

An Immersive Experience of Spectatorial In-Betweenness: The Corporeal Universe of *Taxi Driver*

Liliane Poulin-Dubé

Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) is a film that immerses the viewer in a universe of sensorial intensity. *Taxi Driver* traps the viewer with its protagonist Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) in his taxicab suffocating them in an endless cycle of anger, exhaustion, and paranoia. The intense experience of viewing the film can be analyzed through the Deleuzian Time-image. According to Gilles Deleuze in the cinematic experience, images are not simply projected from a distance to the viewer. Instead, the viewer interacts with the images, which are overflowing with intensity, excess, and tactility. In the opening scene of the film, the camera lingers inside a taxicab driving aimlessly in a rainy cityscape. The viewer is isolated from their own reality and intertwined into the film. Throughout the film, the taxicab imprisons the viewer in the universe of the film creating sensorial experiences as the viewer affectively participates in the film's unfolding (Figure 1, next page). Each time the viewer returns to the taxicab they have been changed by the unpredictability of the images that have bombarded the screen. In exchange, by affecting the viewer the film gains potential lines of flight. In other words, *Taxi Driver* is not only defined by what is shown on the screen but the affect it has on the infinite imaginaries of its viewer. The film is no longer a dimensionally flat narrative but a three-dimensional universe which uses the taxicab as a mode to explore it. For instance, the film effectively introduces Travis' character, his desires and his frustrations, by lingering in every space he spends time in, his apartment, the taxi parking, the dirty streets of New York, the adult cinema. The film pulls the viewer into these spaces with Travis so

Liliane Poulin-Dubé is a graduate of John Abbott College in the Science program. She is now studying at McGill University in the Peter Guo-Hua-Fu school of architecture. The program has allowed Liliane to explore her love for the arts and sciences through modes of representation of spaces and their programs. In the future, she hopes create places where communities can flourish with respect and dignity.

they can experience his becoming. This allows the film to be effectively analyzed as a Deleuzian time-image. The film is an event that is continuously changing with the viewer or in Deleuzian terms becoming(-). The hyphen accompanying becoming further emphasises that it often does not have a beginning or an end in the development of the narrative. In other words, viewers and characters are so intertwined that there is no end, only becoming(-), a continual process of change. I utilize Deleuze's notion of the Time-Image to argue that *Taxi Driver* immerses the viewer in the anxieties of the on-screen bodies, particularly those of the lost and lonely Vietnam veteran, Travis Bickle, as the film lingers in the in-between of Travis becoming-hero and becoming-antihero.



Figure 1: The tactile taxi.

The Time-Image and the Haptic In-Between

Taxi Driver begins with blurred images of the gritty city of New York cloaked in radiant lights. Enter Travis Bickle, a loner who embodies a sense of alienation as he spends his days distanced from others. When he does attempt to come in contact with other people, it feels out of practice and awkward. Despite his attempts to make meaningful connections, he remains stuck in his isolation. He becomes an insomniac cabbie crawling the streets at night and spending his days chronicling his inner desires and frustrations in a journal. He writes: “The days go on and on They don't end. All my life needed was a sense of someplace to go.” His journaling is portrayed through voice-

narration. The film uses the voice-narration as a strategy to conjure conventional narrative structures for understanding Travis Bickle's character while also subverting them. This unique use of voice-narration brings the viewer to wander into the in-betweenness of Travis. Travis and the viewer are both lingering endlessly as in-between passengers with no progress. They lack agency, imprisoned in the taxicab as they roam in the labyrinth of New York City streets. The taxicab allows Travis to fill his emptiness with routine all the while giving him the impression he is no longer alienated as he drives his fares around and watches people on the street. The viewer is made to accompany Travis as he idles in seedy cinemas watching pornography to feel visceral sensations in order to escape from his ennui. Soon he latches onto a beautiful presidential campaigner for Senator Palantine, Betsy (Cybill Shepherd), after glimpsing her from his cab. The viewer participates in Travis' obsessive lust for her, which turns violent when she rejects him. Scorsese shows Travis's dangerous infatuation with Betsy through lingering shots, which zoom in on her, subtly invading her privacy. He will later release these suffocating emotions of anger, loneliness and hopelessness by intensifying his destructive becoming(-) through killing other people. The viewer is both his hostage and his accomplice as he first attempts to assassinate the senator and then resolves to rescue a 12-year-old prostitute, Iris (Jodie Foster) from her pimp. As a vigilante, Travis believes himself to be a purifying agent. He says about NYC: "[s]ome day a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets." Travis is adrift in his loneliness, so he fantasizes about being a saviour like a cowboy in a western film. His delusions of superiority over the others in his city are driven by his desire to distance himself from his life of inhibition and isolation. *Taxi Driver's* narrative requires a Time-Image treatment because it is not a film about a "hero's journey," but about wandering. The narrative "wanders" to evoke its subject's in-between-ness.

In *The Brain Is the Screen*, Gregory Flaxman describes Gilles Deleuze's Time-Image in cinema as that which "eliminates the distinction between the subject and the image, realizing a radical immanence" (Flaxman 2000, 22-23). The screen becomes the viewer's reality as there is no longer a subject and object relation like in a video game. For instance, in first-person shooter games the player views the action through the eyes of the character they are controlling thus dissolving the separation between viewer and the electrons in the screen. *Taxi Driver's* filmography often positions the viewer in the eyes of Travis Bickle or in such proximity to his face it simulates the first-person shooter experience. The film embodies Travis' perspective. The Time-Image for Deleuze displays duration by lingering in the space of the on-screen body.

Often prioritizing longer shots rather than montage, it immerses the viewer in the experience of duration. *Taxi Driver* does not conform to the dogmatic narrative-based logic of the Movement-image. Scorsese does not map out a narrative his protagonist must follow to satisfy the viewer's expectations but instead allows the viewer to wander purposelessly in the universe reflecting Travis' unstable headspace, making him a relatable person. Despite a taxicab being constrained to the routes determined by its fares, Scorsese transforms it into a wandering entity through chaotic and nonsensical imagery of the city. The viewer can not follow the taxicab's movements, loses the thread to reality, and becomes utterly lost. This opposes the Movement-image which Deleuze defined as a pre-conceptualized linear and organic framework of narrative cinema restricting itself to a specific path from A to B through montage. The Movement-Image is confined to a "methodical, and ultimately normative, chain" (Flaxman 2000, 5). On the contrary, the Time-Image's universe is complex because it lies in-between allowing for the possibility of an infinite potential of becoming(-) since very few constraints govern the film's universe. Scorsese places as much importance on the center of the screen as the edges, which are bustling with life, allowing the universe to run free past the limits of conventional films. For instance, as Tom (Albert Brooks), a volunteer for senator Palantine, is on the phone, in the background two ladies bump into one another and start up a casual conversation. Instead of moving from one point to another, as in the structure of the Movement-Image, the Time-Image resides everywhere as a mode of in-betweenness. The Time-image engages the viewer in a space rather than a narrative. Therefore, there is none of the linear progress so prized by the Movement-Image structure. The Time-Image can properly embody the process of becoming(-). The bodies of the cinematic experience, both the viewer and characters of *Taxi Driver* are not simply given a function to further the narrative. Instead, Scorsese encourages the on-screen and off-screen bodies to idle in a universe of uncertainty and chance with a web of relations in a perpetual state of interchange. The taxicab connects these webs together. Through the taxicab, each of the on-screen and off-screen bodies either share a space or spaces in proximity to each other throughout the film. For example, Betsy, Iris and Senator Palantine all enter the space of the cab and other secondary characters such as Wizard, Tom and Sport come very close to it. All of these bodies share an experience of the becoming(-) since they inhabit the constructed cinematic space together. They remain attached in this web threaded by the film even as the credits roll. The universe of the Time-Image film creates lines of flight, other spaces off-screen, for the

viewer to creatively engage in different forms of spectatorship focused on the experience of in-betweenness.

Taxi Driver has many in-between spaces that the on-screen and off-screen bodies inhabit, giving the viewer the experience of being mutated into the film. As the camera lingers in Travis' ennui, the viewer is sucked into the screen vicariously through Travis, much to the same effect of the disturbing image, in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) of Max Renn (James Woods) trapped in a television screen possibly made of his own skin. The camera idles in these in-between spaces which function by embodying an "inaction, waiting, and exhaustion [which involutes] into the mind, opening up a whole new sense of mental duration" (Flaxman, 2000: 6). The term "inaction" expresses that there is no progress in Travis' journey in the conventional sense. However, there is still becoming(-), a process of being. Travis' taxi is an example of an in-between space prevalent in the film. The viewer is g(r)azing the taxi and the universe around it from the very first images of the film to the last. G(r)azing is a combination of gazing and grazing surfaces with an embodied eyeball. This allows the "audiovisual media [to evoke] other senses within [its] own constraints, in a manner more consonant with Deleuze's model of the time-image cinema" (Marks, 2000: 131). The haptic images evoke a kind of mimesis of the intense emotions of the on-screen bodies in the body of the viewer. According to Laura Marks "tactile visibility draws upon the mimetic knowledge that does not posit a gulf between subject and object or the viewer and the world and the film" (Marks, 2000: 151). Tactile sensations such as smell, touch and taste are embedded in the body to a higher degree than vision. The viewer's body is overpowered by these affective sensations "spread out over the surface of the image" (Marks, 2000: 13). The opening scene of the film is a close up shot of Travis' sleepless and glazed eyes as he stares longingly at people walking by his taxicab. *Taxi Driver* encourages the viewer's g(r)aze through bodily imagery overflowing the screen to embody Travis' yearning for connection.

In some images, the viewer lingers in Travis' perspective inside the cab. Travis stares at the bodies outside of his cab voyeuristically. The viewer perceives the world outside the cab as Travis does; through the dirty windows of an old Checker cab. The dirty windows act as a screen connecting the cinematic space to the viewer, merging the on-screen and off-screen world. Corporeal tactility leads the viewer to share the emotion of longing Travis feels towards couples embracing, aversion towards those he believes to be "scum" and excitement when he encounters the possibility of escape from his lonely and alienating life with Betsy and Iris, a young prostitute who enters his

cab one night to escape her abusive pimp. The bodily images are powerful enough to arouse intense feelings that transcend beyond the screen to the viewer. The viewer idles within the space of the taxi enduring long and focused shots of the streets (Figure 2).



Figure 2: In the taxi with Travis.

The viewer is submerged in the space of the taxi with Travis on his circular wanderings. This filmography technique means to provoke a sense of claustrophobia, anxiety, stress, frustration, and exasperation for the viewer. In order to manifest this intensely, the film uses techniques that blur visual perception, disorienting a viewer who is accustomed to relying on seeing to comprehend and control the world around them. Tom Gunning refers to this as *dépaysement*, part of the cinema of attractions. It is “the power of the apparatus to sweep away a prior and firmly entrenched sense of reality” (Gunning 2009, 121-122). Additionally, the film’s storyline swerves and accelerates like a taxi, eschewing the linearity of the Movement-Image. The film also employs excessive repetition. The viewer is driving with Travis aimlessly around the same neighbourhoods, in the same bodily, “filthy” and “sewer” of the city, draped in the same intense neon lights to the sound of the lonely saxophone from Bernard Herrmann’s melancholic score. The taxi roams in a city littered with the wastes of capitalism and marginalized people: sex workers, addicts, pimps, deemed as scum by Travis. The viewer is not immersed in the airbrushed post-Rudy Giuliani Manhattan usually portrayed in contemporary classical Hollywood cinema. Scorsese rightfully captures the

corporeal and chaotic city of New York of the 1970s. The repetition embodies a loop; people come in the cab, drive, people get out of the cab, drive and then repeat. This creates the hypnotic sense of moving in a circle with no hint of the linear progress or organic totality from the Movement-Image. The viewer is stuck in this grim limbo with Travis causing a sickening sensation like being trapped on a never-ending merry-go-round. The viewer gives themselves to this experience of “unbearable pain within the pleasure of desire [since] cinema [is] a lover [the viewers] take, an image with which [the viewers] fold and to which [they] consent” (McCormack, 2010: 175). The viewer enters the cinematic space willingly by watching the film. The pleasure arises from the deeper connection the viewer builds with Travis and the becoming(-) they share in this constructed cinematic space.

Travis’ apartment expresses in its textures Travis’ becoming(-). The place where someone lives is imprinted with their habits, their mental and corporeal states, their sociability as well as their physical health. Each object in the frame has an affective dimension thanks to these textures. The entire apartment is painted a dreary color. The cracks in the walls age the apartment. The cheap and tired-looking furniture like his bed, are only there by necessity giving the impression he does not know how (or does not want) to indulge in his own comfort. The lack of decor could also be related to Travis’ low income. By choosing to linger in a taxi driver’s life, the film comments on social economic class. Junk food, trash and various items are scattered across the room. The only signs of decoration are the many posters hung up of his taxi routes, Palantine presidential campaigns, and a “one of these days I’m going to get organiz-ized” sign, all evidence of Travis’ obsessive nature and search for a purpose. This tiny room embodies a sense of being lost. The viewer lingers inside of it for several extended moments during the film, gaining a sensorial epistemology of the apartment. The apartment is not simply a setting for the character. If it were a film, which inspired to be treated more as a Movement-Image, the apartment would have been defined by the limiting description and function the filmmaker attributed to it. According to Deleuze, it would have been ascribed a “molar” existence. The “molar” is a static two-dimensional representation of movement while the “molecular” is a three-dimensional space laboratory for movement. The “molar” essence, “is essentially immobile, [thus] its synthetic privilege is such as to engage in posturing (posing) as movement” (Flaxman, 2000: 18). Instead, the film *Taxi Driver*, can embody chaotic complexities of movement, in other words a “molecular” quality by emphasizing materiality in the sense expressed by Flaxman: “The automatic movement of the cinema propels sensation to a new

order, thereby realizing the [“molecular”] essence of the image” (Flaxman 2000, 19), which is especially powerful in the Time-Image. It is charged with lines of flight that allow the viewer to feel the “molecular” universe for themselves without “molar” intermediates. The apartment is part of a “molecular” universe, beyond being the place Travis inhabits. In a particular image from inside the apartment, the viewer is forced to watch Travis eat alone again. There is limited vision of one side of Travis through the reflection of a confining mirror, while the other side of Travis is also confined by metal grates on the window. This causes a feeling of claustrophobia. The light bulb and reflection of the light bulb elicits an impression of repetition, suggesting the viewer and Travis are again stuck in a loop. The surrounding walls are murky green and old, evoking a sort of nauseating bleakness. The apartment isolates the viewer and Travis in a becoming(-) space. Bowls, kitchen appliances, cereal boxes and other miscellaneous items are stacked in an attempt to be organized. Nothing in this setting gives an indication that there is a connection to other bodies from the world outside the apartment evoking a sense of isolation and loneliness in not only Travis, but encouraging it in the viewer as well (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Disconnection, isolation and loneliness in Travis's apartment.

Loneliness and longing in the cinematic space of the *Taxi Driver* are “sensations [that] traverse the membrane [...] breaking it down until [the viewer is] left with an in between” (Flaxman 2000, 14). *Taxi Driver* beautifully dwells and slowly sinks the viewer deeper into such images. When the frame

focuses on a certain image in the universe of *Taxi Driver* it is equivalent to the viewer interacting with the bodies in that image because, as Flaxman contends, “[t]he screen is a form of relation, of interchange, of mutual synthesis between the brain and the universe” (Flaxman 2000, 16). For instance, Travis sits down at the table of a few taxi drivers with whom he is acquainted. There is a noticeable distance between them physically and the viewer must endure the pauses and awkwardness in his communications with them. He stares with hostility at Black men across the restaurant. The combination of interactions that Travis has with the bodies surrounding him linger on and traverse through the screen into the body of the viewer, luring the viewer into a sense of complicated malaise created by the duration of the scene. Loneliness and isolation are experienced by the spectatorial body as the viewer is forced to experience Travis’ routine. At the table, the screen lingers on an antacid dissolving in Travis’ glass of water. The shot slowly zooms in until Travis and the viewer are completely dissociated from the world around them. The zoom embodies his everyday, a state of meaningless in-between, where Travis and the viewer are closed off to all bodies around them. An homage to the swirling coffee crema in *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1967), this long take on the fizzing water is alien to systems of interpretation. The viewer can not control or understand it. They are lost in the affective in-between space with Travis. A space filled by pain, frustration, and exhaustion. The narrative structure of the Movement-Image is no longer relevant since the tactility of the image is in direct contact with the viewer, holding the viewer in its grasp. The mesmerizing images of sizzling bubbles “drown” the viewer in Travis’s anxieties of loneliness and longing.

Similarly, on two different occasions, Travis, and the frame focus on images of bodies touching on his television which cause him, once again, to crave connection. The images on the television themselves carry textuality and personality in their pixels and blue hues. The first time, Travis is glaring intensely at the image of people dancing. The shot lingers on the closeness of their bodies as they sway and on a pair of small shoes. The shoes do not fit with the surroundings. They are separate from the dancers around them, so they seem out of place and abandoned. They embody a sense of not belonging. The shot sinks into the image projected on the television (Figures 3-5, next page). Focusing on this image has no symbolic or narrative purpose; instead, it generates an affective resonance. These images exist in excess to their usefulness for the narrative of the film; they are powerful in their evocation of a process of in-betweenness. The viewer inhabits, with Travis, this state of loneliness and longing for connection.



Figures 3-5: Sinking into the image, evoking in-betweenness.

Travis' Becoming(-) and Immersive Viewership

The viewer is brought back to Travis's apartment where he sits in front of the television. There is a more apparent anger and restlessness in his movements. Travis is watching a black-and-white soap opera. Onscreen, a woman is torn as she betrays a man's love, and the man attempts to cope and dissuade her. Travis gently and deliberately places the Television on its edge, in-between falling and standing, where the viewer has been throughout this film. By experiencing a becoming(-) together in the cinematic space of the film, the viewer has been immersed in Travis' precarity. The television's destruction once it falls to the ground allows a small release of Travis's pent-up mixture of aggression and depression. Travis is in relation with the materiality of the images portrayed on his television. Simultaneously, the viewer is in relation with their screen which portrays Travis' interaction with the images on his television. Therefore, the film viewing experience manifests a world within a world. This forms a never-ending loop, which places the on-screen and off-screen bodies in-between where there is no progress and no distinction between the reality of the film and that of the viewer. Another time in his apartment, Travis points a gun to his own head. Travis is gambling with the potential of an extremely violent and visceral action on his body which grants him a slight feeling of freedom amid the constraints of his angst and dread. By pointing the gun at his head, he raises the potential of blowing his brains out. He forces the viewer to linger and participate in this masochistic tinkering between continuing to be alive in his chair or having a bullet in his head and part of him splattered around his apartment. The film is successful in placing the viewer in a masochistic dynamic with Travis because of the deeper connection formed between the viewer and Travis, as they have an intertwined becoming(-). In the cinematic space, the viewer and Travis share his exhausted body, his desolate environment as well as his flirtation with suicide. These scenes have a powerful mental duration. The degree to which their duration exceeds narrative purpose embodies a sense of exhaustion and irritation. They have no progress or linear movement, forcing the viewer and Travis to bask in the image. These scenes end with the viewer accompanying Travis in his apartment just as trapped in his ennui as before. Both the viewer and Travis remain in an in-between space that is loathsome as they are caught in eternal stagnation.

As the film unfolds, Travis is a walking build up of suppressed affect. His underlying agitation—expressed through his constant wandering, his

contemplation of suicide, and his deflective interaction with objects like the TV—conveys the impression of a ticking time bomb. Travis’ failed assassination attempt on the senator is a precursor to further and more extreme actions taken by Travis. He is very close to committing a politically motivated murder but not able to execute it, deepening his sensations of frustration. Later, Travis goes to challenge Sport (Harvey Keitel), Iris’s pimp who plays the villain of Travis’ delusions. This is the catalyst that leads to sparks flying. The fuse is lit. This is expressed through the materiality of film as Sport throws his lit cigarette on Travis and flares of red and orange bounce off Travis’ chest. Travis has committed to this destiny to go out with a bang and embraces in entirety the hero persona he has created for himself as “a man who stood up against the scum, the cunts, the dogs, the filth, the shit.” He wants to permanently escape the ennui, loneliness, and longing caused by his inability to connect with others properly. Throughout the entire sequence of his confrontation with gangsters to save Iris, the colors’ hues appear to be degraded suggesting a more sinister and hopeless world. The darker shading also contributes to the viewer’s disorientation. During the shoot-out in the apartment building between Travis and the gangsters the on-screen bodies seem to shoot at each other with no purpose. Instead of simply dying after being gruesomely shot, both Travis and the gangsters he is trying to destroy get up to exact revenge. These relations form a loop arresting the viewer in a state of in-between. The film lingers on and g(r)azes on the gore forcing the off-screen bodies to be trapped with on-screen bodies. This causes feelings of visceral discomfort. As the gun fight rages on, multiple cuts to Iris’ distress, as she hides behind a couch, reflects and in turn amplifies the emotions of the viewer. The silence except for gunshots and screams during the entirety of the scene also adds power to montage, further immersing the viewer in a cycle composed solely of visceral violence. This scene is impactful because the excessive “sensations do not refer to anything outside themselves [they are] purposiveness without purpose” (Flaxman, 2000: 13). After killing the gangsters, Travis attempts to escape this state of limbo through suicide. Travis gently places the gun under his chin, the viewer’s body clenches in anticipation as they expect to hear a bang and blood to spray out of his head, but unpredictably only receive the clicks of an empty gun. Travis and the viewer are left to sink even deeper in the duration of the image. In the aftermath, the film g(r)azes the consequences of the violence in Iris’ room, the staircase, and the hallway. The viewer is brought outside of the building where crowds are forming. The film lingers on how these recent violent movements have affected the entire neighborhood. Additionally, in the edge of the frame there

is a hopscotch drawn on the pavement, one of many examples of textures of the urban environment that the film presents to the viewer. These textures give dimension to the urban landscape inside the universe of the film as well as a glimpse into on-screen bodies that surround Travis, regardless of their importance to the narrative.

Becoming(-) is the cinematic relationship of mutual interchange between viewer and the film, each contributing to the process of being of the other: “[If] the power of cinema does lie in the capacity to exile us from familiar conceptual terrain, then the system is tantamount to its own formation, a becoming(-) system, a process” (Flaxman, 2000: 10). Throughout the film, the viewer is sucked into the unfamiliar cinematic space and bombarded with unpredictable images. The viewer is immersed in Travis’ becoming(-) through lingering shots which embody his failures, frustrations, neuroticism, and voyeurism. The beginning of the film is not only the introduction of Travis’ story, but the Time-Image unfolding the universe of the film, a becoming(-) that often works against any sense of the progressive. The viewer is a participant in the becoming(-) of Travis since they are part of the same universe as him. Travis’ transformation is not linear, but rather circular, as he is seen driving his cab again at the end. Travis adopts a persona as he attempts to play the role of the super-hero character with homemade gear. His identity mutates him, freeing him from his repetitive mundane life. This allows him to gain confidence. This is embodied in scenes where he meets Iris. Later on, when the two have breakfast together, he even lies to her, telling her he works for the government. The viewer is an accomplice since they also want to break free from his confining life. Travis has a fictive perception of himself within the reality of the film. Travis’ transformation is revealed to the viewer just before his attempt to assassinate the senator in a pan up shot of Travis with a mohawk dressed in his old army jacket and sunglasses, a physical embodiment of his becoming(-). This physical mutation feeds his hero delusion.

Travis becomes what Deleuze calls a “body without organs,” the pre-subjective state of materiality that is constant mutation. The plane of immanence, a “molecular” chaos of movement, is being produced “on the body-brain itself” (Flaxman, 2000: 22), bombarding and energizing its sensations with affect. Travis attempts to fasten his own narrative -- or any semblance of order -- from the chaos of the universe that surrounds him. When he asks Iris during their third encounter “don’t you remember me,” he reveals his misguided belief that their relationship is more profound and fate-driven than just a series of chance encounters. It is logical for Iris to not know

who he is considering that the first two encounters Travis was under the guise of a taxi cabbie, but this does not line up with Travis' egocentric delusions. Travis lies on his bed motionless, and eyes closed enveloped in his army jacket. The shot feels never-ending as if Travis and his jacket are permanently mutated into each other. The thin line between his lies and his truth blurs as the film unravels. The voice-over narration creates a blurring of Travis' fiction and nonfiction as there is a blurring of his reality and the viewer's perception of it. Unlike in a Movement-Image, the voice-over in *Taxi Driver* should not be treated as narrative. Travis' voice-over has limited importance to the unraveling narrative, instead its affect mostly auditorily amplifies the in-between space of ennui already built by the visual lingering of the filmography. Travis' voice-over disrupts the convention of a voice-over. Travis' ramblings are an extension of his delusions and frustrations rather than a proxy for the director's voice. On two occasions, the viewer witnesses Travis taking pills, however no information about their nature is given. They are simply a small glimpse into his becoming(-). Shooting Sport is Travis' breakout performance for a persona he is finally revealing to the world. However, his execution is very awkward as he pulls the gun out of his coat pocket with haste, and fumbles. Additionally, his catch line "suck on this" seems out of place. Earlier in the film, a chance encounter with a stranger in his cab, played by Scorsese himself, affects him and the viewer. The stranger angrily venting to Travis about his cheating wife's betrayal. Travis' frustration and anxiety are intensified. The neon green lights dominate the frame and trap Travis, the stranger, and the viewer in the cab. This is suffocating and causes a feeling of claustrophobia in the viewer. The viewer is anxious about the way this stranger has affectively steered Travis' becoming(-), charging and encouraging his anxieties into potential destructive action. The stranger's demented laugh drags into the next scene at the diner, harassing Travis' thoughts as well as the viewer. The stimulating green of the encounter with the stranger is contrasted with the intense red neon color of the STOP sign as Travis enters the diner. The STOP embodies how the viewer feels towards Travis' becoming(-). The viewer cares for Travis as they are linked. In similar fashion to the voice-over, this is another technique allowing substantially quasi-meta communication between the viewer and Travis.

Scorsese's use of the Time-Image aesthetic, particularly his focus on duration, suggests a documentary quality in the film. Deleuze chose cinema to discuss philosophy because in the Time-Image the on-screen bodies are no longer characters in a narrative representing something symbolically (molar), they are bodies in a universe that the viewer is sensually part of (molecular).

The “molecular” universe is “the expressed within the process of expressing” (Flaxman, 2000: 14). In other words, it is a state of becoming(-) that is in-between points A and B. Travis struggles to express his suffering to another cabbie called Wizard (Peter Boyle). Red hues drape everything around them. The sudden intense color contrasts an otherwise murky film placing importance on this moment for Travis’ becoming(-). In this moment, Travis’ becoming(-) has been magnified. A close-up shot of Travis as he is sharing his worries is ridiculed by the background movements and sounds of traffic and the city. The close-up is also immediately juxtaposed with a wide shot of Wizard embodying indifference especially as he responds, “Look at it this way. A man takes a job, you know. And that job-- I mean, like that--That becomes what he is”. This impersonal advice only further anchors Travis in his frustration with his life lacking purpose and connection. The materiality of Travis’ face manifests the heavy weight his suffering is having on him. This is shown in the severe pursing of his lips in pain, the drooping dark bags under his eyes, his slight perspiration, his messy hair and his longing stare lingering into nowhere. These are corporeal signs of his metamorphosis. His inability to communicate properly causes a lack of release of affect. Travis’ thoughts involute and do not carry him anywhere. His thoughts keep him stuck in a loop, an in-between filled with desire for destruction and violence. For instance, Travis’ voice-over is largely linked to his thought process, which like the film itself, does not have the main focus to progress towards a linear conclusion. The viewer leaves in Wizard’s cab abandoning the silhouette of a broken Travis dressed in the tense red lights of the city around him.

Time-Image: Lingering and Waste

Taxi Driver’s realism suggests Scorsese is paying homage to the Italian Neorealist style. Scorsese’s shots linger on everything, no matter their weight in the narrative. The on-screen bodies in the film are also each walking affects thanks to how the Time-Image operates. The lingering aesthetic of the film allows the viewer to enter the intimate space of the onscreen body and vice-versa. All bodies are given a state of becoming(-) causing them to have the potential to affect the viewer. As Travis is phoning Betsy, the camera moves slowly away and lingers on the hallway leading outside. It lingers there on the emptiness of the corridor and on other on-screen bodies walking on the street in the distance, conveying to the viewer an awareness of Travis’ isolation from others. Through glimpses the viewer acquires bits of knowledge and

understanding about the lives of the on-screen bodies. These glimpses are tiny haptic textures which are either visual, in sound or in dialogue. For example, Scorsese throughout the film uses the light emitted from the city streets in ways that encourage haptic and other sensorial responses in relation to abstraction to trap the viewer and Travis in the taxi. These fascinating colors are blurred into puzzling shapes creating an eerie aesthetic across the screen withdrawing the viewer from their reality. Isolated in this in-between space inside the taxicab, the viewer is more vulnerable to feelings of loneliness and even longing, shared by Travis. Furthermore, fleeting glimpses create Deleuzian lines of flight, pointing the viewer to a sense of who these on-screen bodies are presently, their state of becoming(-), which is shaped by their past experiences, their memories, and their desires for the future. For instance, the viewer is teased with glimpses of Iris' past through dialogue but most importantly through her outfits, mannerisms, and habits. In *Taxi Driver*, during Travis and Iris's conversation at breakfast, Iris casually puts on green plastic glasses only to take them off and later replace them with blue shades. She also places importance in astrological signs and pours a large amount of sugar on her toast. These child-like, lively glimpses of freedom and spontaneity are contrasted with her occupation as a sex worker, which is portrayed as a grim, unsafe and decidedly adult occupation. Similarly, Travis' taxicab gives him freedom of movement but only within the parameters of New York City. Both Travis and Iris have delusions of being free and above the working class New York City street life even if in truth they are condemned to it.

The Time-Image creates a universe of in-between that is chaotic, unpredictable and operates by uncertainty and chance encounters. The Time-Image forms a plane of immanence in the on-screen and off-screen bodies, giving them the potentiality to affect and participate in each other's becoming(-). This reflects real life, unlike the predetermined symbolic narrative of the Movement-image. The Movement-image links its images in a "normative chain" (Flaxman, 2000: 5). The universe of the *Taxi Driver* or, as Deleuze described it, the whole, is "open, like a thread that weaves through all sets" (Flaxman, 2000: 20). The universe is a web of relations. A street-side drummer Travis and Betsy pass by on their date is one of those webs composing the universe. The viewer realises the soundtrack of the film has been the sound of his restless beating on his drum. The music is a permeance, but it has different degrees of intensity during the film. Thus, the music has its own becoming(-). The drummer, Gene Palmer, plays himself in the film. Palmer was an iconic New York street musician during the 1970s and 1980s.

His presence provides an extra dimension to the film and the in-between nature where there is no distinction between fiction and nonfiction. After Betsy rejects Travis and refuses to see him, he resigns to driving by her work to catch glimpses into her becoming(-). He is fuelled by his obsessive lust for Betsy. He has an insatiable need to know her, to obtain her. The beam of the building structure, the reflection in the window and the speed of traffic, prevents him from better seeing the space her *being* occupies. His suffering is caused by "... teetering on the brink of the abyss that is [his] own desire-a vacuum that is not empty, but outside, that does not exist to be thought or known" (McCormack, 2010: 171). Travis' desire to know beyond the known is what creates perpetual unfulfillment and suffering. He writes about Betsy in journal "She appeared like an angel. Out of this filthy mess, she is alone. They... cannot... touch... her". Betsy is part of the fantasy Travis cannot fulfill.

In the film's conclusion, Travis returns to his occupation as a taxi driver. Instead of being arrested as the viewer expected, Travis is praised as a hero who saved a lost girl from gangsters. He receives recognition not only from other taxi cabbies, from the entire city via newspapers but also from Betsy. Yet, it feels to the viewer as if they have just entered his fantasies as the narrative the film has been loosely following up to this point has now been turned upside down. The viewer cannot distinguish whether they now reside in the fiction of Travis' fantasies or the nonfiction of Travis' reality. Scorsese also uses a picture of his own parents on the wall to represent Iris' parents, giving the film a documentary-like aesthetic, a deeper layer, to the viewer who knows this information. Travis Bickle's world seems to have been restored to its initial state. His hair has grown back and is neat. He seems well adjusted. He is still slightly reserved but calm. This regression back to the "beginning" of the film gives the viewer a sense of moving in a circle without progress. It is as if the film is showing the viewer Travis' fantasy of his heroic feat, the final chapter in the delusional narrative he has constructed for himself. The only physical difference in Travis is a small scar on his neck that is revealed when he turns to see his fare, Betsy. The scar has texture and evokes disgust. This subtle glimpse shocks the viewer into recognition. The image of a larger scar of a similar kind on Travis' back was encoded earlier in the film when he was doing push-ups in his apartment. The viewer does not know where the first scar came from or the connection between the two scars. This loose thread in the narrative is not addressed leaving the viewer in a state of confusion and ambiguity. The *dépaysement* in this scene of, for example, Betsy's face floating in the rear-view mirror combined with the blurry neon lights of the city, brings the viewer back into their memories of the "beginning" of the film. However,

the film does not make this conclusive. Instead of using this moment to embellish the narrative, Scorsese keeps the scene enigmatic (Figure 7). Betsy is dropped off and the taxi drives away. The viewer watches as she turns and abandons them. The taxi embodies isolation, loneliness, and imprisonment. The limited vision of Travis' face confined in the rear-view mirror embodies this as well. The quick and sharp change in the imagery and music disturbs and confuses the viewer. The visuals seem to speed up and the smooth jazz is interrupted by an eerie sound. It is an editing style of experimental cinema which, “derails perception from its stable center, shuffling it along an unpredictable path of movements” (Flaxman, 22). This conveys the violent sensation that reality has collapsed for Travis. The viewer's reality is also distorted because they have been immersed in and interacting with the universe of the film. The viewer's reality is the film, similar to how Deleuze states that the brain is the screen. The film constantly affects the viewer in ways they did not consent to, since the images shown are unconventional and unexpected by the viewer. A does not move to B in a linear organic way. There is no distinction and therefore no progress. The viewer no longer even has the certainty that A was the beginning and B was the end. These temporal points of reference disappear.



Figure 7: Keeping things enigmatic.

Taxi Driver is a Time-image film that affectively immerses the viewer in the intense becoming(-) of its protagonist Travis. The film operates around the lingering long take, letting the viewer witness their own becoming(-). This

quality of the film opens it to the potentiality to form a universe instead of a narrative. This universe, a state of in-between points A and B is stuck in a circular motion with no linear progress. It has no purpose, which is the lifeblood of the Time-Image. The Time-Image film reflects a universe without category, order, or easy cause-and-effect chains; a universe that encourages embodied, affective responses as much or more than cognitive ones. *Taxi Driver's* narrative parallels this breakdown of conventional order in its structure and via Scorsese's reliance on repetition, liminality, lingering, haptic and other non-visual senses, and duration. The film unravels itself with materiality of the Time-Image expressing the anxieties of being stranded in someone's becoming(-), which in Travis' case is haunted by ennui and anxieties of loneliness, longing and isolation.¹

¹ This essay was written for the course, "The Cinematic Body," taught by Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare at John Abbott College in the fall semester of 2019. It is presented here as part of our commitment to featuring original work in horror and related studies by students at the college level.

References

- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Athlone Press, 1986.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Athlone Press, 1989.
- Flaxman, Gregory. "The Brain Is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema," Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- Gunning, Tom. "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator". *Film theory and criticism: introductory readings* edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.114-133.
- Kozloff, Sarah. *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- Marks, Laura. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Duke University Press, 2000.
- McCormack, Patricia. "Cinemasochism: Submissive Spectatorship as Unthought". *Afterimages of Gilles Deleuze's Film Philosophy* edited by D.N. Rodowick. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010. 157-76.
- Scorsese, Martin. *Taxi Driver*. Columbia Pictures. 1976.

- 2021 -

MONSTRUM is Published in Montréal, Québec by the Montréal Monstrum Society.
Intellectual rights are held by the individual author(s).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).