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# Voluptuous Carnage

Beth Coleman

In returning the repressed to the screen, Jafa executes his own user's guide to détournement, conjuring with all the magic tricks of postdigital cinematic production to depict the black pimp as *Taxi Driver's* haunt, as loci of black male power derived from a ruthlessly conscripted history of plantation economies. *Alors*, pimping ain't easy.



## MY BLACK DEATH (OBSESSION)

This is not a redemption story. That is not what the undertaker does. This is more of a guilty pleasure. And yet in its own looping, jaggedy way, Arthur Jafa's \*\*\*\*\* does correct the record, returning to the American mythic of *Taxi Driver* (1976) what had been erased: the iconic black pimp.

## RIOTS

The consensus was that in 1976 black people would have rioted if the pimp and other two victims of the bloodbath that closes *Taxi Driver* had been black actors, as specified in Paul Schrader's script. ("Taxi Driver Battles Gangsters"). In the sweep of Travis Bickle's gaze across New York's Time Square

in its full '70s grit, there is a very thin layer of fiction that separates the “scum” as a general attribution from a particular descriptor of the predominantly black presence on those dirty streets. In a broader film context, *Taxi Driver* battles the arrival of black men in American cinema in a way that never existed before the dawn of Blaxploitation as a popular genre. *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Van Peebles, 1971)

a man of deadly action in the desolate American badlands marked by deprivation and sorrow, a result of tumultuous wars, disrupted homes, and shattered social lives. Robert De Niro's indelible, compelling, pained, and painful Travis Bickle is one type of return of the repressed in his eruption of violence. This enduring impact is distinctly marked across decades, from John Hinckley Jr.'s failed assassination of



with its Earth, Wind & Fire concept soundtrack caught fire at the box office, turning heads and opening certain kinds of doors. In that sense, black men were suddenly taking up too much space on the screen.

There is no one point of provocation for the lonely man moving from passive watcher to man of action. He becomes

President Ronald Reagan to online chat channels dedicated to questions like, “What kind of gun is used in *Taxi Driver*?” and “How to make a quick-draw...” Travis never quite gets off in *Taxi Driver*. He kills the black robber at the deli, which does function as a kind of wet dream. And then there is the mimetic scene with Diahnne Abbott at the Porno concession

stand, which is swept under the rug for the two blondes. The assassination of Senator Palantine is a dud, further removing him from being the dude. His power is in his restraint until he explodes, which means he cannot be depicted as a stone cold racist.

In choosing to bypass the feared protest over race, Scorsese builds a hermetic seal for the film in the form of

staged of the American psyche. Keitel is too good an actor to place Sport in the category of *Birth of a Nation*, but the edge-of-corniness and the lampoon of smooth pimp dances around the performance.

#### DÉTOURNEMENT

With \*\*\*\*\*, the turn is a deep cut where the filmic surface



Harvey Keitel as the stand in white pimp, Sport. The substitution of the fake native is not a new turn for Hollywood. *The Searchers* (Ford, 1956)—an explicit reference for the *Taxi Driver* script—casts a white actor (Henry Brandon) as the savage Indian, Scar, allowing for a full minstrelsy of villainy that draws on a long tradition of peekaboo with what can be

is seemingly undisturbed. Scorsese's mise-en-scène remains intact. But the psycho-technical reconfiguration of the scene/seen in *Taxi Driver* is both immaculate and epic. Jafa makes all the white dudes, who were supposed to be black, black again. It is not a simple reversal of day for night, it is a haunting.

The \*\*\*\*\* hijacking is not a Black Power move. Eldridge Cleaver and the Black Panther Party's endorsement of *Sweet Sweetback's*, would not be transferable. There is no full reversal where a black Travis shoots up the white pimps, etc, and saves the day. Rather, \*\*\*\*\* undertakes a more tapered down state of relations. To use a figure from Jafa, it "plays the changes." If playing the changes is black people navigat-

on what was erased in a movie that changed the cultural landscape, he makes \*\*\*\*\* a cycle. The piece moves through the changes, troubling guilty pleasure and revolutions of repression. Stating the obvious, \*\*\*\*\* is not a critique of Scorsese as a racist filmmaker. It is something far more complex and haunting than a take-down reaction. Cycles demonstrate a repetition compulsion with additive, generative layers.



ing change—structures, constraints, acts of violence—then something like Coltrane's "My Favorite Things," gives a freedom of movement in a closed set.

Jafa perfectly and seamlessly waylays the structure of visual pleasure established by *Taxi Driver*. With the clarity and obsession of a person trained in film who grew up gnawing

#### MAN OF ACTION (SCOPOPHILIA)

If one narrates the cycles, \*\*\*\*\* offers the shock of the familiar. In staging a deep fake, it authenticates an adjacent memory of something known but obfuscated. Specifically, \*\*\*\*\* loops obsessively on *Taxi Driver*'s ending, the man of action ends all action. Travis kills everyone around barring

himself (no more bullets) and Jodie Foster's Iris (witness needed). It starts with a phrase delivered by De Niro much along the lines of "You looking at me?" Travis says to Sport:

"You got a gun?"

Travis shoots the pimp, then walks to the next building and shoots the night manager in the hand. Iris (with a john in a plaid suit) hears the shots and turns her head in a reaction



shot. Travis is on the stairs up to Iris's rent-o-room when he is shot in the neck from behind by Sport. Travis turns and delivers the killing shot to Sport. Keitel goes down in the doorway. Away from Bernard Herrmann's heavy-rain score, the scene is cut with entirely diegetic sound (gun shots, screams, stomping around), underscoring the explosion of

violence and gouts of blood. "I'll kill you"—the howling night manager on repeat is essentially the only dialogue. The john in the plaid suit comes out of the room. Travis pulls out his hidden quick-draw gun and kills the john who falls back into the room. Travis then stabs the night manager in the hand (boot knife) and shoots him in the head (Iris is now screaming and cowering). Finally, Travis puts a gun under his own



chin but it clicks blankly. He's out of ammo. He then sits down on the couch, bloody and ravaged. This is where the cops, with their pistols drawn, find him. Travis makes the gesture known and dear to so many of the dispossessed: he puts his bloody hand to his temple in the shape of a gun and mouths a detention. Suddenly freed of Travis's direction,

the camera lingers over guns, bloody bodies, a growing police presence and a crowd, as the audience lingers over the money shot.

In the \*\*\*\*\* cycle, all of the same cinematic gestures take place with the realignment of black actors playing the roles of pimp, john, cops, etc., with the vertiginous verisimilitude of De Niro's Travis Bickle staying in place. The shift of view so

scene. Jafa's \*\*\*\*\* replays the inevitable, troubling the horrific that haunts the American landscape as blackness.

#### NOTES ON AUTONOMY (FETISH)

There is a scene in *Taxi Driver* early in the film where Travis joins a gangly group of cabbies at a diner, their native haunt, a crossroads for late-night travelers. Consistently a



perfectly rendered within the *Taxi Driver* world displaces the violence and the viewer. It mesmerizes like a conjuring, in praise of shadows. As a form, the cycle shapes, loops, and reshapes, a constant bending of the note. Amy Taubin, the most relentless and brilliant writer on Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, writes of the "voluptuous carnage" of the original

man of few words, Travis mutters through a story of a cabbie who got cut up on 122nd Street. Wizard, played by a brutal Peter Boyle, offers up the collective unconscious, "fucking Mau Mau land." In the next beat, Travis's eyes pan across the room, then the camera frames in portrait-like stillness two stone cold pimps effortlessly dressed to the nines. The

combination of patterns and textures is breathtaking. To the left, Mr. White in a white straw Homburg hat and white brocade lace shirt unbuttoned to mid-chest, dark glasses, and no smile, sits still. Mr. Black, to the right, wears a classic black wool fedora with striped band, polka dot red bow tie with an inkling of a swirling patterned shirt peeking through a three-piece buttoned-up black suit with red pocket square,

As Jafa explains, “In the scene where Travis Bickle goes to the diner, there are two extras who are pimps. They are not actors. Look at their level of self-possession. The camera moving past them is the trigger for Travis’s first interior monologue. These brothers are real in the fiction as Harvey Keitel is a fiction of the real.” It is as if Keitel must bend over backwards to get into this skin. Notably, the foreplay scene



sporting dark gold framed glasses and a look of utter contempt. Scorsese did not invent these men. Perhaps they were in the diner and invited to be in the shot. However it worked, the film is arrested for a moment. When the white arm of the waitress reaches into the shot to place a drink down for maestro, we know who is getting served. Travis looks away.

between Sport and Iris is one of the few scenes not shown from Travis’s view and was one requested by Keitel to ground the truth of his Sport. Undoubtedly, the scene is terrifying, serving as further constraint toward *Taxi Driver’s* explosive conclusion. But in thinking about specters of riots and other types of mob violence, seeing the pimps in the diner, one



could imagine that the idea of Jodie Foster getting touched by one of these men was beyond the pale.

#### TOP DOG

To say it quickly, the slave economy in America produced the black pimp in the sense that he is an American icon. Pimping may be the second-oldest profession in the world, but it was

highly constricted mobility of black people. The black pimp lies at the intersection of American fetish and pathology. The first is the perverse overvaluation of the object, while the latter is the deviation of the peculiar disease of race as caste. That is why pimps must wear good shoes, handmade genuine leather from Italy. Because the pimp is both. He is a parody of propriety, a levered mechanism, an electronic Negro. The



in America first that the pimp became a black pop star. From the early colonial *Code Noir* through *Jim Crow*, blackness was ongoingly ratcheted down, the regulatory world reflecting the social one where self-possession became a trait of whiteness. In a framework of persons as commodities, pimping was one of the few viable economic positions afforded within the

essential overvaluation of the object, the black fetish, is his trump card. To play the black fetish, one has to make peace with Anubis, the dog-headed god of death, in so far as the dead dog is transformed into the top dog. The pimp is the boss because he masters the art of black representation. He is a veritable signpost for black fame in his shiny shoes.

You're a star, baby.

In his 1969 memoir *Pimp*, Iceberg Slim committed to the page what was already famously pimp lore. Slim made clear that the sexy part of pimping is not the sex, but the control. He writes, "A pimp is happy when his whores giggle. He knows they are still asleep." In the incredible opening paragraphs of

whores by tearing them down physically and verbally. He lays down the law. The right of mastery is dedicated in the most mundane of manners: a car full of dirty, tired people, creeping through the early morning. What is played out for the pimp, at the expense of the women, is the reassertion of rights.

The black pimp produces such glee in his audience precisely because he cross-wires the machine. For him to be the



the memoir, Slim describes the perils of leaving oneself wide open to interpretation. His nose inflamed from the "gangster" he just snorted, tired, and physically leaky, he needs to stop up the holes in his persona. (The pimp is anal if nothing else.) To get himself together, Slim performs a ritual transformation that is repeated throughout the book. He disciplines his

master is a local revolution unto itself; for him to trade in a localized zone of human labor is the twist of the screw to the point of giddiness. The irony is that if he does his job well, in order to become a free agent, he must reproduce a peculiarly limited mode of bondage. For, of course the commodity of pimping is sex.

## SCAR'S ARIA (INTERIORITY)

Moving through the \*\*\*\*\* cycle is a solo moment, an aria as such, unimagined by *Taxi Driver*. In a moment of quiet, Scar smokes a cigarette, humming along to Stevie Wonder's epic "As," a journey across time and space where love asks for nothing. It's a moment of interiority that one almost never sees in film. *Moonlight*. *Killer of Sheep*. There are painfully few

I'm lousy  
with that need  
dem wants  
that doom  
(that sutra)  
that means of production  
that mama



instances when a black man is pictured in quiet self-regard, just being. The man of action at rest. Scar, necessarily, marks a wound. That is what the name points to across cinematic spaces from *The Searchers* to *The Lion King*. And yet, Jafa has given the viewer this man, a cycle away from the glare of the violence. Scar speaks to himself:

that baby bitch  
I risk everything  
(for so little)  
I'm a sun (son)  
I ain't  
no hustler

baby  
just a dead black star  
A killa of sheep  
(and dreams)  
(being)



He continues in his reverie until he is interrupted by the inevitable. Travis Bickle calls off screen, "You got a gun?"

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Amy Taubin was for many decades  
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Beth Coleman is an artist and writer  
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