

Narrative Unreliability in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*

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Abstract

In this paper, Narrative Unreliability is examined which is present in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976). The notion that Travis Bickle is suffering as a symptom of his troubled mind does not tell the whole truth. This study uses narratology and close psychological analysis to uncover subjective perspectives. Various cinematic techniques like selective editing, voice-over narration and point-of-view shots depict an unreliable narrative framework in the film. These techniques, though used sparingly, reflect psychological decomposition of Travis. The inconsistency in Travis's personality in the film is not just a stylistic choice. It depicts urban alienation, the trauma post-Vietnam and how the identity of vigilantes of America in 1970s was formed. The film's narrative unreliability immerses the audience in Travis's distorted worldview. Simultaneously, it critiques the violence it appears to glorify. It is evident how Travis misinterprets social cues and frequently constructs delusional narratives. His voice-over contradicts visual evidence throughout the film. The primary assumption in this paper is that moral ambiguity is placed at the centre of the film's meaning through unreliable narration. This would provide ground for movies in which the protagonists are psychologically unstable. *Taxi Driver's* narration is also crucial to understand subjective cinema and character psychology.

Keywords: Unreliable Narration, Psychological Fragmentation, Cinematic Subjectivity, Urban Alienation, Subjective Cinema.

Introduction

Taxi Driver (1976) of Martin Scorsese might be described as a fever dream of the lowest of the low of the 1970s New York City, where the city's rottenness and of the mind of one of its inhabitants, Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro), run into each other. The film, is about a Vietnam War veteran, Travis Bickle, who loses his way in the night mist in metropolis. What starts as a quiet tale of a taxi driver turns into something darker when he becomes a spectator of the moral rot of the city and is indignant about the evils therein.

The script for the film was written by Paul Schrader, who takes significantly from Dostoevsky (especially *Notes from Underground*), Camus (*The Stranger*), and Sartre (*Nausea*). The existential nature of the film finds its roots in these works, from which Schrader was also heavily inspired. Moreover, the unreliability of the protagonists in these works further implicates their influence on the film.

The film is told in a way that the viewer feels it and is at least prompted to take the fine line between compassion and uneasiness. Released long after, and in New Hollywood, *Taxi Driver* attracted viewers in a nation which was still recovering from post-Watergate, economic depression, and the post-Vietnam War. These incidents, were somehow an exact reflection of the troubled state of America at that time. It reflected a portrait of alienation that was occupying its streets. Travis is one such example.

The first element that lies at the centre of the film's subtextual power is the narrative strategy of an unreliable narrator. And in such technique, what the filmmaker shows is not to be taken literally. Some of this narrative technique is owed to various literary conventions. Though, in any case, it is as powerful as Scorsese's visual grammar, Schrader's dialogues, Hermann's music, and other things that make this film so relevant. From the outset, we learn that the film is told by Travis's perspective. We hear voice-over from the beginning and the framing shots implement broken perception of the world, possibly harmed by isolation and trauma that can be connected to his experiences in Vietnam. We do not see an objective view but the smog of Travis's mind. This illusion of unreliability here is the workhorse of the machinery of the narrative.

Wayne Booth in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) defines the concept of unreliable narrator and shows values of any particular narrator (here Travis), as unfitting to the true intent of a writer, creating irony and doubt. Due to the focalization of Travis (a concept of Gerald Genette), we see through his view. This traps us to his mental disorganization and breakdown. It is his inability to be legible, that corrupts us to look things clearly as audience.

In this paper, unreliable narration is central to find out how Scorsese applied it in *Taxi Driver*. The paper argues that using these narrative distortions, the film mirrors Travis's deteriorating mental state, while simultaneously drawing us, the audience, into complicity. The film seems to critique the very violence audience seems to romanticise through Travis. The unreliability of Travis is the expression of the moods of that age. City-death urbanisation, the post-Vietnam trauma that cemented a generational species of the dead and the appeal the vigilante identity in a city where antiheroes like Dirty Harry were a type – these all elements were the parts of 1970s American Society. When we come around to the actual meaning of the film, we find ourselves at the gray area of ethics of what this film is all about. Do we cheer the cleansing "rain" that Travis craves early on in the film, or do we flinch from the blood it unleashes? The question is central. It is one of the after-effects of the subjectivity of the film, which advances a collection of films in which the main

characters are unreliable. Examples are many, *Fight Club* (1999) and *Seven* (1995) of David Fincher and obvious and perhaps faulty homage of *Joker* by Todd Phillips, and a host of other movies, which wrestle with inner conflict of their protagonists.

To explore this, narratology and psychological close reading were employed. The modes of cinematic, too, have received close treatment in traditional film theory in an attempt to reveal the socio-historical pulse. The paper refers to such terms as internal focalization and anachronies, which are the time breakages that undermine the fact that Travis is living in the present moment. The paper also draws from Booth's ethics of unreliability and Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1980). Psychologically, the Travis delusions are the focus of Freudian concepts of the uncanny and Lacanian concepts of the gaze, where the delusions of Travis are interpreted as projections of the fractured ego, which is attempting to construct meaning out of the disintegration of the urban 'real'.

Why are we revisiting *Taxi Driver*? Or go 50 years back? Its reflections on a state of facing a state of perceptual disintegration are prescient and timely in an age of digitalization and digital echo-chambers. Travis is not a victim, or a villain, he is the product of that disintegration. His unreliable lens, a product of disintegration, warns us about the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of filth.

Theoretical Framework: Unreliable Narration and Cinematic Subjectivity

It demands a sturdy framework to analyse *Taxi Driver*. As it is dubiously narrated. In Literary Criticism, the unreliable narrator is one whose narration we cannot trust, possibly because of his biased delusion or limited insight. There are numerous examples in literature like these. Wayne C. Booth kicked this off in his 1961 book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. He argued that unreliability emerges when the narrator's "norms" clash with those of the implied author, who is the guiding intelligence behind a tale. It is not about outright lies but a mismatch. The narrator believes their take on things, even if it distorts the truth. Take example of Humbert Humbert in Nabokov's *Lolita*, spinning a seductive web around his predation. In Kubrick's

film adaptation, this translates differently, leaning on images and sound rather than pages, but the principle holds. Scorsese adapts it as well, turning Travis Bickle into a cinematic unreliable focalizer, where his inner world bleeds into every frame.

Gérard Genette's narratological toolkit explains this further. In *Narrative Discourse* (1980), he breaks down the means by focalization. Focalization is the angle from which we view the action into zero (omniscient), internal (through a character's eyes), and external (objective). *Taxi Driver* sticks mostly to internal focalisation via Travis, making his subjectivity the prison of the audience. We do not get a bird's-eye view of New York. It is as if we are somewhat confined to the front seat of Travis's cab, seeing the world through his eyes. This arrangement results in what Genette refers to as "anachronies". These "anachronies" signify changes in time, such as flashbacks which are not quite flashbacks but intense overlays of the present. They bring together his reflection with the images to form a quatrain of the present and the past. Genette's model sheds light on how these transitions do not only bewilder us, but also reveal his recurring trauma.

In a sense, cinema is asking us to relate this uncertainty and ambiguity to the footage just as well. Novels, in their reliance on prose, show doubt sometimes even in a hesitating phrase or a conspicuous contradiction, whereas films resort to mise en scène, cinematography and editing to depict such untrustworthiness. Besides, voice-over can be seen as another way of internal monologue.

Nevertheless, in the film *Taxi Driver*, it is rather an ironic voice. Travis, through his narration, expresses his desire for a world to be pure ("someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets") while the camera shots that accompany him are of the same streets, where people are seen selling their bodies under the barely lit signs. What he says and what the camera shows are two different things. The words are conflicting with the images similar to those in the movie *Fight Club* where the narrator's speeches hide a feeling of separation. The use of point-of-view shots exaggerates this, making us see through Travis's eyes; the low-angle tilts on leering johns or slow zooms on Betsy in a porn theatre are not neutral; they have been contaminated by his sexual desire

and have become threats or temptations. This can be termed, as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson in their *Film Art* (1979) refer to it as, subjective point of view, and is a manipulation instrument that does not present, but rather affects the audience with the false front of the character.

Travis, however, is not abstract, but probably a case of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) where his hyper-vigilance and intrusive thoughts are maladaptive to reality. It is the Vietnam veteran of this kind who has re-created the world as seen through the hazard. In a 1978 VA report by Egendorf, it was discovered that urban noise caused him to bring back the combat flashbacks. PTSD's prehistory of PTSD creates the perfect conditions for shell shock. Travis embodies this. His diary is an autobiographical stream of consciousness monologue. From banal ("They are all animals anyway") and to the messianic ("I am God's lonely man"). What we see in Travis's case is how familiarity is made strange by repression. The ghetto of the city does not need to be literally ghetto, but the suppressed horrors of war projected onto 'pimps' and 'whores'. Lacan carries it further with his concept of gaze. Travis is not gazing per se, he is creating a paranoid history of himself as an avenging angel. His interactions with everyone, scream this. He reads Betsy's politeness and sophistication as flirtation. He also sees Iris's fears as damsel-in-distress. Critics believe that it is a effect of an ideological failure, in which the failure of social connection is filled by a delusional element in person's character, as examined by Slavoj Žižek in *The Perverts Guide to Cinema* (2006).

These strands, narratological, cinematic and psychological, create a net of disintegration in Travis's mind. Such a narrative cannot be called window dressing, but it is the sort of thing that is created when alienation introduces lethal action to life. These, Booth calls them, are the tellers, who box us in and ultimately replace the veils to discover the truth.

Cinematic Techniques Constructing Narrative Unreliability

Taxi driver is a visual attack of acoustic intensity and all the fragments, angles, and superimpositions that lead to the malformed Travisian lens. Voice-

over narration, contradictions, point-of-view shooting create an illusion, and not just tell a story. These cinematic techniques put us, the audience, at the centre of the madness of disorienting Travis.

Voice-Over Narration and Contradictions

Nothing displays Travis's unreliability more loudly than his voice-over. Scorsese and Schrader use it sparingly in the film. However, it is very surgical in nature. Its internal focalisation is at its most intimate. Travis mostly speaks in clipped, aphoristic bursts. The famous line, "I got some bad ideas in my head", showcase the rot that is eating up his mind.

Consider the sequence in which Travis first spots Betsy in her campaign office. The camera lingers on her through the window, soft daylight haloing her like a beacon amidst the grime. His voice-over kicks in: "She appeared like an angel... clean and pure." It's romantic, almost lyrical. It evokes film noir dames but stripped of cynicism. We lean in, buying the poetry, until the visuals pull the rug out. As he enters, the office buzzes with mundane chatter. Betsy's smile is polite, professional, not the flirtatious spark he narrates. The contradiction hits like a slap. His words paint courtship, but the diegesis shows awkwardness. Later, when she rejects him after the porn theater fiasco, Travis's voice-over doesn't rage, it muses. The flat delivery undercuts the humiliation on screen. This mismatch signals the narrator's flawed norms: Travis can't parse social cues, so he rewrites them as epic quests.

These voice-overs pepper the film, each one a misinterpretation that deepens his isolation. In the start of the film he laments, "All the animals come out at night—queens, fairies, dopers, junkies, sick, venal." To him, it is a biblical plague. To us, it's just New Yorkers hustling. This irony creates moral confusion. Do we trust the voice's disgust, or the image's reality? Scholars such as Amy Taubin, in her *Taxi Driver (BFI Film Classics)* (1991), have noted how this technique is similar to Schrader's Calvinist roots. For Schrader, sin is real, but the sinner's eye is blind.

Point-of-View Shots and Subjective Distortion

Scorsese does not hesitate to use point-of-

view shots as much as he wants. This is similar to subjective distortion. Such shots link directly to the theme of urban alienation, which kind of shows the city of New York being a hostile organism that feeds his perceptual breakdown.

These, however, are nowhere stronger than his interactions with other characters. Through these point-of-view shots, we can see his delusional projections. For example, consider Iris. She seems as the innocence that is idealised to compensate for Travis's bleak view of the world. This is further deepened by shallow depth of field camera work that concentrates only on her, and blurs other characters like the pimp, Sport, in the background. When we look at the subjective camera work, we realise that we are searching for targets along with Travis. It seems that we too have a place in his savior complex.

Selective Editing and Fragmentation

In making *Taxi Driver*, editing seems like an architect of chaos. Editing done by Thelma Schoonmaker, Scorsese's long-time collaborator, is as sharp as possible. The social misfires are the final fruit of this art of selective montage that is used in the film.

To understand the effectiveness of editing in the film, take the case of the scene where Travis goes on with date with Betsy. The editing is not smooth here. And it is purposefully so. Schoonmaker evolves a space that is discontinuous in meanstreets of Scorsese. In the end, editing does not narrate, it disintegrates, constructing a reality as piecemeal of Travis's mind.

Psychological Fragmentation: Alienation, Trauma, and Vigilante Identity ***Urban Alienation and Social Misinterpretation***

New York in *Taxi Driver* does not act like a backdrop, but rather like an antagonist. Travis drifts through this city as an outsider. His voice-over catalogues the people not with curiosity but contempt. This is not a neutral reportage, it is misinterpretation that is born out of disconnection. Travis does not seem to adapt, he narrates over it.

The core of Travis's trauma seems to lie in the dialectic of repression and testimonies. It is his inability to speak and the need to speak that

decentre him in relation to others in society. Paul Russell in his book, *Trauma, Repetition, and Affect Regulation* (1998), describes how victims of trauma, here Travis, mostly demonstrate “a failure of recognition” of the cause of their emotional deficiencies. This is because there is a rupture of language. This is seen in how Travis is not able to interact or communicate his troubles. The trauma transfers into alienation. This also makes the subject impotent, creating decentering which is only overcome in the film by cathartic violence.

Travis feels like the last man standing, and his insomnia seems a metaphor for the era’s rootlessness. Film critic, Robert Phillip Kolker, even describes Bickle “as a radically alienated urban castoff, a mutant produced by the incalculable dehumanization of post-industrial society” (Kolker, 1988: 194) His diary frames the multiculturalism present in the city as “scum” to be hosed away. Travis continually looks up to black youth in a demeaning way. This selective gaze, ignoring shared humanity, mirrors real 1970s decay.

Post-Vietnam Trauma and Delusional Narratives

Bickle’s story is not specific, nor his background. However, there is constant indication of an element of war trauma in his past. The war haunts Taxi Driver as spectral presence. It is his trauma that fuels his delusions. One can observe that Travis Bickle suffers from PTSD. The 1980 DSM-III would codify it later, but in 1976, vets like Travis navigated a void of recognition, their “shell shock” was dismissed as weakness.

The film’s 1970s release hit amid vet suicides spiking, over 100,000 by some counts, yet Hollywood peddled Rambo before Rambo. Robert Ray argued that “*Taxi Driver* allegorized the American experience in Vietnam: detached isolationism followed by violent, and ultimately ineffective, intervention” (Ray, 1985: 360) Scorsese subverts, using Travis’s focalization to expose the cost: delusions aren’t escape but escalation. His narrative fractures are not despite the war, but because of it.

Vigilante Identity Construction

Travis feels completely disconnected from everyone around him. This isolation pushes him

toward his most dangerous fantasy of becoming a vigilante hero. He’s not just daydreaming. He is desperately trying to rebuild his identity by turning himself from victim into avenger. This is the result of the existential crisis he goes through, which is induced by his traumatic experiences in the past. (Traumatic events...violate the victim’s faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis. Herman, 1992: 50)

Scorsese shows this transformation through Travis’s increasingly unreliable storytelling. His voice-over changes from a sad complaint to an angry manifesto. The editing makes his practice sessions look like epic preparations for battle. This reflects the 1970s mindset.

After Watergate, people didn’t trust institutions anymore. This bred lone wolf types like Travis, who saw society’s failures as permission to take justice into their own hands. The process starts small. Travis writes in his diary about “getting organized.” His voice-over criticizes politician Palantine’s empty promises. His unreliable perspective flips his weaknesses into strengths. When Betsy dumps him and cops ignore him, Travis misreads his powerlessness as a prophetic calling. His trauma transforms shame into mission.

Close Textual Analysis: Key Scenes and Audience Implication

Theory and themes converge in the film’s flesh-and-blood moments, where Scorsese’s unreliability hits the hardest. This section dives into three sequences and to see how they use the art of distortion in makes us internalize it.

The Betsy Courtship Sequence

Nothing proves Travis’s unreliability than his non-stop pursuit of Betsy. When he first sees her, he describes her like a pleasant dream (“She appeared like an Angel, out of this filthy mess. They cannot touch her.”) To understand the film, it is very important to see how Travis meets Betsy in the campaign office. The subjective shots bring us right into the scene with the action. From her work desk, Betsy (Cybill Shepherd) looks at a cab outside the window. Travis is staring at her through his taxi. We can see here that Travis is obsessed with her. In his

mind, she is an angel among animals. The camera is making a special effort to showcase her. Thus, she is kept away from other people. Volunteers in the office, including her co-workers are blurred into nothingness. The focus is on her, and rest is just a noise.



Figure 5.1 Travis meets Betsy. *Taxi Driver* (1976). Directed by Martin Scorsese

The genius of the scene lies in the fact that everything is conveyed through implications. This is a manifestation of narcissistic projection. Thematically, it exposes the gender identities of 1970s because the rescue mission of Travis is not tainted by ill motives but, instead, is performed in good faith. Without realising it, he is chasing patriarchal ideals, and the dichotomy of the angel and the whore is central to understanding how Travis sees women.

He cannot communicate with Betsy or Iris without this internalised drive to save or be a saviour. When he asks Betsy on a date, he remarks, “You’re a very lonely person.” Which is far from the truth. It is *his* loneliness, not hers. His alienation turns into flirtation and ultimately into felony.

Diary Entries and the “Someday a Real Rain” Monologue

The central object of Travis’s unreliability is his diary. His voice-over vignette are very rich resources to study his psyche. It is apparent in his “someday a real rain...” monologue. This quote sounds rather biblical except that visuals in the film contradict this. The diary’s entries showcase his psychological fragmentation. There is no continuity or reflexivity of thought. Rather, his diary entries indicate displacement and repression. (Baker, 2014:373-395)



Figure 5.2 Travis writing his journal. *Taxi Driver* (1976). Directed by Martin Scorsese

While Travis’s monologue sounds like a soliloquy, its confession is laced with contradiction. We are addicted to the poetry of his monologue because we all wish to have a reset in chaos. Travis narrates godhood, ignoring his own “scumminess” (stalking, arming). Žižek might call it ideological fantasy, the big Other’s failure projected Outward.

In one of his diary entries, he wrote, “I do not believe that one should devote his life to morbid self-attention. I believe that one should become a person like other people, “he seems to be longing to be like ‘others. His diary entries are thus unsuccessful attempts to navigate social systems that he cannot comprehend or fit into. His voice-overs, when he reads his diaries, are filtered through his skewed sense of the world. Thus, the unreliability of his monologues is central to the film’s motive.

Climactic Confrontation and Moral Ambiguity

The climax of the film offers rich insights into understanding Travis’s distorted descriptions. The violent ending scene is also one of the very few instances where he is able to exercise his power. The brothel raid scene erupts as *an* unreliable crescendo. The bloody scene in the end is where heroism and horror entwine. Travis storms in, mohawked and armed, “rescuing” Iris. A voice-over is absent here. However, there is unreliability. Taubin, like many other critics, argues that the scene is a hallucination and not an actual reality, “the hallucination of masculinity. It’s the search for that image of ideal masculine wholeness that subtends the entire history of the movies” (Taubin, 2000: 21). On initial viewing, one might make the mistake of taking the ending on its literal terms. Thinking it to be Travis’s character arc, where he achieves his goal of “rescuing Iris” and earning Betsy’s adoration. But that doesn’t seem to be the case.

The cuts accelerate, pump-action blasts intercut with Iris’s screams. In this particular scene, Travis’s delusion peaks. He narrates nothing here, but his actions scream savior. Post-raid, headlines hail him as hero. Contrary to the accusations, Scorsese subverts glorification here. Violence seduces visually, with all the gore and blood. However, editing exposes hollowness and moral ambiguity.

Slavoj Žižek (2005) designates the film’s climax as a representation of passage à l’acte. The passage à l’acte is sort of a “false exit, a way to avoid confronting the horror of the phantasmatic netherworld” (Žižek, 2006: 59). Travis creates this hallucination for himself, of him being a saviour.

Conclusion: Legacy and Significance

Taxi Driver finishes with Travis driving through the city, visibly content. He seems satisfied with the idea of ‘rescuing Iris’. However, we still cannot tell what is real and what is just his fantasy.

Throughout the movie, Scorsese employs deliberate methods to depict this ambiguity and unreliability. Travis’s internal monologues, ramblings, and awkward interactions via subjective camerawork and sharp editing, along with the chilling music, all give us a glimpse of how confused his mind is. All this adds up to showcase the illusion within his mind.

The film does not idolise Travis or his killing spree. Rather, it conveys the condemnation of such mode of thought by making us be present in the mental landscape of Travis. The unreliability of his character is very important in the movie, as it is used to reveal the workings of society. Ultimately, this kind of narrative was a risk for both Schrader and Scorsese. Regardless, it opened the door for subjective cinema where ‘Travis types’ became cultural seismographs.

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