

# Flâneur of the Urban Decay: Martin Scorsese's Taxi Driver

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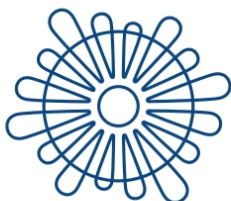
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Odjel za anglistiku

Diplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti

**Krešimira Polegubić**

**FLÂNEUR OF THE URBAN DECAY:  
MARTIN SCORSESE'S TAXI DRIVER**

**Diplomski rad**

Zadar, 2022.

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Flâneur of the Urban Decay: Martin Scorsese's Taxi Driver

Diplomski rad

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Zadar, 2022.



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Zadar, 2022.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the analyses of film and literary narratives, spaces and places tend to be perceived merely as parts of the setting, and a backdrop for the plot. However, in correspondence with the interrelationship between social sciences and humanities, the theories on the spatiality of human experience have provided a framework for a more complex analysis of the narrated space and, correspondingly, for new interpretations of textual and visual narratives. The spatial experience was often described in binary oppositions of space and place, the dichotomy of which is based on the ascription of meaning. Place is, therefore, described as a meaningful space towards which people have formed an emotional attachment. The attachment to a certain place presupposes a practical dimension of experiencing space, described as “thirdspace” by the theorist Edward Soja. Thirdspace appears a subversion of the traditional dual paradigm within the “trialectics of space”, a notion first constructed by Henri Lefebvre. Soja applies the concepts of trialectics and “thirdspace” to the analysis of the lived experience in the urban space, which is inherently defined by its rapid development and the unique economic and social conditions created by industrialisation and urbanisation.

The buzzing metropolis seems to evoke the feeling of excitement and thrill; however, it also seems to involve a more sinister undertone of instability and fear. Georg Simmel describes the individual experience in the big city as nerve-numbing, as the overstimulation that the urban life provides ultimately leads to indifference and isolation. Such attitude may lead to a lack of social and moral values, which, together with the overwhelming immensity of the city and its crowds, provides fertile soil for crime and corruption. This fear of the city and its looming shadows, which seems to be deep-rooted in the human psyche, was reflected in various narrative forms and even employed as a means of manipulation and propaganda. Steve Macek refers to the anxiety over the city’s allegedly criminal nature as urban paranoia and points to the fact that such fear is heightened during times of urban crises. The post-industrial crisis which struck the American metropolises serves as an example of how urban paranoia can be ideologically marked and employed, inevitably affecting the perception of urban spaces and the urban experience.

The individual experience in a big city is narratively reflected in the figure of the *flâneur* or the stroller, a literary type who emerged with the rapid urbanisation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While Charles Baudelaire defines the *flâneur* as a passionate observer of the city's crowds, Walter Benjamin's definition of *flâneur* surpasses the harmless observation of the city and introduces a more active participant of the urban society. Correspondingly, the idle stroller narratively evolved into a detective or a journalist whose *flânerie* has a more defined purpose rather than aesthetic observation. However, according to Benjamin, the *flâneur*, affected by the city's threatening atmosphere, harbours the potential to become a sinister figure himself. Benjamin provides the example of Edgar Allan Poe's *flâneur* in "The Man of the Crowd" as a depiction of a more violent, aggressive figure, intrinsically linked to crime.

In *Taxi Driver* (1976), directed by Martin Scorsese situates the concept of the city *flânerie* in a rather specific temporal and spatial context: a neurotic Vietnam veteran famously portrayed by Robert De Niro deals with his insomnia by driving the night taxi through crime-ridden, morally corrupted streets of New York, looking for a sense of purpose and unavoidably veering towards violence. Such context allows the figure of the *flâneur* to escape the theoretical boundaries of a passive and objective observer and (d)evolve into an embodiment of a darker, more unstable urban experience. Although Scorsese employs the gritty image of New York amid its darkest period marked by economic crisis and urban squalor, and De Niro's Travis Bickle conveys the post-Vietnam neurosis, the film cannot be reduced to a social critique.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the urban experience of Travis Bickle, the protagonist of *Taxi Driver*, as *flânerie* through the crisis-stricken post-industrial city of the 1970s in order to provide an insight into the cinematic and artistic employment of the American city in decline, and urban space in general. The analysis will begin with an overview of Edward Soja's trialectics of space in order to establish a theoretical framework for the examination of the spatial experience. The psychological and sociological aspect of the way we perceive and experience the city life will be explained using the ideas of George Simmel, which will, along with Steve Macek's theories on the fear and foreignness of the urban, serve as a guideline to observe the depiction of post-industrial New York in *Taxi Driver*. *Flânerie* will be theoretically defined

using the ideas of Benjamin, Baudelaire, Poe, as well as feminist theoreticians, and then connected to Soja's interpretation of spatial experience, in order to analyse Travis Bickle as an urban crisis *flâneur*.

## 2. THE TRIALECTICS OF SPACE

Before the analysis of any type of spatial practice, it is important to recognise that the concepts in which humans usually describe their spatial experience are socially constructed. Tim Cresswell identifies places as the basic coordinates which define a spatial experience, parts of space to which humans have assigned a certain meaning (10). Meaningless spaces are therefore transformed into places by processes such as naming cities, villages, parks, and buildings; decorating and creating our own homes, and forming an emotional attachment with locations we occupy during our lifetime (5). Place-making appears to be an essential part of how humans interact with their surroundings and conduct their lives and is, as such, explored within the field of human geography (1). Human geographers have developed numerous theories on the interrelation between humans and places, most of which focus on the binary oppositions within the spatial experience, such as the aforementioned dichotomy between spaces and places, along with oppositions of "objective/subjective; material/mental; real/imagined" (38). In order to challenge the dualism which marks the discourse on spatiality, theorist Edward Soja has proposed the notion of "trialectics of spatiality", taking into consideration the practiced and lived aspect of a place, due to which it becomes an unstable, dynamic notion (38).

Soja's theory is based on the work of Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre, who established the trialectics of spatiality, containing three types of spaces: the "perceived" and "real" space which refers to the "materialized, socially produced, empirical space", the "conceived" and "imagined" space implying written and mental ideas on space along with "representations of power and ideology, of control and surveillance", and ultimately, a practiced and lived space which therefore encompasses both the real and the imagined aspect and represents not only "the spatial representation of power", but the "power of spatial



representations” (*Thirdspace* 66-68). Soja develops his terminology for Lefebvre’s concepts, with “Firstspace” coinciding with Lefebvre’s real space as a concrete, empirically mappable phenomenon, “Secondspace” as an equivalent to the imagined space which is created by subjective ideas of space “in mental or cognitive forms”, and “Thirdspace” which includes the previous two notions as a lived space (*Thirdspace* 10). While spatial theories were mostly based on the dichotomy between Firstspace and Secondspace, Soja suggests that Thirdspace offers a completely different way of understanding and discussing the spatiality of life. Thirdspace represents a new form of “spatial awareness”, which emerged during the urban and spatial crisis of the late 1960s in the process of “thirling spatial awareness” as a concept that both encompasses the established duality and allows the broadening of its scope (*Thirdspace* 10-11). The expansion of focus allows a more interdisciplinary approach to spatiality, which, along with historicity and sociality, permeates all spheres of social life as “even in the realm of pure abstraction, ideology, and representation, there is a pervasive and pertinent, if often hidden, spatial dimension” (*Thirdspace* 46).

Soja notes that Lefebvre’s disruption of dualism, caused by the introduction of a third concept, allows the inclusion of otherness to the discourse (*Thirdspace* 60). This strategy, which Soja names “thirling-as-Othering” grants Thirdspace access to additional “othernesses” which can serve as a starting point for critical analyses and ensure further development of “spatial knowledge” (*Thirdspace* 61). These potential analyses are based on the fact that practiced and lived space is permeated “with politics and ideology, with the real and the imagined intertwined, and with capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and other material spatial practices that concretize the social relations of production, reproduction, exploitation, domination, and subjection” on every level, from individual “corpo-reality of the body and mind” to a more global scale of collective identity (*Thirdspace* 68).

The notion that spatiality is socially constructed at micro and macro level, and as such, it is prone to change and susceptible to the influence of social relations and power dynamics was rather revolutionary, leading to a paradigm shift in the perception of the spatial dimension. Soja acknowledges Michel Foucault’s

contribution to the creation of Thirdspace by citing his remark on the different perceptions of space and time in humanities and social sciences: while time was traditionally regarded as “richness, fecundity, life, dialectic”, space was devalued as “dead fixed, undialectical, immobile” (*Thirdspace* 15). Foucault’s critique therefore played an important role in the exploration of spatiality of human life and its equivalence with historicity and sociality, and consequently, in the analysis of Thirdspace. In his book *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*, Soja analyses the urban space by applying the strategy of “putting space first” as a subversion of the traditional analysis in which cities were viewed “primarily as an architecturally built environment, a physical container for human activities (...) and a host of non-spatial but distinctly social and historical processes of urban development” while “its more dynamic, generative, developmental qualities” were disregarded (*Postmetropolis* 9). In correspondence to Foucault’s critique, cityspace was viewed as “a constructed stage-set for dynamic social and historical processes”, contrary to “urban history and the historical development of urban society” which was “privileged and prioritized” in the analysis of the corresponding processes (*Postmetropolis* 9).

Soja’s analysis of the city was also influenced by Lefebvre, one of the most important urbanists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who demonstrated his theory on spatialization on the example of urban space. On the basis of Lefebvre’s work and his own interpretation of the trialectics of space, Soja develops the trialectics of cityspace by defining the city as a set of concrete forms and specific practices of urban way of life from a Firstspace perspective, which appears to be the dominant perspective in the interpretation of urban space, and a “mental or ideational” cityspace from the perspective of Secondspace, encompassing “urban imaginery”, such as a mental map of the city, the notion of urban utopia, ideas, thoughts and discourses about urban space. In respect of Thirdspace, “spatial specificity of urbanism” is to be investigated as an “active arena of development and change, conflict and resistance, an impelling force affecting all aspects of our lives” (*Postmetropolis* 11). While spatiality begins “with the body, with the construction and performance of the self”, humans are inextricably linked to space around them, as we construct the space around us and the collectively constructed spaces simultaneously influence our actions and thoughts to an

extent far greater than we realise (*Postmetropolis* 6). The investigation of a lived, real-and-imagined cityspace, therefore, requires both microscale and macroscale focus: it should observe the everyday life on the city streets, as well as the city and the urban society “as a whole”, keeping in mind “that no lived space is ever completely knowable” (*Thirdspace* 310). According to Soja, there has been an obvious partiality of the micro perspective in contemporary urban studies, the preferred viewpoint being “the intimate geography of everyday” voiced by the “intensely localized *flâneur*” (*Thirdspace* 312-313). The microgeography which examines “the body, the streetscape, psychogeographies, erotic subjectivities” often reads the everyday city life as a display of a “dominating masculinist voyeurism”, undermining the macrospatial perspective (*Thirdspace* 21). As a solution of the micro vs. macro debate, Soja once again proposes a trialectal understanding which would offer “an-Other way” of reading urban space by including both micro and macro spatiality, local along with the global, the view from above and from below, while simultaneously transcending these concepts and forming new narratives (*Thirdspace* 21).

### 3. THE CITY

The particularity of the urban experience is inextricably connected to the city’s spatial and social specificity. The development of the city and the “urban society” occurred simultaneously with rapid industrialisation and economic growth (Lefebvre 2). Industrial production, along with mass consumption has significantly altered the urban life, amplifying the opposition between the urban and the rural, peasant way of life. Ever since the first cities appeared, there seems to be a preconception about the malevolent, abnormal nature of the city, in contrast to the village, where life is regarded as pure and simple. The development of the city in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which saw the appearance of large metropolitan centres, has certainly intensified the pre-existing anxieties and fears: European industrial cities have therefore been described as immoral, dismal, and frightening, and similar descriptions have been assigned to the expanding American metropolises (Macek 41). Furthermore, rapid urbanisation has

transformed the city into a place of production, consumption, buying and selling, which has irreversibly affected the mentality of its dwellers, their social relations, as well as the general dynamic of everyday life. In his essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, sociologist Georg Simmel examines the alterations of personality one must undergo in order to adapt to the forces of the big city.

Simmel correlates the urban existence with the emotional overstimulation provided by the constant “shift of external and internal stimuli” (11). Due to its hectic pace, the metropolis is overflowing with stimuli, standing in stark contrast to the “slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm (...) of small town and rural existence”. While rural life relies heavily on emotional connections and steady compliance with unwritten rules, the metropolitan life is characterised by intellect and rationality, as a means “of protection of the inner life against the domination of the metropolis” (12). The “intellectualistic attitude” is inseparable from the “money economy” which controls the metropolis and permeates everyday life with “weighing, calculating, enumerating”, creating a new system of values based solely on financial gain (13). The urban alienation, along with the overstimulation of senses ultimately leads to the “blasé attitude”, commonly associated with urban residents: rapidly changing stimuli excite the nerves to the highest degree possible and, as, a response to the sensory hyperawareness, the nervous system protects itself by ceasing to produce any sort of reaction, resulting in apathy and indifference (14).

The blasé outlook significantly shapes, or rather impairs the interpersonal relationships between city dwellers, which can be described as rather reserved towards one another, their apathy serving as a means to protect them from the chaos of the urban life. It is simply psychologically and physically impossible to establish a close contact with strangers within the agglomeration of so many different people, greatly differing from the closely connected communities of the small towns, marked with amicable cordiality and familiarity. The lack of genuine reaction created by the façade of indifference may also mask darker, more dangerous feelings of “aversion, mutual strangeness and repulsion”, which can potentially reveal themselves in the explosion of “hatred and conflict” (15). The individual animosity and reserve also seem to stem from the “developmental tendencies of the social life as a whole”: the social organization of

communities relies heavily on the differentiation and separation from other antagonistic groups which could potentially threaten its stability. Simmel claims that numerically and spatially big, metropolitan groups may hinder the establishment of such tendencies, however, various social forces controlled by interest groups may influence their restoration (16). Steve Macek notes that in times of crises, when the city's economy would plummet and crime rates would escalate, the threatening group, which the society deemed dangerous, would purposefully include the city's marginalised, lower-class citizens, who then became the focus of the antiurban anxieties and fears (xiii). This seemed to be the case during the social and economic crisis of the American post-industrial metropolis when the mass media and various types of representation played a crucial role in the formation of negative public opinion on the origin of the crisis, the nature of the city dwellers, and the urban life itself (xv). While the depictions of the city as frightening and corrupt created a hysteria which had a detrimental effect on the city and its dwellers, such climate also seemed to create possibilities for the new analysis of the urbanscape, the reconsideration of established discourses, and artistic exploration.

### 3.1. The Urban Paranoia

Macek notes that the anti-urban anxiety is ingrained in Western civilization, even having its roots in religious tradition: the Bible often refers to the city as wicked and sinful, as seen from the treatment of colossal cities such as "Babel, Sodom, and Gomorrah" (41). While some ancient cities were highly praised, the historical development of the city generally corresponds to the growing disrepute of the city. As cities became more important and urban areas became more populated, so evolved the negative attitude associated with the city, which was marked as "wild, treacherous, and malevolent" and became "the focus of anxieties once attached to nature" (41).

Industrialisation, which caused a rapid expansion of the city and growth of the urban population, also elicited bigger, towering buildings; overcrowded slums, air pollution caused by the rising smoke from numerous chimneys, providing the city with a gloomy, formidable shroud (41). The writers of the time

period therefore often employed the city as a setting for terrifying experiences, hazed in a cloud of smoke, noise, and dusk (42). The beginning of the industrial revolution also led to the concentration of the working-class population in the overcrowded, poorly built slums, which the upper-class observed with uneasiness, gradually transforming into paranoia. Macek claims that the paranoia stems from the realisation of the fortunately situated intellectuals, writers, and journalists that the “human detritus” occupying the overcrowded slums is shunned by the same economic system which grants them their privileged lifestyle (43). Consequently, an image of the urban poor was constructed as a means of projecting “the sources of social anxiety” onto the antagonised, easily-targeted social groups. The vocabulary and the concepts which are used in such descriptions seem to be internalised to such an extent that they are still traceable in today’s discourse on urban life (43).

While the critique of the slum was often disguised as concern over public health and safety, the discourse on inner-city issues was usually permeated by a sense of repulsion and disgust. The neighbourhoods which housed the working class were described as a site of “filth, scum and contagion”, which represents a predisposition for the immoral and criminal behaviour (43-44). The language which was employed in the description of the urban poor was often connected to animals or beasts, which was an attempt to exclude them from the rest of society (45). This ostracism was particularly evident within the American urban paranoia which was undoubtedly racially marked, as most of the urban poor were newly arrived immigrants “from Italy, Ireland, Russia, China, and Eastern Europe or Black migrants from the South”, viewed as the parasites of the American city (45). The rising social and economic issues within the immigrant communities were exclusively blamed on the degeneration associated with foreignness, instead on the harmful and biased urban policies. The urban poor is therefore portrayed as “threatening, filthy, amoral, and absolutely Other”, as a part of the discourse which dates back to the Victorian era and serves as a way to not only transform the urban poor into the object of hate, but also to depict their problems as “self-caused” (50). This representation was employed in the transitive period of post-industrialisation which caused economic and social issues for a great number of American cities.

### 3.2. The Urban Crisis

In the 1960s, an urban crisis erupted in the American metropolises, marking the end of the “long post-war economic boom in the advanced industrial countries” (Soja *Postmetropolis* 97). Industrial capitalism, which was the basis of the American post-war urban economy, created a fertile ground for social divisions and economic crisis, as it was characterised by “mass suburbanization, the rise of an automobile-based culture of consumerism, the decline of the inner city, increasing segregation and ghettoization (...) and the rapid growth of the middle class” (Soja *Postmetropolis* 98). The urban crisis, which spread over the succeeding decades, was accompanied by anxiety about the disorder caused by the decadence of the city life and the misbehaviour of its dwellers, whereby the corrupt inner city was opposed to the pristine and righteous suburbs. The media representations of the city, in particular, played a significant role in the propagation of anxiety over the violence and immorality which supposedly pervades the urban space and generates economic and social issues in the American city. The anti-urban depiction of the crisis in the media was certainly ideologically and politically marked, as a product of the dominant social forces which benefit from the promotion of the urban panic.

The American post-industrial urban paranoia can be observed as a consequence of intertwined racial, demographic and social issues stemming from the post-war separatization amid which the white middle and upper class deserted the city centres and settled in the suburbs, while the inner city became populated mostly by poverty-stricken Latino and African American citizens (Macek 3). Although harmful urban policies were the principal cause of the deterioration of the central city, which gradually became characterised by unemployment, crime, and poverty; the discourse on the urban crisis was mostly controlled by conservative interest groups who opted for the deflection of blame. The media discourse, under the thumb of the right-wing politicians who attempted to legitimise their policies by blaming the issues of the inner city on its unruly inhabitants, therefore lead to the stigmatization and othering of “an already disadvantaged and unfairly marginalized” social group. The depiction of the urban as immoral was

intrinsically laced with “racism, privatism, anti-urbanism, and extreme individualism”, which were the elements of the white middle-class suburban mentality (Macek 2).

Macek claims that ever since the nineteenth century, there seems to have existed a tendency to suburbanise the American city, as the elite would retreat into the suburbs to avoid the inner-city “noise, pollution, and crime” (4). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century cars became the backbone of the transportation system and the consumer society, allowing the suburban residents to easily reach the city centre, on which they still relied economically. The suburbanisation also coincides with the American principle of individuality and privatism, which was reflected in the systematic effort to place every white family into its own, stand-alone home (5). While the Great Depression and the Second World War halted the settlement in the suburbs, in the post-war period, suburbanisation was encouraged through cost-effective mortgages and loans given to veterans who could raise their middle-class families in the newly built suburban housing (7). When the middle-class population deserted the inner city, many facilities dependent on their consumption located there, such as shops, theatres, bars, department stores collapsed, causing great economic problems (10). Suburban exodus also prompted significant demographic changes, as it mostly included the population of the Caucasian race, leaving the city to the minority communities, and giving the urban crisis a racial dimension (11). One of the biggest demographic shifts, which greatly affected the racial composition of the city, was the mass migration of African Americans from “the rural South to the urban industrial centres of the North” where they encountered a racially rigid housing system. Macek argues that the presence of the African American community in the inner city, caused by the ghettoization of Black Americans from the South, was another reason for white families to grasp the opportunity to abandon the city, creating a system of spatial segregation (16).

The biggest economic turning point for the city was the shift of the financial basis of the society from the industrial production of goods to the “service, post-industrial economy”, which started in the 1960s. Most of the inner-city citizens, which belonged to the working class and were employed at manufacturing factories, suffered dire consequences when the American manufacturers, in search of cheap labour, moved



their production abroad, resulting in unemployment, poverty, and homelessness (17). While poverty in America has traditionally been associated with the rural areas, as a consequence of the deindustrialization and the white exodus, the city has exceeded the countryside as the nation's "chief 'poverty zone'" (23). The crisis has plunged the urban centre into a "self-reinforcing" destructive cycle, in which the lack of investment and planning is both a cause and an effect of the underdevelopment, miseducation, and financial insecurity (26). However, what attracted the most attention from those in power were not the difficult living conditions of the ethnic minorities forced into unemployment, but the rising rates of crimes such as arson, burglary, thefts, rape, and murder in the metropolitan centres, which sparked moral outrage and obsessive panic (27). The common fear appeared to be a unifying factor for the dwellers of the suburbia, helping to create a common identity for the whites of different cultural backgrounds. Although the suburbs have become less homogenous in terms of race and ethnicity, the anxieties and the "fear of unruly urban Others" persisted, resulting in the obsessive fear of urban crimes, even when the actual crime rates were not as alarming (29).

The post-industrial urban crisis has restored and reinforced the Victorian image of the inner city and its residents as the savage "Other". This concept was verbalised by various right-wing sociologists, politicians, journalists, and writers, which have ascribed negative connotations to the urban resident, describing them as violent, mentally ill, sexually deviant, reckless, troubled; and creating an "underclass pathology" (37). Likewise, the neighbourhoods occupied by the inner-city poor were places permeated with negative associations of being dirty, foul, wretched, and chaotic, a product of the residents' deviant behaviour and the lack of righteousness, and an exact opposite of the domestic utopia of the suburbs (38). By claiming that the "urban underclass" intrinsically possesses certain behavioural characteristics which generate deviations from the "normal life", attention is shifted from the real causes and possible solutions of the crisis.

During the post-industrial urban crisis, the negative image of the urban underclass was easily distributed and dispersed throughout the public discourse with the help of television, which had, by that time, a

suburban middle's class primary source of information on the urban life, creating a psychological barrier between the suburbia and the inner city (35). The psychological distance, along with economic differences, created a massive gap between the American city and the suburbia, generating an attitude of indifference and apathy (36). The media portrayed the urban citizens as "criminal, degenerate, violent, and a threat to the family-oriented way of life", in an "alarming or derogatory" manner, and according to Macek, this kind of discourse was not incidental, but was deliberately launched into public space and the media to accomplish political agendas of conservative groups who set to blame the inner-city residents for the issues of the American society and deflect responsibility for the mismanagement of the economic and social crisis (35-36). The consequences of this kind of influence on the public opinion were evident in the unified suburban support of the right-wing electoral options which would enforce the anti-urban policies, such as the "racialized war on drugs", welfare cuts, and the disinvestment in the urban infrastructure (39). Macek notes that after the mobilization of suburban voters to elect the Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon, every president after him, from Ronald Reagan Every to Bill Clinton, gained an advantage over their opponents by "denouncing promiscuous ghetto welfare queens, announcing a commitment to wage a war on drugs centred on minority neighbourhoods", or promising to mobilise thousands of policemen to defeat youth gangs on the streets (ix). The most popular implementation of such plans was later conducted by Rudolph Giuliani, New York's conservative mayor from 1994 to 2001, who developed a strategy based on the "broken window" theory of combating minor crimes to create an environment marked by order and civility which would lead to the decrease of serious violence and crime. While Giuliani's policies helped to reduce crime rates and to initiate a redevelopment of neighbourhoods which were previously considered unsafe, they resulted in the abuse of police power, harassment of homeless people, and Black youth, leading to a "deepening racial division and growing economic injustice" (108).

### 3.2.1. The Urban Crisis on Film

Since its very beginning, the cinema seems to be inseparably linked to the city, forming an interconnection that is felt and operative in the “lived social reality”. While the cinema was an important part of the city’s material reality, contributing to the city’s cultural life and economy, it also possesses the ability to express the spatial dynamic of the city narratively and with the help of numerous techniques such as “mise-en-scène, location filming, lighting, cinematography, editing” (Shiel 1). Clarke describes the cinema’s relationship with the real life can therefore be described as complex and reciprocal, as the film is influenced by the urban reality while simultaneously “leaking out of its specific context to become dispersed (...) all over the city” (3). The shift in perception of reality caused by the emergence of film coincided with the changes in human perception upon experiencing the big city and its “strangeness”, as the “virtual presence” was created in the realm of the modern city, populated and experienced by strangers (4).

Narratively speaking, the film inherited most of its tropes on the city from classic literature or popular culture, depicting the city as a place of fear and darkness. For example, the film noir of the 1940s and 1950s, marked by a strong connection to the metropolis, reflected the hard-boiled pulp fiction’s imagery of the city’s mean streets, while also using the classic template of the metropolis as a crime scene, established by writers, such as Poe, Buadelaire, and Dickens (Krutnik 87). The “cityness” of the film noir was mirrored in the period of the urban crisis when the deterioration of the real inner cities was “paralleled by cinematic representations of the city as a desolate battleground traversed by human monsters on the very margins of sanity” (McArthur 32). However, instead of simply serving as a projection of America’s urban fears and anxieties onto the screen, the depiction of the city during the urban crisis also includes the experimentation with the trope of the nightmarish city, subverting old codes of representation and creating new imagery which inevitably leaks into the city’s reality.

Lawrence Webb associates the concept of crisis with Edward Soja's concept of restructuring which implies transformation arising from destruction, refuting the idea of a crisis as an inert, static state. The crisis therefore creates, not only destroys and what emerged from it are the new paradigms, including the ones in culture, social theory, and art (17-18). The art of film played an important role in distribution of the urban images and narratives, and while the portrayal of the metropolis in crisis was often used as an ideological weapon, it also "provided seventies cinema with a grounded, densely textured fictional world and narrative space (...) a subject for exploration and ideological critique, and frequently, a source of aesthetic inspiration and visual fascination" (10). The analysis of the spatial dimension of seventies cinema therefore allows the assessment of the interconnection between "urban restructuring", emerging from the crisis, and the cinematic depiction of the urban decline which contributed to the regeneration of the city (11-12).

By the late 1960s, the film industry was facing its own crisis, as the urban crisis coincided with the financial downturn of the Hollywood studio system, caused by the appearance of high-budget blockbusters and the consequential increased costs of shooting in Hollywood studios. Film shooting was then relocated from studios to the streets of American metropolises, such as New York or San Francisco, which allowed the city in decline, with its poverty-stricken residents and its urban squalor, to become a narrative and aesthetic inspiration for the filmmakers, and to replace its lost industrial economic base (10). Webb argues that the gruelling transition from the industrial to the post-industrial city "had profound effects for film industries on the form and the content of films", as filmmakers not only employed the city as a filming location and a narrative setting, but helped to change "the representational codes" of the city and establish new ways of "constructing and presenting cinematic space", which "both reflected and helped to shape the experience of the emerging post-industrial zeitgeist and would continue to influence popular perceptions of cities and urban life for years to come" (12).

While some genres and styles employed the city as a "dream space" and others strived to achieve a somewhat authentic representation of the city, the seventies film places focus on the "location shooting and

contemporary settings” (20). However, the issue of the depiction of the city in film cannot be reduced to the duality between the “concrete reality of the city and its fictional or imaginary representations on film”, as the film industry, along with its institutions and practices, has a material presence in the city (23). The previously mentioned paradigm proposed by Edward Soja, who disputes the idea that space and place are concepts marked solely by dichotomies, allows the analysis of the city in film to transcend the concepts of real and imagined or the material and mental. Webb claims that it also seems problematic to discuss solely the representation of the city, as the city itself can be considered as a representation of the urban space, instead of being a static, constant notion that can be represented either faithfully or unfaithfully on film (24). The city is reciprocally influenced by its on-screen representations, which “reverberate back” to the city they demonstrate, as “shifting narrative modes and aesthetic strategies were related to wider processes of historical change in the urban environment” (28).

There seems to be a narrative and aesthetic change in the depiction of the city, coinciding with the cultural shift of the 1970s, when the audience was prepared for experimentation and change after the excessive display of urban crisis and the Vietnam war on television (32). The city governments also played a role in this shift, as Webb mentions a new mode of governing the urban area in the 1970s when emphasis was placed on rebranding and touristic promotion of the city, which could help the city to successfully compete as an attractive filmmaking location after the crisis of the centralised Hollywood studio system (37). Post-industrial urban landscape was essential for many films of the period, with New York City as a prime example of the distinguishing, noticeable urban scenery, which included not only the postcard locations of Manhattan but the previously unexplored areas such as the Bronx and Brooklyn (38). By providing an image of these marginal working-class and African American neighbourhoods, the 1970s films offered a “compressed portrait of the country in microcosm”, as New York City encapsulated the main issues faced by the entire nation, such as violence, addiction, bombings, strikes; which could not be depicted as truthfully if shot in a Hollywood studio (29). This subverted the conventional iconography of classical Hollywood, which, with the exception of film noir, depicted the city as a thrilling, generous space

which allows an opportunity to fulfil fantasies, whether professional or romantic, and provided fertile ground for the questioning of dominant ideologies and the conventions of genres (42).

### 3.3. New York in *Taxi Driver*

According to Webb, New York was often perceived as “a manifestation of urban modernity”, with its famous landmarks becoming a symbol of American capitalism and entrepreneurship, which is why the crisis had an effect beyond “the city limits” and New York became “a symbol of national political and ideological divisions” caused by the development of a post-industrial neoliberal economy (75). The cinematic portrayal of New York certainly did not omit the issues of the city, as many films of the period featured “dystopian and often implicitly anti-urban images of the city”, but, paradoxically, the city seemed to have benefited from this kind of exploitation (76). The years of urban crisis seem to represent the revival of the Big Apple’s film industry, with the gritty and grimy metropolis serving as a unique backdrop for the films of the period, as well as a home for a number of subcultures and art scenes (80). Many films shot on location were critically acclaimed and grew to become rather influential due to their great artistic and cultural value, helping New York to reinvent itself as a cultural and social centre. One such film, featuring one of the most notable portrayals of the urban squalor, is *Taxi Driver* (1976) by Martin Scorsese, belonging to a group of directors “with deep roots in the city”, who “captured their native city on film with unprecedented authenticity and local colour” (79). Although pertained with dystopic imagery, *Taxi Driver* itself cannot be perceived as a social critique of urban decay and New York’s decline, as Scorsese’s focus is rather “psychological and aesthetic” instead of “social and political”, however, it provides a fertile ground for analysis by subverting Hollywood conventions, reflecting the cinematography of film noir, and referencing the populist ideologies in 1970s America and (Quart & Auster 123).

Martin Scorsese described *Taxi Driver* as a product of the frustration caused by living in the city, where “there’s a constant sense that the buildings are getting old, things are breaking down, the bridges and

the subway need repairing”, while the society is also “in the state of decay; the police are not doing their job in allowing prostitution on the streets” (60). The entire film has a nightmarish quality to it created by the aestheticization of the urban paranoia as a part of Scorsese’s general idea to produce “a cross between a Gothic horror and the New York *Daily News*” (54). In an attempt to project the urban malaise onto the screen, Scorsese shot *Taxi Driver* during a hot summer in New York, when the atmosphere at night feels like there is “a seeping kind of virus”, which you can “smell in the air and taste in your mouth” (54). (Mis)placed in that setting is the film’s protagonist, a paranoid, lonesome, mentally disturbed Vietnam war veteran Travis Bickle, famously portrayed by Robert De Niro, who attempts to deal with his insomnia and post-traumatic stress disorder by driving a night shift taxi through the sleaziest parts of New York City (Quart & Auster 123). The nightmarish New York is portrayed almost as a character in the film, existing in symbiosis with Travis, aggravating his already damaged nerves and triggering the buried frustration which culminates in the bloody outburst of violence. However, Kolker notices that the mise-en-scène of the film, as is usually the case with films set in New York, inherently conveys “a New York-ness, a shared image and collective signifier of New York that (...) expresses what everyone, including many who live there, have decided New York should look like”, coinciding with Soja’s notion of representational space or Secondspace, while also being a reflection of the protagonist’s mind (240).

The opening sequence of *Taxi Driver* introduces New York with the slow motion, low-angle shot of a yellow taxi, one of the city’s symbols, emerging from the cloud of steam ominously rising from the manhole covers. While this depiction connotes the street of New York, it is far from realistic: the yellowish hue of the steam almost resembles the smoke of inferno and the taxi emerges “at a speed too slow for it to be an actual cab on the streets”, which Kolker interprets as the defamiliarization of a familiar and the “real” image. While this sequence was often interpreted as an “emergence from hell”, Kolker emphasises that it is precisely the lack of clearly defined space, which is replaced simply by an allusion to the familiar and recognisable, that makes this image sinister (286). The lack of “spatial specificity” can also be interpreted as a means of generalising Travis’s experience and applying it universally, whereby the squalor of New

York represents the urban life in general (Kredell 341). The beginning of the film establishes the subjectivity of the portrayal of the city, which is filtered through Travis's distorted insomniac perspective: a close-up of Travis's eyes is followed by a shot of raindrops on a blurry windshield, that "dissolves to a neon-lit, rain-slicked, night-time city street" and switching back to Travis's psychotic eyes, coloured by red lightning (Grist 132). Along with such point-of-view shots, the subjective perspective is achieved through the voiceovers of Travis reading his diary entries, in which he documents his voyeuristic drives through the city. What follows after the scene in which Travis duly writes his diary in a cluttered, dirty apartment, is a sequence of Travis's cab driving through the night. After the isolated shots of the taxi's isolated parts, such as the hood, side-view mirror, and rear-side mirror, splattered by raindrops, the camera focuses on the commotion on the street, reflecting Travis's unwavering gaze. The rain-slicked streets strewn with trash, seem to be a meeting point for the urban underclass, which is either obscured in the shadows or illuminated by the city's neon lights and signs. The red light, in particular, seems to be important for the film as it paints the hellish atmosphere of the city, indicates its sexual deviancy, anticipates potential bloodshed, and contributes to Travis's feeling of uneasiness and paranoia. In addition to the film's jazzy score, the use of neon lights, haziness, and shadow appear to be reminiscent of film noir, which used "lightning to not only define space but also inflect it with psychological character and motivations" projecting "a mood of urban anxiety and nihilism" accompanied by nostalgia for the pre-war city. (Prakash 7). Amid this gloomy nightmarish setting, the people on the streets are depicted merely as blurred figures, fleetingly emerging from the mass and disappearing again, having no importance in the large city. The citizens who are shown clearly usually belong to the urban underclass of minorities, prostitutes, pimps, criminals, and drug dealers, with the hellish images of the city providing a perfect background for their moral corruptness.

The fact that Travis only seems to notice the violent, criminal, and sexually deviant members of the underclass is certainly not a coincidence nor the reflection of urban reality: they are a part of his distorted perception which zeroes in on the marginal and immoral, recognising it as a threat, while simultaneously choosing to participate in the city's dark underbelly (Kolker 290). Kolker claims that the world depicted in



*Taxi Driver* “exists only within its own space”, which is created and shaped by the psychotic, obsessive mind of its protagonist, providing the viewer with a double perspective on space as seen by Travis Bickle, as well as on Travis himself occupying that same space, “thereby permitting both proximity and separation” (285). While the depiction of New York is heavily framed by Travis’ psychosis, his gaze also seems to reflect the general mental concept of “New York-ness”, and the aforementioned anti-urban sentiment directed towards the decaying city and its residents. Having arrived in New York as an outsider, from the Vietnam War, Travis is disgusted by the moral decay of the city and its residents, its delinquency, crime and the dilapidation, writing that “All the animals come out at night — whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies, sick, venal. Someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets” (00:06:05-14). In the manic search for a sense of purpose, which he possibly lost since his discharge, Travis becomes obsessed with the concept of cleaning the city, washing the human and the literal trash, reflecting the dichotomy of dirt and cleanliness, present in many American films and metaphorically connotating oppositions such as “corruption/purity, animalism/spirituality, sexuality/repression” (Wood 46). However, Travis’s condemning perspective cannot be simply described as politically or ideologically motivated. His mental disturbance, which seems to constantly seek out the images of crime and violence, possibly as a result of war trauma, is amplified by his inability to comprehend it, as well as by the urban isolation. The city, as described by Simmel as a place of indifference and dissociation, intensified by the post-industrial crisis, shuns a lost and morose individual like Travis and by doing so, fuels his hate and frustration. While Travis can be perceived as “a radically alienated urban castoff, a mutant produced by the dehumanization of the post-industrial world”, the film does not seem to offer a deeper psychological or social examination which could explain his behaviour (Kolker 291).

Kolker notices that Travis’s perception is shaped by sudden impulses, otherwise being a “tabula rasa, a blank slate” on which the city is “inscribed, or rather rudely and selectively scribbled” (291). Travis seems to be too out of the touch with the “ordinary human experience” to form a coherent and consistent judgement, and, instead, the fragments of his mind cope with the frustration and isolation by reflecting the

American populist anti-urban myths on the deviancy and corruptness of the city (292). In correspondence to the dominant conservative ideologies of the time, Travis seems to associate squalor and crime with the racial heterogeneity of the city, proved by his discomfort with the Black community. While driving a presidential candidate Charles Palantine, whose generic political slogan “We are the people” reveals empty and populist politics, Travis gets the opportunity to publicly express his viewpoint on the city. The campaigning politician, who claims he has “learned more about America from riding in taxicabs than in all the limos in the country” feigns interest in Travis’s opinion, asking what bothers him the most about the country (00:29:05-00:29:10). Although he claims he is not that familiar with the political situation, the question seems to trigger Travis’s aversion, prompting him into a rambling description of the city as an “open sewer (...) full of filth and scum”, which the future president should “flush right down the fuckin’ toilet”, as its smell gives him headaches that never seem to go away (00:29:33-00:30:01). Travis’s bitterness creates a palpable sense of unease, probably caused by Palantine’s realisation that he is talking to a mentally unstable person, to whom he generically responds that the improvement of the city requires “radical changes” (00:30:17). The figure of a political candidate who eventually also becomes the object of Travis’s aversion and his individual target, serves to emphasise how distant populist politics really is from “the people” and “how distant Travis is from anything as communal as politics” (Kolker 291).

While Travis condemns the city’s decay, it seems that he is constantly trying to partake in it, resulting in confusing and contradictory behaviour: he speaks of cleaning the grime from the street, while living in a dirty and cluttered room, poisoning his body with alcohol, pills and junk food. His isolation and lack of social interaction are both the cause and effect of antisocial behaviour, due to which Travis struggles to even participate in a conversation, let alone establish a personal connection. The inability to fit in and to connect with the city and its citizens, along with a lack of sense of purpose, is what actually seems to amplify Travis’s frustration and paranoia instead of the decay of the city itself. His distorted perspective and maladjustment confine him to a dystopic urban nightmare, an “open sewer”, in which he seems to deliberately seek out the places of violence, the manic spiral finally culminating in the own eruption of his

own brutality. After Travis attempts to shoot Palantine, the man he wanted to clean the city, he murders gangsters who organise the prostitution of minors and ironically, his outburst of violence becomes celebrated by the city as a heroic act. However, due to his mental disturbance and social incompetence, Travis does not seem to truly belong to the either side of the squalor: not to the urban underclass immersed in it, nor the right-wing conservatives who wish to clean it up. Ultimately, *Taxi Driver* cannot be considered “a documentary of the squalor of the 1970s’ New York City, but the documentation of a squalid mind driven mad by its perception” (290).

The grimy metropolis, in all its gruesome glory, is portrayed without social critique and moral outrage, as Scorsese manages to find the aesthetic potential in the squalor and the decay of the city. undoubtedly drawing inspiration from film noir. However, Scorsese seems to offer a more “complex and personal” portrayal by focusing the camera on everyday objects, such as “a stainless-steel cafeteria machine (...) the cab’s medallion and bright yellow colour”, skilfully shot in a way which “captures their beauty” and transforms them into “anthropomorphic urban icons” (Quart 70). Similar to the aestheticization of the squalor, the urban paranoia and anxiety are used to convey the disturbed and suffocating perception of the damaged mind, which shapes Travis’s experience of the city, instead as a means of arousing moral and social concern. While the elements of the social reality during the post-industrial are included, and there are a couple of realist scenes “that take place in Times Square and East Village”, Scorsese manipulates these components to create “a selective, subjective view of a city where the balance between the hallucinatory and normal has tipped toward the nightmarish” (Quart 69). In correspondence to Soja’s idea of thirding, it seems ineffective to discuss the depiction of the city solely in terms of real and imagined or actual and fictional, but what needs to be taken into consideration is the spatial experience of the film’s protagonist, or, in microgeographic terms, Travis’s *flânerie* through the post-industrial city, presented to the viewers through his psychotic, voyeuristic gaze.

#### 4. THE FLÂNEUR

Working as a night taxi driver, Travis becomes an observer of the city, examining it at night, at its most vulnerable state when “all the animals come out” to its seedy streets, the taxi windows serving as a lens through which Travis perceives the city. The discourse on the individual exploration and the observation of the metropolis seems to inevitably include the figure of the *flâneur* or the aimless stroller, which can be considered an allegorical reflection of the urban experience in a rapidly growing, industrialised city. Simultaneously with the shift in the engagement with the city, the *flâneur* emerged as a literary character in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was first described by Charles Baudelaire in his text on modern urban experience “The Painter of Modern Life” as a “passionate spectator” of the commotion of the city life (9). The *flâneur* is rather passive in his observation, representing a blasé, emotionally detached outlook, defined by Simmel as a result of individualization and the overstimulation of the city life. His detachment and indulgence in loneliness and isolation, paired up with the simultaneous need for commotion make him a symbolical embodiment of the metropolitan ambivalence (Wilson 93).

On the other side of the *flâneur*'s lens is the urban crowd, also a product of the city's rapid growth and urbanization, which “seems to have its own amorphous individuality, seething with purpose like a single human being” (Nicol 87). Baudelaire refers to aimlessness and placelessness as the *flâneur*'s defining features, as he does not belong to any specific place, but instead, he abides within the crowd, and for him “it's an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude (...) To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home” (9). In his voyeuristic observation, the *flâneur* becomes a “mirror as vast as the crowd itself” or “a kaleidoscope (...) reproducing the multiplicity of life” (9). The duality of *flâneur*'s relationship with the crowd also reflects the paradoxical urban experience of isolation with the mass: he manages to be omnipresent and concealed at the same time, as a “prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito”, who “remains hidden from the world”, and yet “enters the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy” (9).

Baudelaire's theorisation was the basis for the further examinations of *flânerie*, most notably by Walter Benjamin who analyses and defines the *flâneur* in his studies on Charles Baudelaire, as a part of his extensive collection on the 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, titled *Arcades Project*. Benjamin offers a reinterpretation of *flâneur*'s passivity, claiming that his idleness and indifference can serve as a disguise for his watchfulness, which is a characteristic trait of the *flâneur* as a detective or as a journalist, but also of the antagonistic character tropes (*The Writer of Modern Life* 72). An example of a literary narrative within which the stroller surpasses the merely philosophic nature of the *flâneur* and acquires a more threatening role is Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd", which contains a framework of a detective story: "the pursuer, the crowd, and an unknown man", who "always remains in the middle of the crowd", and can therefore be described as a *flâneur* (*The Writer of Modern Life* 79). The *flâneur*, therefore, is not necessarily a positive figure, his concealment and voyeuristic nature allowing him to be "at once guardian against the unknown and also a potentially menacing figure himself", which explains the omnipresence of elements of *flânerie* in a myriad of both positive and negative figures in literature, film and popular culture (Nicol 92). The descriptions of the *flâneur* and his relationship with the city also provided background for new readings and theories with broader scopes, such as the feminist analysis of urban space as gendered and explicitly male-dominated. The focus on *flânerie* as an individual, lived urban experience therefore represents Soja's "the view from below" or the microspatial view of the city, and can as such be employed in the analysis of Travis' relationship with New York, his perception of the declining city, his nightly 'strolling' through the grimy streets and the act of violence he ultimately commits.

Travis's roaming through the city is conducted by a taxi, which differs from the aimless nature of the prototypical *flâneur*, as his movement is determined by the demands of his customers. He does, however, claim that he will drive "anytime, anywhere" when asked where he wants to drive, not bothering to choose a specific area of New York, and reveals that, due to insomnia, he has been driving around the city in buses and subways, and he might as well "earn money for it" (00:02:59). The taxi seems to provide a cloak of invisibility essential to the *flâneur*, who is untouchable in his observation (Nicol 94). Mike

Featherstone emphasises that the *flâneur*'s detached gaze is even more intensified by the process of driving a car, marked by the swings "between immersion and detachment" in the realms of the inside of the car and the outside world of the road (915). While driving a taxi permits Travis to act as an observer of the crowd on the streets, which depicts a melting pot of downtown residents, it also allows the direct encounter with his customers, whose faces he observes in the front mirror. Some of those customers, argues Travis, are even "spooks", as it "don't make difference" to him where he has to go, unlike his colleagues who avoid driving to predominantly Black and dangerous neighbourhoods, such as Bronx or Harlem (00:06:40-00:06:45). While his occupation grants him the opportunity to drive all over the city, Travis does not seem to belong to any of its parts, and can instead be characterised as a "placeless person", not even bothering to differentiate the neighbourhoods he frequents. It remains unknown where Travis is from, as the only information referring to the time before his arrival to New York is his service in the Vietnam War as a U.S. Marine who was honourably discharged in 1973. Baudelaire's *flâneur*, as previously mentioned, is also away from home, but yet feels at home "everywhere", making the crowd his home, as among the crowd is where he urges most pleasure (9).

Benjamin refers to the *flâneur*'s "intoxication" with the stroll, which urges him to resist "the temptations of shops, of bistros, of smiling women" towards which he remains passive – the stroll creates a hunger which only the stroll itself can sate. After the stroll, the *flâneur* returns hungry, "like an ascetic animal, to his room, "which receives him coldly and wears a strange air" (*The Arcades Project* 417). Travis's room to which he returns famished seems to be situated in a dilapidated building, cluttered with trash and pill bottles, and minimally adorned with old furniture. The internal space of his apartment seems to reflect his inner turmoil and disrupted state of mind, which reveals itself through his emotional instability, insomnia, his social incompetence, and the difficulty understanding himself, translated to cinematic language through incoherent and fragmented voice-overs of dramatic diary entries, abrupt cuts, and shaky camera movements. The hunger which Travis attempts to satisfy, and which seems to only deepen as the film progresses, seems to arise from the lack of sense of homeliness and the inability to establish an affective

bond with New York, in which Travis recognises only filth and squalor, viewing its dwellers as morally corrupt.

Travis's attempts at interactions with New Yorkers are unsuccessful at most times, which is a result of his inability to decipher social relations and mutual incomprehension, reflected even in the "framing of shots", as was the case in the scene where Travis joins his colleagues in a seedy diner. Travis is here visually separated from the other cab drivers, sitting further from them and shot "in close one-shots or as a slightly out-of-focus presence in the foreground or background", finding it difficult to participate in casual conversation, and reacting with confusion and embarrassment to the teasing question "How's it hangin?" (Grist 135). His ineptness and isolation, which represents a neurotic, disturbed variation of the alienation ingrained in the metropolitan experience, seems to be a recurring motif throughout the film, with Travis claiming that "loneliness" has followed him his "whole life, everywhere, in bars, cars, sidewalks, stores", making him "God's lonely man", in a voice-over that accompanies his observation of the blurred figures of pedestrians moving in slow motion (00:00:53:13-00:53:28). His inability to form personal attachments prohibits him from the integration with the crowd, which appears unified in its purpose and direction. The inability to situate himself within the crowd coincides with placelessness, and results in a lack of sense of purpose, as "all (his) life needed is a sense of somewhere to go", which would oppose the "morbid self-attention" he wallows in by obsessively keeping a journal in his solitude (00:10:05-00:10:13). Recognising that his behaviour is anti-social and irked by his seclusion, Travis expresses his belief that "someone should become a person like other people", seeking a direction in life which would grant him integration and purpose (00:10:16-00:10:21). In his mind, "becoming a person" seems to involve the establishment of a heterosexual romantic relationship, which is why he decides to focus on Betsy, his *flânerie* soon transforming into stalking. Upon Betsy's rejection, Travis's pursuit of purpose acquires a more sinister and violent undertone, by chance culminating in a vigilante fantasy of rescuing Iris, twelve-year old prostitute, which ends in a bloody shooting spree.

#### 4.1. The *flâneur* and masculinity

The feminist theoreticians have described the pleasure the *flâneur* derives from his strolling as gender-based, with the *flâneur*'s "visual possession of the city" serving as an "embodiment of the male gaze" (Wilson 98). The ability to roam around the city and unabashedly gaze at its dwellers is a rather masculine activity, with the city serving as an arena for the ideological division of places as masculine or feminine. Janet Wolff claims that the public sphere of the industrialised 19<sup>th</sup>-century city was not accessible to women, who were ideologically confined to the private sphere while men enjoyed the city life of work, bars, cafes, and the street. The experiences of the *flâneur* as described by Benjamin and Baudelaire can be described as solely masculine, especially taking into consideration the prohibition due to which women could not participate in public life alone, and the woman's inability to imperceptibly blend into the crowd, caused by the over-scrutinization of the way women dress and conduct themselves (40).

Griselda Pollock recognises the *flâneur*'s observation as the embodiment of the male gaze, or the "male sexuality" which "enjoys the freedom to look, appraise and possess", marking women as objects of inspection and prohibiting them from glancing back (79). However, Wilson states that the *flâneur*'s aimless wandering ultimately leads to the suspension of satisfaction, his fruitless voyeurism representing "the disintegrative effect" the metropolis has "on the masculine identity" as an unpredictable place of simultaneous excitement and fear (109). The alterations that the human psyche undergoes as a result of the metropolitan experience seem to have a destabilising effect on the established notions and conceptions, connected to both social organisation and the individual identity, therefore including masculinity. In his passive observation, the *flâneur* seems to become an object himself, serving as "a blank page upon which the city writes itself", which is, ultimately, "a feminine, placatory gesture" (108).

The search for the re-establishment of masculinity seems to be an integral part of Travis's wandering, who seems emasculated by the lack of purpose upon his return from the Vietnam War. The loss in Vietnam was itself perceived as emasculating and was often portrayed as the victory of the feminine over



the masculine, leading to the crisis of American masculinity (Jeffords 155). In his first attempt to “become a person like other people”, reinvent his masculinity, and counteract the loneliness and isolation of the destabilising metropolis, Travis tries to establish a romantic relationship. A stable, heterosexual relationship could also represent an antithesis to the perversion and immorality of the city he encounters every night, when he has to “clean the come off the back seat” upon returning the car to the garage (00:07:51). However, Travis’s stance on the sexual deviancy of the city appears to be rather inconsistent, his hatred blending with the fascination with obscenity. For example, although he seems disgusted while driving an older man with a prostitute, with the next shot uncoincidentally depicting Travis driving his car through the splashing water of a hydrant as if to cleanse it, he does not refrain from visiting porn theatres, his blood-shot eyes willingly focusing on the filth even outside his work hours.

When Travis firsts spots blonde, blue-eyed Betsy in front of her workplace he describes her as a lone “an angel” emerging “out of the filthy mass” who “cannot touch her”, placing her on a pedestal as a symbol of purity (00:10:30 – 00:10:40). While the shot of Betsy, clad in a white dress and sauntering in slow motion against the buzzing crowd reflects his perspective, Betsy’s first glimpse of Travis is certainly not as romantic: she notices Travis’s car in front of Palantine’s campaign office and notes to her co-worker that a “taxi driver has been staring” at them for “a long time”, sending her colleague to chase him off (00:12:37-00:12:55). The scenes with Betsy and her colleague seem to highlight the difference between Betsy’s and Travis’s worlds: while Travis witnesses the urban violence and crime on daily basis, Betsy and her colleague jokingly and incredulously talk about the mob which supposedly “blows off fingers” as an act of retaliation (00:19:43). When Travis finally decides to cease his lurking and directly approach Betsy, Travis storms into her office, feigning interest Travis’s in Palantine’s campaign, and invites her on a coffee break by projecting his own anxieties onto her: “I think you’re a lonely person. I drive by this place a lot and I see you here. (...) I saw in your eyes and the way you carry yourself that you’re not a happy person” (00:21:50-00:22:09). Their date in the diner seems to highlight Travis’s social ineptitude and his disinterest in Betsy as a real person, e.g., he tells Betsy she has, “beautiful eyes” 00:24:47) right after she talks about

her work. Betsy seems intrigued by Travis's unusualness, calling him "a walking contradiction" (00:27:05), summarising the inconsistencies of Travis's behaviour, and anticipating their disastrous date to the adult cinema. In a rare shot which features Travis moving along with the crowd, Travis seems immersed in the unity of the mass, wearing a suit and resembling a man with a purpose, set to impress Betsy and establish a connection which would defy his isolation and the city's moral decay. However, the plan soon backfires, when Travis, who first glorified Betsy's angelic purity, self-sabotages their relationship by dragging Betsy to the hellhole in which he usually kills time – a garish porn theatre. He does not seem to understand the problem when Betsy storms off, and trails behind her with a tight grip on her arm. Betsy then refuses his calls and returns his flowers, the smell of which makes him sick, prompting him to believe that he has stomach cancer. Betsy's rejection is detrimental to his mental state, triggering a distraught Travis to ultimately storm into Palantine's headquarters and call Betsy out for not responding, shouting that she is "in hell" and she is going to "die in hell like the rest of them", placing her in the inferno of the city, opposed to his primary perception of her as an angel (00:39:33-00:39:38). He realises how much she is "like the others, cold and distant", but "many people are like that, women for sure" (00:39:53-00:39:59).

As previously mentioned, a stable relationship, ruled by conventional norms, could have served as a way of re-integration into society and re-establishment of masculinity, representing private stability in the destabilising, chaotic urban space. When this plan backfires and Betsy rejects him, Travis responds with resentment and aggression, his search for direction and purpose taking a violent turn and morphing into psychotic hypermasculinity, manifested through obsessive training and the purchase of weapons. His frustration with Betsy's rejection and his loneliness is evident in the scenes of Travis watching couples slow-dancing on television with a gun pointing at it, and even knocking the television off with his foot while watching a soap opera, which ends with a close-up of Travis cradling his head as if in realisation of his mental disturbance. In order to take his revenge on Betsy, Travis begins preparing for the assassination of Palantine, an important male figure in Betsy's life, as a way of finally taking action. However, this also coincides with his encounter with Iris, who allows him to fulfil the typically masculine role of a saviour,

which he could not fulfil with Betsy. Travis first spots Iris in his taxi, glaring incredulously at her through his rear-view mirror, a scantily dressed child prostitute shrinking away from her pimp, representing the worst of the city's sexual deviancy.

While the figure of the prostitute was often considered as a *flâneuse*, or the female counterpart of the *flâneur*, Wilson claims that the streetwalker simply operates on different times, completely at the mercy of the male gaze, and deprived of free observation (105). In the context of *Taxi Driver*, the character of a young prostitute serves as a key figure in directing the course of Travis's *flânerie*, steering him from criminal intentions of assassination to a vigilante rescue fantasy, accompanied by his fluctuation between a positive and negative figure. Travis's preparedness to commit a crime coincides with the concept of an aggressive *flâneur*, once again resulting from the city's destabilising tendencies, as the "agoraphobic" urban space "tempts the individual who staggers across it to do anything and everything – commit a crime, become a prostitute" (109). The potential for criminal behaviour can also be linked to Travis's performance of hypermasculinity, which stems from the threatened masculinity and inevitably seems to lead to aggression.

#### 4.2. The criminal *flâneur*

The idea of a transgressive *flâneur* has its origins in the depictions of the *flâneur* as an "active member of the society", who, as a master of the city streets, uses his expertise to contribute to society, usually as a crime-solving detective, such as Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, and various others literary characters (Lukić & Parezanović 2). The end of the *flâneur*'s inertia allows the stroller to abuse his knowledge, de(evolve) into a potentially lethal figure, and expanding the existing theories on *flânerie*, although this deviation is still congruent "with the theoretical line of development of the *flâneur*" (Lukić & Parezanović 2). Nicol recognises the *flâneur*'s "predatory potential" as a basis for the creation of undoubtedly dangerous and evil figures, such as "the prowler or the rapist, perhaps even the serial killer" (93). The *flâneur*'s aggression was first theoretically defined by Walter Benjamin, in the analytical reading

of Poe's "The Man of the Crowd", which he calls an "x-ray picture of a detective story", as it features the potential criminal and his stalker (*The Writer of Modern Life* 79).

Poe's narrator scrutinises the crowd of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century London from a coffee-house and as a true detective, classifies its members according to social status and occupation, based on the details in their appearance, from respected noblemen, attorneys, and clerks to the marginal gamblers, pick-pockets, and drunkards. When he is unable to classify a peculiar old man, he decides to follow him through the rainy bustling streets of London, observing the vigour in the man's step whenever he encounters a dense crowd and his confusion upon entering an empty street. As the night begins to fall and they enter the sordid slums of London, the narrator notices a change in the crowd, as the night lures "every species of infamy from its den", and the chase takes on a more sinister undertone when he spots that the old man carries a dagger (392). Upon reaching the most repugnant, filthy, poverty-stricken quarter of London, the narrator finally faces the man, describing him as a "genius of deep crime", who refuses to be alone" (Poe 396). While the narrator transforms from a passive observer to an eager stalker, it is the character of the old man where the character of the *flâneur* truly subverts the theoretical descriptions of the idle stroller, his concealment, and anonymity allowing him to commit a perfect crime. However, both characters seem to be inseparably intertwined with crime, one of them serving as a prototype of the *flâneur* as a detective with an impeccable instinct to spot crime, and the other embodying the transgressive, criminal *flâneur* (Nicol 93). The ambiguity of the *flâneur*'s connection with crime can be perfectly summed up by Walter Benjamin's idea that "No matter what traces the *flâneur* may follow, every one of them will lead him to a crime" (*The Writer of Modern Life* 72).

The complexity and duality of the *flâneur*'s relationship with crime are reflected in the portrayal of Travis as a "walking contradiction", fluctuating between the deliberate participation in a filthy, criminal city and the desire to fight against the city's deviancy. While denoting the New York's crowd as "scum" and emphasising the crowd's otherness in relation to him, Travis seeks integration and identification with the crowd, adorning his room with Palantine's slogan "We are the people", recognising that normalcy

undoubtedly implies belonging. The relationship between the individual and the mass in an urban setting presents another correlation with Poe's story, particularly with its exploration of the complex concept of the mass as a novelty of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The mass is a social category, in which "individuality is both accentuated and dissolved", its apparent singularity creating a sense of security and solidarity with others, dispelling any fear, while also inducing anxiety "that the threatening Other" might be anonymously hidden in the crowd at any moment, secretly "engaged in criminal behaviour" (Nicol 87). This correlates to Georg Simmel's idea on the blasé attitude possibly acting as a concealment of hatred, which allows indifference to quickly transform into aggression, enabled by the city's antagonistic and separationist tendencies.

Fuchs recognises Travis's obsession with "otherness" as an attempt at self-definition and finding identity by opposing the urban Other, whereby this opposition is strongly based on "gender and race", and accompanied by violence (35). This mechanism seems to be the only element evocative of the service in the Vietnam war, which remains an untouched subject throughout the film, its only tangible remnant being Travis's military jackets. While centred around a war veteran, the film does not feature any traumatic flashbacks or "wartime memories", however, it does contain an urban jungle, "seething with heat and chaos", in which Travis is constantly "surrounded by the enemy" (39). Correspondingly, Travis's animosity towards the unruly Other seems to be highly racially motivated: although he claimed he does not mind driving Black people, Travis's racial prejudice is often reflected by a slow-motion camera movement, meant to reflect his lingering gaze filled with suspicion. A case in point is his focus on the Black pimps in flashy clothes, drawing his attention while he is attempting to converse with other cab drivers in a greasy diner, displaying obvious discomfort in interaction with Charlie T, a Black driver.

When his mental state begins to deteriorate, the violence around him begins to intensify, as if he is becoming numb to perceive anything else, and, once again, race plays an important role, with the minority becoming the embodiment of the urban squalor and a trigger for Travis's hatred. The amplification of his desire for violence and aggression, which follows right upon Travis's confrontation with Betsy, seems to be conveyed in a scene featuring Scorsese himself as the psychotic passenger who asks Travis to stop the

car in front of a certain building. The passenger then reveals to him that his wife is cheating on him with “a nigger” who lives in the building, which is why he is going to “kill her with a .44 Magnum pistol” (00:42:22-00:42:57). The violence of this scene is reflected in the language employed by the neurotic passenger, who asks Travis whether he knows that a magnum pistol can “fucking destroy (...) a woman’s face” and “a woman’s pussy” forcing Travis to voyeuristically observe the two silhouettes behind the window (00:43:10-00:43:15). According to Fuchs, this scene is not coincidentally chosen as an introduction to Travis’s shift to aggression, as it represents an “intersection of race and gender as the ultimate focus of Travis’s physical violence”, with “the female body” and “the Black body” fusing together into a “visible site of difference” (42). The similar allusions, linking race and violence, seem to become more frequent, as in the shot of Charlie T teasing Travis with “Bye, killer” gesturing a finger gun, right as he exits the diner to ask some advice from Wizard, or the intense eye contact he makes with a Black passer-by in front of the diner, his taut face drenched in red lightning. In a conversation with Wizard, an older, more experienced driver, Travis explains in broken sentences that he has “some bad ideas in his head” and feels that he wants “to really do something”, seeming unable to comprehend and express what truly bothers him (00:46:45-00:47:05). Indications are therefore given that Travis could be potentially harmful to his environment, the “bad ideas” contrasting the claim he makes at the beginning of the film that his “consciousness is clean” (00:03:12).

Travis finally decides to abandon the passive observation and realise his “bad ideas” by choosing Palantine as his main target. However, right in the beginning of his scheming, Travis again encounters Iris, who appears like a deer in the headlights when he almost hits her with car, after which he decides to follow her as she strides among the crowd of pimps and prostitutes, while an enraged Black man is running and shouting that he will “kill” a certain “her” (00:52:12). After “a long continuous chain” of “indistinguishable” days, a change occurs in Travis’s life when he decides to purchase a gun from a salesman, immediately asking for a .44 Magnum (00:53:39-00:53:43). The scene of gun purchase consists of alternating shots of close-up shots of various guns and shots of Travis practicing his aim, while the salesman explains he sells high quality-weapon only to the right people, and not “jungle bunnies in Harlem”

(00:55:12-00:55:15) Encouraged by the salesman's words, Travis decides to buy the entire gun collection and then begins with a preparation resembling a military training, aiming to solidify his body through intense exercise, and even attaching a sleeve gun mechanism directly to his arm, which Fuchs perceives as the reconstruction of "his body to destroy the corrupt social body, erecting a boundary between himself and the Other" (43).

The process of preparation plunges him deep into isolation and "morbid self-obsession"; his observation is now limited solely to Palantine and his rallies, where he talks to a secret service agent, inquiring about the weapons they carry and claiming he would be a good agent as he is "observant" and "good with crowds" due to being an ex-Marine (01:03:43-01:03:47). The alienation and violence to which he has succumbed, cause him to become identical to the 'Other' he despises, as the boundary he is trying to establish quickly collapses. This is reflected in the most popular scene of the film, in which Travis draws the gun on his reflection, faced with his own otherness. Staring at himself in the mirror, with a paranoid, glazed look in his eyes, he asks himself "You talkin' to me? (...) Who the fuck you think you're talking to?" and responds with "Well I'm the only one here" (01:06:45-01:06:57), demonstrating "the breakdown of the visible difference that once defied him", as he is "looking at the enemy who is the same" (Fuchs 44). Surrounded by Palantine's campaign posters and new articles on the presidential candidate, in a cluttered, dirty space which resembles the filth of the outside, Travis writes: "Listen, you fuckers, you screwheads. Here is a man who would not take it anymore. A man who stood up against the scum, the cunts, the dogs, the filth, the shit. Here is a man who stood up" (01:07:19-01:07:23). In contrast to his diary entry, Travis is then seen lying down in his bed, cowered in a foetal position, an image of weakness and powerlessness, with the final shot once again depicting a conversation with his reflection, this time saying "You're dead" (01:07:46).

The first outburst of Travis's pent-up violence occurs in a neighbourhood shop, where he witnesses a young Black robber threatening the owner with his gun. Without much thinking, as if he was just waiting for a chance for a release, Travis grabs the gun and shoots the robber, while the owner brutally beats him

to death with a pole. The burst of aggression is once again racialised, and, while Travis expresses some confusion and worry, the owner diminishes his concern and sends him off, claiming that the robber is the “fifth motherfucker” (01:09:41) of the year. The brutality demonstrated by the owner and his justification of the murder seem to provide validation for Travis’s need for transgression, as the rules of morality and conscience evidently do not apply in the bloody and violent urban arena. However, the violent impulse he received after the murder seems to direct him in the opposite direction, where he plays the role of a saviour, and Travis decides to visit Iris, pretending to be a customer and making a deal with her pimp Sport. Travis’s exchange with Sport highlights Travis’s incongruity with the streetwise urban underground, as Sport mistakes him for a police officer, responding to his remark that he is “hip” with “You don’t look hip” (01:17:45). In this scene, Travis is depicted as the “inarticulate cowboy” in leather boots, while Sport is a “fast-bargaining” long-haired Indian, trying to make a deal with Travis by graphically describing explicit sexual acts Iris can provide for twenty dollars (Fuchs 44-45).

The depiction of American Wild West iconography reflects Travis’s vigilante fantasy of restoring order in the city and defeating the “Other”, as well as his need to re-enact the staples of heroic masculinity portrayed in westerns. The plotline for Travis’s heroic fantasy was even inspired by *The Searchers* (1956), a western starring John Wayne as a Civil war veteran attempting to save his niece, who was kidnapped by the Indians, but now refuses to be rescued (Grist 377). As an urban vigilante, Travis switches his role from the criminal assassin to the protective guardian, refusing Iris’s sexual advances with disgust and attempting to help her escape prostitution. Inviting her to a diner, Travis tries to convince Iris that she deserves a normal, stable life; however, similar to the damsel in distress in *The Searchers*, Iris refuses Travis’s help, denying that she is trapped, and responds to Travis’s comment on Sport resembling “a killer” with “So, what makes you so high and mighty? (...) Didn’t you ever try looking at your own eyeballs in the mirror?” (01:26:28-01:26:35).

Iris’s comment rings true, as Travis is again seen practicing his shooting, and subsequently, sharpening his knife and burning Betsy’s flowers. He leaves some money for Iris with a note that announces



his death and writes: “Now I see it clearly. My whole life has pointed in one direction” (01:33:39-01:33:47). Claiming that “there never has been any choice” for him, Travis decides to conclude his strolling with the criminal act of assassination, which would mark him as a deranged murderer, whose *flânerie* inevitably leads to crime (01:33:45-01:33:48). He arrives to Palantine’s rally with a shaved mohawk on his head, sported by the Special Forces in Vietnam as a sign that they were “ready to kill”, distances himself from the crowd and grins knowingly while the presidential delivers a tedious speech on the liberation of the city from poverty, inflation, and unemployment (Grist 213). However, in the moment when Travis attempts to pull out his gun, the security notices him and his plan falls through, a desire for violence and transgression left unfulfilled. Returning to his flat in disarray, Travis decides to find another outlet for his aggression, a visit to Iris’s bordello being an obvious choice. Stepping back into the role of vigilante saviour, he waits for the night to fall to drive his taxi to Iris’s building, his psychotic eyes blurred but determined. He provokes Sport on the doorstep, who does not recognise Travis and tries to chase him away which earns him a shot in the stomach, accompanied by the command to “suck on this”, a reference to Sport’s sexualisation of Iris (01:39:10). After sitting on a nearby stoop, Travis enters the dark building and shoots the bordello’s timekeeper, blowing his fingers off, a gruesome act jokingly referenced by Betsy and her colleague at the beginning of the film. At that moment, Sport returns and shoots Travis, who shoots him back, and then climbs upstairs with the old timekeeper on his tail, who repetitively yells “Crazy son of a bitch I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you!” (01:40:25-01:40:33). When Iris’s client barges out of the room, Travis fires multiple bullets into him, and the fight relocates to Iris’s room, where he stabs the timekeeper with a knife and then shoots him in the head.

When the carnage finally ends, with blood splattered on the walls and Iris’s screams and sobs ringing in the background, Travis, who is now drenched in blood, puts a gun to his throat and shoots, but finds out he ran out of bullets. The police find him sitting on the couch, pointing a bloody finger to his head and imitating a gun going off, with the camera moving to an overhead shot, which depicts him lying among the bloody bodies around him, once again mirroring his opponents. The grotesquely violent scene in the

bordello represents almost an orgasmic release of Travis's pent-up aggression, and can be considered successful in terms of the desired bloodletting and purification he managed to achieve through the destruction of his opponents, however, the confrontation with himself as his final enemy ultimately results in failure, as he is unable to commit suicide and, therefore, unable to dispose of the "bad ideas in his head" (Fuchs 46).

In the aftermath of the massacre, Travis is recognised as a hero, as the carnage he committed to expel his hate and aggression is ultimately seen as a selfless act of single-handedly rescuing a teenage girl from the jaws of prostitution and eliminating New York's notorious criminals. Travis seems to proudly accept his newfound status, having decorated his walls with newspaper clippings titled "Taxi Driver Battles Gangsters" and "Reputed New York Mafioso Killed in Bizarre Shooting", along with a letter from Iris's father expressing gratitude for Iris's return to normal life. His mission of "really doing something" has therefore deprived Travis of *flâneuristic* anonymity and resulted in acceptance from the community, which is even reflected in the shot Travis conversing with his colleagues, now as a part of their circle instead of being visually separated from them. His personal satisfaction also arises from the fact that he managed to destroy the sleaziest, most disturbing part of the urban perversion he had encountered, and liberate Iris. However, the audience knows the truth about his heroic venture: it would not have happened if Travis had managed to shoot Palantine and had not been in a desperate need to unleash his aggression. The narrative surrounding Travis could have easily been completely different, as murdering a presidential candidate would mark him as a deranged killer and a criminal. His fluctuation between a positive and negative figure, determined solely by a set of circumstances not only encapsulates the *flâneur's* ambivalence, but consequently brings into question the concept of celebrated heroism and righteousness. The artificially constructed concept of the individual hero who serves the community seems to be deep-rooted in the society, exemplified by the celebration of war veterans and reflected in the "American movie myths", which explains *Taxi Driver's* references to Western iconography (Kolker 291).

While Travis has been proclaimed a hero by the news media, Scorsese makes sure to highlight that his criminal potential has not faded away, as his madness is still present, albeit hidden beneath the surface. The closing scene features the intrigued Betsy as Travis's fare, claiming she has read about Travis in the newspaper, however, there seems to be a hallucinatory, dream quality to the shot of Betsy's head floating in the taxi's rear-view mirror, surrounded by the city's neon lights (Kolker 304). After Travis gallantly refuses to charge Betsy for her ride and leaves her standing on the sidewalk, watching him drive away, the camera shifts to Travis's paranoid eyes in the mirror, once again illuminated by red lightning with ominous music playing in the background. The scene with Betsy could have easily been a dream sequence, once again emphasising the subjectivity of Travis's psychotic gaze, which alters the brutal reality of the decaying city, employing grotesque versions of cultural and social myths, and blurring the distinction between the real and imagined. The credits roll against shots of the neon-lit city at night, which feeds Travis's hatred, announcing that there exists a possibility of Travis's aggression once again accumulating until it overflows and explodes, but this time in a more criminal and transgressive manner.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this thesis was to provide the analysis of Travis Bickle's urban experience in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* as *flânerie* through the cinematic representation of the 1970s New York, corroded by the effects of the urban crisis. The examination employs the theories on the phenomenon of the metropolis, placing focus on the anxiety which permeates the ideas about the urban experience, before providing insight into the urban crisis and its cinematic exploration. Simmel's idea on the nerve-numbing effect of the big city seems to be detrimental for the understanding of the detached mentality and urban indifference, due to which the inhabitants of the metropolis therefore experience a paradoxical loneliness while being swallowed by the enormous crowd of people on a daily basis, in a city of gigantic proportions. Such experience inevitably sparks fear and anxiety, with the amorphous mass of people of dubious intentions, provides fertile soil for the realisation of criminal intentions. The urban anxiety is often directed towards the city's most marginalised, financially deprived, "strangest" part – the inner city, which became the main source of paranoia, while its inhabitants were perceived as inherently criminal and dangerous, and the main culprits for the urban crisis. While the anti-urban sentiment was often propagated by the media during the American urban crisis, this period also saw the artistic exploitation of the city, with film directors recognising the aesthetic quality and the narrative possibility of the decaying city.

The broader analysis of the city was then applied to the depiction of New York in *Taxi Driver*, renowned for its stylistic and cinematographic qualities, taking into consideration that the said depiction is meant to represent a singular urban experience of the film's protagonist. The character of Travis Bickle serves as a filter through which the crises-stricken New York seems even more gruesome, and its inhabitants sleazier than in the reality, shaped by the distorted, insomniac perspective of a disturbed mind. The urban isolation and alienation as defined by Simmel are therefore also intensified, corresponding to Travis's lack of purpose and understanding of his issues after the return from the war, while anti-urban populist ideas and cultural myths are reflected in the grotesque, fragmented scraps of Travis's understanding of the world

around him. Travis's *flânerie* is therefore rather selective and hyperfocused on the violence and perversion of the inner city, as his distraught mind is unable to perceive anything else, assigning the urban squalor a crucial role in the psychological characterisation.

The agitation and hatred which seem to define Travis's *flânerie* seem to distance him from Baudelaire's theorisation of strolling, which describes *flâneur* as a passive stroller who delights in the commotion of the industrialised city, and connect him to the sinister *flâneur* as defined by Benjamin and depicted by Poe. Travis's contradicting relationship with the city, based on the desire to clean the city's filth and the simultaneous participation in it, is what correlates him to the Poe's duality of the *flâneur* as a detective and as a criminal. His aversion towards the city seems to stem from the deep feeling of alienation and loneliness, the inability to connect with the city and its residents, but also from the recognition of the aggression and violence within him, which make him rather similar to the opponents he attempts to fight. Even when he attempts to escape the dark underbelly of the city by dating Betsy, who belongs to the completely different world, he sabotages their relationship by dragging her with him to the filth he is supposed to despise. Betsy's rejection symbolises the disruption of Travis's attempt to become a functional member of the society and to re-establish his masculinity, which is hindered by his passivity and lack of purpose, leading to the disclosure of criminal intentions. When he does not manage to assassinate Palantine, Travis decides to unleash his anger by killing Iris's captors, promptly transforming into a vigilante saviour, embodying the *flâneur*'s ambivalence and the dual possibility of being a criminal and the guardian from crime. The city ultimately decides to which side Travis belongs by proclaiming him a hero, but the otherness within Travis which connect him to the city's filth, and which urges him to violence and crime, still prevails.

The analysis of Travis's relationship with the city, and the depiction of New York in *Taxi Driver* was meant to correspond to Soja's ideas on the thirding of spatial theories, the third option of perceiving space as a lived and practiced space encompassing the other two concepts within the triad, both the "real" and the "imagined" aspect merging together into the lived spatial experience. New York, as depicted in *Taxi Driver* is lived and 'strolled' by the obsessive and psychotic Travis Bickle, whose perception distorts

the reality of the urban crisis into a dark, neon-lit urban nightmare, influenced by populist myths and ideas on the urban. The depiction of New York in *Taxi Driver* also seems to reflect the ubiquitous mental conception of “New York-ness” and the metropolis in general, while creating its own mental imagery of the urban crisis through aestheticization, which represents the subversion of anti-urban discourse. The feminist reading of Travis’s *flânerie* and multiple references to Travis’s racism add another layer to the analysis, solidifying Soja’s idea on the city as a politically and ideologically influenced space, permeated by gendered and racialised inequalities and dynamics of power.

Cinematic representation of the city seems to blur the lines between the real and imagined urban experience, not only reflecting the lived reality in the city, but helping to construct the city’s representational space. The mental imagery created in the film may contribute to the imaginary dimension of the urban experience, reverberating against the city by shaping the city’s Secondspace, and the way the city is perceived, discussed, and ultimately, lived. Such consideration challenges the notion of space as a backdrop for literary and film narratives, and, correspondingly, as merely a background of our daily lives, and instead presents it as a dynamic, pervasive and permeable aspect of reality.

## SUMMARY

This paper aims to combine the theories on the phenomenon of the metropolis and the American urban crisis with the concept of the *flâneur* or the stroller, an emblem of the individualised urban experience, and apply them to Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, in order to depict space as a dynamic ever-changing notion, unfairly neglected in humanities studies and narrative interpretations. The theoretical basis for the analysis of space is provided by Edward Soja's theory on the trialectics of space, within which Thirdspace, as a lived space, combines and transcends the real and imagined space. The urbanised and industrialised city is then described as a place of indifference and ambivalence, its immensity unavoidably leading to loneliness and isolation, accompanied by the fear of hidden criminal intentions. Directed towards the city's marginal groups and the representatives of the city's otherness, the urban fear gradually developed into paranoia, which was especially evident during the period of the urban crisis. The analysis of Scorsese's depiction of New York serves as a demonstration of the artistic employment of the urban crisis, as well as the example of the subjectivity of the lived reality and the perception of the city. The ambivalence which defines the urban experience has produced *flânerie* as a symbolical representation of the individual exploration of the city, in which the *flâneur* can evolve from a passive stroller into an active figure, undertaking the role of a useful member of the society or the criminal. Travis Bickle's obsessive and psychotic strolling is reminiscent of Benjamin's theory on the potentially aggressive *flânerie* and the stroller's duality depicted by Edgar Allan Poe, while also encapsulating the ideas on the urban loneliness and the anti-urban myths. Ultimately, the spatial experience depicted on film is not only influenced by the actual spatial experience, but also possesses the ability to contribute to the mental and imaginative aspect in the construction and the practice of spatial reality.

Keywords: literary space, trialectics of space, urban space, urban crisis, *flâneur*, film, Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver*

## SAŽETAK

Flâneur urbane truleži: “Taksist” Martina Scorsesea

Cilj ovog rada je povezati teorije o fenomenu velegrada i američke urbane krize s konceptom *flâneura* ili šetača, simbolom subjektivne i individualne urbane stvarnosti, te ih primijeniti na filmu *Taksist* Martina Scorsesea kako bi se prostor prikazao kao dinamičan pojam, nepravedno zanemaren u humanističkim znanostima i naratologiji. Kao teorijska osnova za analizu prostora, poslužit će prostorna trijalektika Edwarda Soje, unutar koje Trećeprstor, odnosno življeni prostor, predstavlja i nadilazi spoj stvarnog i imaginarnog prostora. Urbanizirani i industrijalizirani velegrad potom se opisuje kao mjesto ravnodušnosti i ambivalentnosti, čija golemost neizbježno vodi u samoću i otuđenost popraćenu strahom od skrivenih zločinačkih namjera. Usmjerenjem prema marginaliziranim društvenim skupinama te predstavnicima drugotnosti, urbani strah postupno je prerastao u paranoju, koja do izražaja posebice dolazi tijekom razdoblja urbane krize. Uz to što predstavlja estetizaciju urbane krize, prikaz New Yorka u filmu Martina Scorsesea primjer je subjektivnosti urbane stvarnosti i percepcije velegrada. Velegradska ambivalentnost omogućila je nastanak *flâneurizma* kao simboličkog prikaza individualnog iskušavanja grada, u kojem flâneur može evoluirati iz pasivnog promatrača u aktivnu ulogu korisnog člana društva ili zločinca. Opsesivna i psihotična šetnja Trvisa Bicklea podudara se s Benjaminovom teorijom o potencijalno agresivnom *flâneuru*, čiju je podvojenost predočio i Edgar Allan Poe; a istovremeno sažima i ideje o urbanoj usamljenosti i antiurbanim mitovima. U konačnici, prostorno iskustvo prikazano na filmu ne predstavlja samo refleksiju stvarnog prostornog iskustva, već ima mogućnost doprinijeti diskursu o prostoru, a time i mentalnom i imaginarnom aspektu konstrukcije i življenja prostorne stvarnosti.

Ključne riječi: prostor u književnosti, prostorna trijalektika, urbani prostor, urbana kriza, flâneur, film, Martin Scorsese, Taksist



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