



Anomie, Alienation and the Grandiose Self: Socio-Psychological Analysis of *Taxi Driver* (1976)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the alienation, loneliness, identity crisis, and existential struggles of the modern individual through Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976). It argues that the film depicts not just the psychological breakdown of an individual but also the broader existential problems generated by modern society. The main purpose of the study is to uncover the structural factors underlying individual crises by situating Travis Bickle's inner turmoil within a social context. His transformation is analyzed in light of theoretical frameworks such as anomie, alienation, narcissistic defense mechanisms, the individuation process, and psychological vulnerability. These concepts are explored through the perspectives of thinkers including Durkheim, Marx, Fromm, and Kohut. Travis's loneliness, estrangement from society, and search for meaning are linked to the oppressive and alienating forces of modern urban life. The research employs a qualitative approach: the film is examined through reflexive thematic analysis, informed by sociological and psychoanalytical perspectives. The relationship between the film's narrative language and Travis's inner world is analyzed, demonstrating that the crises experienced by the character have roots not simply in the individual but in society as well. Consequently, it is emphasized that identity formation is shaped by social conditions alongside personal ones. *Taxi Driver* thus offers a powerful narrative that remains relevant today about anomie, loneliness, alienation, and the neurotic states into which individuals may be driven in attempting to overcome them.

Keywords: Anomie, Alienation, Individuation, Grandiose self, Taxi Driver

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Anomi, Yabancılaşma ve Büyüklenmeci Kendilik: *Taxi Driver* (1976) Filminin Sosyo-Psikolojik Analizi

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ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Martin Scorsese'nin *Taxi Driver* (1976) filmi aracılığıyla modern bireyin yabancılaşma, yalnızlık, kimlik krizi ve varoluşsal bunalımlarını incelemektedir. Çalışmada, filmin yalnızca bireysel bir psikolojik çöküşü tasvir etmediği, aynı zamanda modern toplumun ürettiği daha geniş ölçekli varoluşsal sorunları görünür kıldığı savunulmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda çalışmanın temel amacı, Travis Bickle'in içsel krizlerini toplumsal bağlamda ele alarak bireysel sorunların ardında yatan yapısal etmenleri açığa çıkarmaktır. Karakterin dönüşümü; anomi, yabancılaşma, narsistik savunma mekanizmaları, bireyleşme süreci ve psikolojik kırılganlık gibi kuramsal çerçeveler ışığında çözümlenmektedir. Söz konusu kavramlar, Durkheim, Marx, Fromm ve Kohut gibi düşünürlerin görüşleri üzerinden tartışmaya açılmaktadır. Travis'in yalnızlığı, topluma yabancılaşması ve anlam arayışı, modern kentsel yaşamın birey üzerindeki baskıcı ve yabancılaştırıcı etkileriyle ilişkilendirilmektedir. Araştırma, nitel bir yöntem benimsemekte; film, sosyolojik ve psikanalitik yaklaşımlar doğrultusunda reflektif tematik analiz yöntemiyle incelenmektedir. Filmin anlatı dili ile Travis'in iç dünyası arasındaki ilişki çözümlenmiş, karakterin deneyimlediği krizlerin yalnızca bireysel değil aynı zamanda toplumsal kökenlere sahip olduğu ortaya konmuştur. Dolayısıyla, kimlik oluşumunun bireysel olduğu kadar toplumsal koşullar tarafından da şekillendiği vurgulanmaktadır. *Taxi Driver*, günümüzde de güncelliğini koruyan; anomi, yalnızlık ve yabancılaşma ile bunların aşılması çabasında bireyi sürükleyebilecek nevrotik durumlar üzerine güçlü bir anlatı sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Anomi, Yabancılaşma, Bireyleşme, Büyüklenmeci kendilik, *Taxi Driver*

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INTRODUCTION

In modern society, individuals are surrounded by crowds yet remain fundamentally isolated, with identity formation clouded by uncertainty. The collapse of traditional bonds following the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism have eroded the normative frameworks that once provided stability. This condition, known as “anomie,” leaves individuals disoriented, deprived of structures that once gave life meaning. Alongside this, alienation further detaches individuals from their labor and sense of self, resulting in deep solitude.

Contrary to the idea that modernity brings liberation, individuation today often becomes a solitary struggle amid unstable social structures. In *Taxi Driver*, Martin Scorsese captures this crisis through Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro), a profoundly alienated figure whose search for self collapses into pathological narcissism. As collective norms disintegrate, he constructs a distorted moral code from desperation rather than ethical deliberation, turning his identity quest into delusion and recasting himself as a messianic figure in a meaningless world (Kolker, 2011, p. 223).

The central research problem of this study is to show how Travis Bickle’s identity crisis, alienation, and narcissistic defenses in *Taxi Driver* transcend individual pathology and connect to structural transformations of modern society. Most analyses reduce Bickle to psychological or psychoanalytic readings of his inner world. Unlike studies emphasizing postwar trauma, violence, or male psychopathology, this research interprets his breakdown as a sociopsychological identity crisis in which pathological individuation and narcissistic defenses intensify isolation (Iannucci, 2005). It thus situates Bickle’s disintegration within the anomie and alienation of urban life, framing mental health as a social rather than individual issue. This perspective contributes interdisciplinarily to communication and film studies by exposing the social roots of individual vulnerabilities.

METHODOLOGY

This study examines the film *Taxi Driver* within a qualitative framework using reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis is a flexible method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes in data. This flexibility allows the method to be adapted to the research question without necessarily adhering to a specific epistemological paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 77-79). Since the aim of the study is to conceptualize mental health as a social issue and to demonstrate how this is represented in the film, rather than explaining Travis Bickle’s mental state in solely individual-psychological or

psychoanalytic terms, the analysis was conducted with a theoretical/deductive focus and sensitivity to latent meanings.

The analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework: "(1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) review of themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report" (2006, pp. 86-93). Accordingly, the film was watched in full with detailed notes, and scene-based coding was conducted along the axes of anomie, alienation, and grandiose selfhood. Codes were then clustered into candidate themes and mapped; these themes were refined by testing internal consistency and external distinctiveness, their scope and focus clarified, and representative scene excerpts selected. The findings were finally documented in the analysis section in a coherent narrative engaging with the literature. The study reached four themes: (1) anomie and urban disintegration, (2) alienation and loneliness, (3) grandiose self and compensatory fantasies, and (4) surveillance, violence, and the narrative of purification (see Appendix 1).

SOCIOLOGICAL CONTEXT: (MODERN) CITY, ANOMIE, AND ALIENATION

Modernization is a transformative process that reshapes economic and technological domains while simultaneously altering the structure of social relationships. Following the Industrial Revolution, rapid urbanization altered traditional lifestyles, replacing agriculture-based rural solidarity with individualized, short-term urban interactions (Gedikli, 2001, p. 370). With capitalism, priorities shifted: the modern city became primarily a center of economic activity, with its role as a living space secondary (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 26-30).

Urbanization thus reorients life around economic functions, commodifying once-strong social ties and dissolving them into abstraction (Berman, 1983). In contrast to traditional societies -where social status is largely fixed- modern urban individuals must continually redefine or reinvent themselves in response to market demands. This ongoing reconfiguration, coupled with the erosion of traditional solidarities, contributes to uncertainty, fragmentation, and failures in identity formation (Akgün, 2015, p. 22).

Modernization clearly detaches individuals from traditional social networks, embedding them in abstract, centralized structures (Tönnies, 2001, pp. 45-61). The paradox lies in modernity's emphasis on personal agency and choice, even as individuals become increasingly passive, shaped by large-scale systems (Giddens, 1991, pp. 103-110). Though identity appears self-fashioned, industrialization and

urbanization have eroded personal autonomy through complex economic and bureaucratic forces (Harvey, 1989, pp. 229-235).

These structural shifts have transformed the individual's relationship with social norms, as well as with the self, labor, and others. As Marx argued, under capitalism, individuals are estranged from their essence, their lives governed by impersonal economic forces beyond their control (Marx, 1993/1844, pp. 70-76). Thus, the subject becomes a passive, alienated figure within the very structure they once helped shape. When individuals are either unrecognized or valued only through economic or status-based metrics, they experience an existential rupture and struggle to find meaning within the social fabric (Honneth, 1992, pp. 113-114). In modern society, the pursuit of fulfillment is constrained by market imperatives, undermining self-realization and deepening the sense of loneliness (Fromm, 1959, p. 120).

Georg Simmel identifies the *blasé attitude* as a psychological defense mechanism characteristic of metropolitan life. Overwhelmed by constant stimuli, urban individuals become desensitized, adopting an instrumental outlook and engaging in relationships shaped by market logic -minimizing emotional investment and maximizing personal gain (Simmel, 1997, p. 78). Similarly, the concept of anomie offers a critical lens on these transformations. Defined as a state of normlessness, anomie arises when social bonds erode and established norms lose their regulatory power (Durkheim, 2014/1893, pp. 267-268). Durkheim connects this condition to economic complexity: as labor becomes more specialized, traditional social rules weaken, leaving individuals without clear moral orientation (2005/1897, pp. 256-257): Reduced to functional roles, individuals must constantly adapt to shifting economic demands -a process that, rather than fostering integration, deepens their sense of isolation and fragmentation (Bauman, 1991, pp. 43-47).

Alienation and anomie do not operate independently; rather, they reinforce one another. Alienation describes the individual's estrangement from their essence and social ties within the economic system, while anomie captures how this estrangement becomes an existential and normative crisis. Alienation concerns the individual's role in production, whereas anomie reflects their uncertainty within the social order, arising when ties to normative frameworks break down (Durkheim, 2005/1897, p. 215). As Marx notes, the individual becomes a commodity, losing agency and becoming a passive object in the production process (Marx, 1993/1844, pp. 72-73).

In this context, the modern identity crisis becomes apparent: individuals, unable to truly become themselves, seek to appear "original." Understanding this crisis requires distinguishing between individualization and individuation. Individualization reflects a socially conditioned construction of the

self, shaped by external expectations. Individuation, by contrast, refers to an inner, holistic self-formation (Jung, 1959, p. 275). Yet in modernity, individuation is often eclipsed by the fragmented, performative nature of individualization.

Individualization refers to modern society's detachment of individuals from traditional bonds, leaving them solely responsible for their choices (Beck, 2009, p. 128). Though framed as freedom, it adds burdens and may cause isolation. Individuation, however, involves building inner integrity and adapting to the world, rooted in meaning and spiritual balance (Jung, 1959, p. 280). Jung states that individuation requires facing the unconscious, discovering the true self, and resolving inner conflicts. Yet in modern society, the "shadow" -repressed traits- is continually suppressed to conform (Jung, 1951, p. 120).

Shaping identity around external demands delays this inner work, leading to alienation and a false self (Kohut, 1971, p. 243). Thus, individuation becomes reduced to socially driven individualization. Self-psychology holds that individuals need external validation and empathy to form a healthy self (Kohut, 1971, p. 243). Yet modern society's fast-paced structure disrupts the consistency of this support. Consequently, individuals turn inward for approval, fostering narcissistic defenses (Lasch, 1979, pp. 67-68).

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTEXT: THE INDIVIDUAL RESISTING DISINTEGRATION, NARCISSISM, AND THE GRANDIOSE SELF

In such a societal ethos, individuals develop different strategies: conforming, seeking innovative paths, rejecting rules, or completely withdrawing from the social system (Merton, 1938, p. 678). These may coexist, reflecting the tension between identity loss and self-assertion, as well as the link between nothingness and narcissistic development. Alienation and loneliness fuel excessive self-focus. Lasch emphasizes that, to avoid psychological disappearance, individuals develop narcissistic traits driven by the need for validation and attention (1979, p. 45). In a world of weak ties and fluid identities, narcissism intensifies. As social bonds erode, people retreat inward, using egocentric defenses to fill the void - ultimately masking a deep existential emptiness with an inflated self (Lasch, 1979, pp. 48-50).

Narcissistic individuals feel they can only exist through admiration and recognition (Morrison, 1983, p. 55), making them increasingly fragile and dependent on external validation rather than inner confidence (Kernberg, 1975, p. 184). Modern narcissism is not self-love but a defense against existential emptiness and identity loss. This contradiction defines the modern psyche, marked by alienation and anomie. In trying to fill external voids, individuals inflate their inner world with a false sense of strength (Kohut, 1971, p. 243). Yet this power is illusory; detachment from belonging and authentic identity leads

to isolation and dissatisfaction. It reflects not true individuation but defensive strategies that sever real social ties.

Initially, narcissism referred to a healthy self-love supporting ego development (Freud S. , 1914, p. 88). However, in modern society's individualistic and competitive atmosphere, it becomes pathological, rooted in shame from the gap between ideal and real self (Lewis, 1971, p. 34). In narcissistic structures, this emotion is particularly destructive because the individual's sense of self is dependent on external validation. In other words, while the individual continuously nourishes themselves with approval and admiration from the outside world, when they are deprived of this support or exposed to criticism, they experience intense feelings of shame (Morrison, 1983, p. 45).

The individual develops an exaggerated sense of self in an attempt to conceal the fragility of their true self and the shame they feel as a result (Miller, 1981, p. 79) , which is what is known as the grandiose self. The grandiose self is employed to suppress feelings of inadequacy and shame. The individual tries to hide their feelings of inferiority and worthlessness behind a mask of exaggerated self-confidence and superiority. Beneath the effort to appear perfect, flawless, and strong lies fragility (Kohut, 1971, p. 243).

The grandiose self reflects and reinforces the modern individual's psychological isolation caused by weakened social bonds. The more it is displayed, the less capable the person is of managing inner shame, as it disconnects from the true self (Kernberg, 1975, p. 184). Criticism is perceived as an existential threat, intensifying shame. To protect self-worth, the narcissistic individual projects inner deficiencies onto others -a defense known as projection (Freud A. , 1966, p. 92). This becomes systematic in grandiose personalities, who cannot face their vulnerabilities and instead attribute them to the outside world (Kernberg, 1975, p. 202).

Rather than accepting failure, narcissistic individuals project blame onto others, using this to mask inadequacy and feel temporarily empowered -though it distances them from reality over time (Morrison, 1983, p. 67). On a societal level, projection can target marginalized groups, as Goffman's concept of "stigma" illustrates (Goffman, 1963, p. 42). This defense borders on neurosis: instead of facing inner conflict, the individual seeks to "fix" society to validate their perfection. Yet this suppression fails to resolve their internal struggles meaningfully.

SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF TRAVIS BICKLE’S ANOMIC ODYSSEY

Anomie and Urban Dissolution

The film opens with a dense fog enveloping the city. This fog, materializing as smoke rising from New York’s sewer system, creates a physical atmosphere while simultaneously taking on a metaphorical significance, symbolizing the invisible mechanisms of the city’s infrastructure coming to the surface. The first image of the opening sequence shows a taxi emerging from the smoke. This narrative choice shifts focus away from the individual, highlighting the machine and the workings of the system. In this way, the replacement of the individual by the vehicle symbolically suggests the disappearance of the lower class and invisible workers, hinting at their erasure on a symbolic level.

Immediately afterward, a close-up of Travis’s face fills the screen. His eyes convey a look that is suspicious and questioning, reflecting a sense of trying to make sense of the world around him. Then, through a cut to the taxi’s window, the perspective shifts to Travis’s point of view (Kolker, 2011, p. 217). On a rainy night, water droplets on the glass create a lens effect, distorting the city lights and shapes, intertwining them. This moment can be interpreted as Travis’s first “anomic gaze” toward the city (Scorsese, 1990, p. 54). The city’s chaos is represented in a blurring that suggests both physical and psychological disintegration.

Thus, in the very first scene of the film, the tense relationship between the city and the individual, along with Travis’s alienated view of the world, is presented to the audience. More importantly, it highlights Travis’s isolation. The interior of the protagonist’s taxi transforms into a kind of metaphorical cell, reinforcing his loneliness (Blake, 2017, p. 145). The taxi becomes both a space for observation and a symbol of the character’s separation from the world. Travis’s perception of the city life through the rearview mirror and the taxi window remains an unattainable and distorted reality for him.

What turns the chaotic environment of New York’s streets into an auditory element is the jazz music that plays throughout the film. The “crazy” atmosphere for all the city’s inhabitants is reinforced by Bernard Herrmann’s jazz-infused score, which deepens the alienation and meaninglessness that we witness (Lombardo, 2014, pp. 45-46). The film’s eerie and melancholic melodies sensorially convey Travis’s isolation and his emotional distance from society to the audience. Particularly, the saxophone solos represent his repressed desires and sense of being lost, while as the scenes progress, the music grows increasingly tense, creating a backdrop that underscores Travis’s mental breakdown.

The film's use of lighting and color palette also supports Travis's increasingly paranoid and detached mental state. The intense reds and yellows used in the night scenes reflect Travis's anger and restlessness, while the blurred reflections of street lamps and neon lights further reinforce his distorted perception of reality. Particularly, the lights reflected on the taxi window after the rain abstract the chaotic atmosphere of the city, visually concretizing the confusion in Travis's mind.

Alienation and Withdrawal

Moreover, Travis's anomic loneliness is not merely the result of the trauma of being a Vietnam War veteran. Indeed, his horrific war experience is a significant source of his isolation and pessimistic attitude toward the world (High, 2015, pp. 381-382). However, Travis himself expresses that his loneliness has always existed; it has followed him throughout his entire life. Travis's words imply that anomie and loneliness are not individual deviations, but rather a collective affliction specific to his era. His self-description as "God's lonely man" suggests that loneliness has become an inevitable, fated reality (Blake, 2005, p. 194).

Scorsese does not present an individual pathology. On the contrary, loneliness is a structural phenomenon that permeates all the characters; it is not merely an individual experience or something specific to a particular class. It is a sign of the general dissolution of the social fabric and the lack of solidarity. More explicitly, even individuals belonging to the same class and sharing similar experiences are unable to truly connect with one another. This disconnect is clearly observed in the relationship between Travis and Wizard (Peter Boyle). Although both share similar economic and social conditions, they struggle to understand each other. There is no connection between Wizard's exaggerated stories and Travis's introverted, restless existence; class similarity does not create the intimacy that would bring them together. Later, even Travis's attempt to save Iris (Jodie Foster) will not establish real solidarity between the two.

Throughout the film, all the relationships presented reflect the communication breakdown and the inability of individuals to connect in an atomized society. This disconnect is also subtly suggested in the film's formal elements. In the interior scenes, compositions that emphasize Travis's distance from his surroundings are particularly evident in the scenes with Betsy (Cybill Shepherd). In the sequence where Betsy is at the campaign office, Travis is positioned in one corner of the frame, highlighting his distance from the people around him; this arrangement underscores how weak his social bonds are and emphasizes his isolation from others (Petković & Jurleta, 2022, p. 17).

Travis Bickle's new identity as a *Taxi Driver* can also be analyzed within the context of Marxist alienation theory. Wizard's statement, "When you got a job, you become that job," hints at the process of alienation, where wage labor consumes the individual, and ultimately, a person becomes merely an extension of their work. For Travis, the city thus becomes less a space of belonging and more a dystopia where corruption is witnessed anew every night. The sense of estrangement occurs both on an individual level and on a class and cultural scale. Travis is alienated both from middle-class norms and from individuals who, like him, work at night and belong to the lower class.

One of the most prominent examples of this is the semiotic relationship between Travis and the prostitutes. Like Travis, they earn their living by working at night, so sex workers are positioned in the same economic sphere as him. However, Travis perceives them as "symbols of corruption in the city." The ironic point here is that Travis is also a part of the same system, yet he denies it. Travis's attempt to distance himself from the prostitutes is clearly depicted through the twenty Dollars given to him by the pimp Sport (Harvey Keitel). Travis does not spend this money and ultimately returns it in a bloody fashion.

This demonstrates that Travis rejects the identity imposed on him -being someone from the lower class, working at night, existing on the margins of society. However, his rejection is merely a matter of perception; Travis is deeply embedded in this economic and social reality but tries to distance himself from it. Travis's tendency to see himself as superior to others is repeatedly emphasized. In his view, everyone on the streets at night consists of corrupted and morally degraded individuals. This is most clearly expressed in the scene where we hear his inner voice: "All the animals come out at night; whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies, sick, venal..."

As seen, Travis is a figure who perceives society as a corrupt and hostile structure. From Goffman's perspective, among the groups that Travis stigmatizes, African Americans and women stand out. Throughout the film, black men are particularly portrayed as threats in Travis's worldview (Ballas, 2021, pp. 49-53). In a scene where an African American man is caught stealing in a store, Travis unhesitatingly shoots and kills him, allowing the store owner to cover up the crime (Goffman, 1963, p. 5).

Additionally, the conversation with the man who gets into Travis's taxi and confesses that his wife cheated on him with an African American further reinforces Travis's stigmatic view of women and racial identities (Petković & Jurleta, 2022, pp. 18-20). In this scene, the man's attempt to stigmatize his wife for sexual infidelity and his anger is not only an expression of a personal betrayal but also of his

reaction to the violation of a racial hierarchy. Travis listens silently, but the man's fury and obsessive narrative contribute to solidifying Travis's worldview, where women are seen as untrustworthy and African Americans as threats. This dynamic helps make sense of the stigmatization process that becomes evident when Travis first idealizes Betsy and then accuses her of being "like other women," and also when he views Iris as a figure who "needs to be saved."

The Grandiose Self and Compensatory Fantasies

This process prevents him from remaining merely an isolated observer and drives him to adopt a moral mission against society, developing an apocalyptic/missionary attitude toward the world. Travis believes the city is filled with filth and hopes that one day a torrential rain will cleanse the city of these "filth." This metaphor conveys a desire for purification while at the same time carrying an expectation of an apocalyptic transformation. However, Travis does not immediately assume the role of the messianic savior; initially, he assigns this task to others, particularly to the powerful figures of the system (Briody, 2021, pp. 38-39). This is most clearly seen in his conversation with U.S. presidential candidate Charles Palantine (Leonard Harris) in the taxi.

Travis tells Palantine that the city needs a great change, expecting salvation from a leader figure. However, as the film progresses, his belief that leaders are as corrupted as society itself strengthens, and Travis decides that he must take on the mission of cleansing the city himself. This transformation represents his shift from a passive individual waiting for an external savior to an active messianic figure. He no longer fears administering his own justice (Skoble, 2007) and will bring the "rain" the city desperately needs, "cleansing" the city with his own hands.

Travis Bickle is also a character struggling to assert his individuality. The smallest but also the most concrete sign of his effort to individuate is his keeping a diary. The thoughts he writes in his journal turn into an external voice in the film, providing clues to his inner world and psychological dynamics. Travis's journey of individuation is filled with contradictions. His ambivalence about becoming an individual exposes the tension between originality and anonymity. According to Travis, every person must have a "personality like the others." The wordplay here is noteworthy: While Travis wants to construct his own identity, he is actually aiming to become like others. His perception of individuality as something shared in common with others, rather than as a unique condition, implies a conceptual contradiction in his struggle to become an authentic individual. This is a reminder of the theoretical

framework that discusses how individuation, rather than leading to true individuality, may result in a paradoxical reversal of revolutionary intent in modern society, leading to anonymity.

An even more significant point arises: Travis expresses that he does not understand why an individual would sabotage their own desires. However, he will carry out this act of self-sabotage himself. Having managed to establish an impressive communication with Betsy, even making her admire him at first, Travis sabotages the promising romantic relationship by taking her to an adult film on their first date. This situation can be interpreted in two different ways, both sociologically and psychologically: First, this shows Travis's insensitivity to social norms. As a lonely and isolated individual, he is unaware of the cultural codes that dictate how to behave in romantic relationships. Second, Travis's unconscious mind is sabotaging him. It is well known that individuals with narcissistic fragility tend to unconsciously create the failure they foresee in relationships. In this sense, Travis taking Betsy to an adult film may be an expression of either his feelings of worthlessness or his inability to form close relationships.

Either way, the result remains the same: Travis's inner contradictions and the anger he feels towards the alienated world transform him into a self-saboteur. Following the disappointment with Betsy, the film will focus more on Travis's psychological dynamics and his contradictory character. In fact, Betsy is the character who notices Travis's contradictory individuality, and she compares him to the figure in Kris Kristofferson's song *The Pilgrim, Chapter 33* (1971): "He is a prophet and a pusher. Partly true, partly fiction, he's a walking contradiction." This description, referencing the lyrics of the song, summarizes the inconsistencies in Travis's personality (Blake, 2017, p. 14).

Travis's inner conflicts are reflected in how he perceives the world. While he views the entire city as a corrupted space, he positions Betsy as a figure that is separate from this corruption -untouched and idealized. In fact, it is difficult to argue that there is any rational reason behind this; rather, his interest in Betsy is characterized by an inclination to elevate her and see her as a pure being. In contrast, his thoughts about the city become progressively harsher. When he refers to it as a "sewer", he expresses his disdain for crime and moral decay as well as a broader repulsion towards society. This anger has already been felt in his conversation with Palantine, where Travis's neurotic state even manages to unsettle the presidential candidate.

For Travis, the messianic tendencies he initially externalized gradually transform into an internalized savior identity. This transformation deepens the tension between his individual rage and the construction of an inflated self-image, making violence an inevitable outlet. In this sense, neither Travis's admiration for Betsy nor his disgust towards society indicates a measured or reasonable emotion. His

emotional world begins to evolve into one marked by extreme and erratic reactions, swinging between polar opposites. His interest in Betsy will soon turn into a deep sense of disappointment. Thus, their relationship is not just a failed romantic interaction, but an important indicator that exposes the pathological nature of Travis's narcissistic relationship with society (Yates, 2007, p. 76). Betsy's rejection deepens Travis's identity crisis and accelerates his descent into collapse.

"I realize now. She's just like the others, cold and distant." The words Travis speaks about Betsy are an outward expression of his narcissistic wound. In narcissistic personality structures, the individual experiences intense anger and a sense of worthlessness toward someone who does not approve of them (Kernberg, 1975, p. 184) Travis's sudden redefinition of Betsy, whom he was once in love with, as "immoral," "selfish," and "living in her own world" can be explained by his sudden devaluation of a figure he initially idealized. Such reactions are classic signs of narcissistic injury.

Moreover, Betsy's position in Travis's mind functions as a measure of his trust in the general structure of society. Being rejected by Betsy becomes a breaking point that solidifies Travis's belief that the entire social order is corrupt. From this moment on, a definitive transformation takes place in Travis's emotional world: the admiration he once felt for Betsy gives way to hatred, while the passive dissatisfaction he had toward society evolves into an active and violent desire for confrontation.

In essence, Travis's fundamental motivation is to be accepted and appreciated. He wants to be visible in society, to be valued, and to have meaning attributed to his existence. However, this desire is corrupted by the rupture he experiences, gradually transforming into his greatest fantasy. As Travis fails to achieve a true sense of belonging, he attempts to compensate for this through the construction of an inflated sense of self. The desire for validation and integration into society ultimately shifts into a desire to become a figure outside of, and in opposition to, the system.

Travis's statement, both to Betsy and as a sign on the wall in his room, "One of these days, I'm gonna get organiz-ized", contains a fascinating wordplay. The base form "organized" here conveys its literal meaning of "getting oneself together" or "putting one's life in order," while also implying a redefinition of his individual existence and an assertion of himself in society. However, it's hyphenated form "organizizing" connotation should not be overlooked. Travis is seeking both to find his place within society and to become a "thing," giving form to his existence and turning himself into part of a mechanical, functional organism. Just like the scene where he arms himself and transforms his body into a killing machine, organization for him is simultaneously a mental and social order and a physical

transformation. Travis constructs a mechanical appendage for himself; with the rail system on his arm that pushes a gun into his hand with a single motion, he has now acquired a new organ.

Surveillance, Violence, and Atonement

Travis's need to assert his existence gradually paves the way for his turn to violence. The desire to “get organized,” which shifts from physically establishing order to arming himself and developing heroic fantasies, symbolizes his inner collapse and the pathological dimensions of his grandiose self-construction. Thus, organization becomes for him not just a sense of order but also a process of “becoming a powerful thing,” reconfiguring his body and identity with machine-like precision and functionality. From this point onward, Travis will transform into a figure attempting to reshape society according to his imagined moral framework.

The scene where Travis purchases guns is a critical example of how narcissistic defense mechanisms are reinforced through external objects. According to Kohut's self-psychology theory, when an individual's self-cohesion is underdeveloped, there is a tendency to develop dependency on external objects or figures to compensate for this deficiency (1971, p. 243). Travis's motivation for acquiring the weapon cannot be solely explained by the instinct for self-defense; it reflects his desire to strengthen his fragile and fragmented self. For Travis, the gun is an organ through which he can rebuild his lacking self-confidence and his socially unrecognized existence. In Kohut's terminology, Travis's adoption of the gun as a “self-object” offers him the illusion that he is strong and invincible. However, these external sources of strength fail to compensate for his inner emptiness and ultimately push him deeper into isolation.

In line with this, Travis increasingly adopts a delusional state of mind. In the film's iconic mirror scene, a modern Narcissus is born. Although he speaks and behaves as though he is in conflict with another, Travis's only concern is himself. The emphasis on “Me!” behind every word point to his grandiose sense of self. The question he directs to his imaginary rival, “Who the f.ck do you think you're talking to?” reveals his narcissistic emotions, and the subsequent statement “I'm the only one here!” underscores Travis's egocentric worldview.

The scene reveals the narcissistic mechanism of projection. When Travis looks into the mirror, he doesn't merely see his reflection; he externalizes his internal fragmentation and self-violence. This process is twofold: on one hand, the disgust and anger he feels toward society turn inward, and on the other hand, the disgust he feels toward himself is projected outward, onto society. Thus, the enemy

figures Travis constructs both within himself and in the social realm emerge as reflections of his narcissistic fragility (Polegubić, 2022, pp. 38-39).

Travis's desire to kill Palantine, in this context, is not a political assassination attempt but a manifestation of his narcissistic injury and the construction of his grandiose self. One of the key psychological factors underlying this assassination attempt is the narcissistic wound Travis experiences after being rejected by Betsy. The splitting mechanism, which is commonly observed in narcissistic personality structures, causes Travis to perceive the world in stark contrasts: Betsy is now a part of the corrupted system, and its leader, Palantine, must be destroyed along with her. Travis's attack on Palantine becomes not just an assault on a political figure but also an act of vengeance directed at Betsy's indifference, the society that has rejected him, and a world in which he has been unable to find belonging.

In this way, the assassination attempt is not simply an isolated violent act but a broader psychological expression of Travis's internal conflicts and his desperate need to restore his sense of control and validation. Through this act, he seeks to redefine his place in the world, attempting to impose his own form of justice upon a society he perceives as deeply flawed. Travis's failed assassination attempt on Palantine marks a turning point in his psychological trajectory, shifting his focus entirely to the rescue of Iris. This transition is not just about the introduction of a new target, but rather represents a continuation of his fantasy of self-reinvention as a hero (Stevens, 2023). His anger is no longer directed at destroying the system, but at reestablishing himself as a savior standing in opposition to that system. Although the assassination attempt on Palantine fails, Travis's narcissistic grandiosity finds a new domain in which it can thrive -now, as Iris's rescuer.

This shift highlights an important aspect of Travis's character: his ultimate desire is not to change the world, but to reaffirm his own existence. In saving Iris, he is not merely trying to free her from the clutches of prostitution, but more fundamentally, he is attempting to construct a narrative in which he is the heroic figure, the central character who plays a pivotal role in a dramatic rescue (Frey, 2024). This act of "saving" allows Travis to reinforce his belief in his own significance, transforming his sense of self from a rejected, alienated individual to a self-fashioned hero capable of changing the lives of others -even if, in reality, his actions remain tied to his own need for validation. Ultimately, Travis's rescue of Iris illustrates how deeply intertwined his desire for power, recognition, and identity is with his internal narcissistic needs. His actions serve as a desperate attempt to prove his worth the world around him and to himself.

Travis is dissatisfied with his own identity and suffers from a deep sense of inferiority. In order to compensate for this feeling of inadequacy, he constructs an increasingly fictional and detached identity from reality. In the letter he writes to his family, he mentions that he is in good health, earning a large amount of money, and has been with a wonderful woman (who is Betsy) for several months, but the truth is the complete opposite. Travis, who has no qualms about telling so many lies, is motivated by a deep desire to be validated, and this is explicitly revealed in the last sentence of the letter: "If you saw me, you would be proud of me."

There is a striking parallel between Travis and Iris. Both are individuals who have been marginalized by society, lacking a sense of belonging, and experiencing an identity crisis. Iris's introduction of herself as "Easy" and her dissatisfaction with her own name strengthens the semiotic link between her and Travis. Travis's desire to rescue Iris is not merely driven by a chivalrous instinct to protect women; this action carries a much deeper meaning. Through Iris, Travis is actually attempting to save himself. In this context, his attempt to impose the idea of "going somewhere else," which he presented as his own desire at the beginning of the film, onto Iris, further highlights his search for meaning.

However, it is noteworthy that Iris does not ask to be rescued. On the contrary, she portrays herself as content with her life. At one point, she even questions Travis's narcissistic behavior by asking him, "What's making you higher and mighty?" Yet Travis, on the brink of a deep identity crisis, is approaching the boundaries of psychosis. His claim to be working for the government is a clear sign of this mental fracture. From this point on, Travis shifts into the role of a "pusher" -someone who pressures and manipulates- coercing Iris into agreeing to go somewhere better. However, this attempt, too, ends in failure.

The subsequent events revolve around the murders committed in an attempt to rescue Iris. Travis has only one remaining way to justify his existence and undergo a significant transformation to become "the one who writes his own destiny": to complete his grand narrative through a chaotic act of violence. Travis does not commit these murders out of anger or fear. His act of killing the pimps and criminals without a second thought shows that, in his mind, he has taken on a mission and fully rationalized the act. At this point, violence becomes a ritual through which Travis completes his internal transformation.

One of the most striking moments in the film occurs after the massacre, when Travis presses the gun to his head and pretends to pull the trigger. This scene illustrates that he does not truly want to die

but has instead become absorbed by a fantasy of martyrdom or sacrifice. Travis desires to be a hero, but he also harbors a wish to transform into a tragic figure. Had he truly died in that moment, he might have become a complete mythological figure; however, his survival forces him into a new search for meaning. This is why, covered in blood and with his last breaths, he smiles as he looks around. This smile reflects both his physical survival and the satisfaction of having completed his narrative.

This scene of the film is deepened through formal elements as well. Martin Scorsese uses cinematic tools in this scene to visualize Travis's inner world and mental breakdown. The overhead shot following the massacre symbolizes that Travis has become a figure looking at his own body and the events from an outside perspective. As the camera slowly rises, it presents Travis's bloodied body and the corpses surrounding him like a painting. This scene evokes a divine point of view, supporting Travis's fantasy of seeing himself as a martyr or savior. This will be meaningfully reinforced in the film's closing sequence.

The final sequence of the film should not be read as a series of real events, but rather as an expression of Travis's egocentric fantasies and the psychological foundations of the actions he has carried out (Leetham, 2024). Travis's construction of a grandiose self is related to the individual's dependence on external approval in modern society (Twenge & Campbell, 2010), and all of the events in the final section of the film can be considered reflections of these desires. The newspaper clippings on the wall are filled with headlines about a *Taxi Driver* heroically battling the mafia and becoming a hero. Thus, Travis has transformed from the invisible "Mister Nobody" within society into a figure that everyone loves and admires. The way Iris's parents address him also reinforces this transformation: "Mister Bickle."

Iris's parents are heard reading a letter to Travis. In their letter, they express their gratitude by saying, "You are the hero of this house!" According to the parents, Iris has returned to school just as Travis had wished, and her family is thanking their heroic driver. However, a striking detail emerges here: Iris's parents are so impoverished that they cannot even afford the travel expenses to personally thank Travis. This situation is an important element reinforcing the heroic figure that Travis has assumed; he is positioned as a beacon of hope for individuals at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. In this context, the slogan "We are the people!" from Palantine's election campaign resonates in Travis's actions.

Similarly, it is not surprising that Betsy enters Travis's taxi with a bashful demeanor and says she has read about his "heroic" actions in the newspapers. However, this narrative is only a fantasy. In the final scene of the film, the reflection of Betsy's image in the taxi's rearview mirror and her almost hallucinatory appearance among the neon lights of the city is a formal choice that supports the

disconnect of this narrative from reality. As Travis, adopting a humble demeanor and keeping a distance from Betsy, blends back into the chaos of the city, the film comes to an end.

CONCLUSION

This study examines how the modern individual experiences a crisis of identity in the context of anomie, alienation, and narcissistic defense mechanisms through the film *Taxi Driver*. The analysis demonstrates that the character of Travis Bickle is a representation of the structural identity crisis produced by modern society. The film reveals how the individual becomes fragile when disconnected from social bonds, and how this fragility is attempted to be compensated for through grandiose and aggressive constructions of identity.

The main findings of the study address Travis's existential impasse along three axes. First, in the context of Durkheim's conceptualization of anomie, it is found that Travis is an individual within urban life who has lost direction and lacks a normative framework. In modern society, the individual who loses the sense of belonging is either drawn into a passive existence or seeks to radically reconstruct their identity; Travis's transformation shows that he chooses the second path. Second, in the framework of Marx's concept of alienation, Travis's inability to connect with his labor, the social structure, and ultimately his own self accelerates his internal disintegration. His driving becomes not just a source of income but also a mode of existence that reinforces his isolation from society. Third, in line with the theories of Kohut and Lasch, it is seen that Travis develops narcissistic defense mechanisms and attempts to cover his fragile self with the construction of a grandiose identity. Acquiring a weapon is interpreted as an attempt to strengthen his fragmented self, rather than a mere need for physical protection. His aggressive attitude in the mirror scene, where he attempts to confirm his existence, is a reflection of his need to achieve narcissistic integrity.

In light of these findings, *Taxi Driver* should be read not simply as a character study but as a socio-psychological narrative that illustrates how modern society isolates and dehumanizes the individual, and how the existential need for confirmation can drive a person to extreme lengths. The combination of anomie and alienation with narcissistic defenses makes the emergence of pathological identity forms - where the individual positions themselves as a "savior" or "destroyer"- inevitable. In this regard, *Taxi Driver* offers a timeless narrative that speaks both to 1970s American society and to the fragile construction of the modern self and the crisis of social identity.

Nearly half a century has passed since the release of *Taxi Driver*, yet the story of Travis Bickle remains relevant. This story is a timeless manifestation of the alienation, anomie, and narcissistic defense mechanisms produced by modern society. Today, although individuals do not roam the streets alone like Travis, they experience the same existential entrapment in the virtual spaces provided by the digital age. The loss of meaning, loss of belonging, and pursuit of a grandiose self are no longer merely Travis's individual tragedy, but the story of all of us. Moreover, in the current era, this crisis may have deepened even further. Therefore, comparing the figure of Travis with similar anti-heroes in contemporary cinema and re-discussing the anomie–narcissism–violence triangle in modern social contexts (e.g. digital loneliness, social media) will provide a fruitful opening for future research.

GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Martin Scorsese'nin 1976 yapımı *Taxi Driver* filmi, modern kent yaşamının içinde şekillenen sosyolojik ve psikolojik bozulmayı temsil ederken izleyiciyi modernitenin birey üzerindeki yıkıcı etkilerine tanıklık etmeye davet eder. Filmin baş kahramanı Travis Bickle'in serüveni, ilk bakışta bireysel düzeyde bir yabancılaşma hikâyesi gibi görünse de aslında geç kapitalist toplumun ürettiği kolektif varoluşsal krizlerin izdüşümüdür. Bu bağlamda makale, karakterin dönüşümünü hem psikodinamik hem de sosyolojik kuramlar eşliğinde çözümlemektedir.

Öncelikle, Émile Durkheim'ın anomi kavramı, toplumsal normların zayıflaması veya çözülmesiyle bireyin yönsüzleşmesini, yani toplum içinde kendisine rehberlik edecek değer ve kuralların eksikliğini yaşamasını ifade eder. Anomi, bireyin hem sosyal hem de ahlaki bağlarını kaybettiği bir boşluk durumu yaratır; kişi, neye inanacağını, neyi doğru veya yanlış sayacağını, hangi davranışların toplumsal olarak kabul edilebilir olduğunu kestiremez hale gelir. Durkheim'a göre bu durum, özünde, toplumun yapısal ve işlevsel dengesizliğinin bireysel yansımasıdır. Filmde giderek kendi iç dünyasına çekilen Travis de aynı durumdadır. Anlam veremediği ve uyumlanamadığı bir toplumda onun normlara göre hareket etme yetisini kaybetmiştir. Bu yüzden kabuğuna çekilmiş haldedir. Travis'in yozlaşmış şehre karşı hissettiği öfke de toplum içinde yaşadığı normatif boşluğun yansımasıdır. Bir gazi olduğunu anladığımız Travis'in izole durumu onun dışsal ahlaki referanslarını bütünüyle yitirmesine neden olurken çaresizce kendi içinde ve dışarda yeniden bir düzen yaratmaya çalışır.

İkinci olarak, Karl Marx'ın yabancılaşma kavramı, Travis'in çalıştığı işle olan ilişkisi ve toplumsal sistemdeki yerini sorgulaması açısından açıklayıcıdır. Taksi şoförlüğü, onun için yalnızca maddi bir geçim aracı olmaktan öte dünya ile olan ilişkisinin sembolik bir düzlemde sürdüğü süreçtir. Ancak Travis, bu işi

yaparken kendini gerçekleştirememekte; tersine, daha da yalnızlaşmaktadır. Diğer insanlarla bağ kurmaktansa onları dışlamayı ve “temizlemeyi” tercih eder.

Eric Fromm’a göre de modern birey, özgürleşme süreciyle birlikte giderek daha fazla yalnızlaşır. Modern toplum, bireye seçim ve bağımsızlık imkânı sunarken, aynı zamanda bu özgürlüğün getirdiği sorumluluk ve sosyal bağların zayıflaması nedeniyle bireyi toplumsal desteğin dışında bırakır. Fromm, bu durumun bireyi yalnızlığa ve yabancılaşmaya sürüklediğini, yalnızlığın dayanılmaz boyutlara ulaştığında ise kişinin kendini güvende hissetme, anlam yaratma veya boşluğu doldurma çabasıyla otoriter ya da yıkıcı davranışlara yönelme riskini artırdığını vurgular. Travis’in yalnızlıkla örülü özgürlüğü onu bir tür “içsel sürgüne” mahkûm ederken bu durum onu şiddet yoluyla kendine ve yaşamına bir anlam vermeye sevk eder. Kendini bir çeşit “temizleyici” ve “kurtarıcı” olarak konumlandırması, özünde, Travis’in parçalanmış benliğini yeniden anlamlı şekilde bütünlemeye çalışmasının ürünüdür.

Bu noktada Heinz Kohut’un narsistik kişilik kuramı Travis’in içsel dünyasının psikanalitik çözümlemesine imkân tanır. Travis, değersizlik ve görünmezlik duygularıyla mücadele ederken büyülenmeci tavırla bu duygulara karşı bir savunma geliştirir. Silah edinmesi, vücut geliştirmesi ya da kendini ayna karşısında “güçlü” bir figür olarak kurgulaması, narsistik kendilik yapılanmasının parçasıdır. Özellikle Iris’i kurtarma arzusu, onun “yüce bir amaca” hizmet ederek kendi varlığını anlamlandırma çabası olarak görülmelidir. Bir fahişeyi kurtarma arzusu, gücünü ispatlama ihtiyacından doğar ve bu nedenle narsistik bir doyum sağlamaya yöneliktir. Travis, Iris’in rızasını ya da duygularını önemsemez; kurtarmak istediği kızın hikâyesi Travis’in kendi anlatısının bir parçası olmaktan ileri gitmez.

Taxi Driver modern bireyin deneyimlerini temsil etmenin estetik sınırlarını da belirgin biçimsellikle sorgular. Filmin kullandığı sinematografik araçlar -kamera açıları, ışığın parçalı kullanımı, şehir seslerinin baskınlığı- izleyiciye Travis’in psikolojisini göstermekle kalmayıp bu psikolojinin algısal düzeyde nasıl inşa edildiğini de hissettirir. Başka bir deyişle, Travis’in parçalı benliği filmin biçimsel stratejilerinde yankı bulur; böylece seyirci yalnızca bir karakteri izlemek yerine, parçalanmış öznenin sinemada hangi yollarla temsil edilebildiğini de deneyimler. Bu meta-düzey, *Taxi Driver*’ı salt sosyolojik ya da psikodinamik bir vaka incelemesi olmaktan kurtararak modernitenin krizlerini görselleştiren bir sinema diline dair düşünme alanına dönüştürür.

Bu biçimsel stratejiler özellikle mekân tasvirinde belirginleşir. New York, yalnızca bir arka plan değil, Travis’in zihnindeki kaos ve kirlenmişliğin dışavurumudur. Neon ışıkları, yağmurla ıslanmış sokaklar ve yoğun şehir gürültüsü, Travis’in içsel parçalanmışlığını seyirciye duyumsatır. Kentin bir “günah şehri” olarak betimlenmesi, karakterin giderek daha sanrılı bir algı dünyasına kapanmasına zemin hazırlar. Ayna

sahnesindeki ünlü monolog, bu kapanmanın doruk noktasıdır: Travis'in gerçeklikle bağı neredeyse kopar ve narsistik kişiliğin özünde yatan kendini yüceltme ile dış dünyaya meydan okuma eğilimi, doğrudan beden dili ve bakışları üzerinden görünür hale gelir.

Taxi Driver'ın Travis Bickle'ı, filmin başrolünde olmasına rağmen geleneksel bir kahramanlık modeliyle tanımlanamaz. Travis'in trajik şekilde biten hikâyesi, bireysel zafer veya kurtuluş değil, modern yaşamın dayattığı yapısal baskılar karşısında bir çöküşün ve toplumsal yabancılaşmanın dramatik temsili olarak belirginleşir. Travis'in eylemleri ve kararları, kişisel iradede ziyade kapitalist toplumun üretmiş olduğu normatif boşluk, sosyal izolasyon ve anlam yitimine verilen tepkilerdir. Karakterin anlamsız şiddeti de sistemin ürettiği krizlere yöneltilen cevaptır.

Onun dönüşümü, modern bireyin kimlik ve aidiyet arayışının çarpıcı bir alegorisi olarak işlev görür. Daha önemlisi şudur ki Travis, her birimizin içinde potansiyel olarak var olan parçalanmış modern öznenin ta kendisidir. Travis Bickle, modern anomik yaşamın hem üretimi hem de kurbanıdır ve bu haliyle de modern bireyin krizlerini anlamlandırmak için hâlâ güncel ve çarpıcı bir sinemasal figürdür.

Çıkar Çatışması/Conflict of Interest

Yazarlar çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan etmiştir. /The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Yazarların Katkıları/Author Contributions

Her iki yazarın da çalışmaya katkı oranı %50'dir. / The contribution rate of both authors to the study is 50%.

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Appendix 1. Main Themes and Codes Chart

Scene / Time Code (Approximate)	Short Description	Codes	Theme
Opening scene – Taxi headlights appearing through the fog (00:01:00–00:02:30)	The chaotic and threatening atmosphere of the city	Fog, night, chaos	Anomie and normative dissolution
Travis' job application scene (00:04:10–00:06:00)	Emphasis on insomnia and loneliness; feeling of disharmony	Insomnia, loneliness, disharmony	Loneliness and withdrawal
Talking to Palantine in the taxi (00:39:20–00:42:00)	Travis's sense of political/social disaffiliation	Disconnection from the system, meaninglessness	Alienation
The mirror scene – “You talkin’ to me?” (01:05:40–01:07:00)	Grandiose self and defense mechanism	Weapon, heroic fantasy, self-affirmation	Grandiose self, defense mechanisms
Hotel room scene with Iris (01:30:20–01:34:00)	The desire to be a savior and moral ambiguities	Savior fantasy, innocence, moral defense	Grandiose self, defense mechanisms
Final – Press clippings and letters (01:47:00–01:49:30)	Society's attribution of heroism, the need for recognition	Social approval, self-heroization	Seeking recognition/approval