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Introduction

Like many filmmakers, Nicolas Winding Refn has repeatedly returned to the image of the compromised eye. As evidenced by the infamous Odessa Steps sequence in Sergei Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin*, which ends with the image of a woman's right eye shot out through her eyeglasses, and also by the slicing of the eyeball in the prologue of Buñuel and Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou*, the cinematic destruction of the eye has become strikingly iconic due to its visceral effect upon the film spectator's physical state as well as its effect upon their symbolic or fetishistic desires. The eye is, after all, necessary to *be* a spectator at all, and the onscreen loss of the eye creates the sympathetic loss of the audience's status as spectators, and, more importantly, the loss of their scopophilic ability to enjoy their fetish for onscreen sex and violence. By exploiting the natural discomfort and disgust produced by these types of images and then situating them within an aesthetic and psychoanalytic framework, Refn and other filmmakers provide a visual showcase for a unique type of cinematic violence inspired by films noir and their progeny, one which demands that viewers reappraise the value of their own eyes as they utilize them to watch the destruction of the eyes onscreen.

In this article, I show how the image of the lost eye also frames Refn's poetically conflicted narratives about justice, law enforcement, and the police, narratives which are remarkably unlike other so-called 'crime dramas' or 'dirty/rogue cop' films because no other institutions or procedures of justice are depicted: we see no courtrooms, lawyers, or judges, which are all places and agents in which justice is idealized as blind, impartial, and unbiased. Working both within and without various film noir-inspired genres, Refn's camera depicts criminal underworlds driven by justice *as* violence, primarily in the form of revenge, without giving any consideration to the possibility of justice *or* violence, which the Roman goddess Justitia promises by balancing the scales on the one hand, and enforcing justice by the sword with the other. While this ancient symbol is not mimetically static—some depiction show her

without her famous blindfold—she is, like Achilles' Shield, universally understood to represent the idea that procedural justice should prevail over revenge. As I will argue herein, Refn's own conception of justice tends towards a tacit tolerance of violent revenge, and discloses an 'eye' for justice that is just as compromised as the eyes of many of his characters (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Nicolas Winding Refn's eye. *Directors Talk: Nicolas Winding Refn* (Toby Amies, 2016). www.nowness.com/series/directors-talk/nicolas-winding-refn. Screen capture by author.

Although Refn's entire filmography is notorious for its violence, I focus upon his last five efforts: *Valhalla Rising* (2009), *Drive* (2011), *Only God Forgives* (2013), *Neon Demon* (2016) and his most recent work, the thirteen hour web television miniseries *Too Old to Die Young* (2019). These works fully embrace a *sui generis* retro-surrealist aesthetic that is first seen in 2008's *Bronson* but absent from the works that precede it, including the *Pusher* trilogy (1996-2005), *Fear X* (2003), and *Bleeder* (1999).

In Section I, *Violence in Film: A Brief Metaphysics*, I have three objectives: first, I try to determine what philosophy 'wants' from film; second, I generally explore Refn's persistent use of violence in his films; and third, I present an argument that, from a metaphysical perspective, there is no such thing as 'violence in film' insofar as 'violence in film' is a quantifiable object of investigation and research.

In Section II, *Neo(n) Noir: Genre, Theory, and Practice*, I deploy a detailed analysis of the introductory/title scenes from several of Refn's films in order to show his deep debt to the traditions and aesthetics of film noir, neo-noir, and neon-noir. These scenes prove that he practices both within and without those genres but also contributes to the alternative tradition of so-called 'critical crime' films, which are recognizable due to their moral ambiguity, institutional skepticism, and reliance on violence.

Section III, "A theme park of pain": *Violence, Revenge Tragedies, and Political Skepticism*, explores the noir subject of revenge in detail, comparing how the different filmic depictions of the avenger on the one hand and the vigilante on the other suggest different kinds of skepticism about police, punishment, and political authority. I will argue that through his films Refn discloses a deep distrust of institutionalized punishment as well as a denial that criminal justice in particular can be either blind or fair.

In Section IV, *Eye Violence, Aesthetics, Psychoanalysis*, I use the infamous eye violence scenes from *Battleship Potemkin* and *Un Chien Andalou* as the *loci classici* for the construction of a selective taxonomy of films which feature violent depictions of blinding, eye-gouging, eye removal, and other eye traumas. These scenes, I argue, draw upon both the Oedipal myth as well as the homily of 'blind justice' described in the preceding section. I then situate the trope of eye violence within an aesthetic theory viewed through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis. A brief conclusion is followed by a highly selective Appendix of Eye Violence Films.

I. Violence in Film: A Brief Metaphysics

In this section, I am interested in determining how to approach film in general, and Refn's films in particular, from a philosophical perspective. I then generally explore Refn's persistent use of violence in his films by introducing those most relevant to this study. Finally, I explore whether or not there is such a thing as 'violence in film' insofar as 'violence in film' is a quantifiable object of investigation and research.

First, a brief exposition of what, in the words of film philosopher D.N. Rodowick, philosophy *wants* from images such as those produced by films. "One thing that philosophy wants from images," Rodowick writes, "is to renew itself conceptually through deep engagement with novel forms of aesthetic experience."¹ These forms present themselves to us as images and include cinematic or moving images. Discussing the analogies between Stanley Cavell's assertion that "film is a moving image of skepticism" and Christian Metz's account of fetishism, Rodowick writes that "Cinematographic images are certainly found to be moving, that is, as inspiring affect or emotion. But they are also unsettling; they make us ontologically quiet. If film is a moving image of skepticism, it does not so much confirm our subjectivity (as modern for example) as shake our belief that we know the basis of our conviction in reality."²

As viewers of Refn's films are aware, his films are characterized by excessive violence, and considerations of space prohibit a full discussion of the varieties of disembowelings, beheadings, cannibalizations, acts of necrophilia, dismemberments, executions, throat-slittings, maimings, and blindings he has shown throughout his ten feature films and *Too Old to Die Young*, his thirteen-hour Amazon Prime miniseries. Some take place onscreen or *hors cadre* (offscreen), some might be justified as self-defense from a legal perspective, and many are the product of revenge-seeking on behalf of their perpetrators. Without exception, his films features violent conflict as major plot device. Most of them graphically depict a number of deaths, and all of them feature characters operating in a 'criminal underworld' peopled with assassins, killers, rogue cops, mafiosos, gamblers, and drug dealers.

As a preliminary matter, we might ask what philosophers want, or, in Rodowick's term, what philosophy itself wants, from the violent and bloody images and situations we see in Refn's films. We should ask this because, Rodowick writes, "No doubt every artistic image produces an image of thought, a physical tracing and expression of thought given sensual form, no matter how incoherent or inelegant."³ We should ask this because Refn's artistic images re-produce those images in us in physical and phenomenological form when we experience discomfort or disgust due to violence and gore. But, Rodowick warns, "The artist's Idea is not necessarily the philosopher's":

Images not only trace thoughts and produce affects; they may also provoke thinking and create new powers of thinking. In so doing, we are thrown from sensuous to abstract thought, from an image of a thought to a thought without image—this is the domain of philosophy. And in moving from one to the other, art may inspire philosophy to give form to new concepts.⁴

Philosophy and philosophers "turn to film to examine and clarify problems and concepts that are of concern to philosophy. Paradoxically, this means that a (film) philosophy is not necessarily a part of film studies; rather, it belongs to philosophy alone." Philosophy, Rodowick claims, "explains nothing about film. However, it might have a lot to say about

¹ David N. Rodowick, *What Philosophy Wants from Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 6.

² *Ibid.*, 39.

³ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

why and how film and arts matter to us, why we value them, and how we try to make sense of ourselves and the world with and through them.”⁵ Rodowick concludes that if there is something that constitutes the *truth* of the image, it “resides in its uncertainty, contingency, and becoming.”⁶ With these words in mind I shall attempt to understand the uncertain truths in Refn’s cinema of violence.

René Magritte and Michel Foucault remind us that a painting of a pipe “n'est pas une pipe.” And, by the same logic, depictions of violence are, of course, not violence. That being said, ‘violence in films’ in general has sustained substantial rebukes in the sociological, therapeutic, and criminological literature since the repealing of the Hays Code in 1968 led directly to the widely-studied “New Hollywood Violence” phenomenon.⁷ This phenomenon responds to claims (made primarily by social scientists) that violent media (including films, music, or video games) causes its consumers to engage in violent behavior. Responding in turn to these claims, film theorist Martin Barker argues that there is no such thing as ‘violence in film’ because violence is not capable of being an object of study. “Violence,” Barker writes, “is not an object which researchers have discovered, in the way that *Australopithecus* was discovered.” Rather, he continues, violence “is an arbitrary re-labeling of behaviors, and then also of representations of those behaviors, which in its very act of naming achieves a number of *political* ends.” Violence, he concludes, “is a social concept with a history—and into which the very films, television programs, and other materials which are accused of being a potent cause are deeply interwoven.”⁸

In philosophical terms, Barker argues that violence in general, and violence in film in particular, are not what Saul Kripke calls *natural kinds*.⁹ Unlike tigers and gold (things that exist in the natural world independent of human conceptualization), violence is a social construction, the study of which is significantly hampered by explicit and implicit biases inherent in human cultural differences, and specifically by the social and political vicissitudes which reveal purportedly ‘scientific’ empirical studies (such as surveys) to be merely assessments of preference satisfaction or specialized academic data-mining.

Barker proposes to eliminate violence as a conceptual category in part because media studies of violence have tended to focus on violence and its relationship to criminality, thereby excluding legal, state-sanctioned violence from consideration. With co-author Julian Petley, Barker emphatically writes, “*there is no such thing as ‘violence’ in the media which can have harmful—or beneficial—effects.*”¹⁰ Barker is incredulous that an uproar over ‘violence in the media’ persists, and that anyone takes seriously the claim that “cumulative, contextually-dissociated, generically-unbedded ‘images’ may have the power either to stimulate some kind of imitative behavior, or to desensitize viewers to the wrongness of what they are seeing.”¹¹ This is because violence, he concludes, is not an “abstractable unit whose presence can be counted and whose ‘influence’ can be studied.”¹²

Film theorist Jim Kendrick is less willing to discard the putative connection between film violence and real violence. “The implied semantic equivalency in using the term violence to

⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷ See, e.g., *New Hollywood Violence*, ed. Steven Jay Schneider (NY: Manchester University Press, 2004)

⁸ Martin Barker, “Violence Redux,” in *New Hollywood Violence*, ed. Steven Jay Schneider (NY: Manchester University Press, 2004), 57.

⁹ Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 116 *et seq.*

¹⁰ Martin Barker and Julian Petley, “Introduction,” in *Ill Effects: The Media/Violence Debate*, 2nd edition, ed. Martin Barker and Julian Petley (New York: Routledge, 2001), 2 (emphasis in original).

¹¹ Barker, “Violence Redux,” 67.

¹² Barker and Petley, “Introduction,” 3.

describe both actual events and their mediated representations suggests an inherent connection,” Kendrick writes, “and some would argue that film violence is a form of actual violence in that it can cause psychological distress and even act directly upon the body, causing revulsion, involuntary muscle spasms and even physical illness.”¹³ Thus, Kendrick argues in opposition to Barker, ‘violence in film’ is a proper object of study, and is “best understood as a perception, a label that is affixed to cinematic representations of certain behaviours and actions.” Film violence, he concludes, “is an elastic, sliding, flexible term, one that shifts and changes throughout history and across various cultures.”¹⁴ But concern over film violence is not necessarily due to its sudden emergence in theaters in the late 1960s. After all, Kendrick writes, “people have been shooting and stabbing and slaughtering each other onscreen since the movies began, and the only difference between then and now is that filmmakers have adopted and made conventional increasingly graphic means of depicting these violent behaviours.”¹⁵ This increase in graphic, violent realism, Kendrick writes,

is theoretically and practically complicated by all kinds of mediating factors, but violence complicates this even more because many, if not the majority of, viewers have never actually witnessed in real life the kind of violent actions that we routinely take for granted onscreen. We may perceive an image of a character being shot as realistic even if we have never actually seen someone shot in real life and therefore have no external criteria with which to make such a judgement. Paradoxically, the more stylistically enhanced the film violence is, the more realistic it often appears to audiences.¹⁶

Film violence is at its most powerful, Kendrick concludes, when it “involves a finely balanced interaction between style and viewer expectations.”¹⁷

Assuming that Barker’s admonitions are true, and that violence is not an “abstractable unit whose presence can be counted and whose ‘influence’ can be studied” from a social science perspective,¹⁸ Kendrick’s analysis is nevertheless closer to what film spectators experience phenomenologically when they are faced—quite literally—with onscreen violence: it can cause the viewer to experience discomfort and feelings of disgust, and violence that appears more realistic tends to intensify these experiences. Refn’s films, for example, are notorious for their depictions of violence and brutal criminality. However, a substantial amount of film violence is never depicted onscreen, and it is both the presence and lack of onscreen violence that lends itself to the kind of psychoanalytically-informed film philosophy that is frequently used by crime films in general and films noir in particular.

II. Neo(n) Noir: Genre, Practice, Critique

According to Nicole Rafter, crime films “focus primarily on crime and its consequences,” but *crime film* itself is not a genre: rather, these films constitute a category that includes several genres such as “caper films, detective movies, gangster films, cop and prison movies, courtroom dramas” and the catch-all label of “crime stories.”¹⁹ In *My Life Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn*, a documentary covering the filming of *Only God Forgives*, Refn’s follow-up to his

¹³ Jim Kendrick, *Film Violence: History, Ideology, Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁹ Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Shots in the Dark: Crime Films and Society*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 7.

Cannes-winning 2011 film *Drive*, Refn is asked why he always makes movies about crime. Visibly annoyed by the question, he responds, “I don’t make movies about crime.” Notwithstanding his rather disingenuous reply, Refn’s films disclose his deep debt to the traditions and aesthetics of crime film subgenres including film noir, neo-noir, and neon-noir, all of which tend to treat crime and criminals as their central motifs. In this section, I take it as a given that Refn makes “movies about crime,” and engage in a detailed analysis of the introductory/title scenes from several of his films to show that he practices both within and without those established genres listed here. Finally, I show that Refn contributes to the alternative tradition of what Nicole Rafter calls *critical* crime films, which are recognized by their moral ambiguity and reliance on violence.

A. Genre

In his classic treatment of genre literature, Tzvetan Todorov discusses how the artist struggles against the magnetic pull of popularization which presents itself through the allure of making genre-specific mass art:

We might say that in art we are dealing with a language of which every utterance is agrammatical at the moment of its performance. More exactly, we grant a text the right to figure in the history of literature or of science only insofar as it produces a change in our previous notion of the one activity or another. Texts that do not fulfill this condition automatically pass into another category: that the so-called ‘popular’ or ‘mass’ literature in the one case; in the other, that of the academic exercise or unoriginal experiment. (Hence, the unavoidable comparison of the artisanal product, the unique example, on the one hand, and of mass production, the mechanical stereotype, on the other.)²⁰

For Todorov, only popular literature, including detective stories, serialized novels, science fiction, “would approach fulfilling the requirements of genre in the sense that the word has in natural science; for the notion of genre in that sense would be inapplicable to strictly literal texts.”²¹ Todorov’s analysis can, of course, be applied to any of the arts, including filmmaking, and Refn is not immune from it: he struggles, I think, with his status as an artist, engaged simultaneously in the production of Todorov’s “artisanal product, the unique example” as well as a genre film product such as *Drive*. Refn admits that his most popular film belongs to “the genre of L.A. noir and to this niche genre, which is called neon noir”²² and includes films produced from the late 1970s until the mid 1980s such as *The Driver* (Walter Hill, 1978), *To Live and Die in L.A.* (William Friedkin, 1985), and *Thief* (Michael Mann, 1981).

These films (film noir, neo-noir, and neon-noir) are characterized by several genre elements, most importantly:

- “Chiaroscuro for black and white films, intense or muted color in movies filmed in color (In either black and white or color, the technique is used to enhance the mood and/or the emotional content).
- Crime/planning a crime (usually—but not always—murder).
- The instrument of fate.

²⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 6.

²¹ Ibid.

²² “Cannes Q. and A.: Driving in a Noir L.A.” May 22, 2011. <https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/22/cannes-q-and-a-driving-in-a-noir-l-a/> (accessed February 11, 2020).

- Angst (for example, guilt, fear, self-doubt, confusion, and so on; in other words, anything that contributes to angst).
- Violence or the threat of violence.
- Urban and nighttime settings.
- Philosophical themes (existentialism in particular) involving alienation, loneliness.
- Betrayal.
- No stark contrast between “good” and “evil” (characters, forces, emotion, and so on).²³

“Crime/planning a crime (usually—but not always—murder)” and “violence or the threat of violence” are frequently the central themes in films noir where, R. Barton Palmer writes, “death is always possible, often likely, and its forms are unpredictable, unexpected, and terrifying.”²⁴ On the other hand, in the police procedural, “violent death may be present, but it is viewed from outside, from the point of view of the institution whose task it is to detect crime and deliver evildoers to justice.” In the truly noir film, “crime is seen from the inside, from the perspective of the criminal or violator who must suffer the horrible consequences of breaking the law.” The noir film, Palmer continues, also represents the police or legitimate society as “inherently corrupt, no better, morally speaking, than the criminals who oppose them.”²⁵ Because “Violence and moral ambiguity, as well as murky character and action, create the effect of film noir,” the noir film typically ends by showing that all the characters are “more or less immoral and supposedly respectable society appears corrupt, boring, and stifling.”²⁶

In *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, Mark Conard observes that films can have philosophical themes and underpinnings and can thereby operate “as a vehicle for exploring and explaining traditional philosophical ideas.”²⁷ Neo-noir films, which include “any film coming after the classic noir period that contains noir themes and the noir sensibility,” are particularly suited for this purpose because they contain the same “alienation, pessimism, moral ambivalence, and disorientation” as the films from the original era of 1941 to 1958.²⁸ For Conard, neo-noir filmmakers are able to more accurately capture the “noir outlook” because, unlike the original filmmakers, who were unaware they were making noirs due to the fact that the genre only came into being *post hoc*, the newer artists are conscientiously adding to an established framework, and because they newer filmmakers are not restricted by the production codes which stipulated that ‘no crime go unpunished.’ In neo-noirs, Conard writes, “Good things happen to bad people, and bad things happen to good people (just like in real life!), which seems in line with noir’s cynicism and pessimism.”²⁹

B. Refn’s Aesthetic of the Immediate: The Opening Sequences

Paraphrasing Paul Schrader, Palmer writes that “film noir is more style than story; it is self-conscious and critical rather than socially conservative; it emphasizes artistry over meaning

²³ “Film Noir to Neo-Noir: Transitions and Modern Noir,” August 22, 2015, <http://forums.tcm.com/topic/54642-film-noir-to-neo-noir-transitions-and-modern-noir/?page=12> (accessed February 11, 2020).

²⁴ R. Barton Palmer, *Hollywood’s Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir* (NY: Twayne Publishers, 1994), 19.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁷ Mark Conard, “Introduction,” in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, ed. Mark Conard (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

or, more precisely, collapses meaning into artistry.”³⁰ As Palmer notes, the original film noirs were not an art cinema when they were originally produced, but they “accommodated to the emerging European art cinema and valued in much the same way.”³¹ At what point did Refn’s films become art cinema? There are stylized elements in the *Pusher* films (particularly the introductions) but as art films there isn’t much art. *Bronson*, of course, changes all of that: it is not a noir or a prison film, and it is correspondingly Refn’s first true foray into art cinema.

The following close viewings of the opening sequences from Refn’s truly neo-noirish films *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, *Neon Demon*, and *Too Old to Die Young* describe how the neo-noir aesthetic—and the neo-noir aesthetic in particular—are immediately staged for the viewer in the first few minutes of each film. Here, Refn uses music, lighting, and neon to immediately establish themes and characters through striking images and scenes. Again, *Bronson* is an outlier here in terms of genre, but its stunning opening sequence is included as the earliest exemplar of Refn’s developing artistry.

Bronson begins with actor Tom Hardy, portraying British celebrity career criminal Charles Bronson, in a variation on the character introductions Refn uses in the *Pusher* films: unlike the *Pusher* films, however, where the actors are in chiaroscuro, Hardy/Bronson is shown fully illuminated as he breaks the fourth wall by addressing the audience directly. Refn then cuts to a reverse shot filmed from behind the actor, revealing his perspective standing at the proscenium of a stage in front of an audience. Hardy/Bronson then narrates a short monologue accompanied by static shots of Bronson against a series of different backgrounds, which culminates in another reverse shot of the main character’s view of the audience but without Hardy/Bronson in the scene. This scene then fades into a shot of Bronson inside of a prison cell (here, a metal cage) accompanied by the non-diegetic soundtrack of Scott Walker’s elegiac Gothic masterpiece of song-art, “The Electrician” (1978). We witness Hardy/Bronson in his underwear, covered in what appears to be a mixture of blood, excrement, dirt, and oil, exercising and doing calisthenics as Walker intones “there’s no help/no” over a discordant drone. A small group of correctional officers, outfitted in riot gear and led by a prison official in shirt and tie, prepare to extract Bronson. The oil and other liquids, of course, make him more difficult to grasp and control.

Refn cuts the action to the music: at the moment when drums and strings break apart the song’s dark simmering tension and Walker’s voice suddenly rises to an almost operatic height of controlled emotion (“He’s drilling through the spiritus sanctus tonight/through the dark hip falls/Screaming oh you mambos/Kill me/And/Kill me And/Kill me”), the correctional officers burst into the cage to subdue Bronson, whose extreme resistance is met by their extreme violence. The music and violence play out in a brutal *tête-à-tête* of physical violence and pain. Exhausted, Bronson is finally beaten down and contained, the official in shirt and tie administering the final *coup de grace* that dispatches his prisoner into submission. Refn then cuts to a reprise of Hardy/Bronson’s first appearance from several minutes earlier, only this time the character smiles and laughs maniacally for a moment, then stares intently at the camera. The strings and drums have faded. Walker’s song continues to drone *sans* vocals. Suddenly, the title “BRONSON” appears, in red letters covering the lower half of the frame, timed perfectly to a single aggressively distorted pluck of an electric bass followed by the trill of castanets bathed in reverb. The frame cuts to black, and the music fades out before the third section of the song begins. It is a masterful and unforgettable synthesis of *decoupage* and a singularly striking piece of popular music that both critically addresses the psychology of a disfunctioning human being as well as the institutional failures of a disfunctioning criminal justice system.

³⁰ Palmer, *Hollywood’s Dark Cinema*, 26.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

In *Drive*, after a brief credit, sound composer Cliff Martinez's pulsating synthesizer emulates a rapid heartbeat and plays to a black screen. As Driver, Ryan Gosling delivers a classic film noir narration:

There's a hundred thousand streets in this city. You don't need to know the route. You give me a time and place, I give you a five minute window. Anything happens in that five minutes and I'm yours. No matter what. Anything happens the minute either side of that and you're on your own. Do you understand? Good. And you won't be able to reach me on this phone again.

During this brief monologue, the camera first depicts a map with writing on it. It pans left and we see Gosling/Driver standing and looking out a window at a city with a blinking neon light (Fig. 2). He is talking on a cell phone. The camera continues to pan left and we see the score from a basketball game on the television at halftime. We then see a duffle bag on a hotel bed. Gosling ends his conversation and throws the phone on the bed. He picks up the bag, tosses it over his right shoulder, and exits the frame, leaving a shot of a city seen through a window. The camera zooms slightly in on the lights and buildings, and there is another single neon in the distance. The film then jump cuts to a city street as seen from the vantage point of Driver, who is wearing leather gloves. The synth pulse is now mixed with the diegetic sound of the car's motor inside the car. We first see Driver's face from the perspective of the camera's lens looking up at him from roughly the center console of the car. In just over two minutes, Refn has established that Driver is an outlaw who is preparing to engage in criminal activity, and the car is his instrumentality.

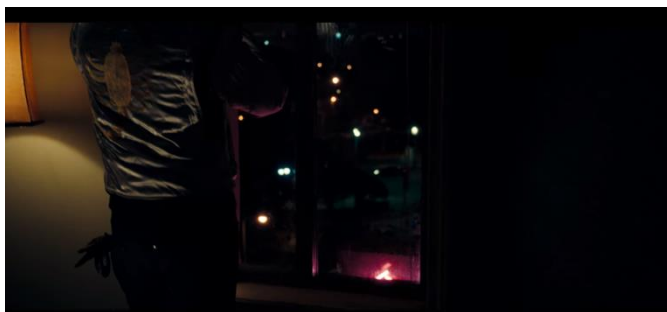


Fig. 2. *Drive* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2011). Screen capture by author.

Only God Forgives begins with darkly ominous drums, a synth drone, and rattling bamboo, again courtesy of Cliff Martinez. There are titles in the Thai language. Moving from right to left like the razor and cloud in the opening sequence in Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*, a long sword (*kachin dha*) bathed in red light cuts the screen in half horizontally. The music reaches a crescendo as the title appears in Thai above the sword, and in an English subtitle below it. Before we see the sword's hilt, the music quickly fades as the film cuts to Gosling's character Julian, shot from below and walking into the frame. There is red light on the set that may or may not be neon. His face obscured, he looks away from the audience to his right. He turns to look to his left, his face now lit by a yellow light. He pauses for a moment, then begins walking out of the frame. The next cut, shot from behind him at several paces, shows him walking down a hallway and approaching two men bathed in the same red light. There is a painting of a boxer on the wall behind them. As Gosling approaches, we can see that one of the men is outfitted as a boxer or martial artist. Gosling's shadow approaches those of the

two men. His character stops in front of them. The scene cuts to a perspective shot from between the two men, showing their backs to the camera with Julian facing them. Julian nods his head, directing them to Julian's right, and says "Go" in Thai. The scene cuts to a large wide angle shot of the three men entering a martial arts arena with a match in progress. Exotic Asian music plays on Martinez's soundtrack. A series of panning and static shots depict the athletes, fighters, and audience as Julian watches. An overhead shot, looking directly down on the square ring, shows a knockdown and a count by the referee. Julian reaches out to tousle the hair of the fighter who accompanied him into the arena, signaling 'you're next' and then walking out of frame. The sequence pauses as the ring is prepared for the next match.

In *The Neon Demon*, the title sequence is initiated by a Cliff Martinez trademark: an ominous drone sound with a pulsating synthesized beat. We see a bright crimson textured surface glowing behind the opening credits, changing smoothly to purple and combinations of other colors. The colors change from light to dark as the credits fade in and out. The soundtrack becomes more intense, punctuated by percussive syncopated beats and a rapid synth bass line. What appears to be stars in a night sky turns into falling, sparkling glitter, and a proper techno/disco beat accompanies the title of the film with the subtitle "NWR." It looks and sounds like a nightclub. The music continues but a sudden jump cut reveals a woman in a bright blue dress laying on a sofa. Her eyes wide open and her head thrown back, her neck and right arm are covered in thick, shiny blood which has dripped onto the floor. She does not move and appears dead. She is so still that it appears to a freeze-frame shot. The camera then cuts to her heavily made-up face, doll-like with garish lipstick and rouge and speckled with colorful sequins. Her eyes again reflect the stare of the dead. We then cut to see the barely-lit face of a young man. Refn cuts back to the shot of the "dead" woman (a shot reverse shot, revealing that the young man is looking at the apparently dead woman), and a long reverse zoom, punctuated with the firing of flash bulbs, reveals a carefully constructed *mise en scène*: behind the woman and couch is a false wall framed in the background by a large window, itself framed by reddish/pink neon, with an industrial city scene in the background (Fig. 3). Refn cuts back the young man's face, but this time it is obscured by a camera. Refn zooms back to the sofa but now the woman is gone, leaving behind a large pool of blood. We are unsure whether the scene depicts the remnants of snuff film or a bizarre fashion photo shoot. The camera draws closer to the now-empty sofa. Suddenly the music ends as the scene cuts to reveal the young woman in a bathroom, very much alive and wiping what is surely stage blood off her body.

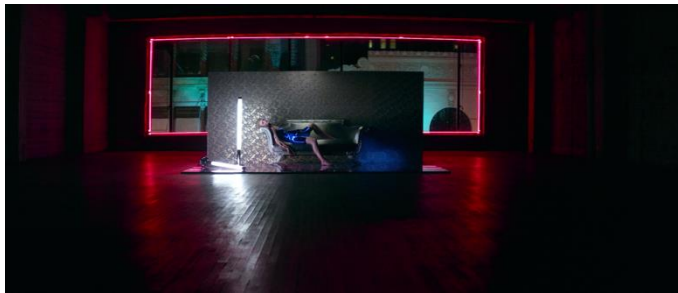


Fig. 3. *The Neon Demon* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016). Screen capture by author.

Refn's most recent work, *Too Old to Die Young*, begins with a shot of a painting which shows desert plants, high cliffs, and a small church in the background. Cliff Martinez's soundtrack is a low synthesized drone peppered with percussive beats. The camera slowly pans left to reveal green neon bunting around the painting as well as commercial neon signs

advertising “Star Lite Cantina.” There is also a cactus-shaped sign claiming to offer the ‘best tacos’ in Studio City, and the painting is revealed to be a mural on the taco shop wall. In this continuous take, the camera pans to show a police car bathed in green neon. The soundtrack is augmented by diegetic police radio broadcasts. We then see a uniformed police officer looking up at one of the neon signs (Fig. 4). The camera pans again to show another police officer who, with his partner, stand by their police car and watch the city move past them. We then see a man watching the officers from across the street. The soundtrack continues to be a mixture of street sounds and increasingly discordant synthesizers. After several minutes the police officers leave in their vehicle. They are followed by the man who was watching them. Accompanied by a steady and dark synthwave soundtrack from Martinez, the title sequence begins.

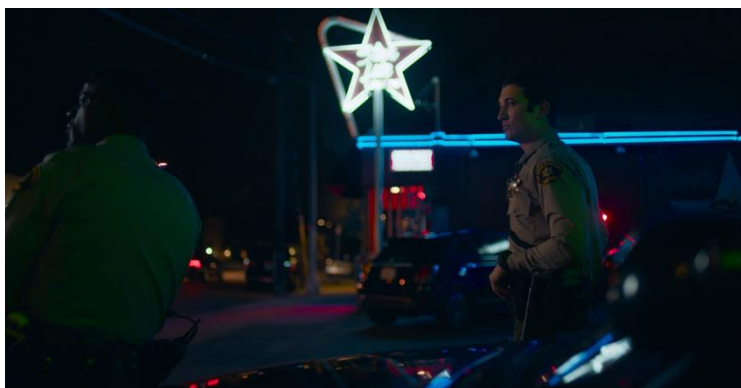


Fig. 4. *Too Old to Die Young* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2019). Screen capture by author.

Like *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising* (2009) lacks outright noirish elements. However, this film provides extensive scenes of extreme violence including beheadings, disembowelings, and dismemberings. It is appropriately included in this study not only because it introduces what Jakob Larisch refers to as an “aesthetic caesura” (“eine ästhetische Zäsur”) in Refn’s work³² due to its minimal dialog, long takes, saturated color sequences, and magnified violence, but because its main character has only one eye, and because of its running theme of perpetual revenge-seeking.

C. The Critical Crime Film

Although the opening sequences discussed here place them squarely in the neo(n) noir tradition, Refn’s films might be more appropriately considered critical crime films. A subgenre developed by Nicole Rafter, the critical crime film is exemplified by Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931), *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971) Martin Scorsese’s *Mean Streets* (1973), *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), *To Live and Die in L.A.* (William Friedkin, 1985), and *American Me* (Edward James Olmos, 1992). These films reject the heroic fantasies of the police procedural and depict not only the failure of institutionalized fairness and justice but also its deinstitutionalized versions suggested by some vigilante/avenger (or

³² Jakob Larisch, “Gewaltdarstellung und Exzess in den Filmen Nicolas Winding Refn,” *Film-Konzepte* 54/5 (May 2019). Original in German; all English translations by the author with assistance from Christopher Turner.

'backlash') films.³³ In critical crime films, which concentrate on the moral ambiguity of the characters and their predicaments, no one is saved: "indeed, there may be no hero at all, or the apparent hero may be almost indistinguishable from the villain."³⁴ These films "take human evil for granted, [and] assum[e] that people are fundamentally selfish and justice systems easily corrupted." These films might draw clear boundaries between right and wrong, Rafter writes, but they may also show "wrong thriving and virtue being crushed."³⁵ Producers of prison-specific critical crime films in particular present the opportunity to make "self-reflexive films that explore new possibilities in representation" and "political truth-telling," as well as films that reflect the "new realities of incarceration" such as the those depicting the United States' continuing engagement with its failed programs of mass incarceration.³⁶

From my perspective, Refn's earlier films—the *Pusher* trilogy in particular—more clearly fall within Rafter's conception of the critical crime film. These films are indebted to Scorsese's *Mean Streets* for their shared portrayal of low-life street criminals who commit violent crimes in between the moments when they attempt to meet their (legitimate and illegitimate) family and social obligations. The recent films analyzed in this paper, which are more explicit in their treatment of the themes of revenge, vigilantism, and the corruption of justice, are only sporadically categorizable as critical crime films, and are addressed accordingly in the following section.

III. "A theme park of pain": Violence, Revenge Tragedies, and Political Skepticism

In *The Scene of Violence*, Alison Young writes, "Violence is a cinematic staple. Within this common currency there exists a pervasive paradox: that the violence of wrong-doing can be met with violence. The key characteristic of this paradox is a normative one: the violence of wrong-doing is wrong, whereas the violence which responds to wrong-doing is righteous."³⁷ Young, of course, is referencing how violence is portrayed in films which feature law enforcement officers, punishment, and, specifically, themes related to revenging and avenging.

In his violent and poetically conflicted films, Refn's camera reveals extensive criminality (e.g., kidnapping, mass execution, contract killings, rape, extortion, robbery, narcotics trafficking) but no courtrooms, lawyers, or judges, all of which are purported to enforce blind, impartial, and unbiased justice through the law's provision of certain kinds of legal process and protections. As a filmmaker working at least partially within the genre of the noir-inspired 'critical' crime film, Refn's work therefore allows us to, in Rafter's words, "meditate on the nature of criminal law without recourse to courtroom scenes and even, in some cases, without characters who are lawyers."³⁸ In fact, with the notable exception of *Bronson*, Refn does not

³³ Notably, Rafter does not include "absurdist" films such as *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990), *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994), or *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) in the critical crime film category because of their "high spirits," "good humor," and "fantastical, semicomical violence." Rafter, *Shots in the Dark*, 17, 53.

³⁴ Nicole Rafter, *Shots in the Dark*, 3-4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 213.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

³⁷ Alison Young, *The Scene of Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 38.

³⁸ Nicole Rafter, *Shots in the Dark*; see also Rafter's citations for studies regarding the 'accuracy' of the representation of crime and justice in film: Rafter, *Shots in the Dark*, 19. From my perspective, it is difficult to imagine how Refn might interpret scenes involving courtrooms and lawyers. I suspect they would lean more towards the bizarre courtroom scenes in Orson Welles' *The Trial* (1963), or the music-

depict *any* institutions or procedures of criminal justice, and police officers are perpetually corrupt or rogue. In these criminal underworlds, characters are driven by justice *as* violence—as revenge—without giving any consideration to the possibility of justice *or* violence, which the blindfolded Roman goddess Justitia promises by balancing the scales on the one hand, and by enforcing justice by the sword with the other.

This, of course, is not unusual for films noir or neo-noirs. Writing about *Double Jeopardy* (Billy Wilder, 1944), R. Barton Palmer notes that “the official system of justice makes no appearance.” Rather, the character Keyes, who ultimately unravels the truth of the murder and deception perpetrated by the antagonists, does not “represent the law as either virtuous action or justice but rather as a not entirely sympathetic desire to know and tell the truth at any cost. The truth, of course, is here opposed to desire (the desire of the criminals and the desire of the spectator that this desire be fulfilled).” The truth does indeed appear in *Double Jeopardy*, Palmer writes, only to be “opposed to happiness; it offers the barren pleasures of knowing instead of being.”³⁹

Noir has also been skeptical about authority and law enforcement in particular. Correspondingly, Refn has consistently produced negative images and characterizations of the police. From one perspective, *Too Old to Die Young* has all of the elements of a traditional rogue cop/revenger/avenger film: after killing a cartel boss, Los Angeles County Sheriff’s deputy Martin Jones’ partner is killed in retaliation by the boss’s son, who wants to turn the United States into “a theme park of pain.” Jones is then blackmailed into becoming an assassin for a rival gang who may lead Jones to his partner’s killer. At the same time, he has been promoted to homicide detective and given access to the Department’s extensive criminal database. Using this information, Jones becomes an avenger by partnering with a murder suspect in order to target and execute pedophiles. He is eventually captured and executed by the boss’s son, whose cousin/lover Yaritza also engages in extensive revenging and avenging killings primarily directed against men who abuse and prostitute young women.

Refn’s other films consistently feature this theme and its variations. In *Pusher III*, Milo seeks and obtains revenge against the drug dealers who cheated and humiliated him. In *Drive*, when we first see Driver in the daylight, he is in a police officer’s uniform, suggesting that the person we have just seen outride and outwit the police in the opening sequence can do so because, in fact, he is one of them. He later avenges the killing of his boss Shannon and the husband of his love interest by murdering several gangsters. In *Only God Forgives*, a true ‘revenger’s tragedy,’ Julian and Crystal (the mother and son characters played by Kristin Scott Thomas and Ryan Gosling) fail miserably in their attempt to wreak revenge upon Chang, the corrupt Thai police lieutenant who permitted Julian’s brother (and Crystal’s son) to be killed in yet another revenge-subplot. These types of films, Andrew McKenna writes, follow “in the tradition of the revenge tragedy that dates from the early modern theater of the Renaissance [which] gratify a popular demand for violent retribution that ordinary legal procedures do not display to the public.”⁴⁰

For Refn, the conception of criminal justice presented to citizens of Western liberal democracies—parsed into discrete yet interrelated institutions that govern law enforcement, attorneys, judges, punishment, and corrections—is a false one, reflecting his skepticism about the legal system overall and the criminal justice system in particular. His films suggest the following skeptical accounts of the possibility of state-sponsored justice:

and-dance number staged during the murder trial of Björk’s character Selma in Lars Von Trier’s *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), another film in which the main character’s loss of sight functions as a key plot line.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁰ Andrew J. McKenna, “Public Execution,” in *Legal Reelism: Movies as Legal Texts*, ed. John Denvir (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 226 (footnote omitted).

- 1). Police cannot be trusted to enforce the law in an unbiased way;
- 2). The legal system enforces a variety of popular prejudices;
- 3). The line between justice and revenge is unclear;
- 4). Individual violence is less troublesome than institutional violence; and
- 5). The system of institutionalized punishment and incarceration does not promote justice.

These accounts, of course, are not novel in the Western literary/aesthetic tradition. According to Stevie Simkin, “The conflict between state justice and individual revenge is fundamental to very many early modern tragedies. Four hundred years later, such conflicts reverberate in sub-genres of contemporary violent film.”⁴¹ Simkin focuses on the theme of revenge cinema and draws an important distinction between the vigilante and the avenger: “the vigilante, an individual (almost always male) who engages in a (usually lone) battle to carve out a path for natural justice in the face of a ruling power that is profoundly corrupt and a justice system that is compromised, hopelessly weak, and unable to right the wrongs perpetrated against victims of crimes,” while on the other hand exists “the personal avenger, the individual victim of a profound wrong, who compromise[s] his own moral purity in order to redress the imbalance and punish the wrongdoer.”⁴²

These themes resonate in the social scientific literature on criminal justice and its treatment of vigilantism. According to criminologist Franklin Zimring, the celebration of private and community use of force “usually implies some distrust of government. The enthusiastic vigilante distrusts either the government’s intentions or its capacity to keep the peace, or both. The vigilante tradition is one that values the community’s interests and those of the individual more highly than it values the prerogatives of government.”⁴³

Vigilante violence also denies the requirement that crimes be investigated and guilt proved beyond a reasonable doubt. Zimring: “As long as the vigilante assumes the enemy is known, he is hostile to the formal apparatus of a legal system—the system is all cost and no benefit from the vigilante perspective. For this reason, the vigilante point of view might inform a theory of criminal justice (by demanding minimal procedure), but it can never amount to a theory or model of the criminal process. Investigation and trial are simply not important in the world that the vigilante assumes he inhabits.”⁴⁴

Problematically, Zimring writes, the vigilante tradition,

neutralizes one powerful argument against allowing the state to kill its enemies: the fear of unlimited government power. The citizen who has positive feelings about vigilante values will identify more closely with the punishment process, will think of punishments as a community activity rather than the conduct of a governmental entity separate from community processes. The psychological mechanism that facilitates this identification process might be a form of transference, where the affective bond from communal social control in earlier times is transferred to state authority for executions and other serious punishments.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Stevie Simkin *Early Modern Tragedy and the Cinema of Violence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 26.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 26-27.

⁴³ Franklin Zimring, *The Contradictions of American Capital Punishment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 212

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

There is extensive commentary on the relationship between these types of social attitudes and their depiction in so-called ‘backlash’ films such as *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971) and *Death Wish* (Michael Winner, 1974). According to Lary May, backlash films expressed “a rising public mood characterized by a declining faith in official institutions and a fear of criminals.”⁴⁶ These films reflected public attitudes that had tired of state-sanctioned punishment, which in the 1970s had been accused of being lenient on criminals and the cause of recent spikes in violent crime. Unlike in earlier crime films, May writes, “the enemy (in *Dirty Harry*) is not big business or a misguided police force, but the liberal courts and politicians.”⁴⁷

Although Refn shares, to some extent, the political skepticism found in these films, from my perspective it is inconceivable that Refn would make a film like *Dirty Harry* or *Death Wish*. These films give credence to the idea that an avenger such as “Dirty” Harry Callahan, or an actual victim seeking revenge (the Paul Kersey character in *Death Wish*, whose wife was murdered) can achieve a kind of vigilante justice by killing either actual killers (whose victims are helpless, but not within the ‘clan’ of the vigilante) or garden variety petty criminals, such as those killed by Kersey in the search for his wife’s actual killers. There is perhaps no better key to understanding Refn’s approach to the claimed legitimacy of these kinds of movie heroes than what is purported to be his next project: a reimagining of Larry Cohen’s *Maniac Cop* and its sequels, a string of late 80s-early 90s B movies in which a revenge-seeking zombiefied police officer executes his fellow corrupt and non-corrupt officers but also innocent citizens.

However, backlash films and revenge tragedies provide only a partial picture of what kinds of spectatorial desires are satisfied by crime films. For McKenna, cinematic crime—usually depicted by the violent victimization of the innocent as the result of their conflict with an antagonist—echoes René Girard’s notion of mimetic desire, “which imitates and identifies with other desires in the choice of its objects and which therefore is structurally destined to rivalry and violent conflict.”⁴⁸ Victimhood ignites desire in third parties (non-victims), who unite with the victim as its surrogate in order to sacrifice a scapegoat, whose expulsion from the social group allows the group to move from these conflicts to what may turn out to be only a momentary peace. McKenna suggests that film audiences partake in victimhood in the same way Girard describes how this anthropological understanding of sacrifice feeds the idea of the sacred, which arises from the masking of our own violence as members of society. Girard writes that a single victim (a real one, or by implication a fictional one in film) “can be substituted for all the potential victims, for all the enemy brothers that each member is striving to banish from the community; he can be substituted, in fact, for each and every member of the community. Each member’s hostility, caused by their clashing against others, becomes converted from an individual feeling to a communal force unanimously directed against a single individual.”⁴⁹ The result is that everyone in the society *doubles* as a victim, and peace can only be approximated through ritual sacrifice, where “a marginal member of society absorbs the violence of the whole.”⁵⁰ The threat of violence must be experienced as real enough, McKenna writes, “to warrant its unanimous expulsion” yet also unsubstantial enough “not to contaminate the community of observer-participants. In this regard, the camera’s eye as predator satisfies the first of these condition while its limitation to celluloid spectacle satisfied the second.”⁵¹

⁴⁶ Lary May, “Redeeming the Lost War: Backlash Films and the Rise of the Punitive State,” in *Punishment in Popular Culture*, eds. Charles Ogletree, Jr., Austin Sarat (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 32.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁸ Andrew J. McKenna, “Public Execution,” 232.

⁴⁹ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 79.

⁵⁰ McKenna, “Public Execution,” 233.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 235.

By depicting non-idealized images of the police and the justice system, Anthony Chase writes that motion pictures by Refn and other filmmakers “threaten to undo the sixteenth-century process of blindfolding justice by making visible that which covering Justitia’s eyes had rendered invisible” due to the possibility that “no technical apparatus can do more to unblindfold justice than the movie camera.”⁵² However, “Justice, being blind, is not cinematic.”⁵³ Dispensing with the idea that films can or should reflect social attitudes or values, the next section examines how blindness and eye violence can be truly cinematic while also reflecting both psychoanalytic and aesthetic theory.

IV. Eye Violence, Aesthetics, Psychoanalysis

*Got me a movie
I want you to know
Slicing up eyeballs
I want you to know
Girlie so groovy
I want you to know
Don't know about you
But I am un chien andalusia*
“Debaser” by the Pixies⁵⁴

According to Werner Herzog, the camera “stares” at its subjects “like death,” and in film criticism there is a “tendency in all reflection on the cinema to equate the camera with the human eye.”⁵⁵ Using their own eyes, “spectators identify with the subject of vision, with the camera’s eye, which saw before the spectator did.”⁵⁶ As an eye, cinema both records and reflects its subjects, who are more than merely blinded when they lose an eye. Or two.

The eye violence films profiled here, I argue, exploit *ommetaphobia*, which is variously defined as the fear of eyes or, more specifically, the fear of eye trauma. The ommetaphobic person fears looking into the eyes of others yet also fears getting something in their eyes. Most importantly for my purposes, the ommetaphobic fears witnessing trauma that results in enucleation: the removal of the entire eye.

This final section first offers a brief symbology of eye violence and its role in the Western religious and legal traditions. I then provide a taxonomic approach to eye violence in Refn’s work and international cinema at large, and conclude with a framework for a film aesthetic informed by Lacanian psychoanalysis based on the what Gilles Deleuze calls the unseen, out-of-field (*bors cadre*) implied images, which testify “to a more disturbing presence, one which cannot even be said to exist.”⁵⁷

⁵² Anthony Chase, *Movies on Trial: The Legal System on the Silver Screen* (New York: The New Press, 2002), 29, 31.

⁵³ McKenna, “Public Execution,” 234.

⁵⁴ Lyrics to “Debaser” written by Black Francis and performed by The Pixies, 1989.

⁵⁵ Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie, Marc Vernet, *Aesthetics of Film*, trans. and revised Richard Neupert (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 28.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁵⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 17.

A. Eye Violence: A Brief Genealogy

Eye violence has a long pedigree in art, myth, and legend. According to Edith Hamilton's authoritative *Mythology*, the one-eyed Odin was "the All-father, supreme among gods and men, yet even so he constantly sought for more wisdom. He went down to the Well of Wisdom guarded by Mimir the wise, to beg for a draught from it, and when Mimir answered that he must pay for it with one of his eyes, he consented to lose the eye."⁵⁸ In symbology, J.E. Cirlot writes that "The possession of two eyes conveys physical normality and its spiritual equivalent,"⁵⁹ and that while the loss of an eye conveys abnormality, it can also "lead to something healing or creative, to the opening of clairvoyance, to the 'third eye' of 'inner sight,' transpersonal awareness."⁶⁰

The Judeo-Christian tradition contains numerous references to the eye, including the parable of the mote and the beam (Matt. 7:1-5) and the admonition from Matthew 5:29 "If thine eye offends thee, pluck it out." Of course, the maxim "an eye for an eye" (usually ascribed to Leviticus 24:17-22) has proven to be a resilient yet controversial foundation for Western-style criminal justice. Commonly understood as both a literal and metaphorical justification for brutal retributivism, the idea arose as a limiting concept meant to provide for proportional justice: an eye and *only* an eye (and not a life, either that of the wrongdoer or their family or clan) can be taken in response to the taking of an eye. Despite its religio-mythic origins as a barbaric practice, the maxim is not so much a justification for revenge or retribution as it is for proportionality. The payment of proportional compensation in a civil lawsuit is a modern, deeply institutionalized version of this concept, but so is the justification of capital punishment for one who takes the life of another. This injunction is overturned in Matthew 5:38, when Jesus tells his followers to reject the maxim and 'turn the other cheek.'

In Greek myth and dramaturgy, the story of Oedipus is well-known, and the description of his self-blinding in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is one of the most gripping in the history of staging. After discovering the truth of his life—that he had killed his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta—Oedipus finds the hanged body of Jocasta after her suicide. After laying her down, the Second Messenger relates Oedipus' next actions to the Chorus Leader:

But what happened next was even worse. Her gold brooches, her pins—he tore them from her gown and plunged them into his eyes again and again and again and screamed, "No longer shall you see the suffering you have known and caused! You saw what was forbidden to be seen, yet failed to recognize those whom you longed to see! Now you shall see only darkness!" And as he cried out in such desperate misery, he struck his eyes over and over—until a shower of blood and tears splattered down his beard, like a torrent of crimson rain and hail.⁶¹

Notably, the play's spectators do not see this action, but only the result of it when Oedipus subsequently reappears on stage with blood dripping from his eye sockets.

⁵⁸ Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (New York: Black Dog and Leventhal Publishers, 1942, 2017), 344.

⁵⁹ J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1971), 100.

⁶⁰ *The Book of Symbols*, ed. Kathleen Martin (Colonge: Taschen, 2010), 352.

⁶¹ Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, translated and edited by Luci Berkowitz and Theodore F. Brunner (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970), 29.

B. *Eye Violence in Refn's Cinema and Beyond*

Inheriting these cultural and religious indicators, Refn's narrative and symbolic use of eye violence situates his work within the trajectory of other eye-centric/eye-gouging films. What follows is a discriminating partial taxonomy of eye violence in cinema, included here not merely to show how Refn may owe a debt to these films but because these filmmakers have all chosen to depict this particular image in their narratives. Although, as Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie, and Marc Vernet recognize, there is an "abundance of themes linked to vision" and innumerable films involve "blind characters or characters suddenly losing their sight,"⁶² the following films, like Refn's, do not necessarily exploit eye violence as a principle plot device (the exception is *X: The Man with the X-Ray Eyes*), but in many of them (*Pan's Labyrinth* and *The Birds*, for example) the eye violence is immediately memorable due to its shock and physiological effect on the spectator. The eye violence in Refn's films include *Neon Demon*, where a cannibalized eyeball is regurgitated during emesis, *Drive* (whose famous 'diner scene' features a torturous murder involving dining forks and eyes), and *Only God Forgives*, where a graphic torture sequence directly quotes *Andalou's* famously sliced eyeball. *Valhalla Rising's* main character is appropriately called One-Eye, suggesting that Refn inverts the Nordic myth of Odin's lost eye as a symbol of knowledge. In his most recent work, *Too Old to Die Young*, Viggo the vigilante's glass eye is swallowed by his mother in a scene whose cinematic memory echoes the highly stylized glass eye that opens *The Holy Mountain* (Alejandro Jodorowsky, 1973) and later reappears in that film when an old man removes his glass eye and hands it to a child.

For my purposes, the earliest and most striking example of eye violence occurs at the end of the famous Odessa Steps massacre sequence in Sergei Eisenstein's *Bronenosets Potyomkin* (*Battleship Potemkin*, 1926). After showing the violence of the massacre of citizens in what Kendrick calls "unequivocal terms," there is a "stunning shock cut to a woman with her right eye shot out, blood running from beneath her shattered glasses." From a narrative perspective, Kendrick writes, this scene constitutes "a savage and deeply disturbing portrait of human violence and one of the finest examples of the emotional and political impact film violence can have."⁶³

The opening sequence of Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) contains one of the most well-known images of graphic violence in the history of cinema. After a man briefly sharpens a razor on a strop, he walks out onto a balcony and looks up. We see a moon on the left, and then a horizontal sliver of cloud approaches on the right.⁶⁴ The next shot features a "direct frontal view of a woman staring at spectator. As his left hand holds open her left eye his right hand moves in front of the lower part of her face, as if preparing to draw razor across the round exposed eye." The cloud now passes before the moon, bisecting it. Then, the sequence's shocking *dénouement*: "The eye with thumb and forefinger holding it open. The razor slices it open. A jellylike substance spills out."⁶⁵ According to Kendrick, "The scene is carefully constructed to fulfil the surrealist imperative to shock and outrage, a literal and figurative attack on vision, and to judge its lasting effectiveness one only has to view the film in a roomful of jaded undergraduate students and hear the collective gasp that accompanies this moment."⁶⁶ It depicts a scene of eye violence that film theorist Vivian Sobchack is "deeply

⁶² Aumont, Bergala, Marie, Vernet, *Aesthetics of Film*, 164.

⁶³ Kendrick, *Film Violence*, 42.

⁶⁴ I generally follow the description of the film's prologue offered in Linda Williams, *Figures of Desire: A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 63-64.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* The eye was not a human eye, and apparently belonged to a dead calf.

⁶⁶ Kendrick, *Film Violence*, 41.

afraid to watch and know.”⁶⁷ Less well-known are the subsequent scenes showing two donkeys with rotten, empty eye sockets, and the final scene showing two characters buried up their chests in sand, their eyes (like the donkeys’) also hollowed out and blackened. *L’Âge d’or*, made the following year again by Buñuel with script assistance (again) by Salvador Dalí, also features a bloody scene of eye violence (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. *L’Âge d’or* (Luis Buñuel, 1930). Screen capture by author.

In the color era, some of the most striking examples of eye violence occur in Roger Corman’s film *X: The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* (1963). The film begins with the image of an enormous disembodied eye that fills the frame for almost one minute while atonal symphonic music plays on the soundtrack. This scene is followed by a shot of an eyeball floating in a bubbling beaker with what appears to be its extraocular and optic nerves intact. This shot fades into an animated spiral, a film trope that is usually associated with hypnotism or dreams, which is then followed by the opening credits. After the credits, the film proper begins with an extreme close-up of actor Ray Milland’s eyes as his character, Dr. Xavier, is undergoing a familiar routine eye exam.



Fig. 6

Fig. 7

X: The Man with the X-Ray Eyes (Roger Corman, 1963). Screen captures by author.

Through the film’s diegesis, it is revealed that Xavier developed eye drops which give him the titular x-ray eyes and allow him to see through clothing and walls. After a series of misfortunes and criminal activity he has become a pariah and outlaw due to his uncontrollable usage of the drops (a rather obvious metaphor for drug addiction). In the final scene, he finds himself at a religious revival. He approaches the preacher and takes off the wraparound sunglasses that have covered his eyes for much of the film. Black contact lenses completely cover Milland/Xavier’s eyes (Fig. 6). The preacher shouts the words of Matthew 5:29 at Xavier: “If thine eye offends thee, pluck it out! Pluck it out! Pluck it out!” The crowd joins in, chanting the command. We then see what Xavier sees through his own eyes: a psychedelic vision of jagged primary colors intended to imply that Xavier has gone insane. He shrieks,

⁶⁷ Vivian A. Sobchack, “The Violent Dance: A Personal Memoir of Death in the Movies,” in *Screening Violence*, ed. Stephen Prince (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 115.

reaches up to cover his eyes, and then lowers his head out of the frame. He then raises his head back up into the frame and quickly removes his hands to reveal empty red eye sockets: following Oedipus, Xavier has torn out his own eyes. This final shot, punctuated by a single abrupt burst of toneless music appropriately titled an “orchestral stab,” is held in freeze frame for approximately half a second (fig. 7).

The most visually shocking moment of Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963) occurs when, Kendrick writes, “an elderly man is discovered dead in his bedroom with his eyes pecked out. Hitchcock draws us directly into the gruesome imagery with three rapid cuts, each of which brings us in closer until we are staring directly into the empty sockets.”⁶⁸

Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* (1973) features a memorable scene where gangster Moe Greene is laying on his stomach on a massage table. As a man walks into the massage room, Greene (played by Alex Rocco) looks up and puts on his glasses. He is then shot in the eye through his glasses. Blood streams down his face. As Kendrick notes, this image is “visually reminiscent of the climactic shock cut in the Odessa Steps sequence of *Battleship Potemkin* that depicts a woman being shot in a similar manner.”⁶⁹

Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982) features a gigantic eye in its opening sequence. Later, there is a scene showing an ‘eye factory’ complete with an eyeball bobbing in a bubbling flask in a nod to *X: The Man with the X-Ray Eyes*. Replicant Roy Batty (played by Rutger Hauer) eye-gouges and murders his ‘father,’ Replicant designer Eldon Tyrell. In the film’s climactic scene, Batty’s famous monologue has obvious eye relevance because he knows his memories will be lost like “tears in rain” due to his impending ‘death.’ The film’s sequel, *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017) features extensive eye violence in its opening scene, which shows the enucleation of a rebel replicant by K, a replicant cop. The extracted eye is then subject to a scanning process that betrays its former owner’s ‘artificial’ identity due to the serial number coded within it.

Pan’s Labyrinth by Guillermo del Toro (2006) features two striking images of eye violence: the first is fantastic and the second is realist. The fantastic scene occurs after the protagonist, Ofelia, has entered the lair of the child-eating yet eyeless Pale Man. Although she was told not to eat anything, she succumbs to temptation and eats a single grape from among the many delicacies laid out on the Pale Man’s table. This awakens the creature. We see that its eyeballs are on a plate in front of it. It places each eye in sockets located on its palms,⁷⁰ and then holds its newly sighted hands in front of where its eyes should be, its extended fingers and nails splayed out as it suddenly gains the power of vision, which is necessary to hunt and eat Ofelia. In a truly horrifying sequence, the Pale Man chases Ofelia, who only barely manages to escape. The second, more realist images occur when a peasant, wrongly accused of supporting Republican rebels, is brutally stabbed in his eyes and face with a broken bottle by the Francoist antagonist. He is then shot.

C. A Lacanian Aesthetic of The Eye and The Out-of-Frame

These films reflect the interrelationship between a film aesthetic of eye violence informed by Lacanian psychoanalysis. First, I briefly outline Lacan’s theory of the Mirror Stage and its influence on film theory. I then develop an approach to film aesthetics informed by Lacan’s psychoanalysis which explores the artistic messages found in the out-of-field (*hors champ*) film

⁶⁸ Kendrick, *Film Violence*, 58.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁷⁰ For the significance of del Toro’s placement of eyes in the hands, see Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 100: “Heterotopic eyes are those which have been transferred anatomically to various parts of the body, such as the hands.”

space, which Jakob Larisch calls (specifically in reference to Refn's films) the *dialectic of showing and not showing* ("Dialektik des Zeigens und Nichts-Zeigens").⁷¹

For Lacan, a child's identity begins to truly develop when it recognizes itself in a mirror and begins to establish an idealized image of itself. But this is actually a misrecognition of itself as an independent being: the child—later to become the adult who persists in this misrecognition—desires this ideal image but simultaneously knows that it lacks it. Importantly for Lacan, the mirror is not a literal mirror: it may be any image (such as, of course, the moving images of cinema) or another human being. The result is a subject that (mis)recognizes itself in external things and images, and desires what is missing from its own identity and body. All of this is achieved through the gaze: the sense of sight and the acquisition of images whether through an actual mirror or the second mirror, which Christian Metz recognizes as the cinema screen.⁷²

For Lacan, "Vision is ordered according to a mode that may generally be called the function of images."⁷³ Due to Lacan's psychoanalyzation of both the physiology of the eye and the entry of light into it due to, for example, the presence of a painting in the eye's periphery, film theorists such as Metz latched onto the idea that just as the child knows the mirror is fixed by a frame, the film spectator also knows that its vision is constrained by a frame or border. Due to this framing, other images exist which the subject cannot see. For Lacan, this lack (specifically, the mother's observed lack of a penis) leads to the Oedipal complex.⁷⁴ This offscreen space therefore provides an integral part of cinema's relationship to desire (we want to see what we cannot) which constitutes Larisch's *dialectic of showing and not showing*.

Larisch engages this dialectic to analyze key scenes of eye violence in Refn's *Drive*. The first is the diner scene from *Drive*, which shows the brutal torture and execution of Cook by the gangster Bernie Rose (who will, not coincidentally, have a similarly brutal confrontation with Driver himself at the end of the film). Cook, Bernie's former crime partner, is invited to current crime partner Nino's diner. Bernie makes a sudden move and attacks Cook. However, Larisch writes, "in spite of the revealing staging, the dialectic of showing and not showing is still present here: the fork does not appear being stuck in the eye. Instead a camera cut is made to the face of Bernie's comrade Nino. Only the following shot clearly illustrates the result of the act of violence (the fork stuck in the eye) in a close-up of Cook's face." Bernie then grabs a knife, and the film then "shows the first stab in Cook's neck visible *on screen* (the fork in the eye is clearly recognizable again). The second stabbing takes place outside the filmed scene, but immediately afterwards a shot of Cook is shown, whose neck and clothing as well as Bernie's arm are now heavily smeared with blood."⁷⁵

In *The Neon Demon*, which is perhaps the apogee point in Refn's cinema of eye violence, the film's final sequence ends by depicting the repercussions of Gigi and Sarah's cannibalization of Jesse's body. In a side room at a fashion photography shoot, Gigi convulses and vomits Jesse's eye out onto the carpeting (**Fig. 8**). She then commits a kind of *seppuku* (ritual suicide) with a pair of scissors by cutting into her stomach (where, presumably, other parts of Jesse still reside). As Larisch describes it, "After a slow tracking shot from her bloody

⁷¹ Larisch, "Gewaltdarstellung und Exzess," 13 (translation by author).

⁷² *Conversations with Christian Metz: Selected Interviews on Film Theory (1970-1991)*, eds. Warren Buckland and Daniel Fairfax (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 190.

⁷³ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1978), 86.

⁷⁴ The Oedipal themes in *Only God Forgives* are too obvious to discuss; as Refn has said in an interview, the film is "about a guy and his mother."

⁷⁵ Larisch, "Gewaltdarstellung und Exzess," 11 (translation by author).

body to the eyeball lying out of the ground, the scene finally expands its excessive potential once more, when Sarah, who is also in the room, picks up the eyeball and eats it. The drastic is indeed present in an act of active violence (the unauthorized stabbing of Gigi), but is primarily achieved through the evocation of disgust in the presentation of the consequences of violence.”⁷⁶



Fig. 8. *The Neon Demon* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016). Screen capture by author.

For Larisch, these scenes provide a cautious defense against those who claim that Refn’s films suffer from an *excess* of violent images. Refn’s films, Larisch writes, “never move from one drastic scene of violence to the next, abandoning his production to the accusation of fetishizing excessive violence. Instead, corresponding scenes oscillate with all the drasticness which at times corresponds more to the aesthetics of the splatter film, always moving between showing and not showing; sometimes, they only hint at the violence. Sometimes they only show the act of violence, sometimes its result.”⁷⁷ For this final scene, its excess is countered by the fact that the initial dismembering and consuming of Jesse’s body is never shown: this far more drastic form of violence occurs completely offscreen.

For Aumont et al., what happens offscreen—what is not shown—is “fundamentally bound to onscreen space because it only exists in relation to onscreen space. The offscreen may be defined as the collection of elements (characters, settings, etc.) that, while not being included in the image itself, are nonetheless connected to that invisible space in imaginary fashion for the spectator.”⁷⁸ They also comment that “Within narrative films one may notice the abundance of themes linked to vision. For example, there are innumerable films melodramas involving blind characters or characters suddenly losing their sight.”⁷⁹ In Lacanian terms, the loss of the eye or eyesight prevents the possibility of the gaze: we cannot see ourselves and therefore cannot see what we lack.

Film aesthetics, write Aumont et al., “covers reflection upon the phenomena of signification considered as artistic phenomena. The aesthetics of cinema is therefore the study of the cinema as an art and the study of films as artistic messages.”⁸⁰ They pose of series of four questions intended to provide a framework for understanding film aesthetics as the ‘problem’ of the film spectator. Two of them are addressed here. First, they ask, “*What is it*

⁷⁶ Ibid., 14: “Nach einer langsamen Kamerafahrt von ihrem blutigen Körper zu dem aus dem Boden liegenden Augapfel weitet die Szene ihr exzessives Potenzial schließlich ein weiteres Mal aus, als die ebenfalls in Raum befindliche Sarah ihn aufhebt und ihrerseits isst. Die Drastik ist hierbei zwar durchaus in einem Akt aktiver Gewalt (dem eigenmächtigen Erstechen von Gigi) präsent, wird primär jedoch durch die in der Präsentation von Gewaltfolgen liegende Evokation von Ekel erreicht.”

⁷⁷ Larisch, “Gewaltdarstellung und Exzess,” 10 (translation by author).

⁷⁸ Aumont, Bergala, Marie, Vernet, *Aesthetics of Film*, 13

⁷⁹ Ibid., 164.

⁸⁰ Aumont, Bergala, Marie, Vernet, *Aesthetics of Film*, 6.

that the film spectator desires?” The film spectator, they write, is “always more or less a refugee in need of restoring some irreparable loss via the cost of a short-lived regression that is socially fixed and lasts only during the time of projection.”⁸¹ The question of desire is, of course, key to Lacan’s mirror theory. Addressing this issue of the spectator’s visual but also auditory desires, Metz has said that “Ardent passion passes through the desire to see (*nudity* is, by the way, a state without any acoustic expression, a purely visual notion), while the innumerable games of exhibitionism and voyeurism do not have equivalents on the auditory level.” Speaking directly to the role of the eye, Metz recognizes that it is “necessary to attribute this striking discrepancy to the fact that the eye is much more precise than the ear and depicts objects better to us, as is the case with erotic representations of phantasies. The acoustic register—in everyday life, as well as in modern technology—has the misfortune of being caught between two extremely powerful neighbors, both capable of exact *expressions* and not only impressions: namely, the image and the language system [*langue*].”⁸²

Next, Aumont and colleagues ask “*Which subject-spectator is tempted by the cinematic apparatus with its dark room, the suspension of motor function, and the overinvestment in visual and auditory functions?*” Undoubtedly, they answer, “the subject-spectators who are caught up in the cinematic apparatus find some of the same circumstances and conditions they have experienced in their imaginary or their primal scene,” where the same “impotence of motor functions while the eye and ear take over dominance.”⁸³ Again, Metz provides an addendum to this prompt by discussing the important *differences* between the cinematic apparatus and the mirror stage. For Metz, the cinematic situation cannot be equated with the Mirror Stage because the cinema spectator “doesn’t look at his own body’s image.”⁸⁴ However, the cinema situation and the Mirror Stage share common features such as “under-motricity (lessened motor activity) and over perception,” which “devotes all the all the spectator’s forces to seeing, watching, and hearing.”⁸⁵ Placed in the cinematic situation, film spectators may experience graphic as well as offscreen violence, in which case there is literally nothing to see except what is created in the viewer’s own imagination.

Conclusion

Compared with the violence depicted in the films collected under the category of New Extremism, Refn’s eye violence and violence in general seems almost tame and restrained; his work appears more like Hitchcock’s than like the directors engaged in, for example, the torture porn genre. Consequently, Refn’s violence owes more of debt to one of his favorite films, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974). As Kendrick observes, *Massacre* “is often discussed as if it were graphically violent, when in fact very little blood is actually shed onscreen.” Although the film is gruesome, “the vast majority of the violence in this film is kept just offscreen in the same manner as classical Hollywood violence. It is the relentless nature of the violence—the nonstop presence of its threat—that makes the film seem so much more graphically violent than it is.”⁸⁶ Like the infamous ear-ectomy in Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs*, where the camera turns away while the violence transpires off screen, Refn’s camera also turns away from violence as much as it depicts it. As a result of this method, Alison Young observes that the “violence within the film thus takes place without the visual display of that violence.” This allows the filmmaker to shift from a graphic display to the

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 198 – 99

⁸² *Conversations with Christian Metz*, 239.

⁸³ Aumont, Bergala, Marie, Vernet, *Aesthetics of Film*, 199.

⁸⁴ *Conversations with Christian Metz*, 190.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Kendrick, *Film Violence*, 15.

“suggestion of display through withdrawal of the crucial object,” permitting the spectator to take initial comfort “from the withholding of an image of violence.” However, they quickly find that an “act of violence not seen can be even more powerfully affective than its full display, as though the camera has looked away from a sight too dreadful to be seen.”⁸⁷ For Refn, operating as a fully developed *auteur* but also within the confines of genre and commercialism, the Lacanian implications of his directorial decisions have led to a filmography whose reputation for graphic violence is well-earned but also recognized for its overall aesthetic which consistently engages with the dialectic of *not* showing graphic violence. The result is Refn’s own style of crime film: a retro-surrealist *mélange* of neo(n)-noir, techno, and ommetaphobia.

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⁸⁷ Young, *The Scene of Violence*, 44.

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Appendix

List of Eye Violence Films: A Selective Filmography

- A Clockwork Orange*. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. 1971.
- The Birds*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. 1963.
- Horrors of the Black Museum*. Directed by Arthur Crabtree. 1959.
- Blade Runner*. Directed by Ridley Scott. 1982.
- Blade Runner 2049*. Directed by Denis Villeneuve. 2017.
- Bronenosets Potyomkin (Battleship Potemkin)*. Sergei Eisenstein. 1926.
- Dancer in the Dark*. Directed by Lars Von Trier. 2000.
- Drive*. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. 2011.
- The Godfather*. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola. 1973.
- The Holy Mountain*. Directed by Alejandro Jodorowsky. 1973.
- Jigoku*. Directed by Nobuo Nakagawa. 1960.
- Kill Bill: Volume 2*. Directed by Quentin Tarantino. 2004.
- Magnificent Obsession*. Directed by Douglas Sirk. 1954.
- Neon Demon*. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. 2016.
- Only God Forgives*. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. 2013.
- Pan's Labyrinth*. Directed by Guillermo del Toro. 2006.
- The Searchers*. Directed by John Ford. 1956.
- Testament of Orpheus*. Directed by Jean Cocteau. 1960.
- Thriller—A Cruel Picture (They Call Her One Eye)*. Directed by Bo Arne Vibenius. 1974.
- Too Old to Die Young*. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. 2019.*
- Un Chien Andalou*. Directed by Luis Buñuel. 1929.
- Valhalla Rising*. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. 2009.
- X: The Man With the X-Ray Eyes*. Directed by Roger Corman. 1963.
- Zombie 2*. Directed by Lucio Fulci. 1979.

*web television miniseries