

BABYLON REVISITED:

Apocalypticism in 20th Century Film

By Charles Curtis

Revelation could very well be a blockbuster Hollywood production with a two hundred million dollar budget. Imagine an executive pitching this story to a studio head: God is ready for the world's final judgment and, with an army of angels and warriors, is prepared to fight a battle against Satan's minions and beasts with multiple heads. John's first sight of Jesus alone would make audiences draw in their collective breath: "I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw...one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire...and his voice like the sound of many waters."¹ Special effects would have a field day trying to produce that awe-inspiring image, along with the bizarre yet terrifying moment that follows: "and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword..." (Revelation 1:16). Costumers and makeup artists would labor to create the glowing garments and whitest of white hair to make "the Son of Man" into the beautiful yet terrifying figure who enters John's view at the beginning of Revelation.

Though the motion picture would not be invented until many centuries later, John's text indeed stands out from other stories in the Bible due to its cinematic language. John's eyes serve as a camera and his words become tools to edit each episode, cutting from one shot to the next: "Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me" (Revelation 1:12), John says, or "After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open!" (Revelation 4:1). John expands his view to a wide screen vision of the universe as, at one point, he sees "the Lamb standing on Mount Zion! And with him were one

¹ *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, Wayne A. Meeks, Gen. Editor, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), Revelation 1:12-15.

hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads" (Revelation 14:1). Because Revelation is told so vividly from John's first person point of view, it is fitting that the medium today for perpetuating apocalyptic themes is through the lens of a camera, able to capture images from the most intimate of shots such as the markings on the head of a beast, to scenes like the vast, almost infinite "multitude that no one could count" (Revelation 7:9). Directors are visionaries who attempt to tell a story through the use of detailed imagery and, much as John does, they control the pictures they want us to see.

In both its content and its director's vision, Martin Scorsese's Taxi Driver could very well be a modern retelling of Revelation. The protagonist, Travis Bickle, believes he has been chosen to end the reign of pimps, prostitutes and drug dealers in the modern-day Babylon of New York City. Another film from that period, Network, contains echoes of Revelation as director Sidney Lumet portrays a modern version of John who preaches his truth on television. David Cronenberg's Videodrome takes the apocalyptic perspective on television a giant step further and into the realm of science fiction, as TV becomes a weapon, blending human beings and cathode rays into a twisted killing machine. All three films have male heroes who act as visionaries and allow audiences to see the world through their eyes, just as John conveys his surreal revelation from God. In addition, these characters undergo an internal apocalypse, in which each experiences life-changing transformations that leave them, like New Jerusalem at the end of Revelation, reborn after a massive struggle.

Film, as an artistic medium, employs the same method John uses in directing viewers to images. As an audience, we see only what a director, God-like in this power,

has chosen to show us through the lens of the camera. Much like John's personal vision told through the text of Revelation using words such as "I saw" or "I heard," the camera's point of view becomes ours as well, as opposed to the less focused experience of seeing a theatrical production that occupies the entire stage. According to feminist critic Laura Mulvey, viewing images inherently pleases humans and explains why film is so effective as a means of expression. In her landmark essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey discusses why staring at moving images fascinates humans. Her view is that this phenomenon occurs due to certain social constructs, most of which can be explained by the theories of Sigmund Freud. Mulvey believes that we derive pleasure through the gaze: "The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is scopophilia (pleasure in looking)...Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones."² Not only do we instinctively enjoy gazing, but, as Mulvey points out, film also provides subjects that cannot look back at us. Because movies are shown on a screen to audiences, there is additional gratification that comes from the fact that films "portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy" (Mulvey, 434). These two pleasures, combined, create what Mulvey terms "fetishistic scopophilia" (Mulvey, 438), the basis for the pleasure we receive in watching cinema. But because Mulvey's concepts are based on Freud's, whose theories only account for males, scopophilia becomes gendered, as only men receive gratification from gazing at women on a screen (Mulvey, 436-39) and not the opposite. Mulvey's theories are altered for both

² Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," from *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robyn Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), pg. 434.

male protagonists in Taxi Driver and Videodrome who find women to gaze at and actually end up interacting with them. Network takes Mulvey's ideas in a different direction, as the main female character becomes the object (as her life comes to resemble a television program) of her own pleasurable gaze.

By applying Mulvey's theories to the text of the Revelation of John, one can understand John's effectiveness in grabbing his readers' attention. Rather than educate his audience through a parable or narrative tale that teaches a lesson, John understands that a more effective method to warn readers of the approaching end is to use the imagery painted by his words. In fact, the book of Revelation reads as if it had been presented to John (and, in effect, to us as well) on a screen as a series of moving images. For example, the book begins at the point when John first hears a voice commanding him to write everything down. But this is no ordinary voice. John uses aural language to transport readers directly into his experience: "And I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, 'Write in a book what you see'" (Revelation 1:10-11). At this point, John's eye becomes akin to a lens as we follow his gaze in a motion that echoes a camera's pan: "Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest" (Revelation, 1.12-13). John's language explicitly guides us to look at these vivid images in order for readers to visualize the scene. But because the images are textual and not specifically visual, John plays on our imaginations, personalizing Revelation and allowing readers to recreate his surrealistic monsters as their own individual demons, making them even more immediate to John's audience. In film, the concept of *mis-en-scene* tells us that the images on the

screen are open for interpretation. Similarly, Revelation presents its hallucinatory and strange textual imagery to readers for their own analysis, as do the directors of Taxi Driver, Network and Videodrome, each with his own interpretation of Revelation's heroes, beasts and fallen city.

Film as a physical art form is not only the perfect medium for apocalyptic thought. The content of twentieth century movies, as Ian Christie points out in his essay, "Celluloid Apocalypse," also contains apocalyptic themes as well:

Does it make any sense to relate [films as] popular entertainments to the tradition of eschatological image-making? I will argue that it does, especially if we recall the beginnings of moving picture entertainment in the 1890s and the extent to which this in itself reflected a new climate of apocalypticism.³

As film became a popular mode of expression, it articulated a new 20th century fascination with apocalypticism in the same way Revelation gave birth to a genre of apocalyptic literature. Even the process of film becoming a medium can be viewed as apocalyptic since the thought of pictures that moved induced fear in early audiences rather than excitement. Christie goes on to analyze films made during the twentieth century, pointing out that they reflect events in the world such as World War II that are construed as apocalyptic, giving a new definition to the term "apocalypticism." He concludes that film has helped bring John's visions closer to our modern reality and instilled terror in us much the way Revelation presumably did for its original audience:

If Revelation speaks the language of 'power lust'...then apocalyptic cinema has become the fantasy of power. It has also played an important part in the processes of secularizing and modernizing Apocalypse...the feelings of crisis, decadence and transition characteristic of modernism have been powerfully relayed by cinema (Christie 337-38).

³ Ian Christie, "Celluloid Apocalypse," from *The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come*, ed. Carey, Frances, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), pg. 320.

The content projected onto the screen reflects a world constantly in flux, which can be perceived as a sign of the final judgment nearing. In addition, Christie's reference to apocalyptic film as "the fantasy of power" reflects Laura Mulvey's concept of fetishistic scopophilia, since audiences fantasize by transferring their dreams onto characters that exist only on a screen.

If audiences project their personalities onto a screen and take pleasure in gazing at films, perhaps movies have taken the place of reality. French theorist Jean Baudrillard, in Simulacra and Simulation, expresses his own 20th century perspective on that very subject. He believes simulacra, in the form of modern media such as television and film, are replacing real modes of expression: "Present-day simulators attempt to make the real, all of the real, coincide with their models of simulation... it is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real... a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes."⁴ Baudrillard sees the world coming to an end much like John. But he sees the earth's collapse with machines simulating reality, replacing human beings' experience of "the real." Film fulfills Baudrillard's theories, as both Mulvey and Christie point out, since the medium simulates our fantasies and allows them to play out in front of our eyes. Through Baudrillard's predictions that now appear to have come true, he becomes the modern prophet of the digital age: "[Representation] is no longer anything but operational... it is... hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere" (Baudrillard, pg. 2). Unlike John, who believes that what he envisions will happen soon, Baudrillard explains that the world already

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), pg. 2.

experiences the age of simulation. In fact, the directors and writers of these three films echo Baudrillard's prophecies, as they depict a world in which modern media blur the real and hyperreal, leaving us to ponder Baudrillard's vision as a modern parallel to John's revelation.

From the first shot of director Martin Scorsese's Taxi Driver, New York in the 1970's is depicted as a city of sin in need of a redeemer. The opening is a medium close-up of white smoke flowing out of a manhole. In a sudden motion the smoke clears as a taxi, in slow-motion and with its headlights ablaze, drives through the haze, parts the mist and reveals a sleeping city behind it, bathed in street light. Scorsese uses these images to introduce Travis as the savior who will bring order to New York City's chaos. Scorsese uses shots that distort the fluorescent lights of New York City, as colors melt into each other, to show that the city has become a disordered, abstract jumble. The chaos throughout the film is aural as well as visual. As Travis writes in his journal, a buzz of noise cuts through the scene: horns honking, children yelling and radios blaring.

What was once a wealthy and prosperous city is now reduced to dilapidated ruins in which humans lead lives of sin. Travis describes nocturnal New York City as Scorsese's vivid camera shots reflect Bickle's words: "All the animals come out at night. Whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies, sick, venal. Someday a rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets."⁵ Travis' account of New York resembles the angel's description of Babylon in the Revelation of John:

Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!
It has become a dwelling place of demons,
A haunt of every foul spirit,
A haunt of every foul bird,
A haunt of every foul and hateful beast (Revelation 18:2).

⁵ Paul Schrader, *Taxi Driver*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1990), pg. 7

To echo Travis' description, Scorsese uses Bickle's words on the soundtrack in voiceover to bring the audience inside Travis' mind: what we see before us is the vision that Travis has of New York City. Scorsese also shows Travis writing in his journal, accompanied by Travis' voice speaking what he writes, reinforcing the director's idea of a personal vision. Travis functions as the chosen apocalyptic "author" of this story much like John, who, as mentioned earlier, was commanded to "write in a book what you see..." (Revelation 1:11). Travis describes the visions that he sees from his cab as he travels through the city at night, sometimes thinking out loud to his passengers: "[This city] is full of filth and scum; scum and filth. It's like an open sewer. Sometimes I can hardly take it. Some days I go out and smell it then I get headaches that just stay and never go away." (Schrader, 28). Scorsese brings this vision to life by converting New York into John's vision of the world, with modern versions of the horsemen War, Hunger, Pestilence, and Death walking the streets, bringing destruction to the world's inhabitants (Revelation 6:1-8). Scorsese uses shots of multi-racial gangs, prostitutes in tight pants looking for customers, and drugged-up men, screaming and wandering aimlessly, followed by close-ups of the disgusted reaction on Travis' face. Travis' expression and voice in Taxi Driver guide the audience through the underbelly of New York City at night.

Beginning with the opening credits, Scorsese uses establishing shots of Travis' eyes, whether reflected in the rearview mirror of his taxi, staring aimlessly at a television or looking into a mirror. Sometimes these eyes are distorted by the colors they see: the red of a traffic light or the blue fluorescent flashing sign of a pornographic movie theatre. The function of these sequences is to show that Travis' view is our point of view, and though his vision is slightly blurred and distorted, he is the visionary who pleads (as he

does to the politician Charles Palantine, who randomly ends up in Travis' cab at one moment in the film) for someone to clean the streets of the "scum" that he sees. But when Travis decides that he will take on the responsibility of destroying the evil in New York City, he sheds the role of the visionary and becomes the avenging angel.

Travis' physical transformation from passive seer to active avenger combines both the role of the messenger John, and the content of message itself, that God will send powerful angels to judge humans. At the beginning of the film, Scorsese uses a long shot of Travis walking out of the taxi depot. Travis' posture and expression show the audience a man who has no direction, and simply sees the world without being active within it. His back is bent as he sticks his hands in his pockets and his face is blank, with his eyes directed at the ground and his mouth moving neither up nor down. His hair, which will change later in the film, sits limply on his head. Later in the film, as Travis begins to exercise, his hair begins to show some activity, signifying a change in his attitude toward the world. It is cut shorter and even stands up slightly. When Travis finally reaches the moment when he is ready to judge his victims, he sports a menacing Mohawk, one line of hair reaching from the front of his head to the back. He now smiles slightly and his eyes are full of expression, especially in the attempted assassination scene when he almost kills Charles Palantine, a politician Bickle views as the false prophet of Revelation, a beast who "deceives the inhabitants of earth, telling them to make an image for the beast..." (Revelation, 13:14). With Palantine's face plastered all over New York on signs, stickers and billboards, the image drives Travis to believe that the politician is evil and must die. Bickle has effectively placed himself into his own vision; he wants to play a part in changing the images that he sees, and through the shots of Travis' physical

metamorphosis, Scorsese illustrates an inactive prophet becoming a vengeful archangel, instilling fear through his appearance and demeanor.

Before Travis exacts his revenge, he sees one character as worthy of being spared among the “animals” that roam New York City. Iris, a child prostitute in the film, mirrors the role of the Whore of Babylon, as described in John:

The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls...and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: ‘Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth’s abominations...’ When I saw her, I was greatly amazed (Revelation 17:4-6).

Though the Whore of Babylon is seen as the manifestation of Babylon’s sins, Scorsese shows that Iris is actually controlled by Sport, her pimp, as well as her customers. Travis understands that the men who make Iris sin must be destroyed, not the Whore of Babylon herself. Iris is not only the Whore but also the sacrificial Lamb: “Then I saw...a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth” (Revelation 5:6). As the innocent Lamb, representing Jesus Christ, she must be defended by the angel on the white horse. Iris’ duality as both the Lamb and the Whore mirrors Travis’ double role as visionary and avenging angel. As her name suggests, Iris is closely connected to Travis because she provides him with his clear vision, that he must save Iris and, in effect, the city as well. In Scorsese’s version of Revelation, the citizens of the city are responsible for their own sins and cannot stand by and allow the Lamb to be sacrificed for their transgressions.

Iris is a child in adult skin, wearing tight-fitting hot pants that show off her thin legs, and huge, colorful hats. At one moment in the film, she changes her sunglasses from a green pair to blue (another reference to her name), just as Travis sees the world in a

myriad of different primary colors. Her given name, like the Whore of Babylon's, is a mystery, as she tells Travis she is called "Easy Lay" (Schrader, 66) instead of her real name, Iris. In terms of Mulvey's filmic universe, Iris, with her flamboyant sexualized clothing, is the perfect example of a female who exists to fulfill male scopophilia: "Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease... she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire" (Mulvey, 436). The costumes that fit Mulvey's description include a skimpily dressed cowgirl and a bell-bottomed disco queen. Though Iris is clearly a "spectacle," Travis goes beyond playing the role of voyeur and literally reaches out to the subject of his gaze to rescue her from being objectified by men.

The climactic scene in the film depicts Travis armed with multiple weapons as he walks into the brownstone brothel where Iris works and murders her pimp Sport, a customer, and the brothel's guard. Here, Travis reflects John's vision of the white horseman: "Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire... and he will rule [the nations] with a rod of iron" (Revelation 19:11-12, 15). Travis' horse is his cab, and his "rod of iron" his surplus of guns. As Travis enters the building and shoots the guard at the door, Scorsese uses a medium close-up of Travis as he fires his guns, which, like his eyes, are "a flame of fire." Scorsese slows the film down as Travis shoots his victims to show how Travis considers the reason for killing each as he destroys the "animals" he has hated throughout the film one by one.

The violence in Taxi Driver serves the same function it does in Revelation as Satan is finally defeated: "And fire came down from heaven and consumed [Satan and his

army]. And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where...[he] will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Revelation, 20:9-10). In using scenes of physical mutilation similar to what occurs in John’s text, Scorsese warns viewers that the result of sinful actions is a painful judgment. Travis does not simply kill his victims with one shot during his rampage. They are left alive as he shoots them multiple times, with Scorsese using gruesome shots of the guard’s hand being partially blown off or bullets entering Iris’ customer’s chest, leaving them screaming in pain until Travis executes them. Throughout the film, Scorsese has used shots of Travis pointing a gun at the camera, or effectively, at us. There is even a scene from Travis’ point of view, as he stares out a window with a pistol in his hand, trying to find a target to aim at. Perhaps we, the audience, are the “animals” that walk in the streets, and Travis’ violence will be directed at us if we continue to live lives of sin.

The final shot of the sequence, as Travis himself passes out, is a tracking shot from the ceiling, effectively a God’s-eye view of the post-judgment scene: bodies are strewn, left bloodied and mangled, and the angel himself has been mortally wounded. Scorsese, in using the shot from above, shows us God surveying Travis carrying out His judgment, as if He had given the taxi driver His blessing. Heaven, in Revelation, rejoices at seeing judgment occur:

After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven saying, ‘Hallelujah...for [God’s] judgments are true and just; he has judged the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants’ (Revelation 19:1-2).

Though John describes the Whore of Babylon being burned, Taxi Driver alters John's text since Iris is saved. Scorsese's overhead shot suggests that God deems Travis' violent judgment on Iris' keepers as the acceptable action.

Even stranger, Travis is hailed as a hero for his actions, not arrested as a bloodthirsty murderer, since the corrupt society in New York City completely misunderstands his rampage. But Travis' actions did have purpose, as Travis states, "My whole life has pointed in one direction. I see that now. There has never been any choice for me...there is no escape. I am God's lonely man." (Schrader, 75). He has been chosen by God to pass judgment and act on his visions, making him both a creator, like John, and a destroyer, like the horsemen in Revelation. John was directed by God to look at images and record them, but Taxi Driver shows that visionaries can step into what they see and alter the outcome.

Another film from this period, Network, alerts audiences to a different evil in their lives: television. Fatherly anchormen on network news shows filter out the chaos of national and world events and package what remains into half-hour programs as news shows engage in a frantic competition for ratings. Director Sidney Lumet and writer Paddy Chayefsky see the inherent contradiction and answer a disturbing question: what happens when the man whom millions of people trust for their daily dose of "the truth" turns out to be an apocalyptic visionary?

The opening shot of Lumet's movie, like Scorsese's taxi emerging from the mist, brings order to chaos. The first image viewers see is that of four television screens with four news anchors reporting simultaneously. The sound of their voices, combined with four simultaneous images, epitomizes the bombardment of sounds and pictures thrown at

us from every channel. Lumet slowly tracks in to focus on one, Howard Beale, a silver-haired man who mirrors the warm, friendly, familiar anchormen on the other screens. Lumet includes a narrator to guide us, a faceless voice that informs us, “This story is about Howard Beale who was the network news anchorman on UBS-TV.”⁶ Lumet’s first shot also creates a context for his fictional story; because he is placed next to three actual anchormen, Howard Beale becomes just as “real” as newscasters Walter Cronkite, John Chancellor and Harry Reasoner. Beale is cast as a powerful and famous figure depended upon to deliver the news message. In the same way that sects of Christianity depend on John’s account as a true vision of the end, the public views Beale as their own trustworthy secular visionary.

When Beale is told he will be fired due to poor ratings, he informs viewers he is going to commit suicide and begins a downward spiral that crosses over into the other narrative in Network, that of Diana Christiansen. She is the UBS executive in charge of programming who believes that the future of television is to show American audiences what they really want to see. There are no sitcoms, soap operas or movies-of-the-week in Diana’s world. Instead, she wants to create programming around a figure who speaks to the disillusionment of the masses: “the American people are turning sullen. They’ve been clobbered on all sides by Vietnam, Watergate, the inflation, the depression. They’ve turned off, shot up, and fucked themselves limp. And nothing helps...[they] want someone to articulate their rage for them.” She finds that very person on UBS’ nightly news, as the next evening, Beale tells viewers that “he just ran out of bullshit.” Rather than being vilified because of his rant on national television, Beale increases UBS’

⁶ <http://www.corky.met/scripts/network.html>, visited 11-13 March 2004. Further references to this film, which is not available in published form, are to this source.

ratings and Diana decides to let him serve as “a latter-day prophet, denouncing the hypocrisies of our time.” Almost overnight, Howard Beale is converted from newscaster to visionary.

Diana Christensen isn't the only high power who wants to make Beale a prophet. In a chilling scene minutes later, Lumet shoots Beale wide awake in his bed, apparently talking to no one: “I can't hear you. You'll have to speak a little louder...you're kidding. How the hell would I know what the truth is?” Beale hears voices that tell him to report “the truth” to his viewers as a personal revelation from a higher being, exactly like John's from God. John swears that God has handed the vision directly down to him and that he is simply a messenger: “And [God] sent forth his angel and presented [it] in signs through him to his slave John who bore witness to the word God gave...” (Revelation 1:1-2). On the news that night, Beale does the same as he informs the audience he has been chosen to tell them the truth: “Last night, I was awakened from a fitful sleep at shortly after two o'clock in the morning by a shrill, sibilant, faceless voice [which said] ‘I want you to tell the people the truth, not an easy thing to do...don't worry about the truth. I'll put the words in your mouth.’” This voice explains to Beale that he is an extremely powerful figure with the American people. When Howard questions the voice as to why this is so, the response is simple: “Because you're on television, dummy!” Clearly, television is now equated with scripture as the best possible medium through which the masses are able to receive the word of God as delivered to his messenger.

Though the staff at UBS thinks Howard Beale has gone insane, Lumet shows the audience there is a higher power at work, adding special effects straight out of Revelation. As thunder crashes in the middle of the night, Beale wakes up on a friend's

couch speaking in tongues, grunting and mumbling to himself. As if in a trance, he walks to the closet where he gets his overcoat, puts it on over his pajamas and exits. When Beale shows up at UBS, Lumet uses a long shot of him walking through the rain, taking small aimless steps, as if he can't control where he is going, and talking to himself. Lumet cuts to Beale walking into UBS as the guard greets him. Beale's response reveals his state of mind: "I must make my witness." He has become John, as the spirit has literally moved him to report what he has heard and seen to the people. When Beale sits down in front of cameras, looking, as Chayefsky describes, "obsessed...gaunt, haggard, red-eyed with unworldly fervor...manifestly mad," he is finally ready to deliver the truth to his audience.

Beale's message begins by telling viewers that he is not going to correct the world around them. Rather, he calls the nation to action by inciting them:

I don't have to tell you things are bad. Everyone knows things are bad. It's a depression. Everybody's out of work or scared of losing their job, the dollar buys a nickel's worth, banks are going bust, shopkeepers keep a gun under the counter, punks are running wild in the streets, and there's nobody anywhere who seems to know what to do, and there's no end to it...we sit in the house...and all we ask is please, just leave us alone in our own living rooms...well, I'm not going to leave you alone.

Like Travis Bickle from Taxi Driver, Beale sees the world in its dirty chaos that no one wants to clean up. Beale's solution, however, is not to destroy the filth in Babylon himself, but to verbally assault viewers, screaming at them to fight back and correct the world themselves: "I don't want you to riot. I don't want you to protest...I want you to get up now...Right now. I want you to go to the window, open it, stick your head out and yell: 'I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this any more!'" Lumet cuts to a shot of a UBS news executive and his family opening their window to see if anyone is yelling.

Sure enough, one by one, people throughout the neighborhood open their windows and begin to rant. The thunder gets louder with every shout, and the scene finally ends in a chaotic cacophony of the storm and the thousands of citizens yelling out their windows. This moment in the film parallels the sounds of divine intervention reported in Revelation, during which episodes of heavenly power are accompanied by thunder and lightning coupled with the sound of voices: “And out of the throne there are proceeding lightnings and voices and thunders” (Revelation 4:5). The thunder confirms that Beale has indeed been chosen to carry a divine message to America.

In the hands of Diana Christiansen, “The Network News Hour with Howard Beale” shows how a modern prophet who articulates the rage of Americans can be marketed as a ratings-grabbing television host. The opening shots of Beale’s show make a mockery of Beale’s mantra. A deep-voiced announcer, over a game show-like theme song, asks a studio audience how they feel. In unison, they all shout back, “happily” according to Chayefsky, “We’re as mad as hell, and we’re not going to take this anymore!” Beale’s vision, packaged by Christiansen’s eye and ear for marketing, has been reduced to a catchphrase, the kind that could be printed on a t-shirt and sold to millions. In addition, a show that calls itself a “news hour” has become a sideshow, complete with Sybil the Soothsayer, Miss Mata Hari, and “the mad prophet of the airways, Howard Beale!” In fact, Beale’s first rant on this program derides the very show on which he preaches: “Television is not the truth! Television is a goddamn amusement park, that’s what television is! Television is a circus...we’re in the boredom-killing business! If you want the truth, go to God, go to your guru...” The irony here is that his own show is “a circus” yet is advertised as a man telling people the truth. And according

to the ratings, people follow him as a god or a guru, just as millions literally believe the words of Biblical prophets warning that the end is near.

At this point in Network, Baudrillard's conception of mass media as simulators begin to play out: "The media carry meaning and countermeaning, they manipulate in all directions at once, nothing can control this process, they are the vehicle for the simulation internal to the system and the simulation that destroys the system..." (Baudrillard, 84). Howard Beale and Baudrillard both preach that television and the news media simulate the truth to viewers beyond the role of entertainment. As other characters show throughout the rest of the film, mass media does more than take control of audiences. Howard Beale's news show becomes, as Baudrillard explains, a "producer[s] not of socialization, but of exactly the opposite, of the implosion of the social in the masses" (Baudrillard, 81). In Network, Beale reduces the masses to an angry mob.

Once Howard Beale is permanently under the control of UBS as their resident angry prophet, Lumet then focuses on Network's second visionary, Diana Christiansen. As her first name suggests, she is an extremely powerful UBS goddess figure on the hunt for ratings. But "Christiansen" can also be read as "Christian son," suggesting that Diana is also imbued with male characteristics as well as religious fervor for her work. During a long, romantic montage with her lover, Max, she dominates him, as he never speaks a single word throughout the entire sequence. From a walk on the beach, to a romantic Italian dinner, and finally throughout their (brief) intercourse at a hotel, Diana is the only person who talks. Even in the throes of passion, Christiansen never takes her mind off of the network, screaming about her problems with the F.C.C. as she climaxes quickly, much like a man who stereotypically ejaculates prematurely. Max confirms that Diana's

view of the world is indeed tunnel vision later in the film: “You are television incarnate, Diana, indifferent to suffering, insensitive to joy. All of life is reduced to the common rubble of banality...you even shatter the sensations of time and space into split-seconds and instant replays.” Max’s description of Diana alters Mulvey’s concepts because Diana becomes both the object and the objectified in Mulvey’s theory. Since Diana takes so much pleasure out of television (as we see in her sex scene) while simultaneously blurring herself and TV together, she receives gratification both from gazing and acting as the subject of her own stare. Christiansen and Beale as well are unable to save themselves from the grasp of television, which ultimately controls every facet of their lives.

But is Beale really seeing only the visions sent to him in his dreams? When he tells audiences that the company that owns UBS, the Communications Corporation of America, is being sold to Arabs, CCA’s owner, Mr. Jensen, takes the haggard newscaster into a conference room and becomes the third of Network’s trinity of visionaries. Jensen knows that Beale will only listen to him if the owner presents himself as God feeding Beale another of his midnight visions. Closing the curtains and dimming the lights, Jensen delivers his words in a deep, loud voice. “Light [shoots] out from the rear of the room, spotting Jensen on the podium...” the script explains. Lumet uses a long shot of Jensen from Beale’s point of view as the CCA owner appears to tower over Beale, becoming God. Jensen shouts, “You have meddled with the forces of nature, Mr. Beale...there is only one holistic system of systems...it is the international system of currency that determines the totality of life on this planet! That is the natural order of things today!...and I have chosen you to preach this evangel, Mr. Beale.” In Lumet’s shot

of Jensen, we actually see John's description of God come alive, as the lamps that line the long desk in the conference room mirror the "golden lampstands...and in the midst of the lampstands someone like a son of man" (Revelation 1:12). Lumet's direction of Jensen makes his voice "as the sound of many waters" and "his eyes as a fiery flame" (Revelation 1:14-15), transforming the character in this scene into Network's version of the vengeful, angry God of Revelation.

Throughout the film, Lumet has created a network of visionaries, each trumping the other. According to the most powerful figure in the film, Jensen, money runs our world, not ideas. In response to being "chosen" by Jensen, Beale wonders once again, "Why me?" Naturally, Jensen repeats the words of the voice in Beale's first vision, responding, "Because you're on television, dummy. Sixty million people watch you every night of the week, Monday through Friday." Beale has truly reached the height of his apocalyptic visions, at one point yelling, "The final revelation is at hand! I have seen the shattering fulgurations of ultimate clarity! The light is impending! I bear witness to the light!" After his meeting with Jensen, Beale is so lost in his religious trance that he believes Jensen is "the face of God." In Network's world of television, Jensen's response says it all: "You might just be right, Mr. Beale." But this particular visionary could be another of Revelation's false prophets because he steers Beale, the messenger, away from the truth about the media that could ruin Jensen's powerful empire built on the American dollar.

Once Beale starts to believe in Jensen's view of a world run by money and preaches it to his audience, his anger becomes depression and his ratings drop. Since Beale is now Jensen's puppet, the owner of UBS doesn't want the newscaster-turned-

visionary taken off the air. Inevitably, Diana's television-obsessed mind comes up with the idea that will increase the ratings of her terrorist reality show while simultaneously getting rid of Beale. The members of the Ecumenical Liberation Army, the stars of Diana's other hit program, enter Beale's studio and assassinate him as he steps out onto the stage. As in Taxi Driver, visions end in violence. Lumet edits the shots such a way that the killing is so sudden we may not even realize it at first. But because we are stuck in the world of television, these images are repeated over and over, as Lumet ends the movie the way it began. The same four screens that once broadcast images of the men who deliver the truth are now replaced with Beale's death played in a loop complete with commercials. The happy sounds of the commercials' jingles mingle with the monotones of reporters speaking gravely. Chayefsky's last line sums up the entirely cynical view expressed by this film, as the narrator tells us, "This was the story of Howard Beale...the first known instance of a man being killed because he had lousy ratings." While we may laugh at the thought, in this twisted tale television really did murder Howard Beale. And because Lumet's ending mirrors its beginning, the film delivers a Biblical prophecy similar to Revelation's: if we continue our current obsession with television, this is what will really happen.

But what if Network were taken a step further, with television physically coming alive to kill humans? David Cronenberg explores the most frightening ramifications of the age of human dependency on television in Videodrome. The film envisions the end of humanity as a blurring of the boundaries that delineate male from female, humanity from machine, and reality from fantasy. While the film makes reference to Revelation, its primary apocalyptic parallel is Baudrillard, who, like Cronenberg, predicts the end of

humanity as the beginning of virtual reality. Videodrome, in playing out Baudrillard's prophecies, posits the frightening question of whether or not the distinction between real and surreal matters.

The film opens with a hiss of static and an interrupted television signal. The title of the film finally appears through the haze of visual static, like Taxi Driver's phantom taxi parting the fog. Cronenberg cuts to a television station's tagline: "Civic TV: the one you take to bed with you"⁷ We then see a beautiful young woman who speaks straight at us, warmly saying "Good morning" and telling us the day's schedule. As the camera tracks out, we see that we are watching television from Max Renn's point of view. From the first minutes of the film, we understand that Renn, the owner of the TV station he watches, is the counterpart of Network's Diana Christiansen. Renn uses television not only as an alarm clock and entertainment, but, more importantly, he literally "takes [it] to bed." He sleeps on his living room couch with his head facing the screen. Because Cronenberg keeps the camera in Max's point of view, we are once again looking through the eyes of its main character, yet another visionary who perceives the world differently than we do.

Civic TV, however, is no ordinary television station; it is neither a typical public access channel high up on the dial, nor is it just "civic." Our first clue that the station is unusual comes when Cronenberg shows us Renn drinking coffee and looking over black and white photographs of an Asian couple having intercourse almost as nonchalantly as if he were reading the headlines of a newspaper. They are stills from a show that Renn is thinking of using on Civic TV. This shot, coupled with our introduction to Renn, enable

⁷ David Cronenberg, writer/director, *Videodrome*, 1983. Further references to this film, which is not available in published form, are to this source.

us to understand that Renn has a vision. He wants disturbing images in order to “give my viewers a harmless outlet for fantasies and their frustrations. It’s socially positive.” His idea is to take extreme violence and deviant sex from the streets and put it on a screen for what the film calls “the subterranean market.” We are left unsure as to whether Renn truly believes that his channel’s purpose is “harmless” since he himself gets so much pleasure out of shocking audiences. This contradiction is the first of many blurred boundaries in the film, as Renn could be either Videodrome’s true visionary who believes television cures society’s ills, or the false prophet who injects violence and sex more deeply into our culture.

The world of Videodrome is a further depiction of Babylon, as yet another city’s underbelly is exposed: “The world’s a shithole, ain’t it?” Max remarks. Cronenberg portrays the seediest parts of Toronto as the universal, grim urban locale. This is a place where Max holds a meeting at an office in a dilapidated hotel room as a man down the hall screams and curses at his wife and bangs incessantly on their door. Characters who live here practice the same deviant sex Max puts on Civic TV. Unlike Travis Bickle who wants to clean up the streets, Renn throws more trash at the public in his search for a program that portrays as reality: “[a program] that’s going to show people what’s really going on under the sheets.” Cronenberg’s own film promotes that same view, as his imagery characters and subject matter attest.

In Renn’s quest for “for something...tough” to program for Civic TV, he stumbles upon “Videodrome,” a show that depicts a woman stripped naked, tied to a pole and whipped relentlessly by a masked assailant while she screams for her life. This is exactly what Max is looking for: the perfect combination of senseless violence and sex,

or, as he describes it, “Just torture and murder. No plots, no characters. I think it’s what’s next.” In fact, Max shows his girlfriend Nicki “Videodrome” when she asks if Max has any pornography they can watch together to get her in the mood for sex. Later, as they watch, Max takes a long needle and pierces her ears, giving her immense sexual pleasure, taking Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze as sadistic a step further. Cronenberg’s characters mirror what they see on “Videodrome”: “Fetishistic scopophilia...has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt...asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness” (Mulvey, 438). Cronenberg ends the sequence as Max hallucinates that he and Nicki are actually lying on the “Videodrome” set. This is the first moment in Videodrome in which reality (Max and Nicki’s sadistic acts) and television (the sadism playing on the screen) begin to merge, the sadistic gaze in Videodrome effectively transformed into physical punishment.

The creator of the TV program “Videodrome” is a prophet of the digital age aptly named Brian O’Blivian, who predicts that the world will end and be reborn with television and reality one and the same. This visionary believes his prophesy has come true, since TV has already taken on human elements: “The television screen has become the retina of the mind’s eye...therefore the television screen is part of the mind. Whatever appears...emerges as raw experience for those who watch it. Therefore, TV is reality, and reality is less than television.” O’Blivian’s philosophy and especially his language echoes that of Baudrillard, who similarly preached, “The eye of TV is no longer the source of an absolute gaze, and the ideal of control is no longer that of transparency...more subtly, but always externally, playing on the opposition of seeing and being seen, even if the panoptic focal point may be blind” (Baudrillard, 29). Both Baudrillard and O’Blivian

characterize television as an object that stares back, a frightening thought that completely destroys Mulvey's scopophilia because the object at which we gaze can control us as well.

The television as active object plays out in bizarre fashion. Following a series of surreal televised events caused by the hallucinatory effects of "Videodrome," Cronenberg goes a step further. The TV set begins to throb and pulsate, as if it were made of flesh. Max, who is watching, gets closer and as he does, the television, with an extreme close-up of Nicki's lips to tantalize him, physically bulges out. In response, he kisses the swollen screen. As Baudrillard predicted, "The TV studio transforms you into holographic characters...[if] your real hand passes through the unreal hologram without encountering any resistance...the hologram has rendered your hand unreal as well" (Baudrillard, 105). Once again, Cronenberg blurs the lines between reality and virtual or televised reality.

The blending of boundaries continues in another of Renn's hallucinations. Max envisions himself as a man with a vaginal slit, blurring genders in a horrifying display. He is now ready for his final transformation at the hands of Barry Convex, the Jensen of this city. Convex, as his name suggests, has a vision for the world that involves "Videodrome." His cohort Harlan explains their mission:

North America is getting soft...and the rest of the world is getting tough...we're entering savage new times and we're going to have to be pure and direct and strong if we're going to survive them. Now you and this cesspool you call a TV station...and your viewers...you're rotting us away from the inside.

These sinister visionaries become men of action, using "Videodrome" to meld humanity together through television in order to be able to program viewers to do their bidding, and they begin with Max.

Renn, like Travis Bickle, goes from visionary to vigilante as he is transformed into a programmed killing machine. The slit in Max's stomach turns into a VCR as Convex inserts into it a breathing, pulsating videotape, and for the rest of the film, Max hears voices that instruct him to murder. Max's descent into virtual reality is complete: he encompasses all genders (with a gun in his hand and a hole in his stomach) and straddles the line between man and machine. Cronenberg constantly alternates between reality and hallucination; at one moment, Renn holds the gun in his hand and tries to shake off the voices in his head. A second later, he pulls out his hand and shows that the gun has been replaced by a disfigured combination of flesh and weapon to create an organic firearm. Once again, we are inside Renn's vision, as Max functions as a living television, much like his own set that seduced him earlier in the film.

At the end of Videodrome, Max is completely transformed into a programmed machine. A television set instructs him visually on how to destroy himself with his gun. When the Max onscreen kills himself, the television explodes into human entrails, further confirmation that Renn and the machine are one. Cronenberg then repeats the exact shot just shown on the television, as Max whispers the final apocalyptic prophesy: "Death to Videodrome. Long live the new flesh." The shot of Max committing suicide occurs twice, reflects the double nature of Videodrome: when Nicki and Max watched an episode of "Videodrome" earlier in the film, it had the same static-filled opening as the beginning of Videodrome. In effect, we have just watched an episode of "Videodrome" ourselves, leaving us with the chilling thought that reality and what we saw on the screen are one and the same, much as Baudrillard predicted. The perplexing final scene confirms Baudrillard's prophecies at the end of his book: "The universe [has] entered live into

simulation...there is no longer a stage, not even the minimal illusion that makes events capable of adopting the force of reality...all of that comes to be annihilated on the television screen” (Baudrillard, 159, 164). The simulacra have effectively become the real.

Prophets don't have to be religious figures who subscribe to a specific faith; these movies portray characters who are extremely familiar to us, from taxi drivers to news anchormen to television executives, who transform from Everyman into visionaries. Even more startling is that these prophets actually stare down audiences, drawing us into their worldview by returning our gaze. Travis Bickle, practicing with his guns, looks in a mirror that reflects back at us and threatens, “Are you talkin' to me?” Howard Beale makes us want to run to the window to scream in anger. The final moments of Videodrome make us wonder if television has taken over our sense of reality. It is the immediacy of these three confrontations that jars us into recognizing that our society is watching some form of John's vision from Revelation eerily play out in front of us. The effectiveness of these three films in modernizing apocalypticism is not because they purport to be the true vision of the world, but because each serves as a social critique of an aspect of American culture. In dealing with violent vengeance in modern Babylon, the mass media as a Messiah, or the terrifying birth of virtual reality, all three not only evoke Revelation, they secularize the religious content of John's text. If the prophecies of these films indeed appear to be coming true, it is because we haven't heeded their warnings for, as John says, “the time is near” (Revelation 1:3).

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