

Dan Stewart
December 12, 2017

Taxi Driver and McCabe and Mrs. Miller: The Subversive Western

In July 1965, Bob Dylan, then a revered master of folk music and songwriting, released what may still be his most famous single - "Like A Rolling Stone". Days later he would perform his first set with an electric guitar at the Newport Music Festival in Rhode Island. He received boos and jeers, but he also set a tone for the oncoming counterculture of the late 60s and 70s. He had even warned of this a year previous when he wrote that "The times, they are a-changin'". From the Vietnam conflict to the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, and the murder of a Rolling Stones fan at Altamont, the late 60s and 70s were filled with anti-establishment and countercultural sentiment that was cultivated through student protests and activism. At the same time, by 1967 Hollywood had evolved into a more liberal and ambitious system that allowed for young directors like Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman, and Francis Ford Coppola to make artistically inclined yet high-budget studio films that have been called "New Hollywood". This new wave of American films in many ways addressed the same countercultural and anti-establishment sentiments that were so prominent at the time. This often involved a revision of mythologized American history - often the foundational ideas of the American dream or the old west. Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* is often marked as the beginning of New Hollywood as it sympathetically chronicles the exploits of the infamous titular criminals, a piece of mythology that would've previously held them as simple deviants. The film subverts the idea of the hero for a more cathartic image of an establishment-fighting crime duo. This subversion is also often found in genre. New Hollywood brought forth the opportunity to subvert not only ideas, but film genres, most typically the western. The western, being a primary target for revision because of its close proximity to American ideals and one of the most popular

genres in Hollywood for decades. The deep hold that the western had in American pop culture and the way it reflects a collective history and mythology about Americans and the American dream, was ripe for being revised, as the anti-establishment and disillusionment of the counterculture and 1960s protest spirit would have had Americans similarly questioning their own values and nationalism. Many films released during this period subverted the classical idea of the western genre. The two films I'd like to make an argument for are Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. Both of these films subvert the western through their use of environment, unorthodox heroes, and treatment of female characters.

The western film in itself is defined through debatable means. In my opinion, the traditional western is first defined significantly by its setting. Looking at most films that have been labeled as westerns, they typically take place on the frontier of America's manifest destiny: the arid plains and deserts of the literal western half of the young United States. Western films foreground their characters against the deep expanse of nature and the wild. Several filming locations have become famous for their distinct western qualities, including Monument Valley in Arizona. In *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, the film carries out in a miniscule mining town in Washington, covered in pine trees early on but blanketed in snow by the ending sequence. The arid open expanse of the traditional western is instead traded for dense and tall wood. The blistering sunlight is replaced by the overcast of winter and the calm of the snow. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* doesn't deviate from the time period, however, as it seems to run parallel to any other traditional western. The technology, dress, and manner of speaking tells us it takes place around the turn of the century. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* then works within the some of the confines of the western genre, but intentionally disobeys them as to connect the visual to the equally subversive thematic elements of the film.

Taxi Driver operates in a more discrete manner, as it does not take place in either a similar time or place to a traditional western. However, *Taxi Driver* channels the same sort of foregrounding of environment that a western does. In the film, the trashy streets of New York City are as much of a character as Travis Bickle is. The camera often operates as Travis' eyes as he moves through the city in his mammoth iron cab, observing the people on the sidewalks and commenting on them as a mass instead of as people. Travis describes the "rain" that will wash the scum from the streets as he watches the denizens of the alleyways and porn theatres move through the darkness. Travis is also seen foregrounded against the city, often walking down the streets in the daytime and cruising in the night.

Travis Bickle is no John Wayne, even if he might think he is. These subversive westerns of New Hollywood often contained unorthodox or "anti-heroes". The classical western hero is masculine, mysterious, skilled, and generally moral. In *Taxi Driver*, Travis Bickle narrates his life with poetic sentiments about his loneliness and how he observes the outside world as animalistic and disgusting. Bickle is a mostly loathsome character. Though the film is biased towards him in its subjective perspective, you learn to hate his higher-than-thou arrogance and the way he observes himself. In Travis' mind, he is masculine, mysterious, skilled, intelligent, and moral. Travis calls himself "God's Lonely Man", an extremely narcissistic and romantic way to describe his general awkwardness. Travis would have the audience believe that his loneliness is mysterious and interesting, like a roaming gunslinger or man-with-no-name of western tradition. He sees himself as a moral center, wanting to "save" the women around him from themselves, be it Betsy, who he sleazily tells that she is "a lonely person" with confidence, or Iris, who he quite literally offers to run away with and "save" from the world of prostitution. This is a clearly satirical indictment of the hero rescuing the damsel in distress. Scorsese would

have the viewer reflect on the awkward and revolting nature of Travis' warped perspective, with his preoccupations of being a hero or a cowboy as unfounded.

McCabe on the other hand, is seemingly an insecure wanderer, incomplete and almost clueless without Mrs. Miller. McCabe has a clear drinking problem, and is seen at least once drunk, alone, and helpless. Later, as Mrs. Miller arrives, she immediately makes an impact on him, informing of how to run his business better, upstaging him and arguably emasculating him. McCabe is also no portrait of the American dream. Instead of the Horatio Alger story of a young man pulling himself up by the bootstraps and establishing himself in an honorable profession, McCabe instead opts for a less legitimate venture: a brothel. In making McCabe a sleazy pimp, Altman is subverting a lot of cinematic conventions. The whorehouse is not often mentioned in classical westerns, let alone focused upon as a main plot point. Most viewers will take issue with the fact that the protagonist of the film is such a flawed human being - he makes his money through disgusting means. McCabe is no John Wayne cowboy or sheriff. He is a dishonorable anti-hero. This appears to be Altman's indictment of capitalism - another countercultural criticism. By taking the idea of a western protagonist and subverting in favor of a slimey businessman, the film takes aim at the age old idea of an American dream: the quest for monetary and professional success through hard work and strong character. Here, the one achieving such success is much more realistic: instead of the common worker, it is the obscene businessman who manipulates and profits off of "the oldest profession". By juxtaposing such a clear subversion of both genre conventions and American ideals with the western, a format deeply rooted in American history and myth, Altman strikes at the heart of what the counterculture was all about: challenging the system and dismantling the false mythology that was so deeply embedded in American minds at the time.

Another constant of the western is the gun: a tool for our formidable heroes to take down the bad guys and save the girl. In the classical westerns, the gun was an extension of the talents of the hero, a symbol of virility and of power. The gun was justice. In *Taxi Driver*, Travis Bickle encounters a man who asks him to watch as he peeps on his cheating wife. The man, played by Martin Scorsese himself, “directs” Travis to stay parked and keep the meter running. The man speaks of how he’d like to murder his wife and her lover. He mentions the .44 magnum: a massive weapon of intense destruction - not exactly the just and lawful revolver that populates old studio westerns. The .44 magnum also represents Clint Eastwood, as he famously used the gun in the *Dirty Harry* films. Clint Eastwood also happens to be one of the foremost western stars, having made “the Dollars trilogy” in the mid 60s. Scorsese’s appearance, and use of allusion to older violent films, then becomes a metacinematic moment. Throughout the film, Travis rolls by marquis’ for gangster films, *Death Wish*, and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, all savage and violent frames of reference for a psychologically disturbed person like Travis. As Scorsese literally “directs” Travis from the back of the cab, there is a notion of an influence of cinema on our vision of violence: that it is a just and lawful solution. The .44 magnum also returns when Travis seeks out a weapon that he plans to use to murder his enemies under the guise of “protection”. In the most infamous scene of the film, Travis, having bought several smaller guns and the magnum, looks into the mirror and seemingly mimics Dirty Harry: “you talkin’ to me?” stands in for “do you feel lucky punk?”. Travis has images of violent retribution in his head but doesn’t understand the weight of them: he has been molded by crime films. In the end, his attempt to “save” Iris in a hail of bullets and fire, which in his head is the heroic climax of his own western, is actually a very gritty, real, and ugly gun battle in a stairwell, that concludes with his death. In the final sequence, it would appear that either Travis is cycling through his dying thoughts, or is in a form of the afterlife: he imagines

himself a true hero, receiving honors and thanks from admirers and Iris' parents, as well as his love interest, Betsy. This is the heroic reception that Travis would imagine having seen the westerns of old. As he lays on the couch in Iris' apartment, dying, he makes the shape of a gun with his fingers and points it at himself. Not to be overlooked, the image of guns, often imitated with the hand, is prevalent in this film. Gun culture and the image of a heroic and mysterious gunslinger are deeply rooted in the language and imagery of this film. This is Scorsese's critique of the western, and of Hollywood films in general.

Travis Bickle believes himself to be "saving" Iris when he blows through the apartment building with bloody vengeance. His warped perception of women, and of himself, make him believe that his vigilante justice is correct and heroic. Iris herself really never agrees with Travis, she only ever asks to be saved once, when she gets into his cab with the intention of running away from Sport. Travis takes it upon himself to "save" her by trying to get her elope or run away with him. Travis sees this an opportunity to act as the hero - Iris is clearly in a bad situation and he believes it his duty to take her away from it. The reality is, though, that Iris never asks to be saved, and she doesn't appear to really want to be saved, other than in the Travis' idea of a damsel in distress, which he sees in Iris, is a misconception created by the entertainment industry. Scorsese subverts the trope of the subservient and helpless female character by establishing Iris as a character of independence. The same can be said for Betsy, who Travis miraculously charms with his confident, yet creepy assumptions about her.

In *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, which was originally based on a novel titled simply *McCabe*, Altman immediately subverts the classic image of first scene that we see her, when she tries to escape the abusive Sport. With Betsy, Travis miraculously charms with his awkwardly confident confrontation in her office. While it is apparent that he is being far too forward and that his attempts to diagnose her are inappropriate - he calls her a "lonely person" without any real

evidence - he manages to get her to go out with him, where he takes her to a porn theater. Scorsese has often tackled an element of catholic guilt and desire in his films: his first film *Who's That Knocking At My Door* in particular dealt with a cognitive dissonance between the sexuality of men and the way that the male protagonist judges the female lead for having been sexually assaulted. In *Taxi Driver*, Travis covets the purity and beauty of Betsy, but can't reconcile his lust for her. Betsy then rightfully rejects him, whereupon he acts rashly, telling her that she'll be damned. Scorsese's treatment of women in the film is subversive for a western film, giving agency to the female characters and allowing them to not only correctly reject Travis, but to have independence, as opposed to the flawed and problematic damsel in distress image.

McCabe and Mrs. Miller was based off a novel that was simply titled *McCabe*, but Altman's decision to amplify the character of Mrs. Miller into a very strong, resilient woman who not only puts McCabe in his place, but runs his business better than him, is a fantastic move. Mrs. Miller not only has independence but also humanity and agency. She teaches the girls of the brothel how to stay strong and to enjoy themselves, despite their situation. Such a strong and full character like Mrs. Miller was an excellent subversive choice that spoke to a burgeoning feminist movement in the 60s and 70s.

Through the treatment of their female characters, protagonists, and environment, both Robert Altman and Martin Scorsese challenged the tropes and conventions of classical western films. Both *Taxi Driver* and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* are revisionist westerns that channel the feelings of counterculture and anti-establishment sentiment that were so prevalent throughout the New Hollywood era. *Taxi Driver* explored the warped perspective of a man whose persona and outlook were cultivated by violent and misogynistic tendencies in film. While Vietnam had been mostly over by the time the film was released, the feminist and anti-war movements of the long 60s and 70s would've informed the rightfully cynical revisionism in the film. *McCabe and*

Mrs. Miller, with its critique of the mythology of the old west and the American dream, challenged the system and the ideals upon which the baby boomer generation would've been sold on. The film was released only three years after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, events that shook the faith of Americans in their nation. These filmmakers knew that America was going through a period of great change and revision, and they took their cameras to document it. By using the western genre, they acknowledged the way things were, and how we were taught to feel about women, violence, and success. They took those ideas and broke them down for the progression of the medium, and to speak to the issues that were so relevant at the time and really even today. Filmmakers, for a time, were a mouthpiece for the disenfranchised and counterculture, just as Bob Dylan was with his guitar. The times were a-changin', and the best way to represent that was to take what was established, and crack it wide open, and these films did exactly that.