Display rhetoric plays a significant role in shaping everyday life for people across the globe. From obvious displays of rhetoric such as advertising to the more illusive displays such as the English language, display rhetoric influences how people think and form their motivations, identities, and understanding of life. This paper specifically analyzes the famous American film, *Taxi Driver*, in order to understand how it serves as a form of display rhetoric. It uses key ideas from Kenneth Burke’s concepts of the *Dramatistic Approach* and the *Pentad* from Bernard Brock’s reading, “A Dramatistic Approach”. Barry Brummett’s reading, “Rhetoric in Popular Culture”, supplements Burke’s concept of the Pentad. The pentad serves as a model for understanding the dramatistic nature of society, which then acts as an aid for understanding the dramatistic approach (Brock, p. 187). These concepts have been selected because they provide sufficient tools to highlight the under workings of *Taxi Driver* that give the film its rhetorical influence. First a brief overview of Burke’s philosophy of rhetoric is discussed in order to understand how he came to the creation of the dramatistic approach and the pentad. These concepts are then defined and applied to the film. By applying these concepts, one can see how the film follows Burke’s dramatistic approach in order to influence its audience into a narrative of failed American values. By applying Burke’s
Pentad, one can see how the film succeeds in conveying this message due to the specific context in which it was made.

Before defining Burke’s dramatistic approach, it is important to give a brief overview of his philosophy of rhetoric. Burke refers to the “human situation” as essentially the act of living. He describes a process in which people use language and symbols in order to “assess” the “human situation” and thus create conceptions of their own surrounding world. However in this process, the usage of certain symbols and dialogues over another essentially, “lock the speakers’ attitude into the language” (Brock, p.184). Burke suggests this is how people come to form their self-perceptions, world perceptions and how they form their motivations. Because people constantly create meaning beyond physical nature through action and language, it essentially creates more “drama” within human society. Burke sees human society as a dramatistic process because, “the human tendency toward action makes a dramatistic vocabulary appropriate to the study of people” (Brock, p. 184).

The dramatistic vocabulary includes the elements of hierarchy; acceptance and rejection; and guilt, purification and redemption (Brock, p. 185). Hierarchy sets the structure for the dramatistic society. Social, economic and political powers are unevenly divided within society, which leads to authority of those with more power over others. The authority of some over others allows certain people to set the structure of permanent society, thus always leaving them in control. This “bureaucratization” of society creates order within society (Brock, p. 185). Once this order is created, the next element takes action through acceptance and rejection. Acceptance is viewed as a positive process and rejection is viewed as a negative process. Burke argues that symbols and language allow
people to reject things, as opposed to simply accepting the positive, natural world. Some people choose to reject hierarchy and they are only capable of doing so through language because language, “adds the peculiar possibility of the negative” (Brock, p. 185). Within the order of society, people either accept or reject their roles or the hierarchy itself. Acceptance “results in satisfaction and order, whereas rejection results in alienation and disorder” (Brock, p. 185).

This idea of rejecting one’s role within their hierarchy, or the hierarchy itself, is what Burke refers to as “pollution”. Those who reject pollute society by causing a disruption in the smooth flow of order. The effects of this pollution or acceptance of hierarchy are what cause the next elements within the dramatistic process; the concepts of guilt, purification and redemption (Brock, p. 185). Burke argues that human beings in society feel this constant guilt about their place within society. While many view this guilt as simply part of our natural life, Burke argues guilt was engrained into society through ancient dynastic or tribal tendencies (Brock, p. 185). Those who reject their role or hierarchy have an obvious sense of guilt for polluting society. However even those who accept their roles within society still have this sense of guilt, stemming from the wondering of “what could be” if they lived in a different level of the hierarchy. Burke deems this wondering of “what could be” as the creation of the sense of mystery. This sense of mystery creates “a guilt that is inherent in the hierarchy itself” (Brock, p. 185).

Guilt itself serves as a form of pollution as it reduces the cohesiveness of society. As people experience guilt they have the “feeling of being less than whole” (Brock, p.196) which leads them to strive for an elimination of guilt through the last elements of the dramatistic process: purification or redemption. Mortification and victimage serve as
the outlets of guilt through purification. Mortification is how one rids themselves of guilt through self-sacrifice because they accept the consequences of guilt. However, victimization uses a “scape goat” as an outlet in ridding oneself of guilt. This scape goat, which represents society’s guilt, removes personal responsibility over the guilt. As Burke writes, “psychological guilt, purification, and redemption result from the rejection of hierarchy, or pollution” (Brock, p. 186). The interrelationships between all these elements are responsible for creating the dramatistic society.

After overviewing Burke’s philosophical understanding of the nature of rhetoric as well as introducing and defining his dramatistic approach, an overview of the last concept used in this analysis must be briefly reviewed. This concept is referred to as Burke’s pentad and it is crucial to the understanding of the dramatistic approach because it provides the tools and origins of how elements like hierarchy are even capable of existing.

According to Brummett, “Burke argues that when people explain the world to themselves, and thus formulate motives for acting in the world, they do so by anchoring their explanation in one or a combination of five basic terms, called the pentad” (Brummett, p. 135, 1994). The five basic terms of the pentad include act, agent, agency, scene and purpose. Take note as to how some of these terms mimic terms related to theater and drama, which ties in to the “dramatistic process” theme. Each of the five terms represents an aspect of society. Act refers to actions, things that are done, willed or intended undertakings. Agent refers to people, groups and beings with the power to choose and to act. Agency refers to the means, tools, or techniques with which something is done. Scene refers to the physical or social environment, or context, for action. Purpose
refers to the guiding ideas, goals, or motives for choice and action (Brummett, p. 135, 1994).

Burke suggests that these five terms, singularly or in combination, construct all texts of society or great philosophies of the world. It suggests that people live in these terms because language bounds us to using them to explain our world. For example, the scientific concept of Darwin’s *Survival of the Fittest* exemplifies the importance of scene over any other element because it suggests that human kind is the way it is because of its physical surroundings. However the most important idea about this concept is that, “the public may or may not respond to a text of popular culture because of their acceptance or rejection of its key pentadic terms or terms” (Brummett, p. 136, 1994). This leads the way into understanding how *Taxi Driver*, as a text of popular culture, was both accepted and rejected by a polarized audience. The reason the audience had such a torn, intense response to the film was due to their focus and acceptance of the current scene in which the film was released.

However before exploring this idea, it is necessary to provide the context in which *Taxi Driver* was released as well as a brief overview of the film. Directed by Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver* was released in 1976 at the height of U.S. political and historical turmoil. It featured Robert De Niro as the main character, Travis Bickle. Harvey Keitel played the supporting role of a pimp named “Sport” and twelve-year-old Jodie Foster as Keitel’s prostitute, “Iris”. The setting of the film is in Manhattan, where Travis has recently returned from Vietnam as a war veteran and finds himself constantly disgusted at what he refers to as the “scum” of the city. It is clear that the war has taken a serious toll on his state of mind. Because Travis suffers from insomnia, he takes a job moonlighting
as a taxi driver throughout the rough city streets. It is the only thing that seems to occupy his mind because he has no family or pastime friends that the film mentions. The movie essentially narrates his late-night trips through the city as he peers through his taxi cab, suggesting he observes life more than he lives it. There are subtle queues that indicate Travis is racist and homophobic.

The height of the film comes towards the end when a blood-bath ensues due to Travis’s urge to “fix” society by eliminating the “scum”. He first attempts to assassinate a politician running for mayor of Manhattan, whom is also adored by the girl that Travis wishes to be with. When his attempt fails, he turns to Sport as his next target in order to “save” Jodie Foster from her life as a prostitute. Travis is successful in killing Sport as well as a few of Sport’s friends. The last scene of the film shows Travis getting into his taxi where the girl of his dreams is seen sitting in the backseat. As he drives her to her home, she mentions Travis’s act of “heroism” (killing the pimps) she saw in the newspapers. He mentions, “it was nothing, really” and that “media always blow things up” (Youtube clip, 2002). As he drives away after bringing her home, the signature eerie saxophone ballot begins. Travis looks in his rearview mirror while driving away and for just a second within that time, an underlying dark tone overrides the saxophone ballot and Travis’s face becomes red with the reflection of city lights. Within that moment, his expression in the rearview mirror changes rapidly to a seriously concerned look. He then quickly turns the mirror away, thus shielding the reflection of his face from the audience.

The first step in applying Burke’s dramatistic approach to “Taxi Cab” is looking at the formation of hierarchy within the film. Travis Bickle represents the common man within society. He has a stable job and his own apartment in a popular city. However it is
this exact sense of “normalness” that allows his character to leave such an impact on viewers. As the movie progresses, it is clear that Travis is in a sick state of mind. In this way, the movie allows viewers to relate with his appearance of normalcy which then forces them to also be associated with, or connected to Travis’s sickness. As Paul Schrader, writer of the film states, “[Travis] is more typical than he is deviant, and this is what makes him so utterly disturbing” (Fuchs, p. 701, 2005). This connection with the audience is clearly intended by the filmmakers as they constantly use camera angles that force the audience to view things through Travis’s eyes. In this way, Travis metaphorically “drags” the audience with him into Burke’s idea of “pollution” within the hierarchy.

As the audience now stands with Travis representing the pollution of society, guilt begins to take over within Travis. His guilt stems from the way in which he cannot seem to connect with society. He is disgusted by everything; the “scum” of the streets, the “fakeness” of the politician and the campaign, the blacks and the homosexuals. He first attempts to relieve this guilt through mortification. His mortification can be seen in the way he attempts to fit into society. He takes a beautiful girl on a date; however he fails because he takes her to a pornographic theater. He talks to the politician and tries to make a good impression by sounding thoughtful and intelligent. However he also fails at this because he talks in a way that indicates to the politician that he is not completely right in the mind. Because Travis cannot even succeed in purification through mortification, he attempts using a “scape goat” to release his guilt. Travis’s scape goat becomes the politician, whom Travis sees as encompassing everything “fake” about society. The theory then becomes that if Travis kills the politician, he will release his guilt and attempt
to fit back into society. However, once Travis fails at his attempted assassination, his new
scape goat instantly becomes Sport. Travis’s rashness and knee-jerk reaction to kill Sport
after failing at assassinating the politician serves as another example of how “normal”
Travis is (because everyone reacts rashly on occasion), which reaffirms his connection
with the audience. Travis’s ways of handling his guilt coincide with Burke’s idea that
guilt pollutes society by reducing its cohesiveness. Clearly, Travis’s assassination would
have disrupted society’s cohesiveness and even his killings of “scum” such as Sport may
be commended by society however it still disrupts the cohesiveness.

The ending of the movie creates the most disturbing tension for the audience as
they are left to wonder if Travis has been “cured” or not through his ridding of guilt. The
most disturbing realization is that in the eyes of society, Travis has been “cured” and
welcomed back as a hero. However deeming such an admirable American value as being
a hero to someone like Travis is where the film communicates the idea of failed
American values. This “curing” is what Burke would term as Travis’s redemption.
However as indicated before during the discussion of the last scene, it is clear that Travis
is certainly not “cured”. In this way, Travis has falsified his redemption and tricked
society into thinking of him as the common man turned hero, which makes a mockery of
the way in which Americans seem so quick to want to label everyday people as “heroes”.
Adding to the disturbance is the fact that the audience has been forcibly connected to
Travis throughout the whole movie, thus imprinting his sense of sickness onto them.
What’s more, people abide by Burke’s dramatistic approach on a daily basis. The act of
not completing the cycle of pure, proper redemption leaves the audience feeling
incomplete, frustrated and impure.
The next step is applying Burke’s pentad to the film in order to show how the pentadic element of scene helps influence the audience’s reaction towards the film. As previously noted, the effectiveness of pop culture in influencing its audience is dependent on the audiences’ acceptance or rejection of the certain pentadic elements that the pop culture is applying to. This paper argues that American society’s general acceptance of using scene as their main motivator behind actions during the 1970’s is what allowed Taxi Driver to have such an effect. People chose to base their motivations from this element because it was a time of political and historical turmoil. As Cynthia Fuchs writes in her critical analysis of Taxi Driver, “Much as any horror film reflects its cultural moment, Taxi Driver reflects its own – the end of the Vietnam War, a swelling of distrust in the U.S. government, the still-unresolved fears as well as hope raised by civil rights, women’s lib, and other identity-based protest movements” (Fuchs, p. 700, 2005). All these things going on in society often served as the basis and rationale behind people’s motivations and actions because it was at the forefront of people’s lives.

During the year of the film’s release (1976), people were still treating Vietnam veterans as if they were solely monsters and killers. The hatred towards veterans resonated deeply throughout society. However at the same time, blacks were now becoming more integrated into society through the civil rights movement. So to have the main character of Taxi Driver be a homophobic, racist veteran who eventually becomes a hero in the eyes of society, was clearly uncomfortable for audiences at that time. The power of the film’s rhetorical influence due to the acceptance of scene as the primary motivator is visible in the way the movie was originally rejected by a large portion of its audience and critics but today is now accepted as a classic film. As Fuchs writes,
“Though Taxi Driver has surely garnered much praise and respect over the years, on its release in 1976, reviewers were polarized over its darkness and excess” (Fuchs, p. 698, 2005). This “darkness” and “excess” stem from society’s uneasiness towards accepting Travis Bickle, a poor display of American values, as tricking his own society into seeing him as a hero. This undermining of society in the film could be reflected onto actual society, which suggested societal ignorance. Fuchs also writes, “[Writer] Robin Wood has called out the film’s ethical ‘incoherence.’ Wood contends this is produced by ‘a relatively clear-cut conflict of auteurs,’ that is, ‘the Scorsese/Schrader collision’” (Fuchs, p. 699, 2005). Wood’s description of the film as possessing “ethical incoherence” is an example of society’s rejection of a piece of culture that does not fit into, or complete the cycle of Burke’s dramtistic process. Instead Wood chalks up the ethical incoherence as just a film writer and director getting “carried away”. At this point, the movie itself rides a fine line between being a thought-provoking work of pop culture or a pollution to actual society.

Another American value that Taxi Driver manipulates is the idea of manifesting one’s own destiny (Reel, 2005). Americans have long lived by the concept that if one works hard, anything is possible. Travis is a positively contributing member of society (at least initially) with a stable job, which allows him access to live by the American value of controlling one’s own destiny. However, as Travis tries repeatedly throughout the film to gain control of his own destiny, it seems no matter what he does, it becomes a failure. He essentially “wins” over society through his own shortcomings and lack of control over his life. This also resonated a feeling of uneasiness to viewers because their society at the time was undergoing such political and historical re-shaping. Travis’s failure to control
his destiny implied that society may not change for the better or head in the direction that people hoped for. This upsets the order of hierarchy by questioning the validity of American values.

_Taxi Driver_ was able to have such a lasting rhetorical influence on society because of the scene in which it was released into. Without the social and political context serving as a background, _Taxi Driver_ may have gone more unnoticed. Travis’s failure to complete the dramatistic process upset audiences because it suggested a failure on actual society’s part. More so, Travis’s ability to trick his society into viewing him as a hero, poses the question: who decides who is considered a hero? Despite the actuality of the situation, the mere acceptance of society to see him as a hero essentially does make him a hero – only because society has the power over the individual to determine what the individual represents. This circles back to Burke’s power of hierarchy, where he suggests that society determines what is acceptable and rejected. In this way, _Taxi Driver_ brings to light the lack of control people really have over their lives, despite their belief in the American value of the “manifestation of one’s own destiny”.
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