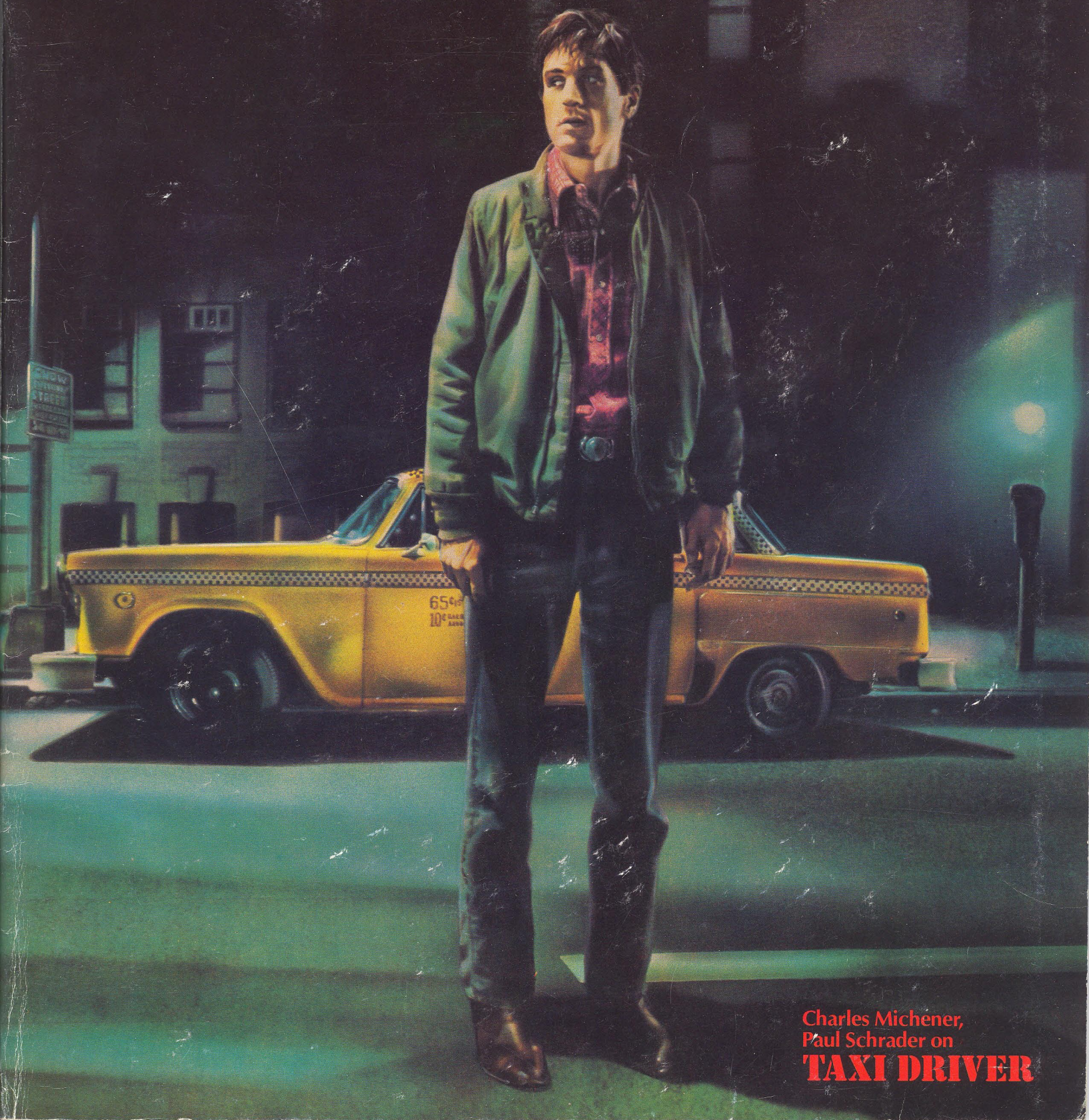


FILM COMMENT

MARCH-APRIL 1976

\$1.75

The Last Days of Pasolini
Wertmuller: Pro-Men Or Con Woman?
Robin Wood Loves Susan George
The Pluck of Stanley Kubrick
Manhattan: Dream City of the Movies



Charles Michener,
Paul Schrader on
TAXI DRIVER

Paul Schrader, 30, is probably best known in Hollywood for selling his first screenplay, *YAKUZA*, for \$300,000. He is considered one of the new breed of screenwriters which includes David Ward, Gloria Katz and Willard Huyck, and John Milius. After receiving an M.A. in film from UCLA, Schrader published *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (University of California Press, 1972). Schrader was among the first group of Fellows selected by the American Film Institute for its Center for Advanced Film Study at Greystone mansion in Beverly Hills. While at AFI, he became the editor of *Cinema*, then a sort of fan magazine devoted to the industry, published by a women's fashion magnate; Schrader transformed it into a substantial film journal from his first issue on (Vol. 6, #1, in 1970, to Vol. 8, #1, in 1973). When the AFI purged its research and critical studies staff, Schrader was one of two Fellows to resign in protest.

BACKGROUND

I was never a movie-obsessed child. I wasn't interested in movies as a child and didn't see one until I was seventeen. I'm totally unlike all the people I know—the Huycks, Spielberg, Scorsese—whose whole adolescent consciousness is defined by movies. My adolescent consciousness is defined by the church and the family structure. Movies were an adult aberration. I came to movies as an adult rather than as a child.

Were you exposed to other kinds of popular narrative as a child? Classic children's novels?

Oh yes, we were great readers. My father had to drop out of seminary in the Depression, and he vowed that his sons would be ministers and therefore he was very heavy on education.

I had no intention of being involved in the motion-picture business; I backed into it. It began when I was at Calvin College, a seminary in Michigan. I became interested in movies because they were not allowed. This was the era of *THE SEVENTH SEAL* and *LA STRADA*, and I saw that movies could fit into the religious structure of the school and provide a bridge between my religious training and the forbidden world. Movies were forbidden in our church by a synodical decree of 1928 which defined them as a "worldly amusement," along with card-playing, dancing, smoking, drinking, and so on. I snuck off to see my first movie, *THE ABSENT-MINDED PROFESSOR*, which I'd been blackmailed into seeing by watching *The Mickey Mouse Club*.

You were allowed to watch television?

Our family was; there were others who weren't.

Was there any logic behind the prohibition of movies?

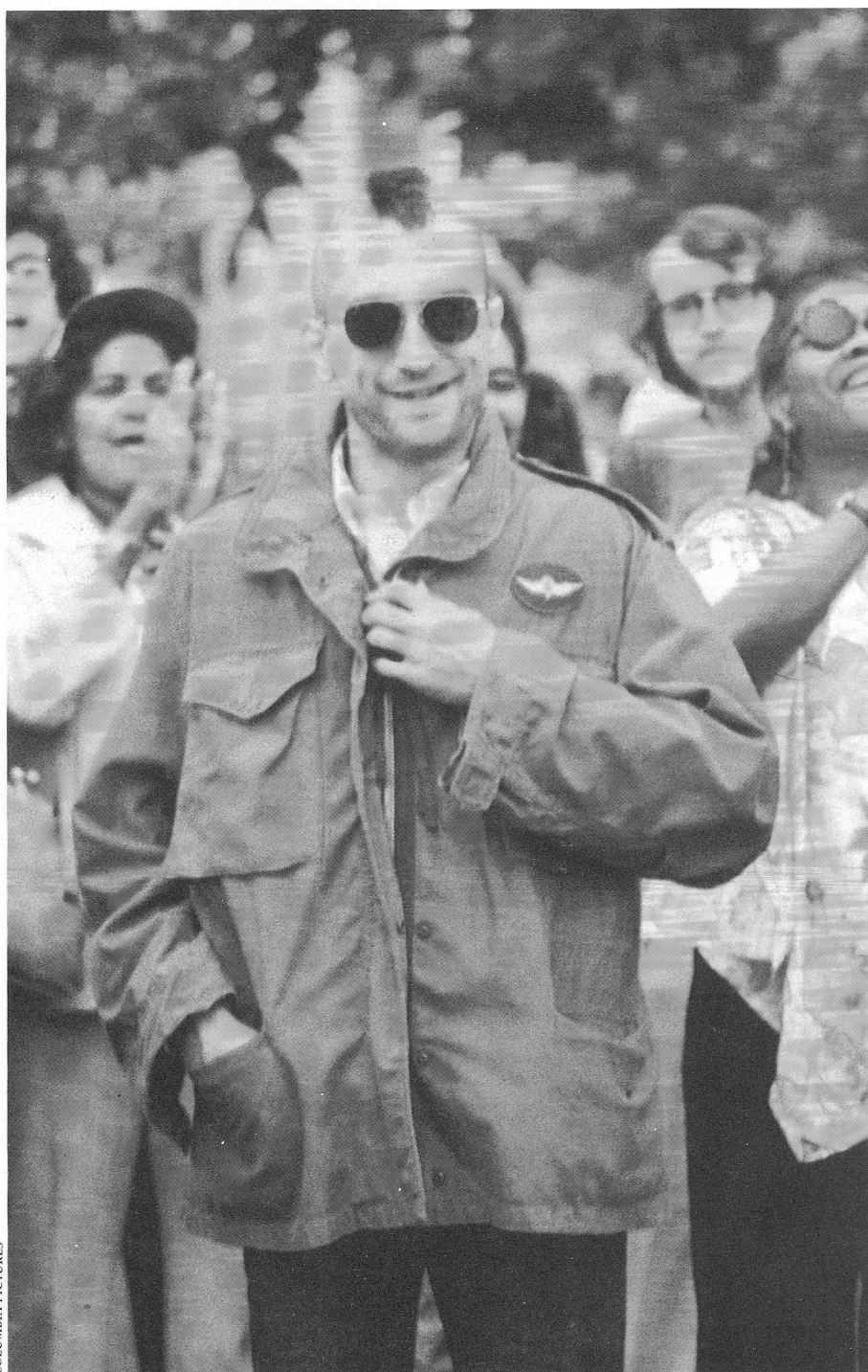
My mother said that no matter how innocuous the movie may be—I was pleading in one case to see Disney's *LIVING DESERT*—your money goes to support an

Richard Thompson is grateful to Jack Shafer for his help with this interview, which took place in L.A. on January 26 and 29, 1976.

SCREEN

TAXI DRIVER's

interviewed by

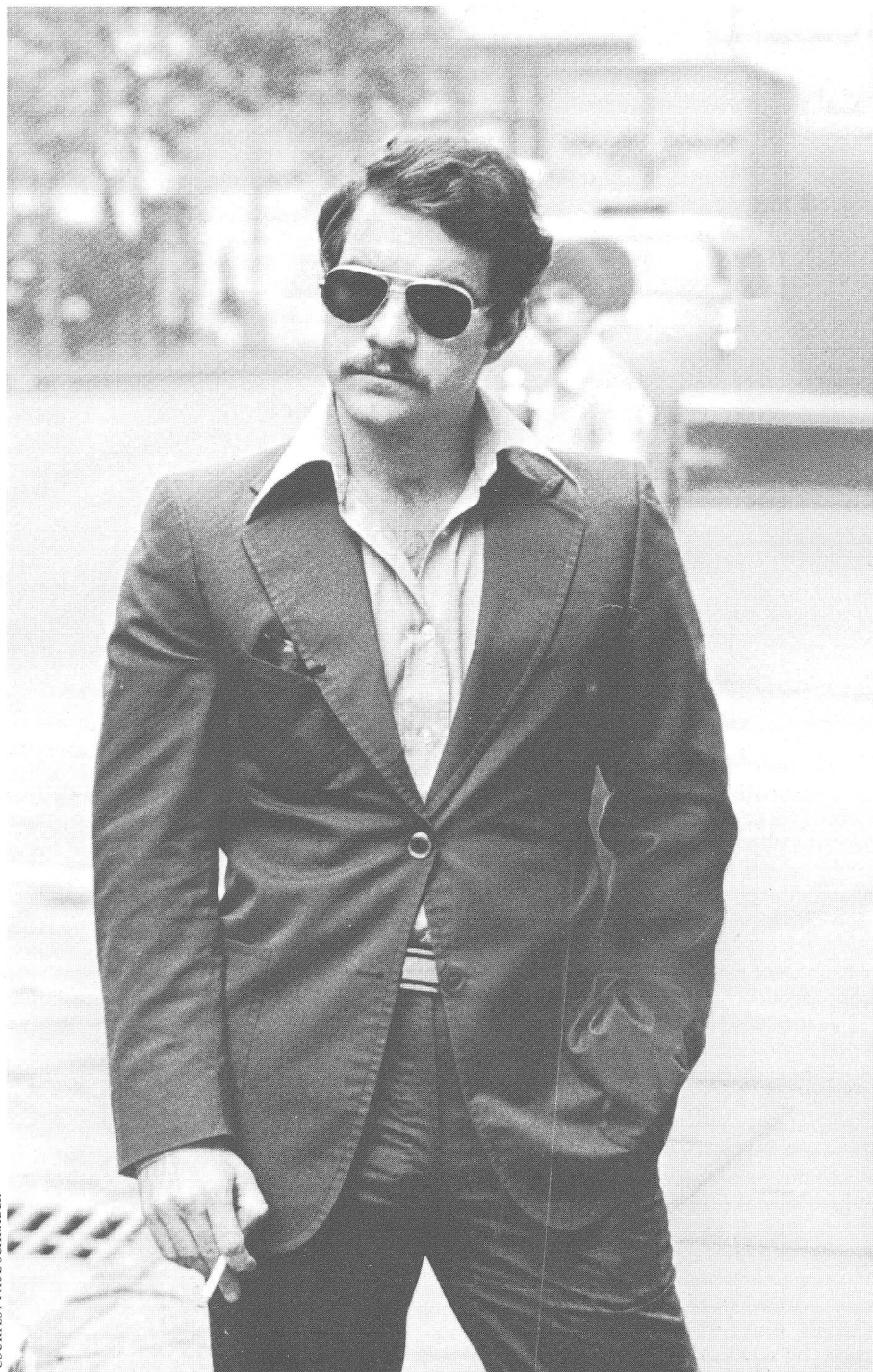


Robert DeNiro in *TAXI DRIVER*.

WRITER

Paul Schrader

Richard Thompson



COURTESY PAUL SCHRADER

evil industry; therefore, you can't judge the individual movie. I remember getting on my knees and crying to see *KING CREOLE*. What broke the church control structure was television, because if you didn't have it in your house, you'd go next door to your friend's house; they couldn't stop it from coming through. Today, they've had to revise and change. Movies are no longer forbidden.

Did music have the same effect—the availability of rock 'n' roll on radio?

Yes. I can remember my mother finding me listening to a Pat Boone song and taking the radio and throwing it against the basement wall. I remember her anger at losing control, at the insidious effect of the media, destroying and undermining the family structure, which it did.

Was it a difficult choice for you to break away from the Church's view of film?

In order to learn more about film when I was at Calvin, I went to Columbia one summer and took all the film courses they had. That summer, I was at the West End Bar late one night and got to talking about Pauline Kael's *I Lost It at the Movies*, which had just come out. The person I was talking with turned out to be Paul Warshow, the late Robert Warshow's son. He said, "Let's go over and see Pauline"—she had just come to New York at the time, living on West End and writing for *McCall's*. We went over there the next day, and I ended up talking with her all night and staying on her sofa. The next morning, she said to me as I left, "You don't really want to be a minister, you want to be a movie critic. If you ever want to get into UCLA graduate school"—which at that time was the *crème de la crème* of film schools, and very hard to get into—"let me know, and I'll get you in." I kept up a correspondence with her for a long time, and she was very generous to me.

Finally, when I graduated from Calvin and realized that she was right, that I didn't want to be a minister, I called up Pauline and said, "Several years ago you told me this, is it true?" She said, "Yes," and she got me into UCLA film school, even though I had no real credentials whatsoever. I came out here to film school and got a job on the *L.A. Free Press* and started writing criticism. I did a lot of stuff around town at KPFK, *Coast*, *The L.A. Times Calendar*, that whole freelance circuit. I wrote the book for University of California Press, which was a real monkey-off-my-back book, something I felt I had to write; I felt in a unique position of knowing both about theology and about film. After UCLA, I went into the initial program at the American Film Institute, which was a bit of a luxury that first year.

A luxury in what sense?

Just one enormous party. We'd be seeing films, whatever you wanted; the student staff ratio was about two-to-one in favor of the staff; there were continual cocktail receptions for industry notables.

Rather than titillate me, it soured me on the whole thing; I could see that the money was being wasted and that the wrong decisions were being made.

One of the reasons for this was picked up by Stanton Kaye immediately. Stanton said that no good would ever come out of the place because the AFI is offering young kids the rewards of being successful without demanding the successful product; for most of us, reward is all we want so why should we go out and make good films when we can hang around and meet Charlton Heston, Billy Wilder, Frank Capra? It takes away the reason to make films.

The definitive mistake in the history of AFI is Greystone. George Stevens, Jr., once let slip in a meeting with the Fellows what caused this mistake. He was defending the use of Greystone and said something to the effect that the motion-picture business is a very rich and success-oriented business, and you will have to identify yourself at this level. If we didn't have an institution like Greystone, we couldn't get people like Heston, Wilder, Wyler, to come here. That statement made me absolutely aghast. First, it showed how totally distorted his priorities were. Second, it showed in what low esteem he held those filmmakers, because if a filmmaker will only come to a rich, well-appointed place, he must be completely whored out; and that's simply not true of these men. They'll go to Watts or to cold-water apartments. They're decent men and do respect their craft. You don't need a Greystone to get them. It reflects Stevens's total misunderstanding of what it meant to be an AFI student.

I think the value of USC, UCLA, and AFI is that they give you an excuse to come to L.A. It's very hard to pack up and come out here and get an apartment and try to break in. Your psyche just can't handle the change and the rejection. Whereas if you can say for one or two years, "I'm a student," it gives you the psychological boost to get through that rough initial period. I don't think UCLA, USC, AFI, really do much of anything. The courses are Mickey Mouse. They expose you to a lot of movies, but then anybody with money and ingenuity can be exposed to a lot of movies. The level of instruction is not rigorous; it's very easy to get through without coming to terms with aesthetic questions. I'm of the school that the function of education is to educate.

Not to acclimate.

Yes. I've been trying to teach at UCLA for years—they never let me in—but if they ever do, they'll regret it, because I'll flunk everybody. I have this fantasy about going in there and trying to make students work. I never thought I was made to work much.

UCLA has changed so much in the past few years. Pauline was talking about that. She said, "It used to be, eight or ten years

ago, you'd go to campuses and everybody would be attacking you for selling out. Today you go and they all want to know how." I remember at UCLA when we used to deride Jerry Lewis, Dan Taradash, Abby Mann—people in the commercial cinema—just make life miserable for them, heckle them. Today, when I go to USC, I'm regarded as some kind of icon because I beat the system financially. Not artistically. I made money. They want to know how to do that. Faulkner once told a student that he had to decide whether he wanted to be a writer or whether he wanted to write. And it's the same problem here. Most students want to be screenwriters or directors. They want to be that entity, but the work itself is not what propels them into it.

When I made the jump into screenwriting, I had fully decided to be a critic. My goal at the time was to write for a magazine such as *New Republic*, *New Yorker*, or *Saturday Review*, something with solid credentials that would give me freedom. But again Pauline came into my life and forced me to make a change—she has been a very instrumental force. I was in New York around Christmas time five years ago and she had set up a job for me as a newspaper critic in either Seattle or Chicago; they had both asked her opinion and she was going to make a very strong recommendation for me. She wanted my approval for this. I told her that this was, in fact, everything I was looking for—a chance to make a living, to create a body of work, to work within a community and try to improve standards—yet somehow it didn't ring true for me. I said I would always regret it if I had lived in California four years and never once tried to write a script. It would always bother me; I had to try it once. I said, "Can I have two weeks?" She said, "I have to have a decision right away." I said, "In that case, the answer is no." And Pauline and I did not really speak for almost a year after that, because she had expected me to take my place among the other satellites in her orbit; much as I would have liked that, it just didn't seem the right thing to do. So I came back to L.A. after Christmas, committed to writing a script. I thought, "Well, the decision has been made for you, you'd better write a script."

This was after you had done the Transcendental Style book and while you were still running Cinema?

I had just finished the book, it hadn't been published yet. So I looked up Jim Blue, whom I had known at AFI, and I asked him how to write a script. And he and Alex Jacobs met with me and told me how to do it. Jim's advice was very practical: how one goes about it, how one makes characters interesting, how it's developed—things you eventually learn for yourself. Alex has a taste for violence and action; he advised me on the best way to punch up a script. I was a quick study, so I

caught on to the tricks and could improve upon them until they had some meaning.

I wrote an autobiographical script. I literally graphed out a ninety-minute script. I graphed each of the characters and all the plots; created a complete structure which tried to adhere to the transcendental style I had just written the book about, but in an American context. My goal was also to write a script that could be made for under \$100,000. That was *PIPELINER*, about a dying man who goes home to northern Michigan for sympathy and ends up fucking up the lives of everyone around him. I showed the script to a few friends, including Joel Reisner, a man who collected talented people and who subsequently committed suicide. He had had his eye on me from having read the *Free Press* stuff and always wanted to know what I was doing. I gave him a copy of the script and said, "What do you think of this?" He gave it to a friend of his who was a literary agent—not a film agent—named Michael Hamilburg. They both liked it, and they both said they'd like to get this on. We spent a year trying to finance it. The film never got made, but it turned out to be a sort of calling-card script, and Michael Hamilburg ended up supporting me for the next two years, a crucial period.

I had never really been exposed to the business side. From having to sit down with men who had to put up their money or their client's money, I saw how a meeting worked and how you take a meeting; what is effective. I began to see the commercial needs. It wasn't something alien to me, because I had been a child hustler-businessman, like many children. I had fallen out of that, but once I saw it working I understood how one sells, how one markets, how one packages oneself. In that year, I learned exactly what the business was.

AS *PIPELINER* was falling through, I got hit with two other blows to the body at the same time: my marriage fell through, and the affair that caused the marriage to fall through fell through, all within the same four or five months. I fell into a state of manic depression. I was living with someone at that time, and she got so fed up with me that she split. I was staying in her apartment waiting for the cupboard to run out of food.

I got to wandering around at night; I couldn't sleep because I was so depressed. I'd stay in bed till four or five P.M. then I'd say, "Well, I can get a drink now." I'd get up and get a drink and take the bottle with me and start wandering around the streets in my car at night. After the bars closed, I'd go to pornography. I'd do this all night, till morning, and I did it for about three or four weeks, a very destructive syndrome, until I was saved from it by an ulcer: I had not been eating, just drinking.

When I got out of the hospital I realized I had to change my life because I would die and everything; I decided to leave L.A.

That was when the metaphor hit me for TAXI DRIVER, and I realized that was the metaphor I had been looking for: the man who will take anybody any place for money; the man who moves through the city like a rat through the sewer; the man who is constantly surrounded by people, yet has no friends. The absolute symbol of urban loneliness. That's the thing I'd been living; that was my symbol, my metaphor. The film is about a car as the symbol of urban loneliness, a metal coffin.

I wrote the script very quickly, in something like fifteen days. The script just jumped from my mind almost intact. As soon as I finished writing—I wrote it for no commercial reason, just because I saw that was the need—I gave it to my agent and I left L.A.; I didn't come back for half a year, just bummed around the country. It took that long before I was ready to come back and face the problems here.

Staying in Winston-Salem, I got a letter from my brother with an idea for a film which turned out to be YAKUZA. I called Mike Hamilburg with it, and he said, "It's a great idea, I'll pay you boys to come back to

L.A. and write it." So my brother Leonard and I stayed in a little apartment in Venice. We wrote the script in about a month, between Thanksgiving and Christmas, and by the next February, we had sold it for \$300,000.

I kept writing continuously after that. I went under Freudian analysis, and have been able to integrate the creative and the personal side in a way so that it's not nearly as destructive as it used to be: to keep the pain in the work without having it rule your life. TAXI DRIVER was written when I couldn't really distinguish between the pain in the work and the pain in my life. I hope I'll continue to write stuff that is as good. TAXI DRIVER is a very rich piece of juvenilia, but it is juvenilia, it is an adolescent, immature mind struggling to identify itself. It has no maturity except at the talent level. It's like the ending of any rough, first adolescent work, like Dostoevsky's *A Raw Youth*.

I've been able to write only originals—no adaptations and no rewrites. I find I always have things I want to write; I've got two things right now. Very fortunately,

I've sold or optioned everything I've written except PIPELINER. That doesn't mean that they get made—far from it—but I'm paid well. If I were open to do adaptations, I could make a lot more money.

I have no desire to make another \$300,000 score. I have enough money. What do you do with all that money? Buy a ski lodge? I don't ski. Buy a yacht? I don't use a yacht. Buy a big house? I had a house, and I got so lonely I moved back into an apartment. I have enough money to live on for a couple of years, and that seems to me the only buffer I need. In the film business, the gamble is all in the points, and that's your annuity. If you hit that once . . . I'd rather take my chance at that level, hitting the jackpot on the percentages, rather than doing \$200,000 adaptations and \$100,000 rewrites.

THE YAKUZA

For YAKUZA, the first script you sold, you were paid \$300,000. How did you make such a deal?

Michael Hamilburg financed the script, and he got a part of the pie. He saw that YAKUZA was going to be a hot item: the intensity with which people became interested was clear. He knew he was incapable of handling a high-level auction, so he went to Robin French, who at that time was regarded as the best auctioneer in town. He auctioned and sold the script. After that, I stayed with Robin and Michael made a settlement for my contract.

What was it about the YAKUZA project that made it so clearly a high-potential project?

It's hard to see now, looking back at a film which completely flopped, but it was a very commercial idea. It had a lot of commercial hooks plus a strong love story, rich characters, and an "in" theme. It seemed to have all the elements for a rich, commercial action romance. People still consider it a commercial script today. I have a friend who thinks it should be remade already.

Was it a disaster, or did it break even?

It was disastrous. It cost five million and brought back maybe a million and a half.

Why did it cost so much? Mitchum?

No. Sydney Pollack does not make inexpensive films. Also, movies cost a lot; the picture was all shot on location in Japan, ten or twelve weeks. Movies are very, very expensive. The million-dollar film does not exist anymore; one-and-a-half to two million dollars is now the standard low-budget film in the studio system. And that's talking about a film with a thirty-day schedule, which is really hauling; and you know no big director will ever make a thirty-day-schedule film. YAKUZA was made in sixty days. So it just cost a lot of money.

What did your brother Leonard bring to you when he suggested the script?

What he had was the fingers. He had been seeing yakuza films in Japan. What



Cliff Robertson and Genevieve Bujold in OBSESSION (DEJA VU).

PIPELINER, written in 1971, unsold, permanently shelved.

TAXI DRIVER, written in 1972, made in 1975-76.

YAKUZA, written in 1973, made in 1974.

DEJA VU, written in 1973, now called OBSESSION, directed by Brian de Palma, starring Genevieve Bujold and Cliff Robertson will be released this year.

ROLLING THUNDER, written in 1973, originally bought by AIP. Then Larry Gordon left AIP and went to Columbia; after two years, I was going to direct it at Columbia, went into preproduction, and the deal fell through. It appears the films will now be made by Twentieth Century-Fox.

QUEBECOIS, written in 1973, under option to Lew Allen who produced FAHRENHEIT 451. I wrote this at the wrong time. Gangster films are now out of vogue, but I think their time will come again. It's about a French-Italian gangwar in Montreal.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND, written in 1974, has been totally rewritten by Steve Spielberg. I'll probably receive partial credit for it, though I don't consider it my own work any longer. It's shooting this year.

THE HAVANA COLONY, written in 1975 and bought by Paramount, is now in turnaround to Gordon Carroll, the producer; we're trying to package it. I got caught in the Paramount administration shuffle: I made my deal with Robert Evans, Frank Yablans, and Robin French, and by the time I finished the script they were all gone. It's about the fall of Havana and a man who thinks he's Humphrey Bogart in CASABLANCA; at the end, he realizes he's Marlon Brando and it's been LAST TANGO all along—the story of a man coming to love while the city falls around him.

HARD CORE, written in 1975, is a pay-or-play deal to direct at Warner Brothers.

had impressed him first was the presence of Takakura Ken, which is unlike any he'd ever seen; then came the rituals: tattoos, fingercutting, the jinjis, or introductions. He said it would be an interesting premise to find a man who was there in the occupation and had to come back, get involved in the *yakuza* world, and make that ultimate sacrifice that is so foreign to a westerner. That is the premise we started out on, trying to create a plot that would result in that situation.

Had you already been seeing yakuza films at the time?

No, I came back to Los Angeles from visiting Leonard in Japan and found that the Linda Lea showed Toei films. Before we started writing, we sat there for two months watching films—the Linda Lea changed its double bills three times a week. By the time I started writing, I was thinking like a Toei screenwriter.

You drew on the scheme of repeating conventions in the yakuza genre which you described in your article in FILM COMMENT [January-February 1974, p. 8].

Yes, it was almost a program script in those terms, using all the genre elements. There was an interesting kinky quality to the American hero that was lost on the screen. Maybe I exaggerate it in my memory, but he seemed more interesting than he finally appeared on the screen.

A little more contradictory?

Yes, the edges were rougher, the Mitchum character was tougher. At one point in the script, it's asked how he made his money. Someone explains that a couple of years ago Harry [the Mitchum character] was on a kidnapping case and was offered a couple hundred thousand dollars to forget something, and he forgot it. That was the character, a man who had a great deal of guilt for the way he had lived.

Provides a nice index of his price, too.

I think that in order to get to the point where you are able to make the sort of self-destructive sacrifice that Harry makes at the end of the film—a suicidal metaphor which is also the *TAXI DRIVER* metaphor—you have to have some rough edges, some problems that you feel the need of absolving. If anything, what I'm concerned about in films and in real life is redemption, because I do believe in purging and a kind of transcendence, either through contemplation or action. In *TAXI DRIVER* and *YAKUZA*, it's a redemption through action, self-destructive action. In the films I wrote about in the Bresson-Dreyer-Ozu book, it was through ritual purification—more conventional church rituals.

What was the controversy with Robert Towne over screen credit?

He rewrote *YAKUZA*. I took it to arbitration and tried to get his name taken off, and they decided that he had done enough work to deserve a credit. He probably won the case legitimately, although I argued

against him. My reason for arguing against it was that it was my first screen credit, and I didn't want to share it.

Is there material in the finished film that Towne put in?

Towne wrote for Sydney Pollack; he wrote what Sydney wanted. That's the reason I was fired, because I was unable to write what Sydney wanted. Sydney and I did not get along well, and he needed someone of his own age, whose work he respected, for feedback.

What was Sydney asking you for that you didn't want to give?

The softening. The softening of the

a great worshiper of Takakura Ken, and I know he is a star. If the film had been successful, he could have been an international star. We could use another star, someone like him, with incredible magnetism. But the film failed, and he'll never be anything but a Japanese star.

TAXI DRIVER

Before I sat down to write *TAXI DRIVER*, I reread Sartre's *Nausea*, because I saw the script as an attempt to take the European existential hero, that is, the man from *The Stranger*, *Notes from the Underground*,



Paul Schrader's *THE YAKUZA*: A violent underworld film about blood and obligation.

Harry Kilmer character.

Were you pleased with Mitchum?

I was very pleased with Mitchum, though casting him probably hurt us at the box office. Redford wanted to do it for a time, but to his credit, finally decided he was too young. Looking back at it, if he had played Harry, too young or not, we probably would have made money.

Do you find other things wrong with YAKUZA?

Pollack directed against the grain of the script. I wrote a violent, underworld film about blood, duty, and obligation. He made a sort of rich, romantic, trans-cultural film. Either of those films would be interesting if fully realized, but the final product fell between those two stools; neither film was made. It didn't satisfy the audience that came to see the hard gangster world, and it didn't satisfy the JEREMIAH JOHNSON audience—Sydney's audience—which came to see some poetic realism.

The thing I regret most from the failure of *YAKUZA* is the loss of Takakura Ken. I am

Nausea, *PICKPOCKET*, *LE FEU FOLLET*, and *A MAN ESCAPED*, and put him in an American context. In so doing, you find that he becomes more ignorant, ignorant of the nature of his problem. Travis's problem is the same as the existential hero's, that is, should I exist? But Travis doesn't understand that this is his problem, so he focuses it elsewhere: and I think that is a mark of the immaturity and the youngness of our country. We don't properly understand the nature of the problem, so the self-destructive impulse, instead of being inner-directed, as it is in Japan, Europe, any of the older cultures, becomes outer-directed. The man who feels the time has come to die will go out and kill other people rather than kill himself. There's a line in *YAKUZA* which says, "When a Japanese cracks up, he'll close the window and kill himself; when an American cracks up, he'll open the window and kill somebody else." That's essentially how the existential hero changes when he becomes American. There is not enough intellectual tradition in this country, and not enough

history; and Travis is just not smart enough to understand his problem. He should be killing himself instead of these other people. At the end, when he shoots himself in a playful way, that's what he's been trying to do all along.

Films about growing up bore me to death—the whole *Bildungsroman* style, SUMMER OF '42, HEARTS OF THE WEST. I'm not interested in how one reaches adulthood; I'm interested in the compromises one makes after one becomes an adult, when one realizes the nature of life. Maybe this is because I had a deprived adolescence; I was always facing questions like,

What do you think of the Bremer diaries as literature?

I think he's quite a good writer. I want to emphasize that the script was written before any of the diary was published. After I read the diary, I was very tempted to take some of the good stuff from it and add it to TAXI DRIVER, but I decided not to because of legal ramifications. Bremer's sitting there in jail with nothing better to do than sue us, which is why I made certain the script was registered before the diary came out, and that nothing was changed after the diary's publication. Bremer turned out to be a marvelous film critic; in the diary, he

wish that scene were longer. It's also the CONDEMNED MAN ESCAPED scene, where you see the poetry of mechanical organization. The bit that's not in the script, the only thing, is DeNiro's dialogue; he improvised it, the whole thing about, "Who you looking at? You looking at me? You're a fuck!" To me, it's the best thing in the movie. And I didn't write it.

Travis's alcoholic breakfast is a nice touch.

He has milk, bread, and apricot brandy. That's also from DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST, and so is, "I think I've got stomach cancer." The country priest is dying of stomach cancer. He starts eating just bread dipped in wine, that's all he can eat, which only accelerates his problem.

Were you able to pick Scorsese to do TAXI DRIVER?

TAXI DRIVER is a very special case: it's a film that was made because the people involved all made large financial sacrifices and stuck to them for a long time. The entire above-the-line cost for Scorsese, DeNiro, Michael and Julia Phillips and Tony Bill [the producers], Peter Boyle, Jodie Foster, and myself was probably around \$150,000; people were doing it for next to nothing.

We waited a long time. Michael and Julia Phillips saw the screenplay three years ago, about a year after it was written. They liked it; they optioned it with no real prospects in mind. Then I saw the rough cut of MEAN STREETS. At that point, we were talking about doing TAXI DRIVER with Robert Mulligan and Jeff Bridges. I was fighting that off because it didn't make any sense to me. Yet it was a deal, and God knows I wanted to see the film made. To Michael and Julia's credit, they were not keen on this either, but it was something that was around and that could have gone. I saw MEAN STREETS and said, "That's it. DeNiro and Scorsese." They saw it and said, "That's it" too. We never entertained any other possibilities, we stuck with it. Then came THE STING, and ALICE DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE, and GODFATHER II, and YAKUZA, and all of a sudden it was a commercial deal. No studio wanted to make the film, but we were simply offering them too good a deal. The original budget was 1.3 million (it eventually went up to 1.9), and they were getting all those elements for that price. It's like betting football: maybe you don't want a team to win, but the spread gets so large you have to go with that team.

And the only reason the package deal held together was because all the principals chose to hold it together rather than following their new fortunes?

Oh yes, absolutely. Any of us could have broken the deal. Bobby was greatly pressured; he got thirty or thirty-five thousand to do this film, and he was being offered half a million for something else. He was one of the strongest



Sydney Pollack's THE YAKUZA.: A rich, romantic, transcultural film

"What if you die tomorrow—Jesus is coming tomorrow." I was always thinking of spiritual questions, even in my private thoughts, rather than thinking about getting laid or becoming a football star. There's a crazy edge when talent pushes itself a little further than it has to, when pressure is on. You start to get the interesting compromises a man makes to survive. When he takes this problem a little further than he's accustomed to, the skeletons come rattling out of the closet. Norman Mailer talks about it when he says he likes war because you see a person's mettle at the crucial moment. I think a man also becomes more universal at that point.

Did Arthur Bremer inspire part of the script?

While I was in the hospital, two things happened which tied the project together: a Harry Chapin song called "Taxi," in which an old girlfriend gets into a guy's cab; and Bremer shot Wallace. That was the thread which led to the script. Maybe I shouldn't admit this, but why not be honest? After all, there's really nothing new on the face of the earth.

describes SUCH GOOD FRIENDS as a piece of dogshit with a plastic flower in it. You have to admit that has a certain poetry about it that is denied our more conventional reviewers.

What are the Bressonian elements in TAXI DRIVER?

The attention to detail, the *quotidienne*, the daily little things of one's life. The diary format, showing the writing. The narration. The monocular vision of the world seen through Travis's eyes; we live inside his head and have to accept his reality. The scene where Travis puts on his new arsenal and practices before the mirror. The treatment of his room. And the film is called TAXI DRIVER for the same reason PICKPOCKET is PICKPOCKET, and not A PICKPOCKET or THE PICKPOCKET: it's an anonymous descriptive term that does not describe the character.

I'm impressed with the dress-up sequence, trying on the new weapons.

That's the PICKPOCKET scene. We screened two films before we started shooting: PICKPOCKET and LE FEU FOLLET. I

'TAXI DRIVER' SCRIPT EXTRACTS

TRAVIS BICKLE, age twenty-six, lean, hard, the consummate loner. On the surface he appears good-looking, even handsome; he has a quiet steady look and a disarming smile which flashes from nowhere, lighting up his whole face. But behind that smile, around his dark eyes, in his gaunt cheeks, one can see the ominous stains caused by a life of private fear, emptiness, and loneliness. He seems to have wandered in from a land where it is always cold, a country where the inhabitants seldom speak. The head moves, the expression changes, but the eyes remain ever-fixed, unblinking, piercing empty space. Travis is now drifting in and out of New York City night life, a dark shadow among darker shadows. Not noticed, no reason to be noticed, Travis is one with his surroundings. He wears rider jeans, cowboy boots, a plaid western shirt, and a worn beige Army jacket with a patch reading, "King Kong Company, 1968-70." He has the smell of sex about him: sick sex, repressed sex, lonely sex, but sex nonetheless. He is a raw male force, driving forward; toward what, one cannot tell. Then one looks closer and sees the inevitable. The clock spring cannot be wound continually tighter. As the earth moves toward the sun, Travis Bickle moves toward violence.

THE PUSSY AND THE .44

Later that night, Travis pulls over for a young (mid-twenties) man wearing a leather sports jacket. Travis eyes his passenger in rear-view mirror.

YOUNG PASSENGER: 417 Central Park West.

Travis' taxi speeds off.

Later, Travis' taxi slows down as it approaches the four hundred block of Central Park West. Travis checks apartment numbers.

YOUNG PASSENGER: Just pull over to the curb a moment.

Travis turns the wheel.

YOUNG PASSENGER: Yeah, that's fine. Just sit here.

Travis waits impassively. The meter ticks away. After a long pause, the passenger speaks:

YOUNG PASSENGER: Cabbie, ya see that light up there on the seventh floor, three windows from this side of the building?

Camera closes in on 417 Central Park West. Tracking up to the seventh floor, it moves three windows to the right.

TRAVIS (off-screen): Yeah.

A young woman wearing a slip crosses in front of the light.

YOUNG PASSENGER (off-screen): Ya see that woman there?

TRAVIS (off-screen): Yeah.

YOUNG PASSENGER (off-screen): That's my wife. (A beat.) But it ain't my apartment. (A beat.) A nigger lives there. (A beat.) She left me two weeks ago. It took me this long to find out where she went. (A beat.) I'm gonna kill her.

Close-up of Travis' face: it is devoid of expression.

YOUNG PASSENGER: What do you think of that, cabbie?

Close-up of Young Passenger's face: it is gaunt, drained of blood, full of fear and anger.

Travis does not respond.

YOUNG PASSENGER: Huh? (A beat.) What do you think of that, huh?

Travis shrugs, gesturing toward meter.

YOUNG PASSENGER: I'm gonna kill her with a .44 Magnum pistol.

Camera returns to seventh floor window. Woman is standing in the light.

YOUNG PASSENGER (off-screen): Did you ever see what a .44 can do to a woman's face, cabbie? (Pause) Did you ever see what it can do to a woman's pussy, cabbie?

Travis says nothing.

YOUNG PASSENGER (off-screen): I'm going to put it right up to her, cabbie. Right in her, cabbie. You must think I'm real sick, huh? A real pervert. Sitting here and talking about a woman's pussy and a .44, huh?

Camera closes in on Travis' face: he is watching the woman in the seventh floor window with complete and total absorption. It's the same glazed-over stare we saw in his eyes as he watched the porno movie.

THE TRAVELING SALESMAN

Andy places the suitcases on the white bedspread. The suitcases are equipped with special locks, which he quickly opens. Andy opens the suitcases: stacked in gray packing foam are rows and rows of brand new hand guns.

TRAVIS: You got a .44 Magnum?

ANDY: That's an expensive gun.

TRAVIS: I got money.

Andy unzips a cowhide leather pouch to reveal a .44 Magnum pistol. He holds it gingerly, as if it were a precious treasure. Andy opens the chambers and cradles the long eight-inch barrel in his palm. The .44 is a huge, oversized, inhuman gun.

ANDY (admiringly): It's a monster. Can stop a car—put a bullet right into the block. A premium high resale gun. \$350—that's only a hundred over list.

Andy holds the Magnum out for Travis' inspection. There's a worshipful close-up of the .44 Magnum. It is a monster. Travis hefts the huge gun. It seems out of place in his hand. It is built on Michelangelo's scale. The Magnum belongs in the hand of a marble god, not a slight taxi driver. Travis hands the gun back to Andy.

ANDY: I could sell this gun in Harlem for \$500 today—but I just deal high quality goods to high quality people. (Pause.) Now this may be a little big for practical use, in which case I'd recommend the .38 Smith and Wesson Special. Fine solid gun—nickel plated. Snub-nosed, otherwise the same as the service revolver. Now that'll stop anything that moves and it's handy, flexible. The Magnum, you know, that's only if you want to splatter it against the wall. The movies have driven up the price of the Magnum anyway. Everybody wants them now. But the Wesson .38—only \$250—and worth every dime of it. (He hefts .38.) Throw in a holster for \$10.

Travis hefts the nickel-plated .38, points it out the window.

ANDY: Some of these guns are like toys, but a Smith and Wesson, man, you can hit somebody over the head with it and it will still come back dead on. Nothing beats quality. (Pause.) You interested in an automatic?

TRAVIS: I want a .32 revolver. And a palm gun. That .22 there.

ANDY: That's the Colt .25—a fine little gun. Don't do a lotta damage, but it's as fast as the Devil. Handy little gun, you can carry it almost anywhere. I'll throw it in for another \$125.

Travis holds the .32 revolver, hefts it, slips it under his belt and pulls his shirt over it. He turns from side to side, to see how it rides in his waist.

TRAVIS: How much for everything?

ANDY: The .32's \$150—and you're really getting a good deal now—and all together it comes to, ah, seven eighty-five for four pieces and a holster. Hell, I'll give you the holster, we'll make it seven seventy-five and you've got a deal—a good one. ♣

ones behind it all—absolutely adamant about doing it.

Why did everybody defer so much to make TAXI DRIVER—certainly not to make a fortune?

We were all young enough to want to do something that will last. DeNiro told me, when we were talking about whether the film would make any money, that he felt it was a film people would be watching fifty years from now, and that whether everybody watched it next year wasn't important. That's how we came to it, and that's why we didn't make any compromises; we figured if we're going to compromise on money, we're certainly not going to compromise on anything else. There's nothing in the film that was put there at the studio's insistence. There are things we disagree about, things I would have done differently.

Was this a successful bargaining strategy with the studio?

There was almost no bargaining at all.

The studio didn't intrude at all?

They were aware of the special nature of the film, and that we always presented a single group position to them. If they could have broken DeNiro off, or even Michael Phillips, it would have been a different thing. But we all stood together on it.

This reflects interestingly on the auteur method of splintering up the talents involved in a project; I don't think the people so involved can do that. It's very hard for me to separate Marty, Bobby, and I. Michael Phillips saw one scene in TAXI DRIVER and said to me, "That's you. Bobby is doing you right to a T in there." I don't see that. But I know Bobby asked me to read the entire diary into a tape for him, and he wore my shirt, my boots, and my belt in the movie.

Once you knew the deal was going to go with TAXI DRIVER, what was the step by step pre-production all of you went through?

The script pre-existed, and there was no real collaboration at that point. Marty had questions, and we talked; Bobby too. Marty went his own way, off to New York. About six weeks before shooting, I went out there and we went through everything again; I rewrote the script at that time, sitting in a hotel room with the people involved in the film—Harvey Keitel, Peter Boyle, and Jodie Foster—all around, I had that feedback. I'd just been to Italy and spent several days with DeNiro.

The Jodie Foster character is striking—a Seventies Shirley Temple.

When I was in New York, I was feeling particularly blue in a bar at around three A.M. I noticed a girl and ended up picking her up. I should have been forewarned when she was so easy to pick up; I'm very bad at it. The only reason I tried it that night is that I was so drunk. I was shocked by my success until we got back to my hotel and I realized that she was: (1) a hooker; (2) under age; and (3) a junkie. Well, at the end of the night I sent Marty a note saying: "Iris is in my room. We're hav-

ing breakfast at nine. Will you please join us?" So we came down, Marty came down, and a lot of the character of Iris was rewritten from this girl who had a concentration span of about twenty seconds. Her name was Garth.

What about the "Pussy and the .44" scene, with Scorsese as the murderous husband Travis picks up?

I was upset when Marty said he was going to do it himself, rather than get another actor, for two reasons: (1) I think the director's or writer's job is behind the camera; (2) I think you should get a pro to do that stuff. I didn't know how good an actor he was; I knew his egotism was such that he wouldn't admit it if he was wrong, so we could very well have a bad scene on our hands. Fortunately, he did it well.

It's an ambiguous scene.

The idea of the scene was that the man in the back seat would never kill anybody, but that the man in the front seat would. John Milius tried to get Marty to have me play that role. I wouldn't have done it; Marty didn't ask, either.

The scene was supposed to be the prelude to Bobby's moves toward violence—plant that idea in your head and in his head. And you should also see that he is the man who just sits there, and watches, and thinks. The man in the back seat gets his energy off; Bobby never does.

The asceticism of the film is so strong that even Scorsese's busy style doesn't overcome it.

The asceticism is essentially in the script; Marty's religious tendencies don't take that form. In MEAN STREETS, you have Harvey Keitel and the candles; it's more symbolic than ascetic.

I saw in Marty's work what I didn't have in the script: that sense of vibrancy, a sense of the city. What I think happened was that I wrote an essentially Protestant script, cold and isolated, and Marty directed a very Catholic film. My character wandered in from the snowy wastelands of Michigan to the fetid, overheated atmosphere of Marty's New York. That's another of the contradictions I think is exciting in the film. Travis Bickle is not a character that Marty Scorsese would ever think of or come up with; and that atmosphere is not one that I would come up with. It was a good mix, mixing purely in Bobby, who had the character and stretch that makes them both connect. He plays both ways.

When you talk about the script being Protestant and Scorsese bringing a Catholic tone to it, are you talking about traditional stylistic oppositions—Protestant asceticism and simplicity versus Catholic complication and emotional involvement—or are you talking about larger changes?

No, just the tone. Protestantism has a more individualistic, solipsistic, righteous quality. The Catholic thing is more an emotional, communal flurry. When you walk into a Protestant church, you feel as if you've walked into a tomb; in a Catholic church, people are talking, there are

priests, candles, a whole different atmosphere. Travis's personality is built as if it were a Protestant church, but everything around him is acting differently. Both Marty and I have very strong religious backgrounds, so I don't think that's an incorrect interpretation.

Do you foresee working with Scorsese again, or do you think that concretely about the future?

DeNiro, Scorsese and I have thought that we should get together in ten years and do the story of our thirties; and maybe, later, the story of our forties.

Marty's not an easy person to work with. Of course, I'd like to work with him again, but I don't delude myself; time and reality intrude. I wouldn't work with him on the writing stage—I can't think of anyone I'd like to work with at that stage. If he wanted to do a script of mine, I'd love to collaborate at that level. One of the reasons Marty's good is that he's headstrong and stubborn; he has a very strong view of himself. He sees himself as an important entity, therefore he often takes criticism as a child takes a beating, wincing at every blow. If he gets enough of it, his health will go out—he's not at all a strong man. So arguing with him becomes a therapy session where you're reduced to pleading, screaming, arguing, and Marty's health is fading. It's good for him to go through these sessions, but it's hard, it wears you out. There are other directors who are easy to argue with, who accept your ideas very easily, but they're not as good. You have to go with the best people, no matter how hard it is.

When I first saw the film, Marty and I had a talk about it; he ended up having an attack, screaming, accusing me of not knowing what the movie was about and of being against him. That's one of the things that may do him in. If he has a fall, it will be simply because certain flaws have been exaggerated by success—one of which is an inability to take criticism, a paranoia. It will finally reach the point where he can get enough power that he won't have to deal with other people; then he'll be so cut off he'll make a big flop. It's a familiar pattern.

What about the rating issue—making up release prints with the blood color muted to escape an X?

It hurts the film. I hoped it would help create a surreal atmosphere, but it didn't have that effect; it was more surreal with the candy-red blood. But if you have to pay that price for an R, you pay it, because you just can't get an X played. I don't think the studio would have allowed it, would have released it.

Were any shots taken out?

A few minor ones, but nothing important.

Is there anything in the film you were surprised to find, things Scorsese put in?

Yes, it's full of them, in every scene. Many of them were worked on when I rewrote the script. Most of the so-called im-

provisation was done at that time, sitting down with cabbies, hookers, and people, talking, writing in new dialogue and business.

The value of the script has been multiplied twice over, once by Marty, once by Bobby. DeNiro's contribution was much of the schizophrenic quality of the character, which is not in the script. That quality in Travis of shooting the guy and then saying, "Oh, I don't know what to do about this gun"—all those schizo elements come straight from his personality. The character I wrote was going crazy in a more linear fashion than the character Bobby acted; his characterization zigs and zags.

The broken rhythm is very effective. Is the gesture when the cops come in after the carnage and he makes as if to shoot himself—is that a DeNiro improvisation?

No, that's in the script. A lot of physical stuff is, even to specifying the cuts to the pages of the diary.

What's he redeemed from in TAXI DRIVER? Is it a cathartic redemption?

What he seeks is escape, to shake off the mortal chains and die a glorious death. It's a purely suicidal mission he's on, so to give some greater meaning he fixes on the surrogate father—Betsy's boss, the candidate—then on the other surrogate father—Iris's pimp; he has to destroy that image to break free. It's a shallow, self-destructive kind of freedom. At the end of the film, he is cheated because the gun is empty and he can't kill himself. But, in time, the cycle will again come around and he'll succeed the next time. The redemption or elevation or transcendence he seeks is that of an adolescent—he's simply striking out. He is not intelligent enough to give it any real meaning; it only has meaning as we look at it. It has no meaning for him.

It's quite an irony when he goes through the carnage and comes out an accidental hero.

Well, it's not realistic. It pretends to be a realistic film, but it takes all kinds of license. The whole film takes place inside that man's head; that's why it's not a realistic movie. I think the ending is thematically immaculate and poetically satisfying. The gimmick of the script is to create an untenable situation and see how close you can get to it. You get right to the point where you can't kill the candidate—or you'd have an uninteresting movie. You get right to that point and build up the pressure, then break it away and twist everything around. He's just about to do the act which will totally remove him from our sympathy. That's when the realism of the script starts to fade; it moves into a poetic level.

The controversial nature of the film will stem, I think, from the fact that Travis cannot be tolerated. The film tries to make a hard distinction for many people to perceive: the difference between understanding someone and tolerating him. He is to be understood, but not tolerated. I believe in capital punishment: he should be killed.

He could as easily have been, going into the sequence. Given the way sympathy and point of view have been manipulated about Travis, we can't be sure whether he's going to come out or not.

You don't know, even there at the end of the movie when he puts the gun to his head, whether he's going to die or not. You know he wants to die.

Given your judgment that he should be killed, why isn't he?

I don't really have an answer. The force which he represents is alive; I felt that it should be alive at the end. This is art, not life. In real life, if a man tried to break into my house at night, I'd shoot him. In art, I might want to sit down and have a conversation with him. It's more interesting to have a conversation with a burglar while you hold a gun on him. But in real life you don't fool around.

Long ago Pauline Kael asked me why I wrote about this character, what it had to do with me. I said, "It is me without any brains." It's the same need to escape, to break through, that drives a script in my case—a real need to triumph over the system. Now I live pretty much the way I want, get paid for it, work when I want, get a certain amount of respect, and so I have beaten the system. If I was everybody's pawn, if I was Travis Bickle, the triumph would have to take another course, probably a violent one.

Violence has a central place in your films, conceptually and dramatically.

I'd like to make it less so. I'd like to be able to solve problems without resorting to violence. I tend to write things in which the main character is like a lightning rod, and I build up an enormous amount of electrostatic tension in him over an hour and fifteen minutes. By the end of it, there's almost no place else he can go; he must explode because he's so charged up. As long as I write that kind of character, with a great deal of tension and guilt, then I end up with apocalyptic endings.

I'm trying to do other things. It's hard for me to talk about what I do because I have so little control over it. TAXI DRIVER I can talk about with confidence, because I know that everything I intended is on the screen, for better or worse; that is what I do. But YAKUZA or OBSESSION are films I felt strongly about, but which now have little or no connection to me. It's hard to talk about my work apart from the director, who has the final say. You can write the most complex character, and if the director isn't a complex man, it won't be a complex character on the screen. Travis Bickle is very complex, full of contradictions. If Mulligan, Aldrich, or Rydell had directed that, it would have been a very simple person; they don't make complex people. If they do, they end up cardboard complex, lacking in passion.

As much as a critic pretends to be objective, he can only evaluate what's on the screen. Therefore, in most people's minds, YAKUZA will be a bad script, TAXI DRIVER will be a good script, simply because one is a bad film, one is a good film. That's not always the case. I do believe TAXI was a good script which became a good film; but it could also have been a bad script which became a good film.

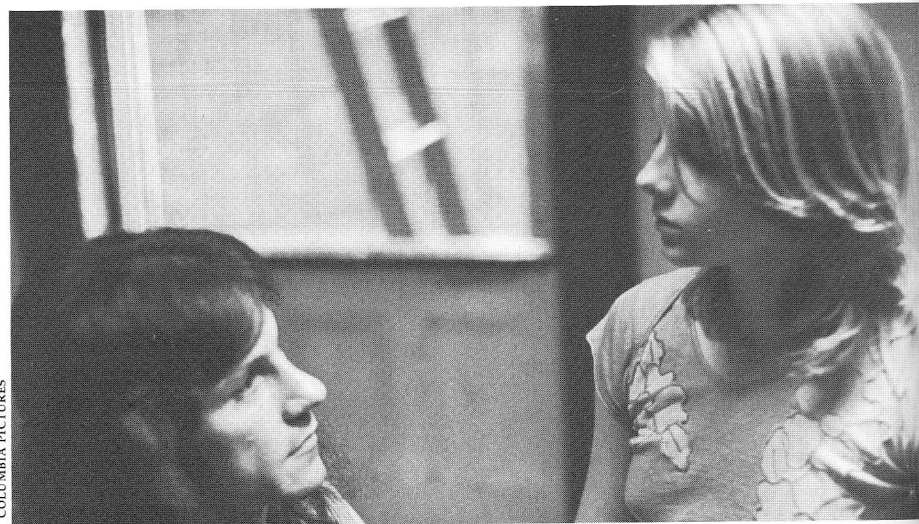
SCREENWRITING

Does your work as a scholar and critic have some bearing on the work you're doing now?

No, I feel very separated from it. I'd like to get back and make the connection again. That's one reason I want to teach so badly: to get back into those disciplines. The similarities between my critical thinking and my screenwriting are more coincidental than anything else; they just don't seem to be part of the same thing.

As a practicing filmmaker, how do you feel about film criticism and thought—do you read it? Who do you read? What does it do for you?

It's as bad as it was when I was involved



SPORT (Harvey Keitel) with his child-woman (Jodie Foster).

in it; hasn't improved; if anything, it's stagnated. In the last four or five years, since the country went into economic recession, the interest in commercial cinema has risen. Our recession probably did as much for American cinema as Andrew Sarris—everybody's interested in the business. You go to a film campus today and eight out of ten questions will be about business; there'll be a few stragglers worried about art.

Usually from the English department.

English, Philosophy, or Psychology, wandered over. I try to read as much as possible, but it's dull and unconnected with my immediate concerns. Pauline and Sarris remain for me the most readable of critics; they're the only ones I can read without work; the others I start, but don't finish. The great tradition of American film criticism is idiosyncratic: Manny Farber, Sarris, Parker Tyler, Pauline—the critical Mount Rushmore—people who have come out of the wilderness and are spouting some sort of doctrine which they have half-cocked in their own heads. The tradition, the academy tradition, is limp. It has no tradition and no idiosyncrasies, so it seems almost doctrinaire; quite uninteresting to me. Agee, Ferguson, and Warshow were all excellent critics, but their tradition hasn't survived—rightly, I suspect. It had phony cultural premises. Now I like Durgan and, on the left, James Roy MacBean—he makes his points simply, effectively.

I wouldn't know what to write if I were writing criticism now. I think that's one of the things that keeps me from going back to it. The only frontier now is the structuralist and semantic frontier, which seems unpromising; it doesn't seem to have created anything. It also exists in such a vacuum of standards that it doesn't relate to anybody. You can't have criticism without standards. It's possible to talk about, say, *FRAMED* in an interesting way. But you can never, ever, say it is a good film. Otherwise, you have so abandoned your

standards, how could you get people to read and trust you? A perfect example of this is *Take One*. You can open any issue of *Take One* and find a rave of anything. There are no standards on that magazine at all.

When you decided to be a screenwriter, how did you organize your campaign to break into the industry?

I didn't think of it as an industry; I thought of writing a script and seeing how much money I could borrow to make the film. I wrote the first script to be made for sixty or seventy thousand. I taught myself to write it very schematically. I'd never written anything before and I said, well, it's ninety minutes long. I used Freytag's triangle—inciting incident, rising action, climax, denouement; it has to have these elements, as well as subplots, and certain characters revealing certain themes. There should always be a rising curve; when I lay on my curves, each character having a curve, one will always be rising. When one starts to fall, another character starts to rise, and the most interesting rising characters all meet at the climax. It was the most practical, calculated way of seeing a dramatic structure. There was a personal element, writing about things I knew. And I tried to evoke the religious feeling in that script that I haven't really tried to do since.

I came to movies as an adult and a critic, and I saw them in that light. When I started writing movies, I began to see them again as a child, with a much more unanalytical eye. When you analyze film, you're dealing with a cadaver, you work it over, and certainly it's a valid enterprise; you're seeing why the cadaver lived or died. But when you're writing films, you're dealing with a kind of nascent, primitive force that's alive and often unformed; you can't be analytical about it, you have to let it develop. Seeing movies as a child, you have to sit there and enjoy certain things that critically you may not approve of.

I have different ideas about writing screenplays than most people. One of the mistakes most young screenwriters make is, they go to the movies and say "I can write as well as that," and go home and do write that well. Of course they can, because most movies are so shabbily written that anybody can write them as well. What they don't understand is that nobody in the studio system would hire a fledgling Stirling Silliphant when he can get the pro—and he knows that Silliphant will do the job and come in with the product. He'll gladly pay extra for that security.

You should never try to beat the old pros at their game; they know it backward and forward. What you have to do is say, "What do I have that is so unique to me that if I write it, no one else will be able to copy it, and if they want to buy it, they'll have to come to me?" And in order to do that, you must come to terms with yourself in a very brutal way. If you want to see a woman cut off a man's hand and eat it,

then you have to say, "Gee, I like seeing that in a movie, it was interesting." You have to accept that fact and deal with it in your own work. But it has to be a personal reaction. I have a friend in Boston who wrote a three-hundred-page script on Charles Guiteau, the man who killed Garfield; essentially a Janovian study of Guiteau. I was able to get through most of it. Afterwards, I said, "Let me tell you a story," and I recited his script back to him. Then I said, "If this movie were showing here, at the Orson Welles Theatre, would you go see it?" He thought for a while and said, "Probably not." I said, "Now you've spent nearly two years of your life writing a script you wouldn't even go to see. Why?"

That is a problem about writers: they write movies for the wrong reasons. They write them for their professors, their parents, the critics, studio executives, or to sell; and those are all the wrong reasons to write movies. Granted, some people do succeed writing movies for those purposes. The other reasons they write movies are to get laid and to get famous.

How would you advise people trying to break into screenwriting or directing?

Screenwriting is obviously the easiest way to get into the business, because there's no apprenticeship involved. If you write what they want, it doesn't matter what age, color, or political faith you have—they couldn't give a damn. If you have it and they want it, they'll take it. You're dealing with services rendered rather than services promised. In the other crafts, you have to undergo an apprenticeship.

My advice is to reach deep into yourself, pull out something unique and meaningful to you, then try to take that raw piece of meat and see it in the context of commercial film: how can I transform this raw meat into something a million people want to see? As a painter, you deal with a very small number of people, a dozen or so buyers of your work. As a novelist, you could break even if ten thousand people will pay for your work. In movies, you're dealing with a minimum base of a million people. It entirely changes your conception of how and what you're doing. You have to find something that at once means something to you and yet has a broad base.

As you get an idea, start telling it to people. Maybe it starts at five minutes, and grows each time it's told. As you tell it, you see feedback from the person you're telling it to. The important thing is not to listen to anything they say, because they'll always tell you it's good or has possibilities; and if you're insecure, you'll believe what they say and it'll fuck up your work. Watch their eyes and body movements; if you don't have their attention, you're losing the story—do anything to get their attention back. That's where you'll find yourself creating. Chandler once said that if you're losing their interest in a story, have a guy walk in with a gun. Nobody will ask how



Betsy (Cybill Shepherd) accepts a date with Travis (Robert DeNiro).

he got there, they'll just be grateful he did. Explain it later. As your narrative grows longer through retellings, you learn what it takes to hold an audience. When it hits an hour, I know it'll work as a script.

Screenwriting is not akin to fiction writing at all. It's like campfire storytelling, and that's how you should think of it. Words are not your primary tools. Dialogue is essentially a function of hearing. Most dialogue is just picking up the argot of the situation. I don't think a movie should have too many good lines—at most five great lines and ten good ones—and the

say. Preferably, you should get them there about a minute before the audience expects them to be there, so you've got the element of surprise. If you have a man and a woman, once married and then having undergone separate episodes, and they are to meet again, which the audience expects them to do in front of a fountain, but you have them meet in a supermarket, you've absolutely got the audience. They go back to her place, it doesn't matter what they say at this point, because you've got them. He can say, "I never realized your coffee was so good," or "Your coffee

It's not only too many lines with him, it's too many good scenes. I just had a meeting with Warren Beatty and Milius in which Warren told John something I've been telling him too: "You come too soon and you come too often." I think that's one of his problems: he's so full of juice he just can't stop coming, rather than holding back and tightening the situation and building characters. That releasing diffuses the energy, the characters are too broad because they never have time to build up the inner strength.

How did you decide to take up screenwriting



COURTESY PAUL SCHRADER

Paul Schrader, Martin Scorsese, Robert DeNiro, making the film of their twenties.

rest should be absolutely ordinary and banal. Too many great lines make it topheavy and unrealistic. This doesn't apply to comedy, of course. I think one of the problems with Terry Malick's writing is that it has too many good lines; you begin to listen to all the good lines—Tom McGuane has the same problem—and it breaks the dramatic narrative thread of the movie. You must learn to use good lines as spice.

If your structure is proper, if you get two characters together at the right place and time, it doesn't really matter what they

doesn't seem as good as it used to be," or "I think your coffee is getting better," or "Did you change coffees?" Every single one of those lines has meaning because the context is so strong that, no matter what they say, it has reverberations; you've put the audience exactly where you want them. That kind of structure is much more important than dialogue. In fact, you can kill that scene by having them say something right on the nose—uttering a great line at that point.

Do you think Milius is topheavy with too many good lines?

instead of novels, or TV, or nonfiction?

Two reasons. One, I'm a product of my time and films are the medium of my time. Two, I'm ambitious and impatient; novels require commitment and patience and sacrifice that I'm not willing to give.

What are you ambitious for that's best served through screenwriting?

Feedback. The two professions I covet most are comedian and rock singer, not because I would care to do those things, but because you get the feedback so quick. You know right away what you're doing; it's jumping right back at you. A novelist

doesn't know for maybe five years. A screenwriter may know a little sooner, but it still takes a long time to get any notion; with *TAXI DRIVER*, it'll be four years between the time I wrote the script and when I start getting feedback. Feedback is just a euphemistic way to say Praise, Flattery, Acceptance, Love.

How do you diagnose the commercial realities you've mentioned and make them work for you? How do you take a meeting?

You sell your reality. All executives are scared. The job has very high attrition. If they have three or four failures, they're out of a job. They know they're in a revolving door and that there's no way to predict what will be successful movies; the rules change continuously. Given that it's four years from the inception to the release of a film, they're trying to predict what people will buy four years from now—there's simply no way to do it. Therefore, they don't know what makes money, and they have to go by their instinct and experience.

You have to convince them that you know, or if you don't know, that your passion is so strong, your perceptions so acute, that they think you may be right. You have to make them believe in you. I remember standing on a coffee table at a meeting and acting out a scene, not only to make the scene live, but to show my passion that it would work. And if you convince them, spellbind them with your storytelling ability, and get them into the energy of the scene, they'll think, "Jesus, if it works for me it'll probably work for other people too." You have to sell that story the same way you sold it to your friends as you worked it up.

Also, you need a certain amount of confidence and dignity about yourself. You shouldn't sell yourself cheap. Nobody likes a groveler. If you grovel your way into a man's office, he doesn't want you because he doesn't trust you. You have to know when to get up and leave a room. If you're not hitting it off with someone, it's foolish to try to win their favor. I've had a few meetings where I've said, "It's clear we don't get along and our ideas don't mix. It's nice meeting with you, goodbye." In the end, they'll respect you for that, and you can come back and have another meeting with them some other time.

What's your interest in becoming a director?

I see it in terms of getting more control over my life. I have to have control over things I do. If I don't get that control in this medium, I'll choose another. I'll become a writer, or a painter—I've never painted, but you can learn—or a teacher, or a craftsman, I don't care. But it has to be something where I can control the product and say, "This is the thing I made," even if it's only a vase. I'd rather set out that vase and say "I made it" than say, "I had ten percent of that movie." And now I'm just at the door. Most people I know in the industry assume that I will shortly direct

something. It just doesn't make any sense to be doing half a film.

How do you feel about the visual and kinesthetic part of directing? Have you always been thinking about that?

I think I have good visual taste toward design, decoration, architecture, art; I don't really worry about it much. I don't want to make films whose sole function is to be looked at compositionally. I see directing as an extension of storytelling, which itself is an extension of thematic explorations. So the work I would do would be strictly at that level: as a thinker and as a dramatist. That's how I see movies. Whatever work I directed I would not be directing as a painter. Maybe after a number of years, I would graduate to that.

You're not without some experience here—you had to make at least one film at UCLA, didn't you?

Yes, I've made several student shorts, but, like I say, I see the image in far more pragmatic terms, as a way to get information across. The visual language is different from the verbal language; I see it very functionally. If a shot does not convey certain information, no matter how beautiful, it doesn't belong in the movie. The primary reason for a movie is to tell a story and get feedback.

There are those who don't agree, who see film as first a visual medium, second a storytelling medium. Some directors conceive of movies first as shots, and that's why you need scripts—you need a very clear demarcation between the writer and the director. You have situations where the writer has conceived a movie in terms of scenes and characters, and the director has done so in terms of visual rhythms—and then they meet. Some directors, thinking in terms of shots, composition, pans, and tracks, listen to your story and think, "Yeah, that's good, I can put my visual stamp on it." Well, I'm a writer; my first interest is in the story. I say, "I have to have a scene in that bed which conveys impotence, or exhilaration, or whatever; how can I shoot it to convey that?" Whereas the director may say, "I have a certain image in mind, now how can I lay that on the scene?" There's a little of that in Marty, because he's not by nature a writer. He had certain shots, visual things, he wanted to do in *TAXI DRIVER* which had to be fitted into the movie. He'd tell me, "I want to do this shot. There isn't a place for it now. Write a spot for it into the movie."

You talk about metaphor, particularly with TAXI DRIVER: when you got the metaphor, you had the whole thing, it crystallized it. Did the metaphor suggest the whole story, did it precede everything?

I think there are three steps to writing a script. First, you have to have a theme, something you want to say. It doesn't have to be a particularly great thing, but you have to have something that's bothering you. In the case of *TAXI DRIVER*, the theme was loneliness. Then you find a metaphor

for that theme, one that expresses it. In *TAXI DRIVER*, that was the cabbie, the perfect expression of urban loneliness. Then you have to find a plot, which is the easiest part of the process. All plots have been done; they're fairly easy, you just work through all the permutations until the plot accurately reflects the theme and the metaphor. You push the theme through the metaphor and you should come out with the plot.

One of the problems with screenwriters is that they think first in terms of plot or in terms of metaphor, and they're going the reverse way; it's awfully hard to do. Once you have a plot, it's hard to infuse a theme into it, because it's not an indigenous expression of the plot: that's why you must start with the theme and not the plot.

Metaphor is extremely important to a movie. A perfect example is *DELIVERANCE*, where you have point A and point B, and four men going from A to B—the first time for the men, the last time for the river. On the strength of that metaphor, you could put the Marx Brothers in that boat and something would happen. When somebody walks up to you and says, "I've got a great idea for a Western and this is the twist," you know right off the bat that they're in trouble, because they're coming at it the wrong way. Maybe they'll be able to write a novel that sells, make a lot of money, and live in Beverly Hills; but it's not interesting to me, not something I really care about.

The distinction between religious and secular art is important to you.

When I came to movies as an adult critic, I tried to write religious film criticism, in the sense that I saw art in religious terms. As I understand it, religious art is the art of unification, the art that tries to find the common code of symbols and Jungian elements in all experience. It seeks to discover how we are all alike and all unified in a single spiritual purpose. That's how I was taught to view art, and that's how I came to film.

I was intrigued by the auteur theory, but I wasn't taken with it because it seemed to be a pursuit of individuals and idiosyncrasy, and I was interested in just the opposite: common elements of genre, theme, and style that ran through cultures and through individual filmmakers.

When I switched to screenwriting, I found I no longer saw film as religious art but as secular art. Because in order to be successful, I had to find something that was unique to me by reaching into my own personality and formulate my own problems in a way that solved them. I had to pursue my own idiosyncrasies. As a screenwriter, I found myself doing exactly what I opposed as a critic: writing the kind of things that I would not approve of formerly. I felt I had to do this to be able to create things important to me. So I see myself at this point as a very secular screenwriter pursued by his own demons.

My thinking about films is schizoid. There's a big fork in the road where criticism was essentially sacred and screen-writing profane. I am looking forward to the time when I can bring them back together. This was the reason that I was unable to write criticism once I started writing scripts: I realized my work in fiction had supplanted the pinnings of my theories as a critic. So instead of solving the conflict, I stopped writing criticism; they were at such cross-purposes that they injured the quality of each other.

That's how I see the difference between sacred and profane; and now I think, as a writer, I can never bring those forks back together, because writers just don't have enough control. If I'm fortunate enough to control a film, I'll try to find a way to do work which is both expressive of my per-

like that whole group of people, which strangely BARRY LYNDON has now joined; Kubrick has co-opted that whole Annette Michelson-P. Adams Sitney crowd, a very interesting turn of events. That's one side, regarding film the way an architect looks at building a church. Then there's the other side I'm attracted to: craziness, pure idiosyncrasy, completely antisocial films. KISS ME DEADLY, where it's just random anger and violence; ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW, Buñuel, Peckinpah; all those who say, "The whole world is wrong, only I am right, only I exist, my reality is transcendent." My likes went right to the edges of the bowl. The great American middle didn't appeal to me—Capra, Cukor, the conventional John Ford. Only the mad John Ford appealed to me: THE SEARCHERS, the Ethan Edwards half of him, which I love. Only the VERTIGO side of Hitchcock, the crazy side. In TAXI DRIVER, those two compelling things are clear: half of it's PICKPOCKET, the other half is KISS ME DEADLY or MEAN STREETS, random brutality all around.

What draws you back to that apocalyptic violence?

Just getting something out of my system—and also, it was a very commercial solution to my problems at the time. I've had a history in the past of violent acts, which I no longer do. One of the stages in stopping them was to be able to do them vicariously in film. The ending of TAXI DRIVER is in no way horrifying to me. It's rich. It rolls out so right and so naturally, like the ending of THE WILD BUNCH.

What do you like about Gehr, Frampton, and Snow?

The ascetic quality, the worship of the structure; the value of the commonplace in the order of noninvolvement, the same thing I see in the transcendental style. It requires a lot of patience, but it finally moves me tremendously.

Do you still see a lot of films?

Yes, but mostly now I see them to keep in touch with who's working, who's available in terms of cameramen, editors, actors; I see just about everything that comes out of America, but I don't see as many old or foreign films as I used to.

Which current films interest you?

The films that make me think the most lately have been MEAN STREETS, BARRY LYNDON, CALIFORNIA SPLIT—horizon-opening films. I think BARRY LYNDON is a revolutionary film, a slap in the face of the entire history of motion pictures. It's an important film. I have endless respect for it. Nobody quite knows what to think of it. It's an assault.

Roeg's PERFORMANCE is an important film. THE DAMNED. THE WILD BUNCH, obviously. I think the two greatest films of the Sixties are LOLITA and THE WILD BUNCH, for opposite reasons. One seems to be a film of the early Sixties, full of lust and promise and passion; the other a film of the late Sixties, full of death and suicide and passion.

I go back to certain films regularly. At least once a year I see THE SEARCHERS, VERTIGO, either AN AUTUMN AFTERNOON OR TOKYO STORY, PICKPOCKET OR DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST—to keep in mind what I'm striving for, and what can be done.

This has been a very healthy year for movies because of the success of off-the-wall projects, regardless of their merits: LENNY, CUCKOO'S NEST, DOG DAY AFTERNOON. These films make the room bigger for all of us.

What about blockbusters?

Every time a movie makes money, that's wonderful, because there's more money to spend. The more that's made, the richer the pot. Though eighty percent of it may end up building a *nouveau riche* palace in Bel Air, some of it will find its way back into movies.

So you're not upset by Steve Farber's worry that JAWS's pre-emptive success will further constrict the number of films to be made?

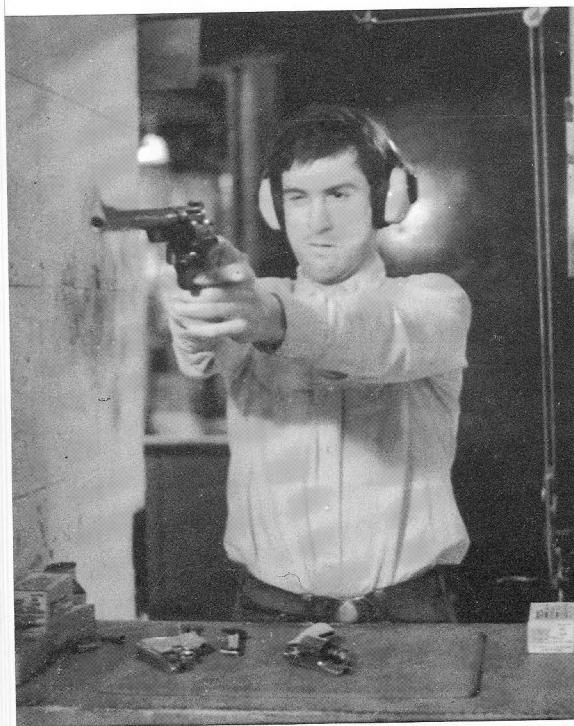
No, no: Zanuck and Brown got their first check each from JAWS—three and a half million apiece. They'll go on making films, and the money will come back. Steve is exactly wrong on this point. The fact that you can hit the jackpot draws more people into the casino.

What are you working toward?

I have one project I've been dying to do for a couple years and it looks like I'll finally be able to do it, despite a rights problem. It'll be very much like TAXI DRIVER: a new version of the Hank Williams story. The only difference between Travis Bickle and Hank Williams is that Williams can sing; it's the same character. With Hank you move up one step from Travis. The need to break through finds expression in art, through Williams' prodigious talent, but he was psychologically just as crazy, ignorant, and lonely.

Then I'd like to do the St. Paul story, where the need to transform one's surroundings, to re-create the world, becomes so great that he changes the entire history of Western Civilization. What we know of Christianity is to my mind Paulism. It was Paul far more than Christ who decided that it had to be a world movement. The Jews regarded Christ as one of their great prophets; Paul came along and said, "No, He's not a prophet. He is a God, He is a redeemer, and He has broken the law. Therefore, we can all break the law and break out of Judaism."

If I move from Travis Bickle to Hank Williams to St. Paul, you'll see how the move to transcend the world grows until St. Paul gets to the highest possible level. Travis obviously transforms his private world; Hank Williams transforms the larger world in a limited manner; Paul transforms the world in a huge sense and finally achieves the glorious martyrdom he seeks. He is not forced as Travis or Williams was to kill himself. I think they're very similar lives, and that's why I want to write about all three of them.



PHOTOS: COLUMBIA PICTURES

Bressonian foreplay

sonality and yet has that universal quality.

Why is the pursuit of the crazy so important to you?

It provides a very definite problem you have to solve. Will I commit the aberrant form of behavior? Will I vandalize or steal or kill or mutilate myself? You're dealing with a very definite problem, crazy people: you have to solve it. It's an easier way to approach cinema, which is kinetic form dealing with action and character, than criticism, which deals with cerebral problems.

These dualities are reflected in your taste in films.

It splits right in half. On the one hand, directors who are community-oriented, thinking in terms of two-dimensional iconographic relationships to a mass—Dreyer, Bresson, Ozu, Rossellini, Boetticher, Michael Snow, Frampton, Gehr. I

I was talking with Marty and Bobby before we shot *TAXI DRIVER*. I said, "This is the film of our youth, the film about our twenties, even though we're just in our thirties now; it's looking back." Bobby had once wanted to write an assassination story some years ago. It was about a kid who carried a gun around New York. He was lonely. He fantasized about using it. He used to go to the U.N. and sit there with the gun, trying to imagine killing any number of diplomats. Bobby said he was never able to write that script, it never worked out for him, but when he read *TAXI DRIVER*, he saw all the things he wanted to do with it. I told him, "You know what the gun is, don't you Bobby? It's your talent. At that time in your life you felt you were carrying that huge talent around and you didn't know what to do with it. You felt embarrassment. You knew that if you ever had a chance to take it out and shoot it, people would realize how important you were, and you would be acknowledged." It's the same thing which caused me to write *TAXI DRIVER*, and the same thing that brought Marty to *TAXI DRIVER*.

Now we've all reached a point in our lives where we've had a chance to take out our guns and shoot them; we've received money and acclaim, and therefore, the pressure is not so great anymore. If *TAXI DRIVER* was to be any good, we would have to backtrack five years to those times when the pressure was so enormous that we needed to fantasize at that level. It goes back to a need to break out that was primitive and juvenile.

What sort of film would the film of your thirties be—the film you said you'd like to make with Scorsese and DeNiro?

I don't think it would be the Hank Williams story—too similar to Travis. It would have to be a story which had a successful male-female relationship; that's the thing that eludes Travis.

Do you envision a place for violence in the story?

I'm trying to move away from it, to solve problems in other ways. In the *HARD CORE* script, I'm going to do the *THE SEARCHERS* ending, where you go right up to the moment of violence and then, rather than have it, you turn completely around and have a moment of forgiveness.

I'm trying to find a balance between my small, monomaniacal films and the large-canvas films. I've failed for the most part on the large ones; they haven't been as good as the small, personal films. I have to keep working on the large ones in order to keep growing. A new film I want to write is a kind of history of the Sixties seen through flashbacks from the points of view of two washed-up guys in the Seventies who are living in the Yucatán—called *NOT SO LONG AGO*. A woman comes back to get a divorce.

I'd also love to write *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* as a film. To write a film unlike anything that's ever been done

in America, a film of ideas; a sort of American Godard.

THE FINISH

There was a story that someone came to your house one night with a script idea, and you listened, then said, "It doesn't have enough of this!" Whereupon you hauled out a .44 and leveled it at the person's nose.

Yes, that was Beverly Walker, she wrote that [FILM COMMENT, July-August 1973, p. 58]. It was a .38. She had written a Western, *PEARL OF THE WEST*, about a female bandit—sort of *ALICE DOESN'T LIVE HERE* in Dodge City. Now, you don't write about those times without having—well, if the gun was here now, I'd reach it up and say, "Without having enough of this." You have to accept that violence. You must come to terms with it. Her mistake was trying to do violence at all, because she had decided not to come to terms with it; so she should not have written a script about gunplay. If you're going to write a screenplay, then you need to have somebody stick a .38 in your face and say, "Give me more of this."

Are you a gun hobbyist, do you shoot as a sport? Do you have guns around for dramatic reasons, or self-protection?

More an obsession. I first got it for self-destructive reasons. I keep a gun right by my bed; have for a number of years. Sometimes I wake up in the night convinced that people are trying to break in. This makes me more comfortable, just a psychological thing.

An interesting thing about guns, which my shrink pointed out to me and which pertains to *TAXI DRIVER*, is that all my suicidal fantasies are exactly the same: they all involve shooting myself in the head. I never fantasize about jumping off a building, or taking pills, or using a knife. The shrink pointed out that I believe all the demons are in my head; the fantasy is to get them out of there. I have those evil, bad thoughts in there—it's my Calvinist background. So when I have fantasies, they're all about my blowing those evil thoughts out of my head, and then I'll be all right. So it isn't even like dying; it's getting that shit out of my head.

When you were a child, were you a good Calvinist boy or were you a rebel?

I was very good. I'm still a confessing member of the Church. I not only went to my own church's catechism, I'd go to two other church's catechism; I'd go to catechism three times in one night. I knew all the answers, and I became rather unliked among my friends because of it.

A bit of a spiritual show-off.

And I had great fantasies about converting the world. I still do. My father is always bemoaning my fate. I tell him, "You shouldn't feel so bad, Dad, I became an evangelist, just one of a different sort." Every time I have a success, it bothers my mother.



Peckinpah climax

Because it's a success in films?

Yes, she's much enamored of the parable of the prodigal son, and she believes that eventually I will have to come back. Each time I have a success, it violates the rules of the parable—I'm supposed to be eating cornhusks out here. Therefore, the more success I have, the more she realizes I'll never come back.

And she won't switch parables?

No, and it's been a hard adjustment to make. But getting back to that story about Beverly, I've now switched metaphors. If Beverly came back here, I'd shake this in her face [Schrader picks up an open circle of metal bands from his coffee table] and say, "What we need is more of this." It's a silver crown of thorns I bought in Mexico. They use it in festivals. They put it on some poor peon's head and lead him around. ✻