

# Manon Sophie Euler:

## Reel hero vs real failure: an analysis of Nicolas Winding Refn's treatment of masculinity

### RESUMÉ

Denne artikel fremstiller og behandler de ambivalente dynamikker, der præger den fremstilling og forståelse af maskulinitet, som er et tilbagevendende tema i Nicolas Winding Refns film. Med udgangspunkt i de dele af genrefilmteori, der omhandler det subversive og kritiske potentiale i genrefilm, diskuteres her indflydelsen fra bestemte 'maskuline genrer': action, skrækfilm, gangsterfilm, og film noir. De ideologiske spændinger, som er at finde i Refns film, når han oscillerer mellem fejring og destabilisering af maskuline arketyper, bliver følgende fremvist og undersøgt igennem tre af hans værker: *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, og *Bleeder*.

### ABSTRACT

This article analyses Nicolas Winding Refn's cinema, exposing and exploring the ambivalent dynamics pervading his treatment and understanding of masculinity. Basing my analysis on a branch of genre film theory that looks into the subversive and critical potential of genre cinema, I discuss the influence of specific 'male genres': action, horror, gangster movie, and film noir. The ideological tension that inhabits Refn's cinema, as he oscillates between celebration and destabilisation of the male archetype, is then explored through three of his films: *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *Bleeder*

### EMNEORD

Maskulinitet, genrefilm, 'maskuline genrer'.

### KEYWORDS

Masculinity, genre cinema, 'male genre'.

## Introduction

In this article, I wish to shed light on the intrinsic ambivalence of Nicolas Winding Refn's work by considering the paradoxical dynamics of celebration and destabilization of the male archetype across his body of work and within the generic frames that shape his cinematic universe. In the first part, I consider how specific 'male genres' – the action film, the gangster movie, film noir, and horror – have influenced and shaped Refn's work. Basing my observations on a tradition in genre film theory that looks into the subversive and auto-critical potential of genre cinema, I explore how, beyond the gendered rhetoric that pervades such texts, these genres may in fact offer more equivocal representations of masculinity.

In the second part, I focus on *Drive* (2011) and *Only God Forgives* (2013), two films that denote the ideological tension inherent to Refn's work, as he navigates between an apology for the heroic, manly hero (*Drive*) and the brutal representation of its demise (*Only God Forgives*). Drawing upon the work of Robin Wood (1977, 80), I argue that the masculine ideal portrayed by Refn is "inherently riddled with hopeless contradictions and irresolvable tensions": there is a back and forth between and within his films, from the celebration of a normative, hegemonic masculinity to the recognition of the limits of such an ideology through the de(con)struction of the male hero. This dialectical conflict finds echoes in Richard Dyer's (1987, 12) comment that the traditional values of masculinity have become "harder to maintain straight-facedly and unproblematically" in contemporary societies, in the wake of de-industrialization, the rise of the third sector, the consequent decline of traditionally masculine work, and a climate of contestation of male hegemony and its patriarchal structures. In this context, an unquestioning reading of the hegemonic male is harder to defend, leading to a proliferation of more precarious images of maleness onscreen and to a more critically minded reading of the gender stereotypes of genre cinema. With this in mind, I conclude with Refn's second feature, *Bleeder* (1999), a film that offers insight into the director's view of masculinity. Refn's depiction of four end-of-the-millennium action flick aficionados struggling with their manhood provides the basis for a "discussion on genre" (Pell 2011, 262-285), its pleasures, and its limitations by shedding light on the painful discrepancy between the appealing but unrealistic and archaic model of maleness of genre cinema and men's actual experiences of manhood in contemporary reality.

## I. Masculinity in genre cinema

With the exception of his latest feature, *The Neon Demon* (2016),<sup>1</sup> Refn has predominantly portrayed male protagonists evolving in violent, male-dominated environments. A look at his body of work evidences the influence of the gangster film (the *Pusher* trilogy), film noir (*Drive*, *Fear X*), and action subgenres such as the prison movie (*Bronson*), the martial arts film (*Only God Forgives*), and the Viking genre (*Valhalla Rising*), while recurring aesthetic and thematic patterns hint at Refn's affinity with a cinema of horror and violence. Because these genres conventionally rely on archetypal representations of maleness (the stoic, potent, macho hero), criticisms of the monolithic nature and repressiveness of these texts have been addressed. 1970s feminist film theorists Laura Mulvey (1975) and Marjorie Rosen (1973) have denounced the pervasive misogyny of genre cinema's rhetoric and its hegemonic male gaze. Molly Haskell (1987) has denounced the under-representation of women in genres ranging from the western to science fiction. What's more, the idea(l) of masculinity put forward in these films has been called out for forcing unrealistic and frustrating models of manhood onto male audiences (Deakin 2012). Refn's genre-infused films and violent, male-dominated plots have similarly been criticized for portraying cliché-ridden and conservative figures of virility, with *Only God Forgives* (2013) notably labelled by a critic as being "a shit macho fantasy."<sup>2</sup>

Yet further research into the structures, functions, meanings, and politics of pleasure at work in genre cinema have pointed to the complex nature of those texts, evidencing how their gender representations and discourses may be more subversive than they at first appear. Barbara Klinger (1984), drawing upon Louis Althusser's work on the epistemological status of Art, has demonstrated the progressive potential of 1940s melodrama and 1970s horror film: Art provides "a spectacle" and "an auto-critique of the ideology in which it is held" by "elucidat[ing] its presence and activity" through a movement of internal distancing (Althusser 1971, 241). Similarly, Jean Loup Bourget (1973, 69) notes that genre's "conventionality is the very paradoxical

<sup>1</sup>*The Neon Demon* tells of the ascension of a young wannabe model, whose arrival in LA kindles other models' jealousy, desire, and obsession.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.hollywood-elsewhere.com/2013/05/stink-in-the-morning-air/>

reason for its creativity” as it makes room for “implicit meaning” and “subtle irony.” Film theorists have also investigated the status and representations of maleness in genre cinema to consider how these frames may lend themselves to more problematic interpretations of manhood. Since the mark of these generic frameworks is a recurrent feature across Refn’s cinema, his use of the action, horror, film noir, and gangster genres may be analysed in light of such studies in order to reach a better understanding of masculinity in his work.

### *The action genre*

In her analysis of the action film, Yvonne Tasker (1993) sheds light on the ambivalent dialectic of power and powerlessness at work within the genre’s seemingly simplistic imagery of the potent, active male body. She brings nuance to the common conception that action films invariably introduce men as active subjects and women as passive objects, showing instead how the action male can fulfil both the position of the subject/‘looking at’ and of the object/‘looked at’. The voyeuristic and fetishistic modes of looking denounced by Laura Mulvey (1975) as dominantly male and heterosexual are nuanced by Steve Neale (1993, 20), who argues that these modes can also be oriented by a homosexual gaze, turning the male body into an object of homoerotic fixation and pleasure. In *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, *Bronson*, and *Valhalla Rising*, Refn finds inspiration in the action genre’s “appealing if unrealistic models of male power” (Kendrick 2009, 90): Bronson’s hypermuscular body is reminiscent of the 1980s action movie, Chang’s agile body echoes the Eastern film tradition, and One-Eye’s ripped physique is rooted in the peplum. Despite the pervasive homoerotic aesthetic, the “submission of the male [figures] as an object to the camera” (Pfeil 1995), there is a tension between the protagonists’ power and its constant negation (Tasker’s power/powerlessness paradigm), making for an ambiguous representation of the male body. In *Bronson* (2008), the extreme virility and ‘action man’ quality of the protagonist is undermined and destabilized by the state of absolute passivity and powerlessness in which the character finds himself, whether he is confined behind the bars of a prison cell, held down and shackled up, or constrained by a straitjacket in a psychiatric ward. The homoerotic value of the prison environment is further exploited to objectify and sexualize the figure: covered in blood or paint, Bronson is often displayed naked and striking poses, his statuesque body turned into “pure spectacle” (Taskers 1993) under the fearful and desiring

gaze of his jailers. The presentation of the action male as erotic spectacle is also an important motif in *Drive*: In several sequences, the narrative flow is interrupted to allow the camera to linger on the Driver's body while dimmed lights and dampened sound participate in eroticising the character's every step and move.

### *Film noir*

Issues of masculinity in film noir have been studied at length (Krutnik 1991): The figure of the femme fatale has been famously pinned as a projection of male anxiety in response to women's progressive emancipation after WWII (Maxfield 1996). The new principles of modern society and the concomitant questioning of men's dominant status has led to a necessary but difficult reworking of masculine experience (Chopra-Grant 2006), which comes across in the loneliness and psychological vulnerability of the male hero. The non-linear and unreliable nature of the plot further hints at film noir's concern with men's loss of control. Control is indeed a defining factor of the social and cultural construction of masculinity and its pervasive absence in film noir speaks of male trauma (Bainbridge & Yates 2005). In *Drive*, Refn resorts to an explicitly neo-noir aesthetic (Haastrup 1999, 108), but it is in *Fear X* that he exploits the genre's narrative structure: Male trauma is explored through Harry, a lonely security guard trying to uncover the truth about his wife's murder. The elliptical temporality and the focus on Harry's subjective perspective makes it difficult to follow the events as they unfold and mirror his confused state of mind and lack of control. Harry's obsessive (if not hysterical) search for the truth is a means of clinging to a fiction of self-hood and masculinity that is eventually denounced as a fantasy and a fallacy (Bainbridge & Yates 2005, 304-308): For a while, his investigation gives him a sense of purpose, but the emptiness of his quest is eventually exposed when the truth about his wife's death is covered up and made out to be the result of Harry's temporary madness and desperation.

### *The gangster genre*

In her work on the gangster film, Fran Mason underscores the correlation between the dramatic tensions central to the genre and the gangster's manhood. More specifically, in "post-modern" occurrences of the genre,

Mason (2003) notes a tendency to portray the gangster as an emasculated and alienated subject. These “loserr[s] at the margin” (Mason 2003, 136) are impeded by deterministic forces (class, ethnicity, race) that keep them down at the bottom of the social ladder: The hero’s obsession with consumption (Wilson 2014), his macho rhetoric and violent behaviour are ways of preserving a fragile sense of virility. In the *Pusher* trilogy, Refn similarly portrays low-life thugs stuck at the bottom of the social ladder and unable to break the vicious cycle in which they find themselves. While they endorse the macho attitudes and homo-social rules of their group, their misogynistic, homophobic, and racist discourse are exposed as a defence mechanism that reveals their economic and sexual insecurities. In *Pusher II*, Tony’s macho bravado is exposed in a particularly humiliating sequence: standing stark naked in the middle of a cheap motel room, the young man fails to get an erection in front of two prostitutes. Throughout the scene, Tony’s bare body is framed between the two women, lying in bed and staring at him in disdain, and a TV screen on which the fully erect penis of a porn actor can be seen in full shot. The discrepancy between the young man’s wounded virility and the sexual prowess of the porn star is conveyed through the composition of the scene, to signify Tony’s struggle to live up to the expectations attached to his sex.

Humiliated, Tony eventually gives up and leaves, after telling the prostitutes to lie about his poor performance. He then goes into town and ends up stealing a Ferrari from a man withdrawing cash at an ATM. Tony’s theft can be understood as a way of redeeming himself after his previous humiliation. Indeed, the car conveys an idea of material success and wealth that appeals to the gangster’s lust for consumption (Wilson 2014, 3) and manly pride, in a society in which such values are staples of masculinity. But Tony is once again painfully reminded of the unbridgeable gap between who he yearns to be (a successful, potent man with an expensive car) and who he is (a penniless hoodlum with erectile dysfunction) when he is eventually forced by his abusive father to give back the car.

*Bloody bodies: male suffering and the aesthetic of horror and violence in Refn’s cinema*

The horror film has been subjected to numerous criticisms due to the pervasive misogyny of its representation and treatment of women (Kendrick

2009, 84). Nevertheless, its progressive and even subversive potential has also been advanced. In her study of the slasher genre, Carol Clover considers the gender issues explored by the genre and sheds lights on the bisexual mode of spectatorship allowed by the male monster/female victim paradigm. In his writings on horror films, Robin Wood underscores the capacity of the genre to unveil and exhibit the tensions, anxieties, and preoccupations – sexuality, otherness., etc. – that our societies and cultures tend to carefully silence (the “return of the repressed” (Wood 2003)). While Refn’s work may not seem as explicitly informed by horror as by the genres mentioned above, his love for such films is no secret.<sup>3</sup> Elements in his work suggest how horror may have influenced his aesthetic as well as the way in which he treats and represents the body (specifically, the male body) as a site of suffering and abjection. The body is a major “locus of horror” (Williams 1995, 162), and its representation “besides itself” is a recurring spectacle in Refn’s film, which abounds with images of penetrated and disembowelled bodies, enucleated eyes, and smashed skulls. In *Only God Forgives*, Chang crucifies Krystal’s henchman to a chair before proceeding to pierce his eyes and ears and cut out his tongue. In *Pusher III*, Milo empties the inside of a dead man hanging from the ceiling into a bucket before dismembering him with a chainsaw. The spectacle of the male body penetrated, ripped open, and turned inside out functions as a reminder of the vulnerability and permeability of the body. What’s more, the phallic nature of the tools used to penetrate the male body (from the needles stuck in Bronson’s buttocks by a horde of doctors to Chang’s blades) pose a threat to “acceptable forms of [male] subjectivity and sociality” (Kristeva 1969, 101-102) and to the figure’s masculinity (where masculinity is understood as necessarily heterosexual). The *repression* of homosexuality as a sexual taboo (Wood 2003) is exposed in these *ob-scene* depictions of male penetration.

These perspectives on masculinity in genre call for a different reading of Refn’s films: Many elements in his work suggest an ambivalent relationship with the male ideal that he appears to praise without question. In her analysis of the horror genre, Rhona Berenstein goes beyond the aporia between the denunciation of the repressive mechanisms of genre cinema and the defence of its critical potential. Instead, she claims that the genre is “a site of

<sup>3</sup><http://www.indiewire.com/2016/09/james-franco-interviews-nicolas-winding-refn-neon-demon-1201730026>

ideological contradiction and negotiation” that cannot be considered as “either politically progressive or conservative” (Berenstein 1996, 10). Extending her comments to the aforementioned ‘male genres’, I argue that Refn’s cinema cannot simply be reduced to a conservative, “shit macho fantasy”, nor can it be labelled as decidedly and consciously progressive. His work instead shows a tension between these two poles, as he operates a back and forth between celebration and rejection of the hegemonic male archetype. I now consider how this conflicting depiction of masculinity comes in play *between* his films, through a brief comparative analysis of *Drive* (2011) and *Only God Forgives* (2013). These films can be understood as a diptych because they exhibit narrative and stylistic similarities and because the main characters of both films are interpreted by actor Ryan Gosling.

## II. *Drive* and *Only God Forgives*: a comparative study

In *Ideology, Genre, Auteur*, Robin Wood (1977) elaborates a list of values (wealth, family, progress, etc.) that are rooted in American capitalist ideology and are recurrent patterns of classical Hollywood cinema. He demonstrates how these concepts pertain to an ideology that, “far from being monolithic,” is in fact “inherently riddled with hopeless contradictions and irresolvable tensions” (Wood 1977, 80). For instance, ideals of manhood and womanhood (the successful man and the docile wife) are pillars of capitalist ideology and common motifs of genre cinema yet are dialectically bound up with their ‘negative’ (the boring, settled man and the erotic woman). These opposing presences enrich the generic text with tensions and contradictions that originate *from* the very ideological assumption postulated by the text. For Jacques Derrida, any word, concept, or value necessarily contains its positive and its opposite: This dualism arises from the fact that our knowledge and understanding of the world is based on a binary logic of oppositions: male/female, nature/culture, body/mind (Derrida 1967, 1978). Even if one term or value is often privileged over the other, as it is the case with ideologies, it only exists in relation to its antithesis. In this sense, masculine ideology and the values for which it stands (strength, independence, assertiveness) always coexist with the threat of their negation and/or opposition.

Drawing upon Wood and Derrida, I consider how the ideology of masculinity that Refn advances in his films is also ridden with contradictions: There is a



dialectical conflict between the celebration of a certain ideology of maleness and its calling into question. The male protagonists of *Drive* and *Only God Forgives* are two diametrically opposed takes on maleness that epitomize this conflict: Driver is the embodiment of the male hero, while Julian (*Only God Forgives*) stands as its emasculated nemesis. At the press conference for *The Neon Demon* in Cannes,<sup>4</sup> Refn himself noted that with *Drive*, he had “reached a height of male masculinity to the extent of homoeroticism,” whereas “*Only God Forgives* is about emasculation and crawling back into the womb.” This antagonism emerges in the ways in which Julian and the Driver are – within a similar structure and set of patterns – physically and psychologically depicted, framed, and treated in oppositional terms.

*Of silence and endurance: the testing of the hero*

Writing about violence and the body in action and horror movies, Anne Jerslev (1996, 39-53) notes that, in action films, the body is defined by its hardness, its impenetrability, and its “almost unlimited ability to resist violence.” Similarly, in *Drive*, the Driver is presented as a hard, “alert” figure who defeats his enemies one after the other, while remaining almost always “intact” (Jerslev 1996, 43). The hero is only wounded once, but he promptly recovers from his injury. This temporary destabilization is an integral part of the “testing of the hero” (Smith 1995, 18). The hero must be destroyed before he can re-emerge even stronger than before. While Refn scrupulously follows this narrative structure in *Drive*, in *Only God Forgives*, the testing of the hero is altered: The consecutive beatings heaped upon Julian do not find resolution in his ultimate redemption and “revitalization” (Smith 1995). Instead, the young man is rendered powerless by all the suffering and humiliation he had undergone, and he ultimately capitulates, to find deliverance in death. Silence is also an important aspect of the action hero’s stoic persona: Indeed, “the muscular body is the only argument [...] no matter how much the hero talks (Jerslev 1996, 42). Founding his analysis in Lacan’s work, Steve Neale (1993, 12) further relates the hero’s silence to the problematic status of language: the acquisition of language is perceived as a “symbolic castration” because language is a “set of processes involving absence and lack” that threatens “the image of the [male] self as totally enclosed, self-sufficient, omnipotent.” A

<sup>4</sup>[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOT0jMB\\_GL8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOT0jMB_GL8)

truly convincing male hero must therefore be a man of action and a man of few words. Both the Driver and Julian are stoic, silent figures, but their impassive demeanours take on quite different meanings. In *Drive*, the hero's silence is presented as integral to his composed, virile, mythical persona. But in *Only God Forgives*, Julian's silence appears to be the result of his fundamental powerlessness, as he submissively puts up with all sorts of verbal and physical abuse, unable to speak out.

#### *Love and romantic relationships*

The platonic relationship between the Driver and Irene echoes that of the knight and the damsel in distress found in medieval writings. Irene, the fair-haired, innocent single mother, is an actualized yet conservative figure of womanhood, in line with the traditional values of her sex (the gentle, motherly figure). The Driver is the contemporary version of the knight in shining armour (now a white and gold motor jacket with a scorpion 'coat of arms' festooned on the back) full of pure intentions and willing to sacrifice everything to save the 'princess'. The love story of *Only God Forgives* emerges as a distorted version of the first couple: Julian is entangled in unrequited love with Mai, the 'exotic prostitute', who seems to feel nothing but scorn for him. Their romance is undermined by the one-sided nature of their sexual encounters: early on in the film, Julian is seen sitting on a chair, his hands tied up, staring at Mai masturbating on a bed. Later, we see him fingering her behind a curtain of beads, his hand slowly 'disappearing' beneath her dress. In both sequences, Mai's pleasure prevails over Julian's, whose distraught expression evokes frustration rather than pleasure. While Mai is a sexually saturated character who takes her pleasure in her own – and Julian's – hands, she is never seen engaging in a sexual activity with him, and Julian is consistently presented as a passive observer. Klinger (1984, 93-109) understands the representation of women's sexuality in genre as an expression of men's fear of castration. Similarly, Mai's sexual agency and pleasure can be understood as a trigger for Julian's feelings of insufficiency and a threat to his masculinity. The bondage imagery and the representation of the vagina as a mysterious, hidden place that 'swallows' the hero's hand (a symbol of potency and a phallic metaphor) seem to illustrate such comments. In contrast, *Drive* provides a reassuring image of a hetero-normative, conservative, (white) femininity that does not threaten the hero's phallic

power but further grounds it within the active/passive paradigm. Indeed, Irene is a passive and expectant figure, a fact made obvious in the elevator scene, in which the Driver suddenly pushes her against the wall and kisses her (before beating a man to death), while she remains totally still and powerless under his embrace.

*The brother horde: male hierarchy and conflicts*

Male interactions in *Drive* and *Only God Forgives* are a source of conflict, as various masculine figures attempt to prove their superiority over the protagonists. These phallic struggles are understood by Justin Vicari (2014) in light of Freud's notion of the "brother horde" (Freud 1922). The horde consists of a group of males who stand united against external authority and are fighting for dominance. However, internal conflicts occur within the group, as each male strives to take leadership. Similarly, the Driver's and Julian's relationships with other men are ridden with tension, as demonstrated by the phallic competition opposing the Driver to Standard and Julian to his older brother Billy.

In *Drive*, Irene's husband, the aptly named Standard, stands as a foil for the Driver. He is a thug and a negligent man who consistently fails to live up to his role as a father and husband. While he is doing time in prison, it is the Driver who takes over as a substitute father and lover. When Standard is released, he comes back to claim his rightful place, only to realize that the Driver has been surpassing him in every possible way. During a dinner scene, Standard attempts – and fails – to reassert his position as the dominant figure of the *agon*: As a token of his 'gratitude' for looking after Irene and their son, Standard invites the Driver to the family dinner table. There, officiating in the middle, he seeks to put the Driver back in his place by recalling the story of how he met Irene. But instead, his anecdote exposes the power imbalance between the two men even further: His first encounter with a then 16-year old Irene ended with the young woman answering his advances by asking about the existence of a "Deluxe version" (a witty pun based on Standard's name). The punch line of Standard's story is then followed by a shot of Irene, glancing at the Driver, which suggests that Irene has found the Deluxe version in the Driver, a fact that Standard is painfully made aware of when he is beaten up by men to whom he owes money in front of his son and is forced to ask the Driver for help.

In contrast, in *Only God Forgives*, it is Julian who is presented as the stooge of his older brother Billy, the hyper-masculine alpha male. Following Billy's brutal murder, Krystal, their overbearing mother, demands that Julian avenge the death of her first and favourite son. Unwillingly, but with the hope of finally earning his mother's respect, Julian decides to find and kill Billy's murderer. But as he fails, Krystal's scorn for her second-born intensifies: No matter what Julian does, he is constantly being compared to his older brother, making it impossible for him to live up to his mother's expectations. In one particularly humiliating sequence, Krystal undermines Julian's virility in front of Mai, his love interest: Officiating at a restaurant table between the two lovers, she tells Mai how, although Julian's penis was "never small," that of her first born had always been positively "huge." Not only do these comments reveal the incestuous nature of the mother-son(s) relationship, but they further expose the precariousness of Julian's manhood. Furthermore, this scene mirrors the dinner scene in *Drive*. Like Standard, Julian is presented as the lesser man, who will never be able to live up to his manly nemesis, no matter how hard he tries.



Commercial posters for *Only God Forgives* and *Drive*: the perfect hero, in control at the wheel of his car, versus the humiliated male, his face swollen after a beating.

This brief analysis lays bare some of the contradictions and ambiguities in Refn's portrayal of maleness: While the Driver is the very embodiment of "the

man we all aspire to be,"<sup>5</sup> Julian systematically fails to live up to the expectations bound to his sex. This back and forth between the celebration of the male ideal and the staging of his demise shows the inherent tensions that extend throughout Refn's work. Elements *within* his films also suggest such a dialectical tension: While Refn presents the Driver as "the male we all aspire to be," he also notes that "he wasn't meant to live in the real world." He is a 'reel man', the embodiment of a certain idea(l) of maleness.<sup>6</sup> This ontological impossibility comes across through the strategies of de-realization of the character: The Driver is a nameless, rootless, and limitless hero, a figure without a past and deprived of a future. This lack of delineation is what enables the figure's completeness and prevents contradictions from arising and qualifying his heroic quality. The same dynamic of abstraction can be observed with One-Eye in *Valhalla Rising* and Chang in *Only God Forgives*: The former is a nameless, mute warrior set in a mythical time-space, while the second is presented as "a disembodied character, an 'it', defined not by his name but solely by his image,"<sup>7</sup> staged in the exotic foreignness of Bangkok. These representative strategies suggest that the presentation of a convincing male hero is, in Refn's cinema, tied to the staging of his impossibility: The masculine archetype is celebrated, but he is also exposed as a mere fantasy, an abstract ideal. Against these mythical males, Refn portrays defeated, flawed men like Julian, the hoodlums of the *Pusher* trilogy, and the widower of *Fear X*, who are fleshed out to become believable and more accurate illustrations of a realistic and therefore imperfect manhood.

### III. Discussing masculinity and genre in *Bleeder*

Refn's second feature, *Bleeder* (1999), interestingly articulates these two antagonistic takes on maleness. In so doing, the film offers a broader perspective on Refn's cinema and his understanding of the masculine ideal. Whereas his other films are *shaped by* the male genres discussed earlier, *Bleeder* critically *reflects upon* the pleasures and limitations of such texts, which is

<sup>5</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/sep/08/nicolas-winding-refn-interview>

<sup>6</sup><http://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/interview-nicolas-winding-refn-and-the-search-for-a-real-hero/>

<sup>7</sup><http://www.firstshowing.net/2013/refns-statement-on-only-god-forgives-compares-to-his-past-films/>

symptomatic of the context in which his work originates: Over the past five decades, the public questioning of “normative masculinity” (Robinson 2000, 2) in the face of modernity’s principles (MacInnes 1998, 11) and the consequent obsolescence of the historical perception and positioning of maleness (McCray 2006) has made it difficult to provide a straightforward and assertive reading of masculinity onscreen. As a result, from the late 1960s onwards, films have tended to show increasingly lacking and troubled figures of manhood: the male body is violated in *Deliverance* (Boorman 1972), and the action hero is masochistic and suicidal in *Lethal Weapon* (Donner 1987). The resurgence of the film noir aesthetic in Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976) and Shrader’s *American Gigolo* (1980) illustrates the feeling of alienation of the modern male. 2000s thrillers like *Fight Club* (Fincher 2000) and *Memento* (Nolan 2000) portray men in a state of physical and psychological crisis.<sup>8</sup> In parallel, a more self-aware and critical use of genre conventions such as gender representations is observed (Kendrick 2009, 101). Genre cinema tends to become less of an “example of genre” and more of a “discussion on genre” (Pell 2011, 262-285) in which the ideological inconsistencies and paradoxes that pervade genre cinema can be enunciated.

With *Bleeder*, Refn lays the groundwork for a discussion of the problematic discrepancy between *reel* and real masculinity. The film tells the story of a group of “testosterone-fuelled young men” (Vicari 2014, 69) struggling with their manhood. The story is set in the late 1990s, at a time when traditional male values are being renegotiated. Lenny is a most-likely-to-be-a-virgin, nerdy salesclerk who finds it difficult to talk to women. Leo is an infertile cuckold, suspicious of his girlfriend’s pregnancy and terrified of becoming a father. As for Louis, he is an angry, low-life male whose chauvinistic rhetoric and violent behaviour are symptomatic of a deeper malaise. The three men, along with their friend Kitjo, gather in a cinema to watch action flicks in order to escape the economic problems and social frustrations of the outside world. The mighty hero kindles their admiration and allows them to indulge in narcissistic fantasies of identification. Yet the pleasure they find in these images of virility is undermined by the recognition of the discrepancy between this ideal, generic masculinity and their own, actual experience of

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<sup>8</sup>I will not comment upon the debate over the legitimacy or spuriousness of the ‘male crisis cinema’ and whether it is prompted by a masculinist, nostalgic, and conservative agenda, to merely observe the way in which the crisis is treated through images of traumatized figures. On the subject, see: Robinson (2000, 10-11) and Bainbridge & Yates (2005, 299-318).

manhood. In this regard, Christian Metz (1975) understands the act of viewing a film and the pleasure one takes in it as being intrinsically bound up with the experience of a lack: the spectator as “voyeur” pursues “an imaginary object [...] that has been lost and is desired as such” (Metz 1975, 59): These ‘objects’ offered by cinema are images that conjure up completeness and stability (like that of the male hero) but are acknowledged by the voyeur/spectator as pure fantasies. Therefore, the search for the object is tied to recognition of its absence. Similarly, when Leo, Lenny, and Louis watch action flicks, they believe in the appealing, unified images of virility before their eyes but are also painfully aware that such images are pure fictions and fantasies and that no matter how hard they try, they cannot live up to such an ideal.

During a movie screening, Leo suddenly stands up to threaten Louis with a gun, in an attempt to assert dominance over his best friend/rival, who he suspects to be the father of his soon-to-be-born child. The framing of the young man standing in the middle of the room, his back to the screen, on which an action figure is shot in close-up, hints at his desire to fill the shoes of the action male. But his performance fails to convince his friends: While they are at first taken aback by Leo’s move, they ultimately do not take him seriously and instead ask him to sit down so they can continue watching the film. Leo eventually lowers his gun and, in a joking tone, unwillingly admits that the gun shoots blanks. His words are an ironic echo to Louis’ earlier comments about his friend’s suspected infertility (“So you don’t shoot blanks after all?”). His failed performance is symptomatic of an end-of-the-millennium cinema filled with “unconvincing performance[s] of masculinity” (Robinson 2010): The scene exposes the discrepancy between the ideal but impossible ‘reel’ male and the real men who are struggling (and failing) to live up to such a standard.

In contrast with Leo’s and Louis’ chauvinistic and aggressive behaviour, Lenny enacts a more moderate and appropriate kind of maleness as well as a symptomatic figure of his time: The nerdy film buff – Refn’s fictional alter ego – is a sensitive, quiet, non-hero-like figure. Even though he is the least traditionally virile male of the trio, he is nonetheless presented as the only positive and ultimately successful figure of manhood left in the end. Beyond any eventual criticism of Refn’s self-indulgence (Lenny’s character is clearly inspired by Refn himself), Lenny is an interesting example of a type whose

manhood is not as actively informed by the masculine ideal of genre cinema, in spite of the admiration he feels towards such figures. Through him, Refn tells of his fascination with the male hero, while acknowledging the limitations and inadequacy of such a figure in the real world. Whereas Leo and Louis actively rip each other apart in the name of an obsolete vision of masculinity of which they cannot let go, Lenny's admiration for the generic hero remains that of a passive spectator since he does not seek to act out the masculine ideology for which the figure stands. His romantic happy ending contrasts with Leo's and Louis' dramatic ending, in which they both infect each other with AIDS (a symbolically charged, stigmatizing disease) before killing one another. The two young men's failure comes from their inability to accept that, as with the Driver, "the male [they] aspire to be" is "not meant to live in the real world." Unlike his friends, Lenny does not try to be a hero. Lenny endorses the position of a spectator who indulges in the unsettling and fetishistic pleasure offered by the sight of the generic male while – more or less reluctantly – acknowledging that he is not and eventually cannot be that kind of a hero himself. The all-mighty male archetype he admires so much is incompatible with the reality of the modern world, and his shy, less macho self ends up representing a more desirable and appropriate kind of masculinity.

## **Conclusion**

With this article, I have sought to present and explore some of the more complex dynamics at work in Refn's films, to go beyond an understanding of his cinema as a mere "shit macho fantasy" filled with one-sided, conservative representations of manhood. I have looked at how specific genres – film noir, the gangster film, the action movie, and horror – have shaped and influenced his cinematic universe. Basing my analysis on a branch of film theory that looks into the progressive and subversive potential of genre cinema, I have suggested ways in which these seemingly monolithic, conservative 'male genres' – and by extension, Refn's films – may lend themselves to more complex interpretations, notably with regards to their representations and treatment of masculinity. Extending Berenstein's (1996, 10) comments on the inherent "ideological contradiction and negotiation" of horror cinema to the violence-ridden, male-dominated genres so dear to Refn, I have argued that his work is neither purposely misogynistic nor decidedly progressive. Rather,



his cinema shows a tension between the representation of a certain ideal of masculinity (the hegemonic, stoic, potent male archetype) and its rejection through the staging of its demise. With *Drive* and *Only God Forgives*, Refn stages two similar yet diametrically opposed figures of manhood, in which the Driver is the epitome of a *reel* but ultimately unrealistic hero and Julian is a degraded, emasculated, yet more realistic version. This back and forth between the celebration and de(cons)truction of masculine ideology finds further meaning in Refn's second feature, *Bleeder*. This film is key to understanding Refn's relationship with genre and masculinity as well as symptomatic of an end-of-the-millennium cinema populated with troubled, traumatized men. *Bleeder* provides the basis for a critical discussion on the pleasures and limitations of genre cinema through the story of three young men who are struggling with their manhood and must accept that the masculine ideal to which they aspire is not only pure fantasy but also a figure that is fundamentally incompatible with modernity's new principles.

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