THE SPECTATOR'S EXPERIENCE: LES ENFANTS DU PARADIS & TAXI DRIVER

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART & DESIGN
&
COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF FINE ART
DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING

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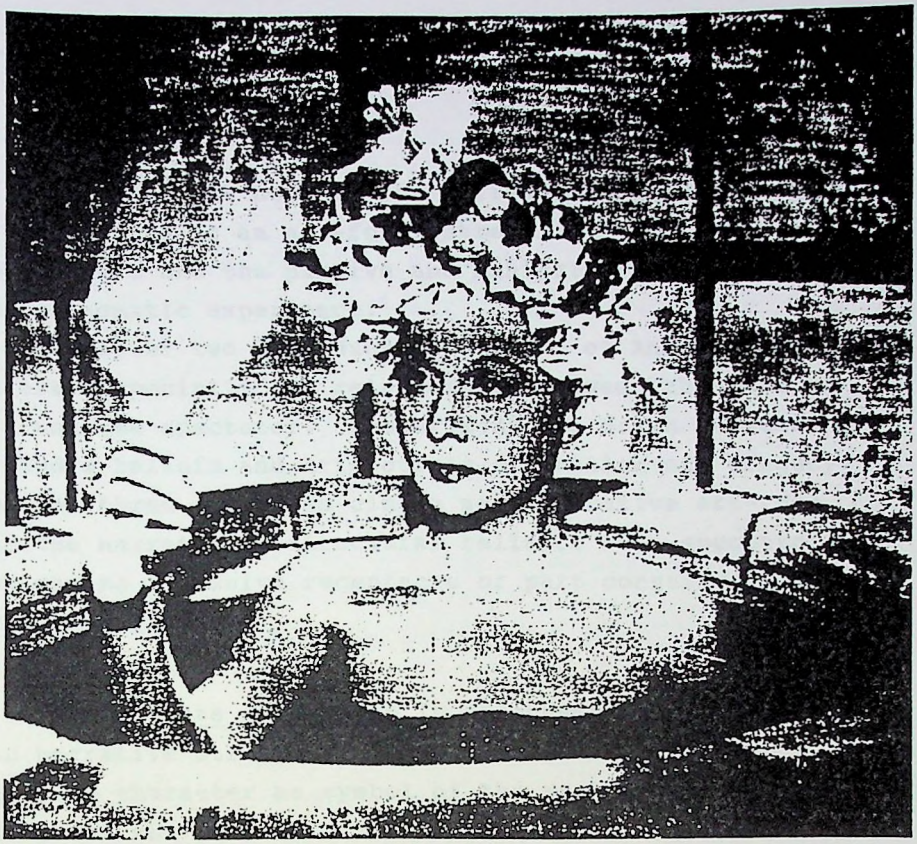
MARCH 1991

BAPTISTE

TRAVIS



L'aboyeur : Entrez, Messieurs, entrez, entrez ! Venez voir la vérité... GARANCE

Barker: Come on in...Come and see Truth herself!

'It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.'

Oscar Wilde

SYNOPSIS

PART ONE:

Chapter one defines the salient characteristics of the cinema as an art-form, stressing its origins in the theatre and the passive and manipulative aspect to the cinematic experience.

Chapter two introduces the ideas of Antonin Artaud on art, especially the relationship between the work of art and the spectator. Comparisons are drawn between Artaud's beliefs and Aristotle's definition of tragedy. Chapter three discusses cinema as a narrative art-form and the narrative's structural reliance on a spectator who may be a passive receptacle or part constructor of the narrative.

PART TWO:

Les Enfants du Paradis is discussed in terms of its narrative structure, its plays on illusion, the Baptiste character as symbol of the artist and the tragic nature of the film.

PART THREE:

Taxi Driver is likewise discussed in terms of its narrative structure. The film is shown to be rooted in 'film noir' and analysed in terms of the way it manipulates the viewer. Travis Bickle is defined as a caricature of the Romantic hero and ways are proposed in which the film can be seen as a modern tragedy.

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INTRODUCTION

I am adopting Antonin Artaud's definition of the spectator as a man or woman whose sensibility needs to be put into 'a deeper, subtler state of perception,'[1] who is living in a world where:

> ...there are too many signs that everything which used to sustain our lives no longer does so and we are all mad, desperate and sick.[2]

Artaud saw art entirely as a means to a transcendental state. This thesis discusses two filmic works of art; cinema being the most hallucinatory artistic medium. These are Les Enfants du Paradis/The Children of Paradise(Marcel Carné, 1945, Fr) and Taxi Driver (Martin Scorcese, 1976, US). In their separate ways, the films involve the spectator in a disturbing experience; namely the difficulty of distinguishing what is true from an illusion, and art's paradoxical method of revealing the truth through a disguise such as allegory, symbol and treatment of myth. Both films avoid direct social, political and historical references and enjoyed immediate popularity with the general public on their release. I do not attempt to draw any further comparisons; each film is discussed entirely on its own merit.

Les Enfants du Paradis represents the classical cinema. It is a homage to the modern film's antecedents: silent films and the theatre. Through the narrative and the varied theatrical imagery the film confounds the viewer with an array of deception and artifice, managing amidst the spectacle to convey a central truth of human existence. The unhappy lovers, Garance and Baptiste epitomize the essential isolation of the individual inevitably subject to the vagaries of Fate.

Taxi Driver is a contemporary film that exploits cinema's capacity to mislead to the hilt.

Martin Scorcese remarks:

> Much of Taxi Driver arose from my feeling that movies are really a kind of dream state, or like taking dope....the film was like that for me - that sense of being almost awake.[3]

In cinema, perception and representation are indissolubly linked. Hollywood 'film noir' is a cynical artistic phenomenon based on this fact. Siegfried Kracauer saw it more idealistically: 'film is the redemption of the world from a dormant state by endeavouring to experience it through the camera.'[4] An analysis of Taxi Driver reveals the truth beneath the artifice. It is an unrestrainedly pessimistic film that unites transcendence with its concomitant; an ancient fatalistic view of life as inexplicably grim.

Intertwining Artaud's ideas with a discussion of these two films one is led to suspect that the modern spectator has survived Romanticism and other -isms and still has the chance to share the Greek vision of reality. This is a capacity to believe; to be affected by artistic creation as the supreme answer to irrational reality.

PART ONE

THE ORIGINS OF CINEMA

Cinema is the seventh and youngest art. Modern film-makers refer only to the tradition of their own century. The first motion picture was made by the Lumière Brothers in 1895. Their contemporary, George Méliès, (1861-1938), made fantasy films. From the outset, the Lumières and Méliès represented divergent cinematic paths; the realist and the anti-realist.

The Lumières viewed film mainly as a scientific medium. Their films record everyday life and were shown to audiences as commercial 'documentary' entertainment. For Méliès, who was a professional magician, film-making was a creative, persuasive instrument. The principal aim in his films was the creation of a plausible illusion that would capture the imagination of his audience. Hence the 1902 Méliès film A Trip to the Moon, in contrast to the Lumières' Train Pulling Out of a Station or Workers Emerging from a Factory(1895).

As the invention of photography aroused instant comparisons with painting so too the cinema was compared with the theatre as the art closest to it. This was principally because of the involvement of actors and audience as well as the temporal dimension. Both theatre and cinema are seen as performing arts yet the film itself is a recording of a performance. The reel of celluloid exists in the form of an object/product like a painting or a novel.

The cinema is not the theatre but it was only as differences began to emerge that cinema achieved its own identity. The fundamental difference, obvious as it may seem - is the presence of the camera. As an intermediary between the events on screen and the spectator; the camera becomes the extra peculiarly cinematic dimension absent from a theatrical performance. A film

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is usually discussed in terms of its effect on the spectator not the audience. Unlike the theatre spectator marooned in Row B, seat N° 14, condemned to a random perspective of the action onstage; the cinema spectator watches a film designed with only one view possible of the events depicted.

This is the tyranny of cinematic positioning which marks a crucial difference in the disposition of theatre and cinema audiences. In the theatre one must make the best of one's seat; one must physically and mentally exert oneself to what is going on. All theatre performances begin with an empty stage and it is up to the performers to gain ascendancy over it; to suspend reality for a while. The cinema begins as an illusory affair. The cinema spectator succumbs to an audio-visual experience that is a complete package to which one gives oneself up in good faith. In the theatre one strains to catch the words, one must constantly pay attention to the shifting centre of activity or meaning onstage. In the cinema the volume is set, the shot perspective is a pre-ordained glove for the spectator to slip into.

Thus, of all the arts, the cinema exerts the greatest control over the spectator. It is a McLuhanian hot medium: high on stimuli and with a corresponding potential for low participation. A film provides a constant stimulus of movement for the viewer; as Panofsky puts it: 'in the movies, aesthetically the spectator is in permanent motion.'[1]

Brecht's concept and practice of alienation brings an ethical dimension to the cinematic experience. As an art whose fundamental psychic mechanism is based on a trusting, escapist spectator, the cutting edge of cinema lies in its misuse or ironic orchestration of that trust. The Hitchcockian plot and Godard's stylistic alienation devices are outstanding examples of such cinematic procedure.

THE THEATRE OF CRUELTY: ARTAUD'S THEORIES ON ART

Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) was a contemporary of Méliès in the formative days of the cinema. Poet, actor and dramatist, his ideas on art, designed with the theatre in mind, reverberate throughout all the arts. He named his ideal theatre the 'Theatre of Cruelty'. This theatre exists entirely as a theoretical construct of Artaud's imagination but survives as an idea and an inspiration. As Peter Brook points out:

> Artaud never achieved his own theatre: maybe the power of his vision is that it is the carrot in front of our nose, never to be reached.[2]

Artaud's influence lies in this spiritual call to arms which is the pivot of his philosophy.

Consciously avant-garde, Artaud wrote as much in reaction to the moribund Western literary dramatic tradition as outside it. He returns the theatre to its crudest origins as a pagan magical rite. In its purest form it is a spiritual experience inseparable from its physical, sensory configuration. He likens the theatre to the concept of a plague; a psychic entity half-created by the human will and consciousness that manifests itself physically.

The Artaudian artist or metteur-en-scène creates a situation whereby the mind of the spectator is infiltrated. This infiltration is more than a communication; it is an arousal and intensification of the spectator's consciousness. Never for one moment does Artaud consider the spectator as an empty vessel waiting to be entertained. The Theatre of Cruelty does not present us with humanity's deepest and most profound emotions and struggles; it is merely the instigator and the conductor of them.

> If fundamental theatre is like the plague, this is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is a revelation, urging forward the exteriorisation of a latent undercurrent of cruelty through which all the perversity of which the mind is capable, whether in a person or a nation, becomes localised.[3]

In The Theatre and Its Double, (first published in 1938) Artaud lays out the prongs of his theatrical vision. He insists on the theatre as a physical space which appeals to the spectator's senses first and foremost. The appeal must lead to a catharsis in the spectator and it is around this metaphysical experience that the Theatre of Cruelty revolves.

ARISTOTLE'S FLAW

In the Poetics, Aristotle says tragedy 'should represent actions capable of awakening fear and pity'.[4] The purpose of the tragedy (and Aristotle saw tragedy as drama's highest form) is to induce a cathartic effect in the spectator; 'by means of pity and fear bringing about the purgation of such emotions'.[5] Of the six elements deemed to constitute a tragedy, the plot is preferred to the spectacle in terms of ability to arouse fear and pity. Here Artaud appears the antithesis of Aristotle with his insistently anti- textual approach and glorification of theatre's powers of spectacle. In fact Artaud's theories are a modern shift of emphasis on Aristotle's.

Since Aristotle; Western drama declined into wordy fodder or Brook's 'Dead Theatre' where playwrights were either less and less concerned with the play as a living thing or deceased themselves and therefore unable to prevent clichéd productions of their works. Moreover, the notion of plot sank into mouse-trap arrangements with the sole aim of providing 'that ersatz emotion we call suspense'[6] for the viewer's delectation.

Aristotle's flaw which became tradition is a literary approach that does not see the director/producer as artist.

> To produce this effect by means of stage spectacle is less artistic, and requires the co-operation of the producer.[7]

Aristotle considers the creation of a tragedy from the author's point of view whereas today it is not Sophocles' but Stephen Berkoff's production of Oedipus Rex that is discussed by the critics. The modern film director is the embodiment of the producer-artist overlooked by Aristotle.

Artaud rejects the playwright in favour of the metteur-en-scène - someone who sees the play in terms of performance. Nonetheless he never dismisses the text which gave rise to the spectacle and indeed echoes Aristotle's recommendation that:

> ..the best tragedies are written about a handful of families...[on] whom it has befallen to suffer or inflict terrible experiences.[8]

Plays admired by Artaud as suitable for the Theatre of Cruelty include Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore and Stendhal's Les Cenci which he produced in 1935. Both deal with perennial taboo subjects of violence and incest within a family.

Aristotle recommends the inducement of pity and fear in a spectator by evoking a sense of 'undeserved misfortune' and sympathy with 'someone just like ourselves'.[9] Artaud moves beyond this neat dual-emotion catharsis in an attempt to engage the spectator's 'soul'. He explicitly invokes magic and underlying his belief in the interaction of theatre and the spectator is something much larger: the primal force of enigmatic cosmic powers.

> What matters is that our sensibility is put into a deeper, subtler state of perception by assured means, the very object of magic and ritual, of which theatre is only a reflection.[10]

In his essay On the Balinese Theatre, he says:

> There is something of a religious ritual ceremony about them, in the sense that they eradicate any idea of pretense, a ridiculous imitation of real life from the spectator's mind.[11]

Intrinsic to Artaud's description of the stage language of the Theatre of Cruelty is the gesture. Actors as moving hieroglyphs become part of an overall décor which is the spectacle. 'Sound enters like a character'[12], words become incantation, lighting, props and costumes are all symbols. The physical gesture functions as a powerfully clear-cut symbol or index to certain soul states. A comparison between the crude, emotional, Expressionist school of painting and the meticulous style and clarity of a gesture as seen by the painter Balthus illustrates the danger of a loose interpretation of Artaud. Balthus designed the stage-sets for Artaud's production of Les Cenci. The work of both men shares a precise vision that translates metaphysics into exact 'scientific' symbols as opposed to the Expressionist intuitive mark.

In the cinema, the actor is turned into a human symbol. The movie-star industry, the threat to the actor's personal make-up implicit in the Method school of acting, prove the tendency of cinema to turn actors into mythical personae at best, commodities at worst.

An actor on the stage and on the screen, Artaud's views on cinema wavered from enthusiasm to dismissal. He compares the cinema to 'a subcutaneous injection of morphine'[13] an analogy which sums up both the power of cinema and the danger of a fascination which merely hypnotizes the spectator instead of awakening him/her.

As an art-form, cinema seems ripe for the application of Artaud's theories since it involves the arrangement of many elements into an overall effect. Artaud recognises the potential of cinema to exploit the senses as 'an amazing stimulant'.[14] The cinema

materialises his concept of the actor reduced to live symbol and he notes 'nothing interposes itself any longer between the work and the spectator'[15] The movies are gleefully escapist and fabricated; a string of fragments given coherence by their projection. Ultimately, the cinema falls short of the sheer physical immediacy demanded by Artaud:

> Besides, from an action viewpoint, one cannot compare a cinema image, however poetic it may be, since it is restricted by the film, with a theatre image which obeys all of life's requirements.[16]

Artaud meant theatre to rescue the spectator from everyday banality by achieving a heightened 'convulsive concept of life'[17] in the theatre. He warns that the cinema must utilize subjects as powerful as the means at its command or it will lose the spectator's soul - the object of artistic enterprise.

In The Empty Space, Peter Brook makes the point that cinematic images take place in the past whereas the theatre 'always asserts itself in the present'.[18] Therein lies theatre's power to intensify and to disturb the spectator's consciousness while the cinema must always be a recording of a past event. Although watching a film is in itself an experience; it is an experience composed of illusory perceptions. The cinematic experience mimics our daily survival perceptions of visual and aural stimuli. While watching a film, we respond immediately to mechanical shadows and recorded sounds. The power of cinema springs from its inherently 'otherworldly' quality which allows the communication of the inquantifiable, the abstract and the instinctual through tangible stimuli. The collage form of cinema is the closest approximation to the workings of the human mind; the imagery of memory, dream and vision.

CINEMA AND NARRATIVE

By its very nature, cinema is a narrative form of art. All films are composed of a series of shots dependent for meaning on their juxtaposition. Even deliberately abstract or anti-narrative films depend on the idea of narrative flow and succession in order to maintain their stance. Christian Metz sees narrative as representing 'one of the great anthropological forms of perception'.[19] The storytelling tradition is an ancient cultural vehicle. The story exists in a triangular pattern between what is being told, who is telling it and to whom it is being told. Metz uses a semiotic framework to analyse the psychological position of the cinema spectator.

METZ'S SPECTATOR

Any film which makes it to the commercial cinema is a seamless product that unfolds by itself, rolling autonomously across the screen. The viewer, in the words of Metz, 'helps it to be born'.[20] The viewer is the silent witness who makes sense of the film.

Metz argues that the film is usually 'discourse masquerading as story'.[21] The spectator identifies not with what is seen but how it is seen. The spectator becomes a camera, a camera that is pre-positioned and pre-edited. In other words the discourse is pre-ordained. The spectator may be fooled into thinking s/he is holding the threads but in fact the story is told by the hidden mechanics which combine to bring the film into being. Of all the arts, film shows least trace of its process of creation; human and mechanical. At a profound level then, the viewer is a degraded witness who only helps the film to live in a commercial sense by filling a cinema seat. The spectator is a receiver and receptacle 'required only to be a place of absence, in which the purity of the disembodied utterance will resonate more clearly'.[22]

Metz ascribes the role of voyeur to the spectator who is satisfied by watching an object that is unaware of being watched. Because the film is a self-contained unit that does not acknowledge a need to exhibit itself, the viewer is not made aware of his/her voyeurism. Metz concludes that the spectator undergoes a vicarious experience in the cinema.

In a wider ideological sense, Metz's positioning of the spectator suggests a cinematic apparatus where 'the audience has the same ideology as the films that are provided for them'.[23] The genre film is the most cynical example of the theory that the most important subject of a film is the manipulation of the viewer's feelings. Westerns and detective films always fulfill audience expectations of a hero, a search and a dénouement. The genre audience anticipates stepping into the shoes of a manipulation; they attend to worry, to ride out the waves and bumps of suspense. Unlike real life, the anxiety is at a safe distance; though they are projected in the present, filmic events are always in the past. Metz maintains that this quality of action having been completed in the past definite is a regressive one; a fulfilment which 'is based on a refusal to admit that anything is lacking'.[24]

The closest art-form to narrative cinema is the classical novel. Both are designed with the solitary individual in mind, one who experiences an illusory sense of intimacy with the story unaware that their experience is duplicated by other individuals. Metz differentiates this private experience from the classical theatre experience which is 'an active complicity'[25] where the actor and the spectator are in each other's presence. The ideal theatre experience is then a mutual and reciprocal game where the author plays to the audience through the performance.

NARRATIVITY

Robert Scholes takes up the idea of narrativity from the novel to the cinema. Narrativity is an umbrella word for the symbiotic relationship of the story itself with the means of its telling.

Scholes grounds narrativity in negative tendencies of the psyche. The more adroit the narrative the more it relies on these tendencies. These are the logical fallacy of believing in temporal cause and effect and a paranoia which places a boundless trust in the omniscience of the author to control the narrative trajectory and to provide a conclusion, no matter what wayward twists it may take. Scholes characterises the the lowest level of narrative film as 'simply matters of stimulus and response'.[26]

In order for film to compensate for a narrative's ability to smother the spectator it must demand a conceptual activity on the part of its audience. Scholes defines this conceptualisation as 'the movie asking the viewer to construct a fiction'.[27]

Peter Brook notes this concept at work in the terminology of the French language for theatre-going. A performance is a 'représentation' - a making present. This connotes the immediacy and the goal of performance. It is made present for the audience, who are also termed 'to assist' by their attendence. The theatregoer 'assiste à une pièce', s/he helps in its realisation. In this sense the theatre is a collective event where actors and audience are in eachother's presence and encouraging eachother by their very presence to make the spirit of the play emerge. This is the power of the theatre, where actor and audience unite to create in the minds of everyone present the latent ideas or 'the spirit' of the work being performed.

No such union is possible in the cinema, which is an essentially solitary experience. As Scholes says;

the cinema must stretch its capability to engage the spectator's mind. In a sense, the more that is left out of a film, the more mental lacunae it accumulates around itself, the more difficult its comprehension, the more enriching and rewarding the experience is for the viewer.

Godardian stylistic alienation devices aim to jolt and disturb the viewer from too complacent an involvement in the narrative. In Persona, Ingmar Bergman, (who came to film from a career as a theatre director), includes imagery showing the very sprockets of the filmstrip itself - crudely emphasizing the fact that the viewer is watching a projection. An alienation device like this quickly turns to cliché if repeated too often.

The examination of the following two films reveals two forms of narrativity. In Taxi Driver alienation devices are used, but incorporated into the story; they are functions of the narrative and so do not disturb the viewer. In Les Enfants du Paradis a classical narrative pattern is followed; no attention is drawn to the cinematic form itself. Taxi Driver is a film in a generic mould but overturns traditional expectations of the genre movies and the myths they support.

Les Enfants du Paradis relies on the viewer's discrimination and gradual build-up of knowledge about the characters in order to achieve narrative coherence amid a sprawling plot. Taxi Driver depends on the viewer's initial gullibility in true 'film noir' style. Thus, in Taxi Driver we see a more purely cinematic narrativity at work where meaning is wrought from the viewer's experience not from what is literally denoted onscreen.

PART TWO

LES ENFANTS DU PARADIS

THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Les Enfants du Paradis (dir Marcel Carné, w. Jacques Prévert) runs at a length of 3 hours and 15 minutes.* The opening scene displays a jostling street carnival. The camera pans over it, then sidetracks into a fair-ground booth. Inside, a woman revolves in a barrel of water; symbolically holding out a mirror while the barker calls out:

> ...Come and see Truth herself! ...Come on in... Pay on the way out...don't let this unique experience pass you by...[1]

The woman is Garance, the central character of the film which follows the intersecting strands of the lives of the men who fall in love with her.

The camera returns to the street and picks out another character, Frédérick Lemaître, who leaves his conversation with a stage doorkeeper to ambush a pretty young woman that he espies in the crowd. This is of course Garance, whom we recognise from her previous incarnation as Truth. Lemaître and Garance, having bumped into eachother, soon part and appear to go their separate ways.

The plot of Les Enfants du Paradis is a tightly woven construction by Prévert which ensures that the principal characters encounter eachother through the machinations of Fate and Chance but never for long. The film is divided into two parts. The first is Boulevard du Crime/The Street of Many Murders, the second is L'Homme Blanc/The Man in White. The time lapse between these halves is an important structural device. This gives events in the final half an added weight as being a form of conclusion to the events of the first half.

*(For a plot summary see Appendix A)

At the same time, by taking on such a panoramic sweep of the characters' lives, the film stresses a sense of life's unrolling arbitrariness and formlessness. The very length of the film, the convoluted plot which brings a novelist's range of depth to the characters, make it alien to the conventional well-sprung plot. It ends with a plunge back into the chaotic carnival Boulevard. Garance, tucked inside a cab, remains as disconnected and as independent as when we first saw her.

In Les Enfants du Paradis, the camera acts simply as a window onto the action. It rarely adopts a personal viewpoint; when two characters talk, both are shown within the frame. This classical cinema style seems to be a presentational method of storytelling with self-enclosed action following its own linear logic. The viewer assumes the vantage point of an invisible fly on the wall, privy to the action but never made to feel it from the inside. However the film does demand a narrative collaboration with the spectator in order to make sense.

It works through irony and a constant play on references and juxtapositions set up within itself. The spectator is presented with five complex characters, never allowed to identify completely with anyone of them but instead must monitor their progress throughout the film. The spectator becomes a witness who must continually refer back to and bear in mind all the information s/he is presented with.

The opening spectacle of Garance disguised as Truth is a pointer to the difficult task for the spectator raised by the film. Among the constant criss-crossing of illusions and performances it is left up to the spectator to recognise the truth. Indeed by setting up illusions within its own imaginary whole, the film hoodwinks the spectator into accepting the filmic plot as a yardstick for what is real.

FORMS OF ILLUSION IN LES ENFANTS DU PARADIS

The heart of the film is the Théâtre des Funambules. Although an imaginary story, the film is based on historic fact. The Boulevard du Temple, commonly known as the Boulevard du Crime was the centre of the Parisian theatrical district at the time of the Restoration. The film is set about the year 1840. Jean- Baptiste Debereau (1796-1846), invented the famous Pierrot character in his mime at Les Funambules. Frédérick Lemaître was a well-known actor of the day.

Jean-Louis Barrault conceived the idea for a film from his fascination with a murder scandal surrounding Debereau. Jacques Prévert introduced the character of Lacenaire based on the popular dandy and murderer executed in 1836, whose Mémoires ensured the mythical, Romantic status of his exploits.

In the first part of the film, Boulevard du Crime, the Lemaître, Debereau, Garance and Natalie characters make their living from the stage. Lacenaire, we learn, is a playwright in his spare time, though a 'petty thief from necessity....murderer by vocation'[2]. Carné and Prévert weave a series of ironic comments on the relationship of art to life, the disparity between reality and illusion. The film itself is bookended by the image of a stage curtain which is literally raised to reveal the burgeoning scene of the Boulevard du Crime.

The stage of the Funambules becomes a place of profound irony in comparison with what is going on off-stage. In the mime 'Lovers of the Moon', Garance is a statue on a pedestal being wooed first by Baptiste as Pierrot and then Lemaître as the Harlequin. It is the latter who eventually persuades her to come down off her pedestal. At this stage of the film's plot, Garance has become Lemaître's mistress despite Baptiste's infatuation with her.

The next mime is a tragicomedy with Baptiste as a frustrated Pierrot thwarted in his every attempt to hang himself as his piece of rope is borrowed, first by a child to skip with, then by a young girl (played by Natalie) to hang her washing on. Natalie is in love with Baptiste and in the middle of the performance she notices that his attention is caught by something offstage. She involuntarily cries out 'Baptiste' at the look of pain on his face - breaking the golden rule of silence. Baptiste has seen Garance and Lemaître together in the stage wings.

Within the context of the film, 'real life' suddenly intrudes, breaking the theatrical spell for a moment. As Baptiste and Natalie suffer this realisation onstage, the spectators obliviously kick their heels. They have come for escapism and are intent on having it.

In an earlier scene, the action onstage turns ugly when two actors erupt into a real fist-fight. The audience delightedly egg them on with bloodthirsty cries. With the thin veneer of spectacle removed, this scene reminds one of Artaud's dark claim that theatre:

> restores all our dormant conflicts and their powers, giving these powers names we acknowledge as signs. Here a bitter clash of symbols takes place before us, hurled one against the other in an inconceivable riot. For theatre can only happen the moment the inconceivable really begins...these symbols ....giving existence and the freedom of the city to acts naturally opposed to social life.[3]

When the curtain falls, putting an end to the bedlam onstage, the rumpus increases among the audience; they become one screaming, stamping mass, unabated until the curtain rises and the mime resumes.

In the second half of the film; L'Homme Blanc, the stage assumes full dramatic importance as a place of mediation between life and death. The first performance takes place in the Grand Theatre where Lemaître has risen to the top of his career.

Lemaître's performance on the opening night of the Brigands Inn, a tragic melodrama, opens the breach in a

conflict between increasingly strained illusions and the truth. Anarchically unleashing his creative spirit, Lemaître exposes the play as a badly written fraud. As the stage sets shake all around him, Lemaître throws his fellow actors into confusion by refusing to allow his character to die, transgresses the sacred bounds of the proscenium and delivers his final speech from a box on the margins of the stage, denouncing the authors as the real criminals of the piece.

Afterwards Lemaître survives an ambush prepared for him in his rooms by Lacenaire because of his generosity. In the following duel-at-dawn scene, Lemaître arrives drunk with Lacenaire and his sidekick Avril as seconds for his assignation with the pompous authors. As he disregarded stage conventions, Lemaître sends up the nonsensical ceremony of a duel by his utter disregard for the proprieties and solemnity expected at such events.

Lemaître's next performance is as a blacked-up Othello in Shakespeare's tragedy. Intercut with glimpses of Othello in his final consultation with Iago and then as he murders Desdemona is a conversation between Garance and the Count in their box. He remarks:

> This debased violence, this lack of decorum.... no really, I cannot say that I appreciate this Monsieur Shakespeare.[4]

The Count is a phlegmatic killer so embalmed in the polite codes of society that he does not acknowledge the fact. Lacenaire, on the other hand refuses point-blank to enter into a duel with the Count whom he insults as 'a character out of a bedroom farce.'[5] Lacenaire is an avowed murderer who sees himself as a tragic hero.

Garance and Baptiste are ironically reunited at Othello. Their apparently clandestine meeting on a balcony while Frédérick is being congratulated in the foyer is the only moment in the film where an unclaimed camera shot places the viewer in a momentarily voyeuristic position. Unexpectedly, the camera makes a circular panning movement, disclosing Lacenaire watching the

embracing couple from the window. He takes responsibility for the point of view. Lacenaire pulls a coup de théâtre when he dramatically draws the window curtain, revealing them to Frédérick and the Count. The Count angrily pulls it back again and challenges Frédérick to a duel in order to prove his monopoly on jealousy.

This petty duel never happens due to Lacenaire's machinations. The Turkish baths are turned into a backdrop for the final grisly performance of the film. Previously Lacenaire had threatened the Count, describing a proposed play of his:

> there are murders in it, and when the curtain falls the dead won't get up to take a bow![6]

Having attended Othello, Lacenaire determines to mount his own tragedy. Once Lacenaire and Avril have gained admittance to the Count's room, the camera slowly zooms into Avril's horrified face as we hear the Count's death-cry off-screen. Lacenaire then reappears to dismiss Avril and calmly sits down in the manner of one awaiting recognition for a perfect performance. The emphasis on Avril's face in this scene and the way in which Lacenaire stage manages his coldblooded murder of the Count turns the affair into a crude exercise in melodrama. All that we see of the actual murder is the Count's limp forearm protruding over the edge of a steaming bath. It is a mock reconstruction of 'The Death of Marat'. The difference is that the Count is a person of no importance while Lacenaire is a man to whom the value of life means little.

Avril's reaction when Lacenaire makes no attempt to leave is the real index to the tragic import of the scene. Lacenaire remains at the scene of the crime to claim his dues as author and to meet his fate at the hands of the executioner. Lacenaire epitomizes the self-styled Romantic hero who creates his own tragic destiny. Earlier in the film he outlines his position to Garance.

> I'm not cruel, I'm logical. I declared war on society a long time ago...petty thief from necessity....murderer by vocation, my way is already

> marked out. My road is straight ahead and I shall walk with my head held high until it falls into the basket on the other side of the guillotine, of course.[7]

THE CHARACTER OF BAPTISTE

The outstanding performer of the film is Baptiste. He assumes a distinct double persona between his ordinary self and his grease-paint whitened Pierrot in robes. He is introduced in this stage-persona as L'Homme Blanc or the chalk-white, pure and otherworldly Pierrot. On the platform outside Les Funambules, his father ridicules him as a 'retarded dope' who 'fell from the moon'[8]

Baptiste is a dreamer who manages to channel his deepest concerns into his pantomime creations. Early on, the film establishes a rivalry between him and Lemaître. Lemaître is full of words, continually punning and assuming various dramatic personae; he is totally caught up with the idea of noble character as he announces: 'My destiny is to bring to life again the great men of the world.'[9] Baptiste is a silent communicator whose concerns are less egotistical. He says of his audience in the Gods: 'I don't only want to make them laugh, I want to move them, to frighten them, to make them cry.'[10]

Unlike Lacenaire, Baptiste can live out his deepest impulses within the relative safety of his Pierrot persona. Among the various tragedies in L'Homme Blanc section of the film, Baptiste performs in The Rag and Bone Man. In this piece Pierrot murders the Rag and Bone Man in order to gain entry to the ballroom where the Duchess is. The Rag and Bone Man is a counterpart of Jéricho the old clothes man (played in the film by Pierre Renoir) for whom Baptiste has a particular dislike. Jéricho is generally reviled as a snoop, a gossip and an informer. After the show, Jéricho accuses Baptiste of stealing his identity and of murdering him nightly in front of an audience. While Lemaître and Lacenaire swim in a morass of stage characters and unfocussed

mercenary murders respectively, Baptiste succeeds in hitting home at a real target of evil through a creative artistic medium.

The real Baptiste Debureau refused to play the Pierrot in the 'Chand d'Habits' (cry of the Rag and Bone Man) because of the murder it contained. Had Carné included a favourite projected scene of Prévert's where Baptiste murders Jéricho, the film would have been a more penetrating exploration of the fine line between artistic and real-life outlets of violent emotions.

In Baptiste's first appearance he is roused from his dreamy stupor when he comes forward as a witness for Garance who is accused of stealing a watch. In a clever pantomime he re-enacts the events which led to the theft of the watch and Garance is exonerated. She throws him a flower in gratitude and moves off into the crowd. Later, on hearing of Baptiste's successful impromptu performance, the Funambules' director gives him a part which blossoms into a career in the theatre. In an oblique way, the film suggests that Baptiste undergoes a dramatic transformation or awakening, from an idiot clown to mime artist, once he encounters Garance.

Baptiste is a character who is wracked by contradictory pulls between his life and art. The stage is the place where his problems reach a decisive melting-point. Frequently, he is shown in the middle of a crisis onstage.

Baptiste loses Garance because he was too caught up in his dreams of what constitutes a perfect love. Inbetween acts of The Rag and Bone Man, Frédérick tells him she has returned to Paris. Baptiste goes onstage to dance with Natalie who plays the Duchess. Despair passes over his face as he struggles with himself and finally rushes off in search of Garance, leaving Natalie stranded in the middle of a waltz. Echoing a similiar scene from the first half of the film, the audience call for him to return to the stage to reassume his character.

The next time we see him Baptiste has left his Pierrot mask behind and is tormenting himself over the correct path to choose. Baptiste is a character equally split between his life and his art; in both he searches for the truth. The film emphasizes him as the true symbol of the artist. His Pierrot mask of opaque white grease-paint is an incontrovertible symbol while Lemâitre's half-smeared 'Moor' is a patently weaker sign, little more than a disguise or flitting persona. Baptiste's performances as Pierrot are presented as coherent extracts unlike the fragmentary clips from Othello, Brigands Inn and the Funambules' burlesque Dangers of the Virgin Forest.

Jean-Pierre Jeancolas describes Les Enfants du Paradis as a 'homage to the "primitives" of theatre and of film.'[11] The film clearly favours the raw theatre of Les Funambules to the more sophisticated Grand Theatre with its society audience. Jean-Louis Barrault, who plays Baptiste, was a friend and regular correspondent of Antonin Artaud. In a review of a Barrault performance elsewhere, Artaud praised him as belonging to the pantomime of ideography as opposed to mimicry.

> ...it was there, in that sacred atmophere, that Jean-Louis Barrault improvised the movements of a wild horse, and that one was suddenly amazed to see him become a horse.[12]

In the Funambules, Baptiste manages to communicate without words to an unruly audience who have just tumbled in off the seething Boulevard. Here is the proof of the precise gesture's potency to communicate the subtlest state of mind. At one point a spectator is heard angrily shouting up to the Gods: 'Stuff it, up there...we can't even hear the mime.'[13] The film takes its title from a theatrical phrase referring to these occupants of the cheapest seats in the house; it can also refer to the actors and actresses themselves.

IS LES ENFANTS DU PARADIS A TRAGEDY?

Beginning and ending with the powerful image of a street filled with a surging, eddying crowd, the film presents itself as a slice of anonymous life out of which we the viewers identify the characters and their concerns. André Bazin said of it in a contemporary review: 'This fresco in which four or five destinies are mingled, seems unfinished.'[14] The most startling stylistic effect of the film is its modern treatment of a nineteenth century milieu. Ending on the suspended motion of a fermenting crowd, the film asserts itself as belonging to a twentieth century sensibility where life is uncertain, fast-moving and incomprehensible. Carné turns a nineteenth century street-carnival into a modern image of chaos. It is worthwhile remembering that Les Enfants du Paradis was made during 1943 under the German Occupation of France. In the light of Canetti's post-holocaust analysis of the raw material of Fascism;- Crowds and Power, this image takes on a more sinister meaning. The final close-up of Baptiste epitomizes the individual struggling and almost overwhelmed by the meaningless brute force of the crowd. The clandestine activities of the French Resistance, a minority against the new order, parallel the subversive antics of the film's characters. Jeancolas sums up the guiding mood of the film: 'Beneath the despair the show goes on'.[15]

The film fulfills Steiner's ground rule for tragedy: that there be 'an ironic abyss'[16] Baptiste is the tragic hero who must struggle against forces which cannot be fully understood or overcome. He assumes the frustrated gesture of drowning man weighed down by the crowd as he struggles ineffectually after Garance. Garance too is tinged with doom; despite her philosophy of independence and freedom to love whom she pleases, she cannot have Baptiste.

Les Enfants du Paradis is in fact a modern tragedy.

There is no flamboyant catastrophe, there is only the inexplicable workings of Fate which controls each character. The film never attempts to explain why Baptiste must live with Natalie and not Garance. There is only the indisputable isolation of each character and ultimate estrangement from eachother. All are thwarted in their goals but it is the viewer who holds the threads of their valiant struggle. S/he is a witness to the mixed up lives of these people whom the camera appears to have plucked out at random from the Boulevard du Crime.

PART THREE

TAXI DRIVER

THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Taxi Driver (dir. Martin Scorcese, w. Paul Schrader)* is prefaced by a hallucinatory image of a yellow cab emerging from the night-time neon glow of New York city; the only visible fragment of the driver is a jarring close-up of his eyes. This is followed by an expository scene of Travis Bickle applying for a job with a cab-company. He becomes a cabbie who'll 'work anywhere, anytime.'[1]

The film assumes guileless, documentary overtones as it follows the taxi-driver's routine. Fares get in and out, the metre clocks up, traffic lights change and throughout it all, Travis Bickle remains in the driver's seat, ritually filling out his trip sheet at the end of the shift. Periodically, a voice-over of Travis reading from his diary is introduced. The viewer imperceptibly slips into sharing Bickle's outlook before s/he realizes that the film is entirely constructed around Bickle's perceptions. Bernard Herrmann's score suggests the steamroller lurking behind the scenery. The composer on Hitchcock's Pyscho(1960), Herrmann's contribution to Taxi Driver adds the crucial layer of inexplicable unease to outwardly banal events. The rhythmically recurring aural motif of rolling drums acts as an escalating sensory clue to the viewer; the horror is a constant accompaniment long before it sinks in.

The film transpires to be an account of Travis Bickle's inexorable progression towards carnage - the flare-up of a simmering, barely suppressed insanity. The ultimate meaning of the film lies not in its portrait of a madman's estrangement from society but in its implication of the viewer in this madness. The plot turns on a

Hitchcockian manipulation of the viewer as Schrader states:

> ...you come to realize that the gimmick of the movie is to make you identify with him for simpler reasons; such as feeling oppressed by the city and then gradually you're made aware that you have identified with someone you don't want to identify with, but now it's too late.[2]

THE 'FILM NOIR' ELEMENT

The success of the film's seduction of the viewer springs from its generic origins. Travis Bickle is a variation on a long line of popular heroic cowboys and private detectives from the stock western and private detective genres. The ideology at work behind these films created the myth of the single man with a self-ordained charter to impose order on the world through violent action. The shaky assumptions behind this notion led to the deconstruction of the detective myth in films like Night Moves(dir. Arthur Penn, 1975) and Chinatown (dir. Roman Polanski, 1974). The Wild Bunch(dir. Sam Peckinpah, 1969) brought an ironic nostalgia to the American way of violence and 'heroic' outlaws. A film termed by Pauline Kael as 'the street-western'[3] rose up to incorporate the left-overs of a broken myth into a crude commercial package. The Dirty Harry, Death Wish films and their sequels are transparent vehicles for violence, machismo and slights on minorities.

The only element these films share with their predecessors is the smooth, well-made plot or hoops-and-corridors of Skinner's box that placate the well-trained viewer. Hollywood's 'film noir' era brought genre films to a consummate art. Paul Schrader is also the author of a seminal essay on 'film noir'. He sees the power of these films in their creation of 'a world [where] style becomes paramount.'[4] In the 1940's, expatriate Germans brought their talents to bear on the industry. 'Film noir' design evolved from the expressionist, mannerist excesses of Dr. Caligari's Cabinet(dir. Robert Wiene, 1920). The décor

evolved into a simulation of the real; quite different from either real locations or abstract invention.

Thus the rainwashed streets, shadowy blinds of these films are more evocative of the period than documentary photographs. 'Film noir', as a stylistic phenomenon took the mechanism of the genre plot that played on the viewer's penchant for deception and turned it into an art-form. David Simmons notes 'film noir's' contribution to cinema as a means of artistic experience:

> 'film noir' turned the emphasis for the film-maker and the audience from the film's narrative fiction (content) towards the perception of that fiction (form). In 'film noir' the question became not what you see, but how you percieved if.'[5]

Sunset Boulevard(dir. Billy Wilder, 1950) is the outstanding example of ironic cinematic treatment, swaying between the viewer's wilful delusion and the inherent trickery of the medium. The narrative voiceover finally identifies itself as the floating corpse seen at the beginning of the film.

In Taxi Driver, the 'noir' spirit is embodied not in constructed sets but in a décor produced by camera distortions of real settings. Robert Philip Kolker sees the film as an 'Expressionist, 'noir' mise en scène'[6] and pinpoints its disturbing effect in a 'defamiliarisation'[7] of the ordinary and the familiar. Here is Kolker's description of the opening scene:

> The smoke is yellowish, and the taxi that emerges from it is not so much moving as looming, viewed from a low angle and traveling at a speed too slow and regular for it to be an "actual" cab on the street.'[8]

Robert Ray traces another stylistic device from a shot in Godard's 2 or 3 Things I Know About Her:

> In an all night diner sequence, Scorcese conveyed his hero's intensifying introspection by adopting his perspective to zoom in on a glass of Alka Seltzer until the bubbling water filled the screen in an enormous close-up.[9]

Godard's shot is deliberately irrelevant; an alienation device drawing attention to the claustrophobia of narrative cinema. Scorcese's is a functional indication of his character's state of mind. Ray goes on to assert that

Taxi Driver abides by 'the American cinema's fundamental assumption that style should serve narrative.'[10] In the tradition of 'noir', Scorcese's stylistic vagaries are ultimately aimed at trapping the viewer into a deliberate pattern of identification. Because Travis sees only the sleazy aspects of life, New York is presented in Robert Hughes' phrase as 'Sodom-on-the Hudson'[11] and the viewer is lulled into sympathy with Travis. Innoccuously driving his cab through the city streets, Travis' voiceover seems almost an innocent encounter with evil:

> All the animals come out at night - whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies ...sick, venal. Someday a real rain'll come and wash all this scum off the street.[12]

Bickle is surrounded by unsympathetic characters, making him appear better by contrast: from the antagonistic cab-boss, the transient fares, the hookers and their clients, to the frivolous Presidential Campaign workers. In such company, Travis appears an impassive rock amid a sea of insubstantial humanity. As the film's world is perceived by a solitary individual, Travis is the only inhabitant who has any depth of character. The film audience never doubt that the Romantic hero at the centre of his universe may not be a hero after all.

THE CHARACTER OF TRAVIS BICKLE

A: THE ROMANTIC ANGLE:

Travis Bickle owes his existence to two literary personages. Schrader cites Sartre's Nausea as a conscious source. Scorcese in turn modelled Bickle on the anonymous diarist on Dostoyevsky's Notes from Underground.

Sartre's existential hero, Antoine Roquentin is a descendant of the nineteenth century Romantic. The Romantic temperament is marked by what Steiner styles 'the rapture of self-consciousness' and an 'evasion of tragedy'[13] Sartre replaces tragedy with the concept of nausea or humanity's inescapable coming to terms with the fact of its existence. Roquentin finds himself in the realm

of the contingent; struggling to find a purpose or meaning to his existence. Like Scorcese's looming taxi-cab or enormous glass of Alka-Seltzer, objects take on a disproportionate significance to a mind devoid of any framework of beliefs. Roquentin's predicament is a godless one, like Greek tragedy's bleak horizon, but unlike the Greek tragic hero, Roquentin finds salvation in himself. At the end of his 'notebooks' he is inspired to write a novel.

The egotistical Romantic justifies his existence through the creative act. Dostoyevsky's anti-hero leaves behind his 'Notes' but fails during his lifetime to solve his torment. Notes from Underground presents itself as a warped tragedy. It ranks under Steiner's classification of 'near-tragedy' or melodrama:

> "Near-tragedy" is precisely the compromise of an age which did not believe in the finality of evil. It represents the desire of the romantics to enjoy the priviledges of grandeur and intense feeling associated with tragic drama without paying the full price.[14]

The anonymous underground man is not a noble character; his tragic dilemma is enacted internally. The forces of tragedy in this case are his own will and caprice leading him 'to act directly contrary to one's own best interests'.[15] Dostoyevsky describes his character thus:

> The tragedy lies in his consciousness of his own deformity...I am the only one to have depicted the tragedy of the underground, made up of suffering, self-torture, the consciousness of what is best and the impossibility of attaining it.[16]

Here Dostoyevsky gives himself away, for his anonymous hero is a Romantic persona that he has adopted. Nonetheless the character contains a genuinely tragic inner landscape raging between an aspiration to high ideals and a failure to achieve them. Again the character shelters the artist who has found an outlet from the tragic impasse.

The character of Travis Bickle begins on the Romantic high-ground. This offers a basis for the audience to place their faith in and empathise with a first-person narrative, a standard 'film noir' ruse. Yet Travis is no artist despite his tortured sensibility. There are no chinks to his subterranean existence except the outlet of random violence.

Travis is in fact a devastating caricature of the Romantic figure as described by Steiner:

> The romantic man is Narcissus in exalted pursuit and affirmation of his unique identity. The surrounding world is mirror or echo to his presence. He suffers and glories in his solitude.[17]

The modern Underground Man, Bickle works the night-shift. He is a lonely man living in a big city; a hypochondriac without friends. His awareness of his isolation is the strongest feature of Bickle's character but he is unable to realize that it is a universal condition.

B: TRAVIS, WOMEN AND GUNS:

In Dostoyevsky's story, Liza the young prostitute becomes a victim of the Underground Man in a harrowing scene where he tells her exactly what he thinks of her, reducing her life to its basest outline. Liza leaves the story as its redemptive factor by walking out on the Underground Man to pursue a life independent of him and, we hope, of prostitution.

Schrader and Scorcese develop the scenario into an anti-romantic conclusion. In Taxi Driver, Bickle's sanest scene is his breakfast with Iris, the teenage prostitute, where he tells her it's no kind of life, winning crucial audience sympathy even as he is visibly disintegrating. He has just admitted as much to Wizard, a fellow cabbie; has rigged himself out with a range of guns, and 'accidentally' killed someone in his local deli. But Travis is not 'right', as the film proceeds to demonstrate. His climatic violent act effects a change in Iris's situation. The police return her to the bosom of her parents in 'Pittsville'. The inclusion of her parents' cloying letter hints that Iris has only exchanged one trap for another. Iris is a runaway whose real problem is trying to take control of her life, but Travis does not see this, only the surface teenage-prostitute who should go home to her parents in some mythical suburban idyll (Pittsburgh).

The other woman onto whom Travis projects his blinkered imaginings is Betsy, the presidential campaign-worker. In his diary, he describes her as a comic-book heroine:

> She appeared like an angel out of this open sewer. Out of this filthy mass. She is alone: they cannot touch her.[18]

Betsy is initially intrigued by Travis but this turns to revulsion when he takes her to a porno-movie on their first date. The porn-movie theatres are habitual haunts of Bickle's and he genuinely cannot imagine going to any other movie. Schrader gives a pyschological insight to his character:

> Now, obviously he's chosen objects which will exacerbate his own pathology - he doesn't really want a girl who will accept him, and when it seems as if the Cybil Shepherd [Betsy] character may, then in that unconsciously destructive way he takes her into an environment that will show her his real ugliness so that she will have to reject him.[19]

Despite Schrader's revealing insight into the internal mechanism, the film is unrelenting in its avoidance of any explanation for Bickle's conduct. Even his establishment as a Vietnam veteran is done through a cursory reply in a job interview. His experience as human cannon fodder seems only another facet of the impersonal universe of junk food, porn movies, mythical gun-men and whore/angel women. His profession ironically underlines the quagmire that he finds himself in. Travis (voice-over):

> All my life needed was a sense of direction, a sense of someplace to go. I do not believe one should devote his life to morbid self-attention but should become a person like other people.[20]

The only people that Travis meets are his fares, co-workers and shop assistants. He inhabits a cold universe of commodities and functional relationships. He is caught in a vicious circle of blackest irony; hundreds of people pass through his cab daily but none remain long enough for the contact to surpass the functional exchange of money for services rendered; passenger and driver.

Subtly, the film plays on universal petty experience. When the cashier at the porn-theatre rudely rebuffs Bickle's friendly advances, we sympathise with his experience of the off-handed, brusquely impersonal, Kafkaesque 'assistant'. She will only respond if Travis asks her for a chocolate malted milk and then discharges her professional duty impassionately.

The film is a continuous questioning: to what extent does the world exist outside Travis Bickle's perceptions of it? Fittingly, the film's director appears in a scene where the line between hallucination and 'reality' is stretched for Travis and for the viewer.

The taxi is parked with the meter running while the customer (Martin Scorcese) directs Travis's gaze to an apartment block across the street. A barely discernible human shadow appears in a lighted window He tells Travis that she is his unfaithful wife and insistently repeats the obscene rhetorical squestion: 'Did you ever see what a .44 Magnum can do to a woman's pussy, cabbie? Travis stares dumbly; in Henry Miller's phrase; 'the world came to resemble a pornographic film with impotence as its tragic theme.'[21]

The very first gun that Travis buys is the .44 Magnum which he turns on Sport the pimp. In a bitter parody of the street-western myth, Travis uses the Magnum to kill the pimp who sells the pussy. When he practices in a shooting-range, the camera insolently places the viewer in the target position so that the gun is literally fired in our faces.

The film endeavours to keep the viewer not on the edge of the seat but uneasily correcting lazy assumptions. Even the .44 Magnum raving customer manages to pass muster because there is a 'socially acceptable' reason for his anger; the woman in the window is his wife and property.

Travis is incapable of creating a relationship with a real woman because he is blinded by clichés of women that come in two types; 'angel' or 'whore'. The film's

audience is also implicated in its recognition of these clichés and forced to examine them.

Travis is doomed to endless taxi-driving and isolation due to his diseased spirituality; a dangerous solipsism. Having been encouraged to identify with a possibly redemptive taxi-driver, the viewer receives a shock when he unexpectedly changes his image. At a presidential rally, the camera pans over the crowd until it reaches 'the most suspicious looking man alive.'[22] That man, we are shocked to realize as Travis with half his hair shaved off. Despite other sinister plot developments, it is only when Bickle's madness reaches the symbolic level that the audience receives a jolt. The distance between the audience and Bickle begins here as Scorcese affirms that Bickle is a character, a creation, not a person or a friendly, predictable cliché.

'THE SLAUGHTER! VIOLENCE AND THE AUDIENCE

Taxi Driver's climatic scene is titled 'The Slaughter' in Schrader's script. It is a precisely choreographed delineation of haphazard, crude killing. The worst moments are the intensified details; the missing fingers, the impaled hand, the refusal of the victims to die quickly; they linger on, lurching after Travis in their death throes. The scene is soaked in red: the culmination of a visual sign that has been building throughout the film. It is a theatrical red, recalling the ceremonious importance of the wine jacket Bickle dons when he goes to meet Betsy. Two previous moments in the film have prepared the notion of a red lit theatre-set at once dramatic and hellish.

The deli-scene is shot from the back of the shop so that as he leaves, Travis appears to step out of the bright interior into an unnaturally red lit street, framed in the doorway like a stage or an ante-chamber to hell. This impression is heightened by the deli-owner who turns to gratuitously beat up the corpse as Travis turns away. Similarly, when Travis leaves the Belmore Cafeteria, he steps out into the night lit by the glow of a red neon

sign and instant aggression as he is embroiled in a locked-eyeballs gaze with a passing black youth.

In the apocalyptic shoot-out at Sport's brothel, Travis achieves his important moment. In the midst of the spectacle, one shot has Travis like a puppet, lying skew-ways and dwarfed by the high ceilinged narrow space of the corridor. His final gesture is to raise a bloody finger to his forehead like a gun and mouth the sound of a bullet on impact. This is the ultimate incarnation of the suicide as spectacle.

Immediately, the camera undermines it. Tracking slowly backwards from a height, it surveys the damage and the trail of destruction until it hovers over the emergency services and attendant crowd outside. This omniscient shot takes the lid off Travis's claustrophobic action with stately deliberation. It in turn is followed by an unredeeming pan over Bickle's glory collage on the walls of his room. This damning sequence refutes any flicker of hope that the narrative might restore a semblance of order to events.

Words become not redundant but obscenely inaccurate in this ironic collage. Newspaper headlines read 'Cabbie Battles Gangsters' and 'Taxi Driver' to Recover'. Iris' parents write 'Needless to say , you are something of a hero around this household.'[23] The pictures are overlaid with Mr. Steensma's bland voice reading a letter of exquisitely meaningless politeness. The letter itself epitomizes the eerie normality of suburbia; the painstaking unjoined handwriting is devoid of personality unlike Bickle's expressionist scrawl and it is signed with the conventional inane joint signature: Burt and Ivy Steensma. One can conjecture the plight of Iris living with a two-headed monster or paragon of the proletariat.

Only the viewer holds the key to the plot. Neither Travis nor the Steensmas and the press for differing reasons are aware of the insanity behind his crime. In a film without a hero, the viewer is entrusted with the discovery of the truth. In this way, Taxi Driver achieves

the combustible power of art. It ignites a sense of awareness in the viewer. Tragically, it is the heightened perception that the world is a place of muted madness. This is borne out by the distorted intensification of Bickle's violent acts and the ensuing fame and praise. We are disgusted because we know that the crime is haphazard and meaningless not a glorious performance. In order to ensure this, the violence is exaggerated to the point where it escapes its literal meaning and becomes an artistic symbol or does it? Scorcese says:

> I saw Taxi Driver once in a theatre, on the opening night, I think, and everyone was yelling and screaming at the shoot-out. When I made it, I didn't intend to have the audience react with that feeling; "Yes, do it! Let's go out and kill". The idea was to create a violent catharsis, so that they'd find themselves saying, "Yes kill"; and then afterwards realize, "My God, no"....That was the instinct I went with, but it's scary to hear what happens with the audience.[24]

Taxi Driver is condemned by Kolker for 'the violence that Scorcese creates on the screen'. He sees it as an excresence, a moment of grotesque excess in an otherwise controlled work.'[25] The shoot-out scene comes close to a piece of performance art featuring Travis Bickle. It does shock the viewer but is in itself a simulation; it is not real. The scene is overtly stylised by the use of red colour tinting. Scorcese creates a catharsis where the viewer goes to the edge with Bickle and then steps back in awe from the demonic proportions of the character.

Here cinema reaches the dangerous climes of the Artaudian concept of art. Powerful art must invoke the very demons it wishes to exorcise. Artaud points out: 'Everything depends on the manner and purity with which things are done. There are risks.'[26] In a purely cinematic way, the Robert De Niro/Travis Bickle of the shoot-out is clearly a cypher. He is not a remnant of the Indian or punk myth. He is as Scorcese puts it, updating Artaud's hieroglyphs; 'a man who is a fucking vehicle on screen.'[27] Bickle is the index to the general malaise; he functions as a purging incarnation of every city-dweller's latent paranoia and negative feeling.

IS TAXI DRIVER A TRAGEDY?

A: THE COMMUNAL MYTH FACTOR:

In the apocalyptic revelation of Bickle's character, the audience suddenly realize that they have seen New York through the eyes of a madman. The tragic condition shifts ground from a mirage in the narrative to the viewer's dawning realisation that s/he is a dupe. In this sense Taxi Driver works as tragedy in the form of a cinematic experience. The viewer is visited on by madness through an erroneous identification with Bickle, fooled into experiencing it perceptually and helpless as to what to ascribe it to.

Factors essential to the creation of Steiner's 'constellations' of tragic drama are paralleled in Taxi Driver's situation. Principally the condition of the audience: H.D.F. Kitto explains the importance of myth to the Greek mind: 'The advantage of myth was that the dramatist was saved the tedious business of exposition.'[28] Steiner suggests a similiar Elizabethan communal spirit:

> They [the Shakespearean audience] shared certain orders of value and habits of belief which made it possible for the dramatist to rely on a common body of imaginative response.[29]

As I have already established; Taxi Driver's audience arrived at the cinema expecting a genre package of heroic action and violence. Admittedly, they expected melodramatic entertainment, but the belief in a myth existed, giving Scorcese/Schrader the basis to affect the audience over and above the safety entertainment level. The film is unthinkable without the accumulation of American cinema behind it, and contemporary cultural myths found in the mass-media and the urban street sub-culture. Made in the dominant visual medium of this century, it is an intrinsically communal as opposed to personal work of art. It owes its existence as much to the mass unconscious as to the authors' ingenuity.

B: THROUGH APOCALYPSE & ARTIFICE TO AWARENESS

Christopher Sharrett accurately analyses Taxi Driver as a criticism of the apocalyptic syndrome in American art. He is beside the point in his blanket summing up:

> ..Taxi Driver....is itself apocalyptic in its view of the current atmosphere as irredeemable...it projects apocalpse as the destruction of all created artifice (seen as tainted and corrupt), an idea of the end that is deliberately suicidal in conception.[30]

Taxi Driver is not a suicidal construct; it is an open work of art. However the film does reject any creative or illusory relief from its cruel vision of the world. Travis himself is culturally starved. He has not even heard of Kris Kristofferson (Betsy's favourite pop-star); the porn movie and cheap T.V. programmes are the only cultural artefacts un his world. Betsy and Iris both mention their fondness of music and are satirized for their delusive ideas sustained by music. Betsy declares 'I live on music'?[31] Betsy is mocked for her frivolous flirtation with Travis, the secret lunatic. The penultimate scene sardonically reintroduces her. She timidly solicits the attention of Travis, the media hero. Her repugnance at their date in a porn theatre - the ugly intrusion of reality into her image of the charming taxi driver is quickly forgotten under the fresh cloud of media hype over his 'heroic' killing.

Iris is a more tragic character who sees the sleazy pimp Sport as a romantic soulmate. She is blind to reality; submerged in a hippy mist of Dylan, Young and other folk heros. Because her illusions dramatically affect her lifestyle, she attracts more sympathy than the older Betsy who leads a secure life. The smoochy dance-scene between Sport and Iris is romantically isolated from the main Bickle-orientated narrative but menacingly drenched in the ubiquitous light of a red electric bulb, while the little finger of the protective hand encircling her tapers to a long red painted coke nail.

The film may deny illusion as a way out for its characters but becomes disarmingly open about its own artifice. The last contrasting shots encapsulate the central point of the film. The viewer has been taken through a labyrinthine identification. First Travis Bickle is a misguided Romantic, then a madman, a killer and media assassin/celebrity. In the final scene, Travis drops Betsy off and drives on; the lone taxi driver in mindless transit, trawling for fares. The film audience warily looks at Travis who is apparently back to normal; hair grown and the routine of work re-established. The viewer's reaction is knowing; they're not going to fall for it again, they know what lies behind the meek exterior. IN setting up this chain of reaction, Taxi Driver defies the apparatus of manipulation that gave rise to it.

The final image returns us to the opening hallucinatory mise en scène: a pair of darting eyes distorted by the neon glow of the city. His disembodied eyes incarnate his unbalanced mental state. Travis is not purged, he is still restless, lonely, in a rut, even his vacuous, Warholian 15 minutes of fame have quickly faded. This gloomy ending echoes Artaud's dark claim that 'evil is continuous'[32]. Bickle is a puppet against a dark backdrop ruled by inexplicable forces. His attempt to stand out is a failure because he is an imploded version of the very world he attacks. He has absorbed it too well, losing the critical distance necessary to an objective, artistic stance. He is the apocalypse personified: a congregation of negativity. Tragedy is more subtle than crisis; it is the tacit awareness of a grim state of affairs. There cannot be a Romantic evasion of this fact nor a desperate embrace with cataclysm. Taxi Driver ends in motion; tragedy is ongoing.

Travis is no tragic hero; he never realises that he is blind in the tragic sense. He accepts the media version of his actions by tacking the clippings to his wall; he does not ponder on the events for himself. The viewer in fact takes up the tragic hero's duty to belatedly understand the implications of events.

The viewer is placed to question the myth, not to accept it. In creating a distorted monster from the myth of the autonomous violent hero, Taxi Driver purges the viewer and in Artaud's terminology, attempts to drain society of this cultural abscess.

C: THE UNMOTIVATED CAMERA:

All tragedies originate in a grain of defiance against the status quo. Socio-political factors can be attributed to what to Travis seems an inexplicably sordid society. Yet the film implies that even these rational factors are insufficient to account for his predicament. Aspersions are cast on society as a whole. The savage deli-owner, the corrupt Palantine, the frivolous hype of the press-reporters are not projections of Bickle's deranged mind. The film threatens us with the suggestion that we are not immune from sharing his disenfranchised, inarticulate reaction to the world.

The use of the unmotivated camera occurs sporadically throughout the film and gives the narrative its quintessentially tragic note. Notably, in the deli-scene, the owner's senseless violence is not seen by Travis; it is left for the viewer's attention. Within the context of Travis Bickle's closed world, these shots provide an alternative, though it is not hopeful.

The deus ex machina shots supply the only indication of morality in the film, Occurring alongside the two scenes of extreme, stylized violence in the film, they act as ironical distancers from the action. They allow it to be seen but not by any 'human' character point of view. The cinema spectator cannot identify with them either; one crouched in the recesses of the deli-shop, the other impossibly high and levitating over the crowd outside.

These shots make insects out of the characters;

their violent actions are stripped of any quasi-art as violence pretensions. At the same time they coldly observe, affirming the tragic view that the unseen gods 'kill us for their sport'. Simmons says:

> We should view Scorcese's Taxi Driver as seeking to express the impossibility of rationalizing such a deranged world within the only form that American cinema has for exploring the irrational, film noir'.[33]

Taxi Driver rests as the modern embodiment of an ageless view of life. As an art-form, tragedy insists on detachment and genuine arousal of sympathy and awe from the spectator - freedom from the repetitive circuit of tension-filled entertainment.

CONCLUSION

Art should open up the circulation of ideas, not limit them. Both of the films under discussion grapple with the problem of distinguishing illusions from the truth.

Les Enfants du Paradis overtly raises theatrical symbols and themes; supreme amongst these is Barrault/Baptiste as the artist. Taxi Driver approaches the issue through the hallucinatory means of the medium itself. Travis Bickle's eyes rendered in slow motion close-ups are the film's leitmotif. The film offers itself as a dangerous, ambiguous experience and fulfills the promise.

Any work of art makes the truth manifest through a paradoxical false structure. The treatment of violence in art illuminates the murky boundary between what we consider to be illusory and what is factual. In Les Enfants du Paradis, Baptiste represents the obviously artistic version of violence. Taxi Driver shows us that the feelings engendered by violence are more dangerous than the acts themselves. Both films invoke the spectator as a party to these feelings.

Artaud describes the common world: 'this world that is slipping away, committing suicide without realising it.'[1] The implication in these films is that the spectator must strive for or be dragged into heady metaphysical climes where art is dangerous because it makes sense. Tragedy is a natural form for this view of life. These films create ironically, humourous worlds where chaos reigns and in the case of Taxi Driver, no character is immune. Schrader expresses the contradictory nature of Bickle: 'A man who feels surrounded is really alone.'[2] Bickle is the imploded specimen of

disintegrating humanity. Baptiste lets go of his fantasies through his artistic persona. Tragedy, as a communal art-form, invites the spectator to join in the expression of life's insanity. In the acknowledgement of this fact, art becomes the truth.

Cinema is an eminently experiential medium; the motion of narrative echoes the ongoing confusion of life; making sense of the narrative is the awareness that redeems tragic pessimism. The work of art is unashamedly a creation, an intensification of life while at the same time tapping profound truths about existence. The spectator who appears to escape into the darkened cinema has the chance to confront Buñuel's 'white eyelid of the screen',[3] reflecting the light of consciousness.

APPENDIX A

SYNOPSIS OF LES ENFANTS DU PARADIS

The mime-artist, Baptiste Debureau is passionately in love with a young actress named Garance. Out of shyness, Baptiste misses his opportunity to win Garance and she becomes the mistress of the well-known actor Frédérick Lemaître.

At the little theatre of the 'Funambules' where they are all three playing, a rich dandy of the period, Count Edward de Monteray, introduces himself to Garance and offers her his protection.

She refuses at first but when falsely accused of aiding and abetting an attempted murder, plotted by her friend Lacenaire, Garance, to prove her innocence holds out to the astonished policeman, the Count's card.

Several years pass. Debureau and Lemaître are both famous and successful in their careers. Lacenaire is an infamous murderer. Debureau is married to Natalie who has always been in love with him and they have a small son. Garance returns to Paris with the Count who is now her protector.

She meets Lemaître and Lacenaire but she is only interested in Debureau. Finally they are reunited on the first night of Lemaître's Othello. They spend the night together. In the morning Natalie discovers them as Garance is leaving. Baptiste leaves his wife and child to run after Garance but it is too late. Meanwhile, the Count has been murdered in cold blood by Lacenaire who waits to give himself up to the executioner's noose.

APPENDIX B

SYNOPSIS OF TAXI DRIVER

A Vietnam veteran, lonely Travis Bickle, takes up driving a taxi in New York in search of an escape from his sleeplessness and disgust with the corruption he finds around him. After failing to begin a romance with the beautiful Betsy, who is working on the election campaign of presidential candidate Charles Palantine, Bickle's pent-up rage leads him to buy a set of guns. While training himself to use them,he meets a teenage prostitute, Iris, and becomes determined to rescue her from her sordid profession. Foiled in his attempt to assassinate Palantine, he goes to Iris's room and kills the men who 'own' her. Failing to commit suicide after this ritual act, Bickle becomes a hero in the press, and returns to driving a taxi.

-from Scorcese on Scorcese, p.156.

FOOTNOTES

INTRODUCTION:

1. Artaud, 1970, p.70.
2. Ibid., p.58.
3. Scorcese, Scorcese on Scorcese, p.54.
4. Kracauer, from Mast & Cohen, p.3.

PART ONE:

1. Panofsky, from Mast & Cohen, p.247.
2. Brook, 1968, p.57.
3. Artaud, 1970, p.21.
4. Aristotle, 1965, p.48.
5. Ibid., p.39.
6. Sellin, 1968, p.77.
7. Aristotle, 1965, p.49.
8. Ibid., p.48.
9. Ibid.
10. Artaud, 1970, p.20.
11. Ibid., p.42.
12. Ibid., p.73.
13. Artaud, 1972, p.60.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Artaud, 1970, p.77.
17. Ibid., p.81.
18. Brook, 1968, p.150.
19. Metz, COOK, Pam; (Ed.). The Cinema Book. B.F.I., London, 1985, p.229.
20. Metz from Mast & Cohen; Psychoanalytic Semiotics: 'Story/Discourse: Notes on Two Kinds of Voyeurism'.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Scholes; 'Narration & Narrativity in Film', from Mast & Cohen; Film, Theatre & Literature.

FOOTNOTES CONTINUED:

27. Ibid.

PART TWO:

1. Prévert, 1968, p.18.
2. Ibid., p.32.
3. Artaud, 1970, p.18.
4. Prévert, p.195.
5. Ibid., p.204.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p.30....p.32.
8. Ibid., p.35.
9. Ibid., p.60.
10. Ibid., p.61.
11. Jeancolas; 'Beneath the despair, the show goes on: Marcel Carné's Les Enfants du Paradis(1943-1945)' from VINCENDEAU, 1990, p.117.
12. Artaud, from Sellin, 1968, p.91.
13. Prévert, p.47.
14. Bazin; p.107 in French Cinema of the Occupation & Resistance, ed. Francois Truffaut, New York, F. Ungar Pub. Co. 1984.
15. Jeancolas from VINCENDEAU, p.124.
16. Steiner, 1961, p.7.

PART THREE:

1. Schrader, 1990, p.3.
2. Jackson, 1990, p.119.
3. Kael, Reeling, Boston, Little, Brown, 1976, p.286.
4. Jackson, 1990, p.86.
5. Simmons, 1981, p.6.
6. Kolker, 1980, p.224.
7. Ibid., p.229.
8. Ibid.
9. Ray, 1985, p.350.

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