

A Critical Divide

Being a 4-Part Examination on Melodrama, Tragedy, the Nature of Evil, and What Constitutes Responsible Movie Violence in Relation to Taxi Driver and Other Works in Response to the Work of Gregory Desilet

by Jasun Horsley

Part One: The Opportunity of Disagreement

Blood Meeting

Last month, I finished up the final draft of *The Kubrickon, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Dr. Stanley*. Somewhat unexpectedly, the book has turned out to be an unofficial follow-up to *Seen and Not Seen*, insofar as it continues my literary attempt to let go of a lifetime's reliance on a set of unbending critical opinions about *what constitutes film art*.

The question "Why should it matter to me so much what *other people* think of movies I love (or hate)?" is, for me, a non-rhetorical one, and the non-rhetorical answer finally presented itself in the process of writing *The Kubrickon*, leaving me with the sense of having got a particularly ferocious cat into—or is that out of?—*the bag*. In the meantime (i.e., since reaching that literary conclusion), a seemingly perfect opportunity has now arisen for me to put this new awareness—and new flexibility?—to the test, and for the rubber of excess theory to meet the road of practiced moderation. This opportunity has taken the (so far virtual) form of another writer, Greg Desilet and his two analyses of film violence, *Our Faith in Evil* and *Screens of Blood*. As it happens, perhaps not coincidentally, both of Greg's books issued from McFarland Press, which published my own *Secret Life of Movies*. So we have been unconsciously "aligned" for some time, unconsciously on my part, at least.

I came across Greg's work online while searching for an old (and scathing) review of my first book *The Blood Poets* (by Oliver Harris) that I wanted to quote in *Kubrickon*. Desilet's books came up among the search results and I think the first thing I saw was his analysis of *The Matrix* (from *Our Faith in Evil*), in which he challenges my praise of the film as naïve, misguided, and irresponsible. I also found the Harris review, and I emailed both him and Greg with a friendly message. In my email to Greg I suggested we do a podcast together and ended with this line: "I would now agree with most of your criticism of my review. I was quite under the neo-gnostic spell back then."

Both Greg and Oliver replied. Oliver expressed chagrin at the harshness of his review and gave a belated (by sixteen years) apology. I thanked him and that pretty much ended our correspondence. Greg's reply was more enthusiastic. He wrote:

When I was writing *Our Faith in Evil* you were my favorite author to reference and respond to. Although there are films where we disagree (at least back in the day), there were many films where we agreed (from my reading). But whether we agreed or disagreed, I always found your writing to be very provocative and entertaining. More so than myself, you have an engaging and highly readable writing style. No easy thing—so kudos on that.

He finished up by saying that he was currently working on a book “comparing the language philosophies of Wittgenstein and Derrida.” In my response I mentioned that I would like to read *Our Faith in Evil* and asked if he could sell me a copy because the prices on Amazon were so high. His response was to make a gift of copies of both his film books:

You are one of few people on the planet I would do that for. But I’m happy to do it because I think you would find parts interesting and I would like to know where you might disagree with me on particular lines of argument and on analyses of particular films and/or TV series that you may be interested in discussing.

He also ordered a copy of *Seen and Not Seen*, because unfortunately I had no extra copies to offer. All of this seemed like the beginning of a beautiful friendship, a feeling that was consolidated when I began to read *Our Faith in Evil* a few weeks later. The first part of the book (which I highly recommend) offers a comprehensive and thorough examination of the roots of horror and melodrama, and is really a profound and searching philosophical treatise, more than a book about movies. Greg is a true academic, obviously a heavy-weight in the realms of cultural analysis, and, rarer still, a genuine original thinker who is unafraid to take on the Moby Dick of literary challenges (the nature of evil and its strange allure), a challenge that also happens to be close to my own heart. In a word, I was stoked.

There is certainly much more to say about this part of Greg’s book, and I will get to it shortly. Before I do I need to finish laying out the challenge presented me via his two works and the why of this current essay. In part two of *Our Faith in Evil*, Greg shifts the focus to specific movies as a means to illustrate his thesis. His thesis, if I understood it rightly, is roughly this: melodramatic story structure that includes violent conflict, specifically *resolution through violence*, illegitimately reinforces an overly “Manichean” (dualistic) view of human existence, one which invariably locates the problem (evil) outside of oneself and in some wholly irredeemable (and inhuman) “other.” This—which he narrows down to scapegoating, with reference to Rene Girard—has unacknowledged social and psychological consequences, most drastically by generating self-perpetuating cycles of violence and preempting the possibility of healing or of a true and lasting resolution. (Hence successful Hollywood melodramas always generate their own sequels!) In contrast to the melodramatic structure, Desilet offers up the tragic one, a form which invariably locates the fatal flaw *within* the protagonist(s) and presents violent external conflict, not as a solution but as the means by which the problem (evil) becomes fully manifest and active, i.e., tragic.

I had no problem at all with Greg’s thesis. I didn’t even mind his direct criticism of my own (former) embracing of movies that, he feels, adhere more closely to the first template (melodrama) than the second, movies such as *The Terminator*, *The Matrix*, *Natural Born Killers*, and *Bonnie and Clyde*. No, my

problem (and it's a beaut) with Greg arose, whole and slaving like the alien bursting out John Hurt's chest, when he offered up another example of the wrong kind of movie violence: *Taxi Driver*! Yes, really.

Okay. So the newly flexible, post-*Kubrickon*, live and let live, let's allow all points of view to co-exist me wants so badly to say, "Hey, it's only one movie, cut the guy some slack!" And really, I tried. After a period of soul-wrestling and seemingly unrelated irritability, I pressed on to the following chapters and succeeded in finding my stride again. I made it to the end of Greg's book and over all was left with a very positive impression—nonwithstanding that one, single misstep, niggling away at the edges of my awareness like a badly infected tooth. *Taxi Driver?! Really?*

It's one thing to be in profound disagreement with someone when one has no relationship with them or particular hopes for one. It's quite another when a potential alliance seems suddenly at stake. Yet beyond even that quite practical concern (the desire not to see a relational opportunity going south), this was causing me a degree of psychological unrest that could only be sourced in some early primal responses. I was becoming unreasonably irritable with my wife (admittedly not a rare thing), and, for one night, experiencing a vague and formless sense of being persecuted by nameless forces, just as if the world entire was against me. Once again, this is not such an unusual feeling for me; but even so, it was unusually acute. With his travesty of judgment, Greg had certainly got my attention (like that funky tooth).

What can't be internally resolved naturally moves—like pus from a boil—into an external expression, a necessary kind of "airing." It is at times such as these that I am grateful to be a writer, and there is no challenge quite so inviting to me as writing a critique while in the throes of emotional turbulence, knowing that its *primary subject* will probably be among the first to read it. On the other hand, this is also—like removing a tooth—a delicate and precarious operation. Potential alliances are at stake, and all that, and jousting does sometimes lead to casualties.

You, the non-implicated reader, now get to be a witness to this operation.

How *Not* to Do Film Criticism

Worse was still to come. Having finished *Our Faith in Evil*, I picked up *Screens of Blood* that same night, eager to discover how, during the eight-year interim between the two books, Greg had come to his senses. No such luck. *Screens of Blood* cites *Taxi Driver* in the introduction as one of the *primary examples* of "how *not* to do screen violence"! There then follows a right-on-the-money excoriation of Tarantino's genuinely repulsive (in the second half at least) *Django Unchained*, almost every word of which I was able to concur with. After that, the dread returns: an essay on *Taxi Driver* that puts it in the same bracket with a wholly forgettable Jodie Foster pot-boiler called *The Brave One*, twinning them as then-and-now examples of irresponsible and shallow movie violence! So in Greg's perceptual tunnel, Martin Scorsese's, Paul Schrader's, and Robert DeNiro's cinematic exploration of the causes of male alienation, sexual dysfunction, and pathological violence is apparently on par with Tarantino at his

worst? But there's more, Greg goes on to contrast these egregious examples of cinematic irresponsibility with his own choices of laudable dramatic portrayals (those that fit his own socio-political model): *No Country for Old Men*, *The Book of Eli*, *Merry Christmas*, *Mr. Lawrence*, and (wait for it) *Shutter Island*!

Take a breath. Bend. Soften. Open. Allow for conflicting opinions to exist internally and not give rise to external conflict. *Do not demonize the other.*

Pause instead to wonder how this came to pass. How is it that an insightful writer with an appreciation for my own work would single out a film I still consider possibly the most outstanding example of cinematic artistry I know of, a film that is also among the most responsible, intelligent, compassionate, and inspiring explorations of violence—both in society and in movies—ever made, as *his leading example of the very opposite*? It is not an exaggeration to say that I know of no other movie that more effectively and sincerely addresses and exposes the problem which Greg Desilet is probing into with his books than *Taxi Driver*. Not one. Nor is it overstating it to say that I know countless men—and at least one woman, my twenty-year old niece—for whom the movie has been a source of inspiration and allowed for a deepening understanding and acceptance of themselves and their own capacity for loneliness, alienation, rage, and potential violence. These are people for whom the movie has—I think unquestionably—had a healing effect due to its unflinching willingness to enter into the pain and suffering of its protagonist. Is it *really* possible that Greg can see the movie as a melodramatic action film exemplifying “how *not* to do screen violence”?

Apparently it is. But here's the thing (and it's my one ray of hope in this tangled morass): apparently the entire thrust of Greg's argument (besides his complaint that the film doesn't give Travis any “back story” or “contrapuntal” character conflict, more on that later) is: *John Hinckley Jr.* Since *Taxi Driver* allegedly inspired an act of violence, Greg reasons, there must be something about the movie that caused this to happen, ergo the movie is irresponsible. Greg then sets about finding the evidence to support this conclusion (though I presume he never liked the film to begin with, he doesn't say). When it comes to *A Clockwork Orange* (a film I despise), and even *Natural Born Killers* (a film I hugely enjoyed the few times I saw it), there *is* plenty of evidence to find and one does not have to manufacture it. This is not so in the case of *Taxi Driver*. There is, in my view, no evidence at all that it glorifies, romanticizes, or incites people to commit violence. Greg accordingly fails to present any—besides the historical “fact” that, in one single case, it did. I put fact in quotes there because there is really scant evidence that the official version of history which Greg replicates in both his books—i.e., that Hinckley successfully shot Ronald Reagan because he was inspired by *Taxi Driver*—has any validity to it at all. But I will get to that later.

In lieu of evidence, Greg offers some opinions unbacked by even the simplest form of argumentation (he never analyzes the film in any depth). Worse, in his introduction, he lumps *Taxi Driver* together with a mishmash of other films, all of varying quality ranging from the execrable to the sublime, under the single rubric of *having inspired copycat crimes*. They are: *The Collector*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Taxi Driver*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Child's Play*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Scream*, *The Queen of the Damned*, *Saw*, *American Psycho*, *Dexter*, and *The Dark Knight*. Greg then damns all of these films with a single brush stroke, as lacking “genuine conflict,” having “narrowly drawn characters,” and

“seeking shock value atrocities.” The exact words he uses (to describe the central characters in *all* these films, please note) is that they “are not confronted by a contrapuntal character or characters to probe beneath crude surface motivations” (*Evil*, p. 16). In *Screens of Blood*, he narrows it down further by stating that all good dramas “require interaction with persons of sufficient insight and strength of character to force a confrontation by anti-heroic characters with the side of themselves they have succeeded in burying” (p. 138). But does it really require interacting with characters of strength and insight for this to happen? Travis’ date with Betsy (when he takes her to a porno movie) is among the most painful “contrapuntal confrontations” ever depicted in a mainstream movie, and the reason has little to do with either Betsy’s insight or strength of character. She is mostly just a witness to Travis’ catastrophic lack of social awareness.

And what of Greg’s contention that Travis—along with Chucky from *Child’s Play* and the killer in *Scream*—is driven by “crude surface motivations”? This is like calling Macbeth a happy-go-lucky kind of guy: just plain absurd. Until its final quarter, *Taxi Driver* is almost *all* interior action (which ironically is one of Greg’s complaints—not enough conflict!). A few paragraphs later, Greg writes that all of these films “lack genuine conflict and substitute violence and the tension of violence in its place.” What kind of weird contortions of logic is Greg applying here to argue that violence and the tension of violence is less than genuine conflict? Violence *always* has roots in interpersonal dynamics, roots that when ignored eventually give rise to out-and-out destruction. This is what *Taxi Driver* is essentially *about*, and it’s what makes it so devastating to watch.

Leaving out the other films (at least a couple of which are worth defending in their own right), where does Greg get off trying to categorize *Taxi Driver* as a melodrama devoid of real conflict, consisting of narrowly drawn characters and lacking tragic depth or meaning, as essentially a vehicle for “shock value atrocities”? What can a fellow film writer say to this? In lieu of my own words, I will instead quote Greg’s back at him, from a passage in which he (quite rightly) reviles those critics who praised *Django Unchained*: “All of these claims, as will be demonstrated, are so extraordinarily wrong as to be delusional.”

Mapping the Divide

At this point I should remind myself—and the reader—that all of this was merely an introduction to lay out my own dilemma (not diagnose Greg’s delusion!) of how to approach a perceptual gulf between Greg and myself in such a way that it doesn’t lead to a despair-induced shrug and a turning away on both sides. Because, let’s face it, that was my initial reaction at being faced with so seemingly unbridgeable a divide. Yet surely, there is some way to bridge it? What chance is there of a lasting reconciliation between the self and the other, if two writers can’t even make peace about a movie?

As becomes quite clear in his analysis (in *Screens of Blood*) of *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence*, Desilet (I am shifting to the more formal address mode now) approves of movies that carry the right message. *How* they do so (in terms of film aesthetics) is apparently of significantly less importance to him (I am

tempted to say of no importance at all, but that's more of a taste thing!). Desilet's preference for structure and intention over internal/unconscious content is diametrically opposed to my own. For me, with a few marked exceptions such as *The Matrix*, I value movies mostly as a medium for personal expression and for how they offer a glimpse into the interiority of the characters and of the guiding intelligences behind them. Simply put, as artifacts of individual human consciousness that give me an experience of being connected to the mysterious other. I have no concern about the moral capacities of the characters as long as I can relate to their struggle. This is not to say I don't care about the sensibilities of the people who make movies—*au contraire*, it's what I most seek out to respond to, and along with Desilet I feel a degree of disgust for Tarantino's brazen celebration of nasty violence as "pure" entertainment.* At the same time (and this is where Greg and I part ways), if it is done *in the right way*, such as *True Romance*, *Pulp Fiction*, or *Natural Born Killers* (and frankly, I enjoyed the *Kill Bill* movies quite a lot too), I am willing to overlook the personal failings of the artist and, you know, *have a good time*.

Returning for a moment to *Taxi Driver*, it's worth remembering that the primary sensibilities behind it—Martin Scorsese, Paul Schrader and Robert DeNiro—were all in their early or mid-thirties when they made it (Schrader was in his twenties when he wrote it). To me, this is a truly astonishing fact, considering just how little wisdom or self-knowledge anyone really possesses at such a tender age, and allowing (though Desilet won't) how profoundly *on the money* the film is as an examination of male violence and frustrated sexuality. This alone—for me, obviously not for Greg—is proof that the film comes out of a rare form of creative alchemy, that it is the result of artistic expression that is genuinely soul-searching and therefore the means to achieve deeper self-awareness (at least while it lasts). It is this process, in my opinion, that is the real gold of "art," the direct transmission of a sensibility. To receive it means being able to meet it at the same level of depth and integrity it was created on, and yet, somewhat paradoxically, to do that requires a willingness to tune into the transmission at its source (In this case, to get *inside* Travis' skin, and hence that of Schrader, Scorsese, and DeNiro, too). In this regard, no film is ever the same for any two viewers, as is manifestly evident with Greg and I, in this particular instance.

In fact, besides *Silence of the Lambs*—for which we are united in our disdain—the sole significant point of agreement between Desilet's movie appreciation and my own (in the two books I have read) is *No Country for Old Men*, which is a film we both unequivocally admire. Yet, reading his (quite compelling) analysis of the film in *Screens of Blood*, I was left with the sense that what Greg admires about the film is mostly its philosophical and intellectual properties. Its "thesis" (which he sums up as the randomness of violence) and its structure (such as how the hero, Tommy Lee Jones, chooses to retire from action rather than confront the villain) appeal to him because they conform to his model of good, responsible filmmaking. In the case of *No Country*, this happens to overlap with a remarkably skilled handling of the material (i.e., aesthetic brilliance), and because of this, I would say beyond its intellectual depth, the film is also very poignant and moving. Yet apparently, this is another crucial difference between Desilet's and

* Tarantino has cited *Taxi Driver* as one of his three favorite movies of all time, however (and on another occasion, named *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* as his all-time favorite; so apparently his viewer-sensibility is not so far removed from my own.

my own requirements of movie art. I want to be *moved* by movies and not merely intellectually or philosophically validated by them. (This may well be unfair to Greg—I bet it is—but I can only respond to what he communicates via his writing.)

To be honest here, even now, at fifty, I am still largely indifferent to the question of a film's social impact. I admire social conscience in a film only when it doesn't weigh down the more primal and poetic aspects of storytelling. Otherwise, give me Grindhouse. Films like *No Country*, *The Counselor*, *Fight Club*, and *The Matrix* work for me as both viscerally exciting fantasy fiction and as social examinations with genuine potential for subversion. On the other hand, there are few movies I despise more than those well-intended deliverers of a message that sacrifice storytelling vigor or honesty for the sake of social awareness. I am pretty sure Desilet isn't advocating *these* sorts of films (*Gandhi*, *Philadelphia*, *12 Years a Slave*), but, by having such clear-cut and minutely worked out criteria for what he deems a good movie—and for more or less equating good with socially responsible—he risks falling into a similar pothole.

I have been moved, sometimes to tears, by scenes of extreme violence in films which I imagine Desilet would (or know he does) revile as beyond the pale. In films like *The Birds*, *The Wild Bunch*, *Taxi Driver*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Blue Velvet*, or *Fight Club*, the intense beauty and strangeness—the exaggeratedly stylized quality—of the violence serves, for me, to bring out the tragedy and pain of the human struggle for meaning (a struggle which *includes* violence, tragically). The finale of *The Wild Bunch*, for example, improbably blends euphoria with anguish and it invokes in me an agonizing tension. This is the tension between my admiration and awe for the beauty of the film itself, and my empathy and distress for the suffering of the characters being depicted (and of the filmmaker doing the depicting). In the case of *The Wild Bunch* (and some of the other films I mention above), this accurately represents the characters' *own* experience, namely, a mixture of the ecstasy and agony of their tragic and willful acts of self-destruction. I think it accurately represents the conflict in Peckinpah's psyche, too, as well as the other filmmakers, even if only during the period when they were conveying their "message" and attempting to resolve an unbearable tension within them. Granted, this does not lead to morally tidy or "responsible" narratives that adhere to a strict social or aesthetic model or formula. But that is precisely what makes them gloriously, messily, tragically *human*.

Part Two: Warring Narratives

Okay But Does *Taxi Driver's* Ending Unwittingly Endorse Violence?

Now let us cut to the chase. In both of the Desilet books being critiqued here, he writes the following:

In a letter sent just three weeks prior to the shooting, Hinckley wrote: "Jodie Foster, love, just wait. I will rescue you very soon." In videotaped testimony provided at Hinckley's trial, Foster was asked whether she had seen a message like that before. She replied, "Yes, in the movie *Taxi*

Driver the character Travis Bickle sends the character Iris a rescue letter." (*Screens of Blood*, p. 40.)

In actual fact, Travis' letter to Iris consists of two lines ("Dear Iris. This money should be enough for your trip. By the time you read this I will be dead."), though he does enclose some money for Iris. The similarity between Travis' and Hinckley's letters extends about as far as their both being letters, and the fact Desilet repeats, and thereby reinforces Foster's exaggeration, rather than correcting it, indicates either how unfamiliar he is with the film or how determined he is to present his argument—that it inspired Hinckley to violence—regardless of accuracy. My impression based on everything he writes is that Desilet isn't really that interested in *Taxi Driver as a film*. (Compare the lengthy plot summations he offers for *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence* or *Shutter Island* to the scant sentences he uses to dismiss *Taxi Driver's* storyline.) He is interested rather in using the film as an example to support his argument for more social awareness and responsibility in cinematic depictions of violence. As a result, somewhat tragically, he critically undermines his whole thesis by choosing to rest it on the flimsiest of evidence.

And yet. . . At this point, having come this far (6000 words and counting), I *might* want to ask myself—for the first time publicly in forty years, all credit due now to Desilet for getting me to this point—how realistic *is* the ending of *Taxi Driver*? (See, Greg, what working on this piece and going all the way into the corner for my once-favorite movie has brought to the surface!) Is it likely Travis' deranged act of violence would be greeted as an act of heroism, and if not, *was* it irresponsible of the filmmakers to transmit such a message, however ironically they intended it? This leads to the question of how likely it is that any viewers might interpret the ending of the film as *a genuine validation* of Travis' heroism, as a sort of "the end justifies the means" twist? In other words, how valid is Desilet's concern that the film potentially glorifies Travis' violent behavior and so might inspire others to imitate it? Even struggling as I am to incorporate Desilet's point of view into my own, I fail to see how such a gross misreading of the film can be laid at the feet of the filmmakers. The morbid irony of the ending is far from subtle—it may even be overstated—and the indications that Travis' "heroism" is motivated by loneliness, desperation, and impotent rage are far from ambiguous. Anyone who misreads the film and winds up admiring Travis must already be so far inclined that way as to not need much by way of encouragement.

While I have no doubt that *some* people saw the film and cheered Travis on in his mayhem, once again, there isn't a great deal that can be done about individuals already primed to get off on screen violence and who simply *don't care about the context*. It's true that Peckinpah felt, on sitting through one screening of *The Wild Bunch*, that he had failed to communicate what he had meant to with the film, because instead of feeling sick at the violence some viewers were finding it exhilarating. And it's true he suffered as a result (though it didn't stop him doing a gratuitous shoot 'em up like *The Getaway*.) I imagine Scorsese had his own moments of doubt about *Taxi Driver* after the Hinckley affair (or even before it). But the idea of somehow making a film for all people everywhere that will be of any actual worth to *anyone* is, I think, naïve and baseless. Human experience and perception is far too diverse for that.¹

Three Circles of Desilection

There are three levels to the John Hinckley, “*Taxi Driver*-made-me-do-it” narrative so central to Desilet’s condemnation of the film. First up, somewhat superficially but still worth mentioning, is the fact that Hinckley shot President Ronald Reagan, who is as far from an innocent victim as it is possible to imagine. This is not to say that there is a justification for shooting him, only that details such as who is being shot at and why—and what sort of justification there might be for the shooting—ought not to be completely left out of any analysis, especially one that seems partially geared towards moral questions such as *social accountability*, as Desilet’s is. Simply put, there were beyond any doubt reasons why Reagan was shot that have nothing at all to do with *Taxi Driver*, and not much to do with John Hinckley Jr., either (as we shall see).

Secondly, why is Desilet—who was involved in political activism in the 1970s—so quick to believe the official version of the John Hinckley assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan? Random shooters—as *Taxi Driver* itself depicts—don’t generally get close enough to powerful political leaders to do any damage. I realize this goes against the mainstream viewpoint, but I am assuming *some* degree of political awareness on the part of the reader as regards the extensive evidence that Lee Harvey Oswald, Sirhan Sirhan, or James Earl Ray were very far from being “random shooters.” On the other hand, creating convincing backstories to make trained assassins *seem* like random shooters or nutjobs is part of the standard operating procedure of domestic black-ops, which means the whole Hinckley-Jodie Foster-*Taxi Driver* official narrative which Desilet relies on—in this writer’s opinion at least—is most likely closer to a whole-cloth fabrication than historical fact.

That said, there seems little doubt that Hinckley *did* “stalk” Foster (with letters and phone calls) and that he *did* fire shots at Reagan. So assuming Hinckley wasn’t simply playing a role, the likelihood is that *Taxi Driver* was used on Hinckley, in a *Clockwork Orange*-style MKULTRA mind control process, as a means to instill Hinckley with a conscious motivation for carrying out his deed, and thereby keep the truth concealed. If Hinckley believed he was shooting (at) Reagan out of obsessive need to win Jodie Foster’s love, he could then be depended on to support the cover-up being sold to the public. But in this case, are Scorsese and his film really anything more than innocent tools in the hands of shadowy agencies of nefarious intent (most likely Vice President Bush and the CIA, of which he was the former director)? Who knows, maybe sullyng *Taxi Driver* and traumatizing Scorsese and Foster—for making one of the very few truly insightful Hollywood movies about violence—was part of the program?*

* To some degree it can be argued that Scorsese’s career never fully recovered after this. His last great film, in my opinion, was the subdued but brilliant *King of Comedy* (thematically the same terrain as *Taxi Driver*), which was filmed the same year as the Hinckley affair and might even be seen as a response to it. After that, with a few notable exceptions (*New York Stories*, the overrated *Goodfellas* and the underrated *Casino* and *Bringing Out the Dead*), Scorsese gave us thirty years of shallow and/or absurdly inflated slick Hollywood products such as *Hugo*, *Shutter Island*, and *Silence*. Perhaps it wasn’t only Reagan who had to be brought back in line in 1981? (I am half joking; but only half.)

Based on the two of his books I have read, Desilet's conspiracy consciousness is low and so he will probably be having none of this. Not low for a film critic, for sure, but low for a former activist and philosophical researcher exploring the limits of human perception regarding evil, violence, false narratives, and the like. This puts him at a marked disadvantage, especially when discussing films-as-propaganda and, more specifically still, when presenting *Taxi Driver* as an example of a film that inspired a copycat crime. To address this gaping hole in Desilet's thesis, I will briefly direct his—and our—attention to a few inconvenient facts about John Hinckley, Jr. and the attempted presidential assassination of 1981.

- John Hinckley's father, John Hinckley Sr., was a Texas oilman and chairman and president of the Vanderbilt Energy Corporation. He was instrumental in helping fellow Texas oilman George Herbert Walker Bush, former director of the CIA, win the Republican nomination for president. He was also the president of World Vision United States.
- World Vision is funded by USAID (United States Agency for International Development), "a traditional CIA front organization, allowing the agency access to an array of places and things around the globe."²
- In the mid-1970s, John Lennon's alleged assassin, Mark David Chapman—like Hinckley a fan of *Catcher in the Rye*—joined World Vision and, after a brief visit to Lebanon, worked with Vietnamese refugees at a resettlement camp at Fort Chaffee in Arkansas. He was named an area coordinator and a key aide to the program director, David Moore.
- In the fall of 1980, Hinckley was arrested at Nashville airport carrying three guns on the same day that then-president Jimmy Carter arrived in the city. Hinckley is believed to have been stalking Carter, who was running against Reagan-Bush. He was neither fingerprinted nor charged.³
- The Bushes and the Hinckleys were frequent dinner companions. John Chancellor on NBC Nightly News reported "the bizarre coincidence" that Vice President Bush's son, Neil, and Scott Hinckley (John Jr's brother) had dinner plans for March 31, 1981, the day after the shooting occurred.
- Just five hours after the shooting, before Hinckley had even been questioned, Vice President Bush publicly announced that "no conspiracy" was involved in the incident.
- Though John Hinckley, Jr., was able to both make and receive phone calls from his hotel room, he chose to walk a considerable distance and wait by a public payphone for calls from an unknown caller, or callers, in the period leading up to the shooting.
- Nathaniel Blumberg, a Rhodes scholar and former dean of the University of Montana journalism school, was so disturbed about the investigation into the shooting that he wrote a 377-page novel called *In The Afternoon of March 30*. The book examines many unreported connections between the Hinckley and the Bush families. "What I'm really after is the case to be officially reopened," Blumberg said, in an interview for *United Press International*. "In truth, I don't think all the questions can be answered without opening up a whole new can of worms."
- In the same interview, Blumberg claimed that Bush had "questions to answer in connection with the attempt," as did the FBI and the judge who presided over Hinckley's trial. "I'm not saying there was a conspiracy to assassinate Reagan," he stated. "I'm saying there was a conspiracy to

keep significant information from the public that it has a right to know.” Blumberg claimed that “journalists were fed a barely believable story full of inconsistencies.”

- Researcher John Judge reported that, while Hinckley fired six shots, all of them could be accounted for and none actually hit Reagan. He claims that it was observable on the news footage that the first hit to Reagan’s body coincided *almost exactly* with Hinckley’s first shot; yet Hinckley’s first shot *hit secret service agent Brady in the head*.⁴
- As in the case of both Kennedy assassinations, Judge’s evidence suggests that there was at least one other shooter, and that Hinckley, along with Oswald and Sirhan Sirhan, was just one more in a long and time-honored tradition of *patsies*.
- After he was found guilty, Hinckley was sent to the Washington-area St. Elizabeth’s mental hospital, “an institution with a fascinating history of involvement with the CIA’s MK-ULTRA program, which focused on mind control experiments—and efforts to study the possibility of ‘programming’ killers. Psychiatrists played a crucial role in recruiting subjects for these experiments.”⁵
- Following Hinckley’s release in August 2016, the FBI declined to release 22 pages of documents that included the names of associates and organizations linked to Hinckley, as well as details of his finances. Documents on Hinckley’s psychiatric records were also among those kept secret.⁶
- Notes by Hinckley describing a conspiracy to assassinate a president were found in a search of his prison cell, according to *Breaking Points*, a memoir written by his parents. They said the notes referred only to “an imaginary conspiracy” and his lawyers dismissed them as far-fetched. They have never surfaced publicly.⁷

There is of course much more to be uncovered around Hinckley, but this is a riposte to Desilet, not a crash course in deep politics (however much I think Desilet might benefit from one). So let’s return to the main point, which is that, based on the above evidence, Desilet’s *primary argument* for the culpability of *Taxi Driver* is based on a set of evidence that he has failed to examine. This leaves only his wholly unsupported—and I think insupportable—claims that the film is a sensationalist melodrama about a narrowly drawn character that lacks any real conflict! Back to the drawing board, Greg?

*

Emotion won’t change you. Logic won’t change you. I haven’t got the faintest idea. Each man must find his own ground—make up his own mind—and then, just stand there. All I can do after that is testify.

Which brings me to my third argument for the defense, as follows: Even if *Taxi Driver did* inspire Hinckley to shoot Ronald Reagan *without* the interventions of MKULTRA, does this in any way prove the film itself is constituted of elements that are *likely* to incite people to violence? Or does it merely indicate that, by a freak confluence of factors, on one solitary occasion, *shit happened*? Is there any real way to separate *Taxi Driver’s* efficacy as a work of art—i.e., a work that deeply affects some people—from its possible negative effects on a psyche that’s wired to respond in all the wrong ways? Would Desilet argue—by the same logic—that The Bible is *ipso facto* a socially irresponsible work? Perhaps he would,

and he might even be right to do so. But he would also be acknowledging that the can of worms he is opening with such arguments is a *lot* deeper and wormier than he is currently admitting.

Presenting evidence for the adverse effects of The Bible would naturally create a vacuum to be filled by counter-balancing evidence for all the positive effects it has had. The two bodies of evidence would then need to be weighed against one another. The problem here, of course, is that it is much easier to find evidence (even when manufactured or falsely contrived) for copycat crimes—and religious fanatical violence—than it is for more beneficent effects, since these by definition are going to be much subtler and harder to identify, or even to locate. Are we likely to hear the testimony of an alienated young man who was plotting to commit some terrible crime and then had a change of heart after seeing *Taxi Driver*? So then what does that leave? As a counterpoint to Desilet’s calling of John Hinckley to testify before the jury—a testimony I consider worthless—I call myself, a writer whose awareness of and sensitivity to violence has been *immeasurably deepened* as a result of repeat viewings of *Taxi Driver*—as I hope this current piece will show.

Plato vs. Pulp (Through the Desilet Looking Glass)

In both *Our Faith in Evil* and *Screens of Blood*, Desilet chooses to focus on the cinematic depiction of violence and the associated values. His assumption, perhaps, is that values relating to violence and conflict, being more dramatically observable, are also more crucial in terms of the health of the social organism. Movie violence is an easy target for anyone wishing to examine the ways in which popular entertainment would seem to both mirror and, to some degree, exacerbate increasingly destructive cultural trends. Yet I found myself wondering if it would be possible to likewise examine romantic comedies that promote a wholly fallacious, unrealizable, dissociative, and fantasy-based version of male-female sexual interactions, and to argue that they do immeasurably more harm, in the long run, than violent revenge fantasies. Values around mating, long-term partnership, child-raising, and the like, are much more unconsciously and unquestioningly adopted than values relating to revenge or violent “justice,” and they probably enter at a much deeper level because of it. Imagery and narratives that have to do with intrapersonal violence are obviously of less fundamental relevance to most people, when compared to the question of how men and women relate to one another, and what they can reasonably expect out of those relations.

To give credit where due, Desilet is clear in stating that violent melodramatic movie fantasy negatively influences people who watch it in ways that don’t correlate with violent imitative action *per se*, but in subtler forms of human interaction. Even so, he has chosen to write about violent movies as presumably the most accountable for a negative inception of values, or at least the easiest to identify. The danger here is that he is going after the lowest hanging fruit. It’s ironic to compare this with my own motive for writing *The Blood Poets*, for which I chose to focus on violence in movies because all my favorite movies were—and pretty much still are—violent, making this the easiest and most logical way to follow my passion.

While reading *Our Faith in Evil*, I didn't ever really get the sense that Greg Desilet particularly *likes* movies. I am fairly sure this wasn't his intention, and that he would say he cares about movies quite a bit, because otherwise why write books about them? Yet at no point does he communicate—to me—the sheer visceral pleasure that movies can provide. This may be more than just a passing criticism, because it is precisely the visceral impact of movies that—both in Desilet's thesis and in my own view—makes them so potentially “harmful” for unprotected psyches (unprotected by self- and critical awareness, I mean). And, as I will go on to argue, I think that Desilet's analytical approach to movies is, in part at least, a way for him to buffer the visceral power of movies and so protect himself from being *moved* by them.

There is only one movie he focuses on for praise in *Evil: Red River*. All the others are subjected to various degrees of condemnation, either for a) fomenting social violence, or b) failing to meet Desilet's criteria for socially responsible cinema. This latter would *seem* (presumably) to overlap with—if not be wholly synonymous with—aesthetically pleasing cultural product (you know, *art*). Yet Desilet's critical skills seem to come and go, according to his need or his interest or both. It's very clear he doesn't *like* certain movies; but besides the criteria already cited, it's not obvious *why* he doesn't. When he reviles *Silence of the Lambs*, for example, he relies heavily on quotes from my own critical drubbing of the movie in *The Blood Poets*, quotes that don't seem to add much to his actual thesis. Mostly, he just seems to enjoy how mercilessly I trash the film, and to want to let *my* words express *his* feelings for him.

Having read both books in their entirety, I am pretty sure I didn't come across a single mention of the subject of *individual self-expression* and its (possibly inherent) value for the individuals doing the expressing, namely, the catharsis and healing (tricky words, I know) that potentially occurs *via the process of making of art*. This also leaves out the possibility (I would say fact) that such an immersive process of creation *transmits* to those who receive the works, those at least who, consciously or not, are able to tune into the wavelength of the artists behind them. This idea is central to *Seen and Not Seen*, but it seems to be beyond the scope of Desilet's thesis. The only criterion he presents for good vs. bad art is his—admittedly quite sturdy—model relating to melodramatic (antagonal) vs. tragic (synagonal) story structure. The trouble with this is that it is a top-down, outside-in approach to movies (and to life and everything else). It is also one which, ironically, exemplifies the melodramatic, *external-oriented* structures that Desilet is trying to expose as essentially “impure” or as harmfully distorting of human perception and experience. Simply put, Desilet's approach to movies *is itself* antagonal rather than synagonal.

Desilet denigrates pulp fiction, for example (in his analysis of the Tarantino film of the same name), as *ipso facto* belonging to the lower class of artistic storytelling. He adopts a conventional and superficial framework (that of style and genre) for gauging content. But some of the most honest, penetrating, and insightful explorations of human experience have emerged from the disreputable realms of pulp fiction, and they will probably always do so. When individuals explore their inner experience with the goal of expressing it, they naturally gravitate to whatever genre, form, or style best suits them. The Joker and Batman, for example, might *appear* to be the epitome of superficial melodrama in which obvious good squares off with obvious evil. And yet—with only the smallest of tweaking by a more serious writer (Alan Moore or Frank Miller), the melodramatic dyad moves smoothly and effortlessly into an at least partially

tragic or synagonal structure—archetypally speaking if not realistically. Once there, Batman’s “goodness” is seen as being mirrored by—even giving rise to—the Joker’s “evil,” and we are given pulp melodrama with tragic poetry at its secret sticky center.

Just as melodramatic structure often disguises itself with a superficial imitation of tragedy, the reverse is also sometimes the case and genuine human pathos secrets itself in and through pulp material. I would even argue that this is the most likely place for it to surface. Desilet seems to want to prescribe an external model to adhere to, one which anyone who wishes to assume the deadly mantle of self-expression would be wise to learn the rules of before daring to put pen to paper or brush to canvas. A rather Platonic sort of Republic looms darkly on Desilet’s horizon.

The point I want to make is simple: what if the depth of awareness, interest, engagement, honesty and sincerity that individual artists bring to their work is what alone determines the measure of its value to others? Art is an artifact—humble or not—of the human struggle to make sense of our existence via self-expression and communication. According to Desilet—if I am reading him rightly, which I may not be—this is not only not enough, it is not even the priority (not even a close second, apparently, since he never even mentions it). The real aim of art for Desilet is Platonic—to offer up right ways to think, perceive, feel, and act to others; in other words to model exemplary forms of behavior. He wants all art to be PG-rated: Platonic Guidance required.

This isn’t quite fair to Desilet, however. He offers up Captain Ahab and *Moby Dick* as a positive example of tragic art, and tragedies in general hardly offer us with suitable role models. So he is clearly aiming to offer a subtler kind of criteria. Yet he *does* sink to this level when he attempts to criticize *Taxi Driver* for focusing almost exclusively on the inner life of its (violent) protagonist, and for failing to provide Travis with strong characters to challenge him in his delusion. Presumably Desilet requires this so he, the viewer, can more easily recognize how messed up Travis is, and not be fooled by the filmmakers’ compassion, like poor John Jr., into mistaking Travis for a hero. Desilet’s position overall isn’t to require more stalwart or upstanding *characters* in movies, then, but more awareness, caution, and responsibility from filmmakers, critics, and audiences.

The question is, would he know it if he saw it? I can’t help but feel that he’s advocating for the suppression of both filmmakers’ and audiences’ deep need to explore the darkness of their being, out of an overreaching concern that it *might* have a negative social impact. Does Desilet really *believe* the Scorsese who made *Shutter Island* (which he thinks “may be Scorsese’s finest film”) is a more self-aware, responsible, and reliable communicator than the Scorsese who made *Taxi Driver*? Incredible as it seems, he *does* believe this, and so I can only conclude that he is either oblivious or indifferent to the aesthetic qualities of both films. I think his focus is exclusively on whether the structural, thematic, synagonal or “moral” marks are being duly (and however dully) hit. Because I can hardly think of a more clear-cut example of the imposition of false values than arguing that *Shutter Island* is a better film than *Taxi Driver*. It seems akin to a Christian fanatic who loves any movie, no matter how awful, that promotes the correct spiritual values, and who rejects any movie that doesn’t, no matter how profound, out of a sense of religious duty.⁸

At this point, I find myself firmly on the other side of Greg's Looking Glass, wondering how I got here. Fortunately, while reading this essay back, I realized the answer was right under my nose. The very thing I was trying to get free of was what I was uncovering in Greg's writing.

It should have been obvious from that start. What's the last thing you see before going through a looking glass?

Part Three: Lend Me Your Eyes

Monistic Antagonism

In chapter 14 of *Our Faith in Evil*, in a section titled "The 'Evil' in Evil," Desilet outlines what for me is the head cornerstone of his philosophical thesis:

In reflexive melodrama, the attitude of the audience toward a dark or villainlike protagonist (for example, Ahab) fundamentally changes through deepening character revelations. Similar to tragic drama, *the troubled protagonist appears as a complex human being who has adopted, through a form of partial blindness, a ruinous set of instructions for operating in the world.* Instead of being presented with a character aligned with evil and designed for destruction, the audience encounters a character *who appears mistaken in orientation in a way that becomes tragically destructive.* (p. 160, emphasis added.)

I emphasize those parts because they seem like an almost perfect description of Travis Bickle, even though that had nothing to do with why I initially selected this section for quoting. This passage comes, if you recall, from the section of the book *before* Desilet gets to any kind of film analysis, and hence I read it before I had any misgivings about his thesis. Based on this, my problem with Desilet arises not with the formation of his central argument, but with its *application*. But before I get to that, let's pick up where we left off, from the same passage:

This way of structuring dramatic conflict, when applied to real life, suggests a broadening of orientation toward conflict. The great problem with the notion of evil as defilement lies not merely in the possibility that it *can be* misapplied but rather in the reality that it is *always* misapplied. As already suggested in the context of the discussion of tragic drama, the logic of evil as a way of structuring conflict can be displaced by another approach to conflict and by a less potentially destructive way of looking at evil. In this alternative way of looking at what is usually regarded as evil, evil is essentially a misperception of nature, the functional relation, and the ecology of beings. Nothing is essentially a pollution and nothing is fundamentally worthy of elimination from the order of being. In this sense there is no "evil." . . . The notion of evil as pollution, as that which is in its essence worthy of elimination, is the *real* evil because it is precisely through the introduction of this notion that the possibility of *finding* something to be

inessential to the whole emerges. This concept of evil introduces the justification for the radical sacrificial negation of beings. (p. 160-61, emphasis in original.)

This really quite brilliant passage is—ironically enough—also a succinct summation of the psychodynamic so beautifully examined and exposed by *Taxi Driver*. Insofar as Travis is driven by a misplaced desire to eliminate those polluting aspects from his environment, it is due to an incapacity to recognize, or accept, his own affinity with them. This is the very essence of tragedy. Indirectly, Desilet’s thesis—which he will go on to use to try and discredit *Taxi Driver*—is here helping me to understand—and deepen—my already profound admiration for the film. Irony upon irony! Desilet continues:

The idea of evil as radical pollution falters on the reality that everything that exists functions, through one context or another, as pollution in relation to something else. . . . But the idea of something as absolutely out of all worldly context fundamentally breaks down against the necessity that whatever has made its appearance in the world must in some way ‘belong’ or must be essentially ‘natural’—otherwise it could not have come into being. (p. 162.)

This presentation is profound in its simplicity and has the special quality of being both startling and self-evident—startlingly self-evident. It is a hypothesis that presents its own proof through the unassailability of logic. It also applies neatly to Travis again, insofar as he unconsciously chooses to move in a world that, at a conscious level, he finds abhorrent. Travis *uses* the sordid under layer of New York society to drive himself into an apocalyptic fury geared towards the eradication of the same “pollutants” he chooses to surround himself by (and fill himself with). “Some day a real rain will come.” But if it did, Travis would be the first to be washed away.

As it happens, last year, while I was working on a novel about neurodiversity that was the fictional counterpart to *The Kubrickon*, I wrote something very similar, if not quite identical, to Desilet’s formula above. I edited the passage out of the final draft because it was too “wordy,” but now it seems right on point:

In a reality model in which pure and impure exist as a polarity, the impure will always triumph over the pure. . . . Where purity has a no-tolerance policy, impurity can afford to be quite liberal about it. However, at the deepest, molecular level, the reverse is the case. Purity is always assured and impurity does not in fact exist. An H₂O molecule can be mixed with other molecules, but doing so does not alter its molecular constitution. It remains an H₂O molecule no matter which molecules it fraternizes with. The *idea* of impurity pertains only to temporary arrangements that are *then put forward as in some sense inherently real or permanent*. Impurity is only possible if we allow for something outside of any given arrangement entering into it and making it “impure.” An arrangement that was self-complete and permanent, if it were truly the sum total of what is pure, could not be infiltrated or contaminated in any shape or form, because there would be nothing that was not itself. . . . Existence as a whole remains as pure and complete as it ever was or ever will be. It simply is. . . . The idea of impurity, then, can only enter into the existing realm once arbitrary and temporary arrangements of the base units come into existence, arrangements that depend on the exclusion of other arrangements of units to maintain their integrity.

This kind of arbitrary arrangement and the accompanying intolerance is what Desilet terms “Monistic antagonism.” He is, I presume, referring to a monistic or monomaniacal point of view that, through its very existence and its insistence and imposition of a single and exclusive way of perceiving reality, sees anything that contradicts or challenges it as antagonistic *to* it. The irony of this is, once again, startlingly self-evident: the desire to apply a single *unitive* interpretation of reality to everything we encounter—a single set of values for all circumstances—*creates the inevitability of division and conflict and destroys unity*. The reason for both the irony and the conflict is, I think, also quite apparent: when we lack an internal sense of truth, meaning, or value, we will seek after external models to live by. Once we have found models that suit us, we then impose them upon our own expression and behaviors. After that, we “naturally” seek to impose them on others as well—for “their own good” of course, but really for our own safety and comfort and to ensure that those adopted values—our crucial fictions—are never questioned. To silence all voices of dissent, both inner and outer, and avoid all “contrapuntal conflict.”

Travis tries in vain to impose his strange puritanical porno mindset onto Betsy (the world, the mother’s body). When it fails, he is left with no recourse but violence. It is through violence that he forges an identity in keeping with his fantasy projection, forcing the world to *bend* to his pathology. The fact he is successful is the tragic irony of the film. Either this was entirely lost on Desilet (as it was on Hinckley, allegedly) or he decided it was simply too powerful and persuasive to be trusted (irresponsible!), since it generated out of tragic irony tragic *reality*. Either way, we are faced with the impact of so-called great art. If Desilet wants to argue against *Taxi Driver* as irresponsible, then he may end up sitting on the right side of Plato and pitting himself against all forms of poetic self-expression. From this perspective, *anything at all* that has the potential to profoundly impact the collective psyche becomes *ipso facto* irresponsible and dangerous. Ironically (again!), this also places Desilet in the very position he is arguing *against*: that of a defender of purity who has created an arbitrary arrangement (his thesis) that can only establish itself by identifying all impure elements—those dastardly movies inspiring copycat crimes!—and marking them for elimination.

Is There a Cure for Film Criticism?*

When all is said and done, can the new, more bendable and accommodating film critic I have hopefully become in middle age—in all good conscience—make the emphatic statement that *Taxi Driver* is an immeasurably superior work to *Shutter Island* or to any of Desilet’s other shining examples of “synagonal” cinematic violence? Can I declare with Moses-like certainty that Desilet is only able to argue otherwise because he has become lost in the matrix of his own sociopolitical/critical evaluation system? Apparently I *can’t*—not in good faith at least.

Taste is by definition subjective. If I were to argue that Greg Desilet’s subjective experience of movies is of less value than my own—that it is, shall we say, delusional—I would find myself on a dangerously

* The title is stolen, whole and intact, from an essay by Pauline Kael about the perils of over-intellectualizing our experience of movies.

slippery slope. Nonetheless, in the spirit of administering a film analyst's medicine back to him, and in the hope of a miracle cure, I *will* say that I feel more confident framing the above statements as *ontological certainties* than I would in doing the same for a statement such as "*there can be no justice in violence.*" This is a statement Desilet makes with ontological certainty on page 19 of *Screens of Blood* (emphasis in original).

A line or two later he adds for good measure "*All violence is tragic.*" Unlike his praise for *Shutter Island*, I find these sentiments admirable and I have no desire to question them *as* sentiments. Desilet seems confident no one else will either: he offers no arguments to back his statements up, as if taking it as a given that all civilized, sophisticated minds will naturally agree. He doesn't take the time to define what exactly he means by justice, either, even though it's a distinctly more sociocultural concept than violence. Without going too deeply into the question of *why* there can be no justice in violence, I think it's fair to point out that, since violence is not a social concept and justice is, retributive or defensive violence must surely predate "justice" as a feature of human experience. So then Desilet—while assembling theses that threaten to topple every last pillar of aesthetic certainty—would be wise to at least *allow for* the possibility of "justice" as a *human intellectualization* that has been imposed upon a natural corrective function, that of force being applied within the so-called "law of the jungle." This would then imply that justice *as a concept*—the black irony of it!—is a form of violence against our inherent natures.

This idea is something movie characters that Greg surely despises—Mickey in *Natural Born Killers*—are fond of arguing, but it's by no means reserved for Hollywood fantasies of *ubermenshian* serial killers. Desilet's thesis could perhaps benefit from an analysis of the Bhagavad Gita here, a religious text that entertains the notion (both ancient and current) that violence has both a literal and a metaphorical, archetypal context, and that the two are *not necessarily* mutually exclusive. In other words, physical violence is believed by some cultures—including let's face it our own—to be a means to a spiritual end. This is something Desilet addresses directly, disparagingly, in his analysis of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (at the end of *Evil*). It also becomes especially relevant when it comes to repudiating (were I inclined to do so) Desilet's repudiation of my review of *The Matrix*. In his analysis of the film, Desilet doesn't allow for any kind of *spiritual* tyranny that *might*, in theory, require physically extreme measures to overcome it (i.e., for wrestling against spiritual wickedness in high places). He doesn't entertain the idea that the death of the body might be a small price to pay for the emancipation of the spirit (though he does address this in the *Passion* piece). The possibility that *The Matrix* might be a form of fantasy that *transcends realism*—and that the violence might also have a transcendental quality—does not reach his synagonal radar; or if it does, it is only to be electrified instantly out of existence.

Not that I blame Greg for any of this. Having once subscribed to this kind of radical mysticism, I can say with authority that literalizing transformation myths is a dangerous game. As an apropos example of how dangerously close to mythic literalization I veered: after the release of *Matrix Warrior*, when I was still hoping to become a literary phenomenon, I toyed with the idea for a time that the book might inspire deranged acts of copycat violence. In my *hubris*, I decided I would be OK with this, because you can't make an omelet, etc., etc. Today, I am much more in accord with Desilet, even to the point of regarding *The Matrix* (and especially my previous allegiance with it) with suspicion. I no longer believe

violence can ever really be the same as or lead to justice, or facilitate spiritual transformation or liberation. But this belief doesn't amount to ontological certainty—it is not a case of knowing it for a fact. After all, I have been wrong before.

To his credit, these are the sorts of philosophical questions which Desilet's work has (re-)opened up for me. They are questions that are deep and potentially bottomless. But my impression—my frustration—is that Desilet pulls back just when he needs to be diving all the way into these questions. The reason he pulls back, I think, is something he has in common with most liberally-minded social commentators. He is not content with merely diagnosing a problem, he feels the need to also offer some sort of solution, no matter how premature or partially formed it may be. The problem with this ought to be obvious to anyone who has been following along with this nonfiction narrative so far: attempts to formulate a solution to a problem that has not yet been fully mapped out or understood are *inevitably doomed to failure*. This is (partially) because the conscious desire to find a solution is rooted in unconscious resistance to going further into the problem. It is a kind of psychological clutching at straws when going under is manifestly the only option. Reaching the bottom, after all, is the only way of pushing back to the surface.

That's how I did it anyhow.

An Exemplary of Confusion

In his essay on *The Matrix* in *Our Faith in Evil*, Desilet writes this:

Horsley exemplifies the confusion among critics regarding *The Matrix* when on the one hand he gives substantial praise for the overall experience offered by the film while on the other hand he submits a caveat such as the following: "The most disappointing thing about *The Matrix* is its reliance on the familiar terms of action movies, presenting violence and 'resistance' as the only means to overcome tyranny." To be more precise, he ought to say, "presenting absolute destruction as the only means of overcoming an enemy portrayed as wholly and irretrievably evil." If this kind of criticism of violent melodramatic filmmaking remains only a footnote caveat at the bottom of a page of commentary, then this kind of filmmaking can be expected to continue pouring fourth from Hollywood." (p. 287.)

Desilet is right here that my caveat requires more than a footnote. What I would add now is, similar to the point made above, that there is a wide contextual spectrum—a canvas—upon which movie violence can be depicted, ranging from the archetypal to the literal and from tragic to comic. Gauging whether a given depiction is healthful or not—much less what effects it might have on viewers—can only be done on a case by case basis and must begin and end with *our own subjective experience*. Leaving aside that all his writing is inevitably an expression of his own opinions, Desilet more or less excludes all personal testimony from his analyses. He rarely if ever talks about how a given depiction of violence effects *his* consciousness or nervous system. Without this as the baseline for his arguments, they tend to float weightlessly inside a theoretical vacuum. They are "all academic."

To be one hundred percent fair and honest at this crucial juncture, I cannot *know* with certainty that watching *Taxi Driver* the fifteen or so times I have done so has not had any deleterious effects on my own psychological development. (I can be pretty sure *The Matrix* did, but I have already conceded that to Greg.) In *Seen and Not Seen*, I more or less conclude that *all* movies, all *art*, affects our development at a cost. This is roughly what Plato—as cited by Desilet—warned about: that art enflames our emotions, ushers us into a dissociative fantasy realm, and feeds a side of us that *thrives* on fantasy and simulated emotions. While it's inconceivable to me that *Taxi Driver* fueled my rage or increased my propensity for violence (it gave me a context for better understanding both), it *is* possible that it reinforced, by glamorizing in the form of Robert DeNiro, my tendency for imposed solitude, tragic alienation, and “morbid self-attention.” It's also possible that this tendency in myself, by being strengthened (even today I own a Travis-style army jacket that I feel quite cool wearing), increased my alienation *from myself* (and hence from others), and that this could have *indirectly* allowed for anger and violence to fester within me.

There is simply no way to know how and why our development unfolds and precisely what the exact relationship is between external influences and internal changes. Trying to sort through those seeds is what *Seen and Not Seen* was all about, and I certainly wasn't able to separate my current evaluation of movies from my sentimental attachments to them, especially the ones that imprinted me when I was most open to being influenced. In the end, the only gauge we have is that of our own responses, combined with our critical faculties for examining those responses and determining how authentic they are. Our responses—being emotional, visceral, and both pre- and sub-rational—will always tend to trump—and potentially sabotage—our critical faculties. Unless, that is, we so over-develop our critical faculties that they become powerful to inhibit our responses.

This latter is hardly a preferable option; but it is, I fear, the path Desilet has chosen. My impression from reading his works so far is that he has—intentionally or not—hijacked or inhibited (“corrected”) his ability to respond viscerally and emotionally to movies. This may seem like a bold and contentious statement—like fighting words!—but I can think of no other explanation for how an otherwise extremely insightful and talented writer could so utterly misread a work of such depth and substance as *Taxi Driver*. It is—I think quite literally—like he has not been able to see the movie that I saw.

To this end, I am endeavoring to lend him my eyes. Isn't that what friends are for?

Part Four: Taking on the Consensus

Desilet's Final Axe-Blow

In *Our Faith in Evil*, Desilet expresses his frustration and disappointment with the Film Academy for giving awards to what he perceives as undeserving films (*Silence of the Lambs*, *Pulp Fiction*). Apparently,

by looking to the Academy as a benchmark for culture, he has a faith in public institutions that I do not. Apparently, his naïve hope, if not expectation, is that they might function to serve the collective good if only managed rightly. From my perspective it's more like sheer fluke if an institution like the Academy gets it right, and it gives me little real satisfaction when things I value are culturally championed (on the contrary, it causes me to doubt my own tastes). Desilet's misplaced optimism smacks to me of a lack of awareness regarding the nature of public intuitions, which, in my opinion are never about serving the collective good but only about serving themselves. Perhaps a similar sort of naiveté is behind his unthinking trust in the mainstream media narrative surrounding the shooting of Ronald Reagan?

In the case of a film like *The Godfather*, *Taxi Driver*, or *The Wild Bunch*—films I personally treasure that have also received almost unanimous cultural approval (albeit over time)—it's a bit too complicated to dismiss this as a “fluke” (though it *is* fluky these films were ever made). I think it has to do with the way in which profound psychological realities—including transformations occurring at an unconscious level in the collective psyche—weasel their way into popular culture (the collective *ego*) via a kind of Trojan-Horse strategy. This Trojan Horsing occurs, on the one hand, at the semi-conscious, individual level of the artists involved (Peckinpah, Coppola, Scorsese), men who briefly gained access to the Hollywood system before being corrupted (or destroyed) by it, and who thereby managed to do something of unusual merit within it. On the other hand, it is occurring at a much deeper and largely unconscious level, within the society and culture itself as it attempts to give rise to *healing strategies*. These strategies are often first regarded with suspicion by the society, rightly enough, since they are attempting to bring about an apocalyptic healing crisis. But over time (sometimes almost immediately, as in the case of the above films), they are embraced by the culture. This is done as *a means to neutralize their impact*. By turning them into cultural artifacts (and trends), they can be used to bolster a flagging system and inject it with new visions and values that are craftily coopted into service of the old ones. So it is that all new wine gets slowly siphoned into old bottles.

In this regard, I can see why Desilet would regard many of these films with suspicion, and why he would want to question their benevolence in terms of social influence. The way of culture is that any social or cultural system promotes only those ideas, works, and personalities that further its own growth and development. I highly doubt *Taxi Driver* or any other popular film—or for that matter, any widely endorsed book, song, painting, or scientific breakthrough—has improved human social conditions in any truly meaningful way (i.e., spiritually). But does Desilet seriously believe that *Shutter Island* has succeeded where *Taxi Driver* has failed? Does he think it has been effective in introducing new human values and interpretations that will have a ripple-down effect on social structures? If so, he is deluded, though I don't think it's any great cause for regret or frustration on his part. Movies (the good ones at least), like everything else that stems from human creative expression, are geared not towards societies but towards individuals, and it is the *individual response* that constitutes change, for good or ill, and that will eventually and inevitably ripple down—through attitudes and actions—into the social structures or their final dissolution (I am being optimistic here!).

Towards the end of *Screens of Blood* (p. 138), writing about *Boardwalk Empire*, Desilet stresses that his primary interest is not the possible negative moral influence of melodramatic screen violence: “the issue concerns quality of conflict and the context conflict provides for the portrayal of violence.” *Boardwalk*

Empire is a show that both my wife and I enjoyed and which we stuck with for fifty-six episodes and five seasons. True to his calling, Desilet disses and dismisses it in several pages as “the pornography of corruption” (p. 143). While his argument draws on criteria that are now quite familiar to me, on this occasion I found his case considerably more persuasive than previously, to the extent it had something of a retroactive effect on me, bolstering some, though not all, of his previous condemnations. Desilet’s argument against *Boardwalk Empire* rests on his claim that it “cannot count as great drama because it does not present great conflict” (p. 142).

Stories of neutral or corrupt characters descending into corruption and greater corruption in violence against each other cannot provide engaging conflict because witnessing corruption versus corruption traffics in merely shock-value violence and voyeuristic pleasures. When primary characters progressively appear as scoundrels and the primary conflict as treachery between crooks, viewers are deprived of dramatic conflict in which anything of genuine value is at stake. [*Boardwalk Empire*] panders to the pleasures of key-hole peeking into the lives of nasty, brutish people whose behavior would be of little interest were it not for the saucy mix of power and money with sex and violence. This kind of material may provide a guilty pleasure in the gratification of human tendencies to be drawn to the spectacle of train wrecks and analogous human distasters, but these diversions do not come without associated cultural costs—namely the deadening of sensibilities toward genuinely engaging conflict and drama. (p. 138-140.)

As much as I enjoyed the show, unlike *Taxi Driver* it occupies no special place in my heart. Maybe this is why I found Desilet’s arguments at least partially convincing.* As a result, somewhat to my chagrin, I found myself minimally more open to his views about the works I *do* hold sacred. Maybe Desilet was aware of softening his audience up for his final blow, because he winds up this chapter by arriving, as if by stealth attack, at what *appears* to be his actual, designated target—*The Godfather*. In the last but one paragraph, he offers Coppola’s film as a parallel, if considerably more hallowed, example to *Boardwalk Empire* of drama that lacks real conflict because nothing “of genuine value is at stake.” In Desilet’s view, “no great conflict arises either within the family members or *within the psyche of the protagonist* who starts out as the ordinary guy” (p. 142, emphasis added). Yes, he means Michael Corleone here. Desilet concludes his argument by pointing out that *The Godfather* won an Academy Award for Best Picture and ranks no. 2 on the American Film Institute list of great American movies, quipping: “if persuaded by the analyses herein, the Academy and the AFI mistake fool’s gold for gold” (p. 142).

If persuaded by the analyses herein. The agent of the Republic is tipping his hand here. Desilet’s goal has been to educate us in order to immunize us to the nefarious indoctrination methods of the dominant culture. It is these methods that keep us locked, collectively and individually, inside antagonistic melodramatic structures of conflict. Hollywood Babaloon, all right! I have been attempting something similar in my own way ever since I first put pen to paper. So when Desilet professes immunity to the

* While reading a first draft of this piece back to my wife, she suggested that the appeal of *Boardwalk Empire* (like that of *House of Cards*, a show we gave up on) has to do not so much with key-hole peeking but with the growing public awareness that the ruling class is also a criminal class. Far from being beneath our interest, the lifestyles of the rich and heinous are of direct, pressing relevance to us, because these are the people who are running our world. This is even more apparent with *The Godfather*, which consciously uses an Italian mobster family to illustrate the underbelly of the American Dream.

artful seductions of consensually endorsed cinematic masterpieces such as *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Godfather*, or *Taxi Driver*, I'm tempted to be impressed, even envious. Let's face it, I'm the *last* person to put stock in a consensual view of *anything*. I am always *theoretically* open to the possibility I have been conned and that my perceptions are faulty—even, or especially, when I most fervently believe what they are telling me. This open skepticism obviously includes—in fact is especially honed for—Hollywood and the probability that my own aesthetic response-ability has been *sabotaged from an early age*. (Cf. *Seen and Not Seen*.) The whole inspiration and purpose of *The Kubrickon* was to bust open the phony consensus of Kubrick as a great filmmaker and films like *2001: A Space Odyssey* (no. 22 in AFI's canon), *A Clockwork Orange* (no. 46, just above *Taxi Driver!*), *Full Metal Jacket*, or *Eyes Wide Shut* as works of art rather than highly sophisticated celluloid shite.

In this regard Desilet and I would appear to be intimately aligned. It is only that our specific designated targets are worlds apart.

Matching Points

In his afterword to *Screens of Blood*, Desilet levels his fiery sword towards Woody Allen's *Match Point*. Towards the end, he imagines a sequel to *Match Point* (the horror!) in which the morally bankrupt protagonist is faced with the emptiness of his existence, realizing how "he has closed off a significant part of himself to others and cannot allow that part to speak. To do so would result in the collapse of the identity façade he has labored, through murder and lies, to create." Oddly enough, this would also serve as a concise encapsulation of the film Desilet disparages, *The Godfather*, and of the tragedy of Michael Corleone. Yet somehow, Desilet is entirely unmoved by that tragedy—at least until he imagines it for another character, in another movie (one he gets to create).

Having read both his books in the space of a week and I think more or less grokked the difference between antagonical and synagonal dramatic structure (melodrama and tragedy) as contexts for cinematic violence, the fact remains that I would be hard-pressed to guess *which* movies and TV shows meet with the Desilet stamp of approval. (He admires *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* but dismisses *Deadwood* with a single line.) At this point, I would probably feel safest picking movies a) that don't have any special place in my heart; and b) that aren't recognized as movie classics. But beyond that, I would have no real clue. This is because, while his analytic system seems to be well worked out and more or less coherent, his application of it remains entirely gnomic, unpredictable, and almost willfully perverse. In the end, I am left wondering if Gregory Desilet is only happy when he gets to go after the biggest game. Perhaps he is the Captain Ahab of film reviewers, so attached to his harpoon that everything has started to look like an evil-incarnating white whale?

For Desilet, *The Godfather* and its sequel lack what he considers the essential elements of contrapuntal conflict. That is to say, the films fail to meet his very literal notion of opposing characters forcing the protagonist into a healing crisis of self-awareness. But isn't this frequently the case with life? It doesn't mean a healing crisis can't *occur*, because the unconscious has ways of making itself felt through

external encounters, regardless of how consciously or actively engaged the people we encounter may be with directly challenging us. An impossible neighbor can bring about a breakthrough if they are annoying enough. *Anything* can. More to the point perhaps, the real breakthrough that needs to occur is in our psyche and soul, not in our external life (though that will invariably follow), and surely it is here that the deepest layers of conflict, whether tragic or restorative, unfold? As I wrote in *The Blood Poets*, *The Godfather* and its sequel portrays, in suspense-filled pulp fiction format, the almost unbearable tension of what happens when a man seeks worldly power at the cost of his own integrity, and how he eventually—perhaps literally—loses his soul. How can there *be* a more tragic or compelling conflict than this? In dismissing Michael’s struggle as “fool’s gold”—as hollow and dull because there is nothing at stake when an ordinary guy becomes corrupt—I can only deduce that Desilet’s sympathy for the damned is highly conditional (i.e., nonexistent). For whatever reason, ironically, his own orientation seems to be more for external, worldly struggles (for socially identifiable manifestations of conflict) than for internal or spiritual ones.

I have no idea why this might be the case. It is almost as if he denies movie criminals and “nasty brutish” characters a spiritual dimension. Maybe he should ask himself why Jesus hung out with thieves and prostitutes—or why, in the words of my fellow movie slummer Pauline Kael, “If there is any test that can be applied to movies, it’s that the good ones never make you feel virtuous.”⁹

*

I was on the edge of my seat reading Greg’s afterword to *Screens of Blood* and here’s why: *Match Point* is a film I found utterly loathsome and easily one of the most offensive “artistic” movie endeavors I have ever had to suffer through. It is also a message movie, and I wrote probably my most vicious and unkind piece of film criticism ever about it (still embarrassingly online). Here’s one of the mildest parts:

Match Point is a moral fable whose moral is that morality is a delusion, and that crime pays if you can deal with the guilt. It has the same basic message as *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, namely, that it is not the fit but the morally vacuous who survive. Any movie that wraps itself around a message runs the risk of being offensive. A movie is not a fortune cookie, and messages are for postmen not for artists. But it’s understandable if we are more indulgent of sappy, life-affirming messages, no-brainer “do unto others” Christian-type ones, since, like Hallmark cards, we know these messages (and movies) aren’t really meant to be taken seriously as art. Any movie that offers audiences an overt “message” automatically forgoes its credentials as “art.” *Match Point*, however, is a freak creation. It is what Woody does worst of all: a nihilistic message movie.¹⁰

I was on the edge of my seat because, if Desilet had praised the film, all my attempts at bridging this gulf between us—a gulf that seemed, however microscopically, to be narrowing through patience and dedication—would have certainly proven in vain. To my relief, Greg disparaged the film, albeit mildly. In the process of doing so, he compares the film to, you got it, *Taxi Driver*! Bad as this was, he did provide me with a final clue to this perceptual puzzle. “Just as Scorsese does in *Taxi Driver*,” Greg writes, “Allen offers absolutely nothing in *Match Point* to place the actions in a critical context” (p. 207). Greg’s point here is that, while Allen’s professed aim was the make a movie whose message was that morality is only possible when we accept that life is meaningless—he had somehow wound up making a film with the

very opposite message. I agree with Greg here (I said the same in my review), for the simple reason—obvious to a sophomore but apparently not to Allen—that meaninglessness and morality *cannot* co-exist.

Ironically, Desilet’s objection to Allen’s film (essentially that he does not judge his characters by presenting their actions outside of any critical context) is the entire philosophical point and *raison d’etre* of Allen’s film (as Desilet points out in his review): to depict life in a Godless universe, free from the “critical gaze” of any deity. So apparently, Desilet wants from movies what Allen is determined to deny in life: a visible, active moral compass impacting the lives of human beings every step of their way? In Desilet’s case, the presiding moral intelligence—the judge of the quick and the dead—is the filmmaker him- or herself.

While I can certainly agree with him about Allen and *Match Point* (or about most of Kubrick’s films: that they lack a moral center), how true is it that *Taxi Driver* offers nothing to place the actions in a critical context? I think it is only possible to say this if we completely ignore the possibility that an artist’s sensibility is the lens through which all his or her work is projected. The “critical context” for Travis Bickle’s actions *is the film itself*, being the film that Scorsese, Schrader, and DeNiro made and thereby imbued with their combined perceptions about Travis. Its power stems from the claustrophobia of being immersed in Travis’ world, both inner and outer, with no relief besides that of our own conscience, that is to say, our conscious *critical* awareness. For almost two hours, we get to *become* Travis. The film leaves us—*by our own devices*—to try and find our way *through and out* the whirlpool of morbid self-attention that is Travis’ existence as “God’s lonely man.” This can only occur by virtue of our own discernment. It cannot be via some *deus ex machina* correcting our course at every step that grace enters this world. It can only come about through our own compassion, acceptance, and *love*, in this case not just for Travis and his victims, but for *ourselves*.

The same applies to Michael Corleone and to every other tragic hero that ever stalked the halls of fiction—both high and low.

Argument to Jehovah

When it comes to compassion for the damned, Desilet certainly extends it when conditions are right for him to do so. In the afterword, Desilet writes the following about Dostoyevsky’s Raskolnikov (*Crime and Punishment*):

The conundrum of his own identity . . . emerges and transforms through the voices of the characters he encounters. Each character speaks the voice of an “other” within himself. And, if in life or drama, the voice of another does not take on the weight and value of an inner voice, then that person or character has not come alive in the drama of a given person or character. It would be misleading to think of this internalization as the voice of “conscience” because, in the active inner life of any person, there are likely to be many competing voices. (p. 217.)

Naturally, all the voices in *Crime and Punishment* were aspects of Raskolnikov because he is the subject of the novel and its author, Dostoyevsky, created all the characters that populate that world. All these voices are literally sourced in Dostoyevsky's interior world—his active inner life. We recognize a work as great drama or as art when the intelligence behind it is sufficiently in tune with his or her interior world to faithfully translate the various voices that sound forth from that interiority. This is what makes a work truly personal, as *Taxi Driver* is personal, compared to the impersonality of countless comparable works (like *Shutter Island* and other films Desilet admires, for reasons I have been unable to fathom).

Yet what makes a character and a voice “come alive” is also dependent on our own ability to tune into its particular frequency and become aware of the sentience behind it (the inner voice of its creator). In life, the more aware we are of ourselves and our own unconscious processes, the more aware we become of our environment and everyone within it, until potentially *everyone* we encounter “takes on the weight and value of an inner voice.” It doesn't matter how aware they may be: it is what is moving *through* them, and its particular way of corresponding with our own unconscious, that we respond to. The same applies to a work of cinematic art: it doesn't matter a jot how “contrapuntal” the characters surrounding the protagonist may be or how consciously and actively they engage him or her with critical conflict. All that matters is how aware the intelligence creating the tragic drama *is*, at the time of creation, and how much these characters represent voices from the creator's interiority. The work in question then depicts *a becoming conscious of inner conflict within the awareness of the people who have created it*—as in the case of Schrader, Scorsese, and DeNiro's shared revelation of male alienation in *Taxi Driver*. This can then be *transmitted* to a viewer or reader. Conversely, in the case of bad melodrama, we have the struggle of an artist to remain *unconscious*, to use artistic expression as a means to assert and reinforce a crucial fiction about the world and themselves—witness the morbid didacticism of *Match Point*—which has a corresponding deadening and emptying effect on audiences.

If Desilet's aesthetic asceticism extended to *every movie ever made*, he might just have me as a convert. When all is finally said and done, I would be willing to throw *Taxi Driver* onto the bonfire of the vanities, if Desilet was arguing that culture in its entirety is a craven and corrupting edifice from which nothing emerges that is benign in any true or meaningful sense. (Nothing good comes out of Nazareth, and all that.) The trouble is, while dismissing some of the greatest works of American cinema (go Greg!), Desilet offers in their place films like *Book of Eli* or *Shutter Island*—films so undistinguished that all I remember about them is that I have seen them. Something is rotten in the Desilet Republic, HAL is starting to sing inane nursery rhymes off-key, and Desilet's schemata are collapsing in a heartbeat as he demonstrates the very *inverse* of rigorous critical intelligence. I could *just* about be persuaded by his overarching thesis that the films I love aren't as worthy of my affection as I thought they were (I have long suspected it), but to then be invited to transfer my affections onto a subset of tawdry B-movies that *happen* to meet Desilet's set of abstract philosophical criteria, there I balk and bounce back to position, more or less (though truth be told, not *quite*) undaunted by the momentary wobble I have suffered. Sweet relief!

When Desilet “explains” why he likes *Shutter Island* or *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence* (or even *No Country for Old Men*), he is advocating not film art, much less the power of individual expression, but those structural principals he considers to be most artistically sound and socially responsible. For Desilet, movies are apparently a means and not an end, and the end he has in mind is some sort of

utopia of “nonviolent competition” where film art doesn’t so much represent life—complete with human neuroses—as some idealized goal of what life ought to be. Not that he wants art to represent that perfect world (he wants it to be tragic), but that he somehow wants the artists to do so, even while no such world exists for them, because it doesn’t exist for anyone. While Desilet is right, I think, in emphasizing the ways in which popular media acts as a form of soft propaganda and cultural indoctrination, even as a subtle form of violence, if his solution is to serve up a kinder, gentler sort of propaganda, then I am left with the amateur’s refrain as my only riposte: “I don’t know about synagonal art, Greg (or justice), but *I know what I like.*” I think I’ll stick with my spaghetti westerns.

The films I cherish the most do seem to have this in common: they invoke an experience of compassion in me, a kind of love that transcends the norm. That some—perhaps even most—of the characters in these films (*Vertigo*, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, *The Wild Bunch*, *The Godfather 1 & 2*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, *Don’t Look Now*, *Taxi Driver*, *Blue Velvet*, *The Assassination of Jesse James*, *The Counselor*) have distinctly “nasty, brutish” sides to them is what makes my experience of love so improbable and so startling. There is not *less* at stake because of how far these characters have fallen, there is *more*. If I can love characters who embody the worst in me, if I can love them *despite* their terrible failings, maybe I am learning to love myself in the same manner: without conditions?

This is not something I was fully aware of before I felt compelled—like Abraham arguing with Jehovah to spare Sodom—to counter the force of Desilet’s condemnation with my own counterargument. Out of a struggle to break down my opponent’s argument, I have forged my own oppositional thesis. I do not know if it is true; I only offer it as a possible alternative. Perhaps the struggle between our perspectives is synagonal and not antagonical? Perhaps we can finally return to the point we started, and know it at last? Because what divide is more worth bridging than the divide between the world and the soul?

End Notes

¹ Addressing the first question first: for Travis to get away with his murderous actions and be glorified for them would seem to depend on various factors. First of all, it would depend on his testimony to police while he was in custody. It’s fair to ask whether Travis, at such a time in his life, would be likely to exonerate himself through his own words. It’s much more likely that, whatever version of the events he gave them, he would be quickly identified by the police as exactly what he was—a dangerously unstable person who is acting out irrationally. And this may have been the conclusion the police reached—it wouldn’t necessarily translate into a media consensus or a jail sentence (or even a trial). Then there is Iris’ testimony to consider. How is she likely to have perceived Travis’ rampage, once she recovered from the trauma of witnessing it? Would she see it as a heroically inspired rescue mission motivated by concern for her, or as a horrific and senseless act of carnage driven by rage and delusion? But again, Iris’ testimony wouldn’t necessarily have affected the final outcome as we see it in the film. The film indicates Travis’ heroization via four main details: a clipping from a newspaper with the heading “Taxi Driver hero to recover,” and another that mentions one of Travis’ victims (Iris’ client) as reputed to have been a “Mafioso.” For all we know, this first clipping comes from a right-wing tabloid and is not at all representative of the general media coverage: just the one that wound up on Travis’ wall (for obvious reasons). Then there is the letter from Iris’ parents thanking Travis for returning their

daughter to them and wishing him a full recovery. There is nothing too improbable about this because it's easy to imagine how the parents would be thankful about seeing their daughter again—and about her temporary removal from a life of prostitution—and not especially concerned about Travis' motives (or his sanity). Lastly, there is the fact that Travis is back to driving a cab at the end of the movie and (in the most fairy-tale-like twist of the narrative) that Betsy comes to see him. Travis being free to drive his cab again indicates that either he was never charged or the charges failed to stick. It doesn't imply that he won any medals for his actions. And as for Betsy, well, maybe she just wanted to apologize for precipitating his meltdown . . . While it's a perhaps overly fanciful ironic touch, I don't think it constitutes irresponsible artistic license. The next and last question to address here is that of Travis' victims. How much do they represent an unequivocal evil that some viewers might consider Travis justified in eradicating? Travis' victims may be sleazy and exploitative; they may belong to a world (child prostitution) that many viewers will find abhorrent to an extreme. Some of them might even believe such types deserve what they get. But, as they are portrayed in the film—or more precisely as Sport, Iris' pimp, played by Harvey Keitel, is portrayed—they are also unmistakably human and very far from stock villains. To some extent—and however much he may resist it—this is also Travis' world and it is also the world of *the movie*, and Travis seems more at home with these characters (if we include Iris) than he does with anyone else in the film. So it is not really possible to condemn the characters he kills without also condemning Travis, to some degree at least. As is well known, Schrader and Scorsese even went to pains to ensure *Taxi Driver* include a scene showing the relationship between Sport and Iris (the only scene that doesn't include Travis' point of view), depicting it as much more nuanced and complex than that of a child victim and her abuser. So when Travis kills Sport and the others, there is no possibility of interpreting his actions as justified, necessary, or as motivated by good—much less as resolving conflict or “battling evil.” Travis' rain is pure corrosion. He is clearly killing because that is what he *wants*, what he needs, to do: kill. Anyone in the audience who cheers him along can only feel the same way already. Unlike the filmmakers and the intended audience, they don't give a damn for the state of Travis' soul. Or, apparently, the state of their own.

² <http://21stcenturywire.com/2014/09/05/usa-in-desperate-need-of-adult-supervision/>

³ <https://whowhatwhy.org/2016/08/16/bush-angle-reagan-shooting-still-unresolved-hinckley-walks/>

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZZnuJ_8Xs8

⁵ <https://whowhatwhy.org/2016/08/16/bush-angle-reagan-shooting-still-unresolved-hinckley-walks/>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Is there any violence more harmful than the imposition of false values? While from an adult perspective this may seem minor compared to actual forms of violence such as child abuse, rape, and the like, it is these early impositions of external and far-from lived or corroborated values that sabotage the development of our ability to navigate our environment, to interact healthily with other human beings, and, most crucially of all, to authentically know and express ourselves in life. As Marshall McLuhan once wrote (Desilet cites him for it), the lack of a clearly defined or rooted sense of identity is the most fundamental cause of all forms of violence.

⁹ From “Ersatz,” Kael's review of *Stand By Me, Hooked*, p. 197.

¹⁰ “Woody Allen, Misanthropy, and *Match Point*: Or How Death Got the Last Laugh.”

<http://brightlightsfilm.com/woody-allen-misanthropy-match-point-death-got-last-laugh/#.WbNoUMiGO70>