

On “The Assassination of Richard Nixon”

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This is a recommendation for film buffs who liked “Taxi Driver.” “Taxi Driver” is an entertaining film, but the real deal in the loner-menace genre is an obscure 2004 film, “The Assassination of Richard Nixon.” For my money, despite all the acclaim it gets, “Taxi Driver” is superficial, “technique-y,” and self-referential (it is more than anything about the director Martin Scorsese, the actor Robert De Niro, and the screenwriter Paul Schrader making a film). “The Assassination of Richard Nixon,” directed and co-written by Niels Mueller, is, at the highest level, truthful and unobtrusively artful, and it’s about the characters and what they do, not about who created them. I’m not sure it can be rented anywhere, but I think you can purchase a DVD of it for around five dollars new, less used, at Amazon.

The Travis Bickle-type character in “The Assassination of Richard Nixon” is Samuel Bicke, portrayed by Sean Penn and based on a real person, a 44-year-old failed salesman named Samuel Byke, who in 1974 tried to hijack a commercial airliner and fly it into the White House to kill President Richard Nixon.

Travis Bickle is alone in the world, but Samuel Bicke is more than just alone. In the eyes of everyone he has contact with, he is nothing, he might as well not exist.

The taxi company wants Travis to be working there. His fellow cabbies try to get things across to him over coffee. Becky the campaign worker finds him attractive for a time, and then at the end of the film comes on to him. Iris the young prostitute gives him energy as a kind of mentor. At the end of the film, he is admired, a hero, a celebrity with laudatory newspaper clippings taped to his wall. He lives his screen life to a backdrop of the pulsating chords of Bernard Herrmann, Hollywood’s most renowned film composer. Travis Bickle is somebody.

In contrast, Samuel Bicke (I'm taken by the similarity in the characters names, Bickle and Bicke) in "The Assassination of Richard Nixon" is insulted by the customers he tries to sell furniture to, patronized and demeaned by his boss, disowned by his brother, unwelcome and dismissed when he smilingly arrives to see his estranged wife and his children (she has moved on, which he can't accept, and really, so have the children, and the family dog has no reaction when he goes to pet it), and he is sharply rejected by a woman he flirts with. Everyone, including the government bureaucrat who is unenthusiastic about his small business loan application and the black people he tries to link up with, gets it across to him that they prefer he were somewhere other than around them. There is music in "The Assassination of Richard Nixon," but it is incidental, not Bernard Herrmann dramatics; basically, Samuel Bicke lives his screen life in silence. Samuel Bicke is nobody.

Robert De Niro has gotten a ton of favorable notices for his portrayal of Travis Bickle, but it is showy, external. It's Robert De Niro acting. Sean Penn's Samuel Bicke reveals the core of this man. It's Samuel Bicke, not Sean Penn. It is gut wrenching and painful to experience Bicke, but at the same time it is enlightening and thought provoking.

So appropriate for these two protagonists, Travis Bickle only feigns blowing his brains out, while Samuel Bicke in the film, as did Samuel Byke in real life, really does it. The presidential candidate Travis Bickle is bent on assassinating is present at the campaign rally that day, while Richard Nixon isn't even in the White House the day Samuel Bicke/Byke makes his pathetic attempt to commandeer an airliner. People can't stop talking about Travis Bickle. Virtually no one has even heard of Samuel Bicke, or Samuel Byke.

"The Assassination of Richard Nixon" is indeed a grim and uncompromising film, and it is certainly not a commercial film. But those responsible for its creation can be proud of their achievement.

