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First Paper

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Martin Scorsese’s Director’s Message in *Taxi Driver*

The film that I will write about is Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* in 1976. The director’s message that Martin Scorsese was trying to portray in the film was that someone could be mentally unstable but would look completely ‘normal’ to us. The same person could do a kind or heroic act like saving someone from a life they weren’t meant for such as prostitution and still be mentally unstable. The elements that prove this as the director’s message are the dialogue, the sound effects, and the music.

The film is about Travis Bickle, an ex-Marine and Vietnam War veteran, who is living in New York City. Suffering from insomnia, he spends his time as a taxi driver at night, watches porn movies at very seedy cinemas during the day, or thinking about how the world has deteriorated into a cesspool, particularly New York. Travis is a loner with strong opinions about what is wrong and right with mankind. The only bright spot in New York humanity, to him, is Betsy, a worker on the presidential campaign for Senator Charles Palantine. He soon becomes obsessed with her; but after incident with her, he decides to do whatever it takes to make the world a better place in his opinion. To start, Travis tries to be the savior of Iris, a twelve-year-old runaway and prostitute who he believes wants out of the profession and under the thumb of her pimp and lover, Matthew.

Travis seems to be suffering from PTSD but didn’t know that was why he had trouble fitting back into society. The only way he could cope was to drive a New York taxi at night. He acted the only way he knew how to after coming back from the war and he might have thought that Betsy would help in some way. Betsy, however, tried to give Travis a chance after their first date but soon realized that something wrong with him. She didn’t even ask him about his past and try to get him to talk about it. She is a little at fault for causing Travis to start stalking her to the point of obsession. Soon his attention gets drawn to the prostitutes then to Iris and her pimp, Matthew. Travis wanted Iris to have a better life for her but she was against it in the beginning. But, she soon sees what Travis was doing for her and seems to be happier in her life since she returned home. Matthew didn’t want to let Iris go and told Travis off. He didn’t want to lose any business and didn’t want to lose any of his ‘assets’ because one man told him to release one girl.

The spoken dialogue in the film shows how dark New York was at the time of the film. The dialogue in the film shows in the beginning how Travis talks about what kind of ‘scum’ that comes out at night and the kind of feelings he has toward them as well as how they need to be cleaned out of the streets. His dialogue and feelings change near the middle or so into the film when he buys some guns illegally. After that particular moment, Travis’ dialogue changes to how he is going to shoot the politician which fails to saving Iris from the punk she was with. The change of dialogue for Travis shows that he was mildly unstable to highly unstable near the middle of the film but wasn’t seen as unstable in the end but as a hero.

The sound effects in a film give it that kind of authenticity to how things might play out in the real world to some extent. In *Taxi Driver*, how some of the bad people died seems over-dramatic and not how someone would actually die. The sound of people dying doesn’t match up with how people actually die in real life with the probable exception of the pimp going after Travis and the man screaming, “I’ll kill you!” over and over after having his fingers shot off as well as probably being shot again in the torso. But, in the film, nothing is meant to match with reality exactly but close enough to it to be believable. If there weren’t any sound effects in the film, the film would sound like a silent film with color and might take way the entire affect of the film.

The music also adds to how someone can be mentally unstable by changing how the music is played and the mood. When the music plays, it gives us clues on how the person may be feeling to allow us to feel the same. The music of any film is important to its success and how to know what to keep an eye on in the scene. Throughout the film, the music told us the mood but in other scenes, the music wasn’t there at all to give us a very creepy feel to the scene. When there is an absence of music in a scene, an unnatural feel comes over you as you watch. Music could also transport you into the film and actually feel like you are being chased or whatever is going on in the film at the moment.

The three elements combined together make the director’s message stand out and show that someone can look completely ‘normal’ to us but be mentally unstable. In reality, we can’t really tell if someone is mentally unstable or not but we assume that the person is mentally unstable by what they do and say. In *Taxi Driver*, we can tell that Travis is mentally unstable by the way he talks and how he acts at certain times in the film but is not going on a killing spree until near the end of the film to save Iris. In the beginning, Travis seems like the mentally unstable person who likes porno movies and stalking people as was the case with Betsey from the politician’s campaign center.

In the end, the elements that have proven the director’s message are the dialogue, the sound effects, and the music. In every film, there needs a balance of all three elements to make what is going on in the film be believable and clear to the audience who is watching it. Martin Scorsese was able to pull the story of the film across with all three elements and still have a few tricks up his sleeves to give the film an extra piece of pizzazz by distancing his audience from his main character. Even though this film was not my favorite, the film was done really well and was able to keep up with the plot of the film.