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**TRANSIENT SPACES IN NICOLAS WINDING REFN'S**  
**– *Drive, Only God Forgives & The Neon Demon* –**

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## INTRODUCTION

“What else is a film if not ‘an expression of experience by experience’?” And how can we apprehend film space if not through the senses? According to Vivian Sobchack, “the cinema uses *modes of embodied existence* (seeing, hearing, physical and reflective movement) as the vehicle, the ‘stuff,’ the substance of its language.” Thus, as spectators watching a film, we are compelled to “see the seeing as well as the seen, hear the hearing as well as the heard, and feel the movement as well as the moved” (Sobchack citing Merleau-Ponty 3). In fact, “cinematic perception is not merely (audio) visual but synaesthetic, an act in which the senses and the intellect are not conceived of as separate,” that is to say an act of “haptic” vision (Sobchack 4-5). For Antoine Gaudin, cinematic space is “a *component* of represent[ed space]” and its “retranscription,” it presents “an aesthetic and theatrical *issue*,” and it forms a “*construct*” that is “half-empirical and half-imaginary” as it “results from the interaction between the film being shown and the perceptivo-cognitive system of the film’s viewer” (5, my translation). In short, “shooting a film, staging it, adding sound to it and editing it always equates to moulding its space,” bringing it into existence by “cutting it” into fragments and “assembling it” into meaningful units (Gaudin 5, my translation). It should be noted that, throughout this thesis, the term cinematic space will sometimes be contrasted with the term diegetic space, which refers only to the intradiegetic/represented spaces and sounds; whereas cinematic space encompasses the space within the screen (diegetic space), the space of the screen (the surface of representation) and the space beyond the screen (i.e. the audience). Yet even though cinematic space holds such a key position in most filmic works, little attention has been devoted to it in film theory and criticism. For instance, in the introduction to his work on *The Cinematic City*, David B. Clarke remarks that “the city has been understated in film theory,” as “the widespread *implicit* acceptance of its importance has mitigated against an explicit consideration of its actual significance” (1). Indeed, if few critical works have been published on the cityscape in films over the past few decades, fewer still have been written on cinematic space. Studying cinematic space therefore seems to be essential in that “rather than a *representation* of space as such, film *(re)produces* a virtual space,” that is to say a space that may “transcend the real” through cinema’s “sensorial immediacy,” through its “*haptical* quality” (Clarke 8-9).

It is in this sense that Danish director Nicolas Winding Refn seems to apprehend cinematic space, that is as a structure designed to recreate rather than reproduce sensorial experience. This

common theme, well established in most of Refn's films, is materialised through the filmmaker's assimilation of the cinematic image to a painting materialised on the surface of a "digital canvas."<sup>1</sup>

In his extensive work on violence in Refn's filmography,<sup>2</sup> film theorist Justin Vicari notes that

the extreme, visceral filmmaking of [Tobe] Hooper<sup>3</sup> and of [George] Miller (and others) inspired and guided him. [...] These were films in which direct experience was being expressed and defined – replicated, in some ways, for the viewer – through visual and sound techniques specific to the art of cinema. Put otherwise, this was something only film could do, a sort of Holy Grail which has often been called 'pure cinema' and which was expressed once by Godard precisely in terms of how something vivid and raw 'exists only in the cinema ...' [...] This pure cinematic essence, for Refn, exists in the horror film above all else, since horror 'deals with visuals and moods and the connection to our subconscious' (33).

Refn first explored his desire to reproduce raw experience by turning to the rougher grain of guerilla filmmaking and handheld camerawork, notably in the *Pusher* trilogy (1996-2005), in an attempt to "captur[e] authenticity."<sup>1</sup> Eventually finding a balance between his first venture in hyperrealism<sup>4</sup> with *Fear X* (2003) and the fabricated authenticity of *Bleeder* (1999) and of the *Pusher* trilogy, Refn established his authorial signature with *Bronson* (2008) and *Valhalla Rising* (2009). In those last two films, Refn moves away from the more realistic cinematic spaces of his earlier films to create spaces that seem torn between reality and various levels of unreality,<sup>5</sup> such as hallucinations, dreams, and nightmares. This fluid shaping of cinematic space, as well as the intense blurring of the boundaries between reality and illusion are even more heavily central in Refn's following three films: *Drive* (2011), *Only God Forgives* (2013), and *The Neon Demon* (2016). Rather than centering filmic creation around narrative developments and characters, Refn seems to place greater focus on the construction of ephemeral tableaux, using the surface of the screen to materialise a variety of

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1 Franco, James. "James Franco Interviews Nicolas Winding Refn: His 'Extreme' Career, Cocaine and the 'Ritualistic Witchcraft' of 'Neon Demon.'" *IndieWire* (September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016).

2 Vicari, Justin. *Nicolas Winding Refn and the Violence of Art: A Critical Study of the Films*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014.

3 Refn is known to frequently quote Tobe Hooper's 1974 film *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* as seminal to his own aesthetics and to his conception of film as a means to recreate vivid experience for the viewer. In an interview with the A.V. Club, he stated that "after having seen it, I decided that whatever that movie did, I wanted to do. When I decided to make movies, I wanted to do what that movie did to me." Refn uses various iterations of this quote in interviews, including in another interview with James Franco in which he stated "whatever that movie does, I want to do."

4 According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the term "hyperrealism" is a form of "realism in art characterized by depiction of real life in an unusual or striking manner." The term echoes Jean Baudrillard's definitions of "hyperreality," which he assimilates to an inability to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality: "thus everywhere the hyperrealism of simulation is translated by the hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself" (17).

5 "After the neo-expressionistic phantasmagoria of *Bronson*, where disparate levels of reality and unreality freely mix within a theatricalized zone outside of diegetic time and place, and where modernity itself is thrown into question, Refn turned to the distant, barbaric, pre-modern past for his next film, the bleak and beautiful *Valhalla Rising*, set in the 12th century A.D. The contest between reality and unreality, however, continues unabated, now inflected with a tone of hallucinatory mysticism, partly inspired (Refn has acknowledged) by Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979), and by Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo* (1970) and *The Holy Mountain* (1973)" (Vicari 151).

haptic devices that shape cinematic space so as to achieve pure sensation.

It is for this reason that Refn's approach of film is evocative of Gilles Deleuze's work on painting and sensation.<sup>6</sup> For Deleuze, sensation exists "beyond figuration (that is, beyond both the illustrative and the narrative)," and going there can only be achieved in one of two ways: either leaning "toward the abstract form or toward the Figure" (34). The figure emerges on the surface of the canvas (or in this case, on the surface of the film) as a "sensible form related to a sensation; it acts immediately upon the nervous system, which is of the flesh"<sup>7</sup> (Deleuze 34). The sensation, Deleuze argues, is "Being-in-the-World:" "at one and the same time I *become* in the sensation and something *happens* through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other" (34-35). The figure remains as the imprint of a "tension between forms and forces," the manifestation of a "psychic activity" perceived haptically<sup>8</sup> (Vancheri 146, 12, my translation). In other words, the figure can often be the key element towards the revelation of the different aspects of space, and its construction as a metaphysical space. In *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*, the setting up of the narrative is partly grounded in the concept of transience as a "figural" notion. As I will strive to argue, the figurality of transience is mainly established through the protagonist of each film: they are made to embody an omnipresent sense of impermanence that is inherently tied to contemporary conceptions of space, and in particular supermodern spaces.

In the late 1980s, the emergence of the concept of "supermodernity" introduced a new paradigm shift in the way space and place were perceived in contemporary society. Etymologically as much as conceptually, the term crystallises earlier issues raised by modernist conceptions of space (notably the weakening of the concept of "place"<sup>9</sup>). Described at length by Marc Augé in his 1992 *Non-Place; Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, supermodernity is explained to be the entrance into an "era characterized by changes of scale." Augé further argues that today's

6 Deleuze, Gilles. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Trans. By Daniel W. Smith. London: Continuum, [1981: 2004]. See chapter 6, "Painting and Sensation" (pp. 34-43).

7 On the other hand, Deleuze notes that "the abstract form is addressed to the head, and acts through the intermediary of the brain, which is closer to the bone" (34).

8 In his 2011 work on *Les Pensées Figurales de l'Image*, Luc Vancheri explains that the "figurability" of images occurs in three steps. First, the "time of the visible, which dazzles and blinds," thus "preventing the mind" from appraising the "details" of the image. Then, the "time of the figures, which eludes the figurative logic," and finally the "time of the virtual, which refuses the [act of] representation" (126, my translation).

9 According to Clarke, modernity was "marked by a powerful obsession to impose a thoroughly rationalized order on to the world" and this sometimes stifling compulsion led to a compartmentalisation of urban space into efficient units (3). This new organisation is described by Clarke as being drastically opposed to "the social and physical spaces of pre-modern society [which] formed an intimately related, lived totality" (4). Instead, the fragmentation brought about by modernity was the source behind the creation of a deep rift that separated the "social and physical worlds," thus giving "rise to a new kind of virtual or spectral presence – a flickering ontology or hauntology – characteristic of the stranger" (Clarke 4). This transient figure looks to be the first symptom of an ever-increasing sense of unease and alienation in contemporary spaces, which eventually reached its peak in the second half of the twentieth century (notably with the post-modernist rejection of modernism and its core values).

society is an accelerated society in which modern means of transportation and communication have shortened the physical as well as virtual boundaries between people and cultures giving way to a universalised, homogenised understanding of space:

Rapid means of transports have brought any capital within a few hours' travel of any other. And in the privacy of our homes, finally, images of all sorts, relayed by satellites and caught by the aerials that bristle on the roofs of our remotest hamlets, can give us an instant, sometimes simultaneous vision of an event taking place on the other side of the planet. [...] It should be noted, too, that the screens of the planet daily carry a mixture of images (news, advertising and fiction) [...] which assemble before our eyes a universe that is relatively homogeneous in its diversity. (31-32)

It should be noted that this change did quite clearly impact representations of cinematic spaces. In fact, although she does not use the term non-place, Vivian Sobchack mentions a similar phenomenon in her 1987 work *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, stating that the “digital ‘bit’ has fragmented our experience and representation of space” and “dislocated our experience and sense of ‘place’.”<sup>10</sup>

Our experience of spatial contiguity has also been radically altered by digital representation. Fragmented into discrete and contained units by both microchips and strobe lights, space has lost much of its contextual function as the ground for continuities of time, movement, and event. Space is now more often a ‘text’ than a context. Absorbing time, incorporating movement, figuring as its own discrete event, contemporary space has become experienced as self-contained, convulsive, and discontinuous (231-232).

This accelerated society deeply changed the very fabric of space and place as “its concrete outcome involves considerable physical modifications,” notably in “the multiplication of what we call non-places,” a concept that Augé opposes to “the sociological notion of place, associated by Mauss and a whole ethnological tradition with the idea of a culture localized in time and space” (Augé 34). According to Augé, “place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed” (79). What is inferred, here, is that the notion of “place” is so deeply anchored in the spaces of everyday life and in human history that its meaning cannot be fully “erased.” However, the notion of “place” has created a new sociological structure in which places are separated from one another by a space from which the paradigm of “place” itself is absent, a “non-place,” a “standardized, anonymous and exchangeable” space (Gebauer et al., 12). In films such as Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967), Sofia Coppola's *Lost in*

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10 “We are culturally producing and electronically disseminating a new world geography that politically and economically defies traditional notions of spatial 'location.' As a system of orientation, conventional geography has served to represent relative spatial boundaries predicated by differences not only of latitude and longitude and 'natural' geophysical punctuation, but also of national real estate. Conventional geography, however, cannot adequately describe where contemporary Palestine is located. Nor was it able to circumscribe the boundaries of a Vietnam that 'placed' itself both 'inside' and 'outside' the American living-room. Our new electronic technology has also spatially dispersed capital while consolidating and expanding its power to an 'everywhere' that seems like 'nowhere’” (Sobchack 232-233).



*Translation* (2003) and Jason Reitman's *Up in the Air* (2009), “these non-places have come to represent the acceleration and fragmentation of life, and their representations [...] are used to question the possibility of social interaction in our globalized supermodernity” and its uniform “labyrinth for the individual” (Gebauer et al. 13, 8).

Augé's somewhat absolute concept certainly seems to resonate with the issues raised by modernism, but it also finds echo in the work of many other scholars concerned with the issue of space, including that of geographer Edward Relph and Paul Virilio, which will be referenced throughout this thesis. In his 1976 work entitled *Place and Placelessness*, Relph already suggested that the notion of place was slowly but surely being erased from urban landscapes. He described the phenomenon as “placelessness – that is, the casual eradication of distinctive places and the making of standardised landscapes that results from insensitivity to the significance of place” and the “weakening of distinct and diverse experiences and identities of places,” which Relph considered to be a “dominant force” (preface-6). On the other hand, in *Speed and Politics* and (1977) *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (1980), Virilio concerned himself primarily with the issue of acceleration, speed, and hyper-efficiency in contemporary spaces. However, as Virilio refrained from discussing the intensity of place, he avoids using the term supermodernity and favours that of “hypermodernity” instead.

Ultimately, most issues raised by the various conceptions of space heretofore discussed coalesce into the concept of “transience.” In order to avoid the many debates surrounding the validity of a complex notion such as that of “non-place,” I will prefer the term “transient” to refer to the phenomenon whereby places are either transformed into bland, functional spaces, or meaning-ridden ones, depending on the way they are shown and used.<sup>11</sup> The term further enables me to refer to phenomena and figures that originated in modern and hypermodern<sup>12</sup> spaces and remain present in supermodern conceptions of space. The concept of “transience” also allows me to insist on the notions of movement and impermanence in relation to space that the paradigm of “non-place” carries, as it is indeed “through movement [that] places become passages, creating non-places” (Gebauer et al. 11). The concept of transient space, as it was first explored by Michel de Certeau

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11 Stating this, I imply that the term “transient space” will also be used to refer to transactional spaces (e.g. restaurants, gyms, etc.: spaces which are essentially functional and cease to be relevant once the transaction has been completed); transitional spaces (e.g. corridors, elevators, etc.: they encompass in-between spaces which have become spaces of transformation in the films under study); and transitory spaces (e.g. hotel and motel rooms, etc: that is to say spaces in which the characters punctually attempt to reassert a sense of place).

12 The conceptual link between those three paradigms is evidenced more fully in the work of Bruce Bégout who clearly associates modern figures with both hypermodern and supermodern spaces. Although Bégout scarcely uses the those last two terms, he clearly references Augé's non-place (see *Lieu Commun, Le Motel Américain*, chapter 7) and Virilio's accelerated spaces (particularly whenever he evokes speed and the automobilist).

and Augé in their definition of “non-places,” suggests that our contemporary world and its physical structure are made out of in-between spaces (Augé 85). These transitory spaces (e.g., roads, hotels, waiting rooms, shopping malls, etc.) appear to be located beyond the “anthropological places” and, as such, they do not usually carry any sense of a distinguishable identity (Augé 78). For instance, it seems that all roads, trains, and shopping malls resemble one another. They are, for all intent and purpose, bland areas of “inhabited” space that are seldom spared a second glance, and in which social contact is largely accidental (Augé 78).

According to film theorist Justin Vicari, this “alienated” sense of space is precisely what characterises Nicolas Winding Refn's work as Refn himself views his “deracinated upbringing as sparking a creative sense of belonging everywhere and nowhere,” and a desire to go on “effecting continuous change” in film space and plot (13). His three most recent films merely underline that idea as Refn uses archetypal transient spaces as the main backdrop to each film's diegesis. For instance, the unnamed hero of *Drive* moves through space safely isolated from the world in the darkness of his car, while the quiet protagonist of *Only God Forgives* walks through a maze of deserted corridors and the narrow alleys of Bangkok by night, and *The Neon Demon* portrays an underage model in the becoming, who resides in a shady motel in Los Angeles and passes through the ephemeral sets of numerous photo shoots. Refn's characters could be said to evolve, in Augé's words, in a “world [...] surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral” of transient spaces (78). Yet at the same time, the director appears to prioritise the exploration of physical and sonic space over plot development, placing his films within “the art cinema” tradition identified by Bordwell and which “motivates its narrative by two principles: realism and authorial expressivity” (718).<sup>13</sup> Refn's depiction of space in these three films is particularly interesting as it refuses to represent standardised inner and outer locations that could be found anywhere to establish, instead, a visually striking background ridden with symbolic meaning and connotations. It does so to the point that the film's background might, in effect, be an amorphous space shaped through pathetic fallacy – that is to say by the characters' own minds and/or identifying traits, including their gender. Moreover, in each film, transient spaces paradoxically constitute the main place of interaction between the characters, but also between the notions of space and identity (including representations of gender). I would argue, then, that transient spaces remain blank spaces until they have been penetrated, as “given enough time, the

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13 In 1979 article “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,” Bordwell specifies that the three main characteristics that determine art films' narrative structures are “objective realism” (the maintaining of “verisimilitude”), “subjective realism” (the depiction of the characters and their “psychological state”), and “authorial presence” (or “authorial self-consciousness,” manifested through an overt narrative process) (719-722).

individual tends to mould the non-place into a place” (Gebauer et al., 10). In the end, space may very well be a metaphysical manifestation of the films’ characters, that is to say an externalised representation of the characters’ psyche, as well as an extension of their own corporeality.

To discuss and analyse these issues, this thesis will rely largely on the work produced by Mirjam Gebauer et al. entitled *Non-Place: Representing Placelessness in Literature, Media and Culture*, and which thoroughly analyses the use of non-places in sociological studies, as well as in literature and films, including *Drive*. Additionally, I will use a number of sources analysing specific spaces – roads, cars, hotels and motels – (which also constitute non-places and that are represented in the three films under study), including, among others, Bruce Bégout’s work entitled *Lieu Commun, Le Motel Américain* (2003), in which it is argued that non-places and spaces such as that of the motel “unveil the profound structure of a mental apparatus” (71). I will also refer to a number of works dealing more generally with the way space is shaped and used in films, such as the work by Gaudin entitled *L'Espace Cinématographique: Esthétique et Dramaturgie* (2015) and his article on “L'Image-Espace: Proposition Théorique pour la Prise en Compte d'un « Espace Circulant » dans les Images de Cinéma” (2014).

Throughout this thesis, I will strive to identify and evidence the implications of representing a transient space in Refn’s *Drive*, *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon*, as well as attempt to demonstrate that this space could very well be a metaphysical space. By discussing this idea, I seek to determine how the space that is located outside the anthropological place might have become one of the most potent vehicles of meaning in Refn’s last few films.

The first chapter of this thesis will focus on the study of the shaping of transient figures and spaces on screen, notably through film form. I will attempt to demonstrate that Refn uses transience and transient spaces as a means to interconnect cinematic space and diegetic characters, all the while submitting the viewer to transient sensations. To do so, I will explore the relationship between the films’ protagonists and the very concept of transience in order to show that the characters might be constructed so as to embody the ephemerality and instability that are characteristic of transience. I will then analyse the different interconnection of transient spaces with movement and temporality, as well as the films’ visual and sonorous textures. Using Gaudin's notion of “the breath of air” (“*respiration*” in French) within space, I intend to show that the films’ form is treated as organic matter, as a living, breathing organism that deeply affects our perception of movement in the films under study, along with the movement of the diegesis and that of the characters.

The second chapter will be dedicated to the study of the films’ transient spaces as

metaphysical spaces. I will attempt to show that cinematic space is constructed as an extension of the main characters' own physicality and psyche. The protagonists seem to progressively integrate diegetic space through pathetic fallacy, as the moods or textures that characterise them seep into the film's structure and aesthetics. Moreover, I intend to demonstrate that the films under study represent bodies that undergo a process of transformation resulting in the emergence of inhuman figures and violence. I will thoroughly investigate the relationship between violence and space as a potential norm within transient spaces, a result of the marginalised position of the places depicted in each film. I will attempt to analyse the different means through which violence is normalised and becomes a way to shape the characters' identity, before trying to prove that transient spaces are presented as spaces of death – that is to say spaces in which death and violence is not just expected but also systematically carried out.

# CHAPTER 1

## – SHAPING TRANSIENCE AND TRANSIENT SPACES –

According to Virilio, the transient, impermanent spaces of supermodernity are often represented in such a way that “the vastness of space is no longer sought except as a means of calling into question the experience of discontinuity” (107). Time and space are made to “seem infinite to us” as both notions are progressively rendered obsolete and disappear, driven away by the “extreme mobility” of transient spaces that, paradoxically, “creates the inertia of the moment,” the “instantaneity which create[s] the instant” to introduce an “illusory” impression of “stability” into representations of such spaces (108). The perceived “disjuncture of both time and space that modernity inaugurated” by surrendering space to the “transitory, the fleeting and the contingent” appears to be “most intensely felt” within the boundaries of the “modern city,” which produces the in-between spaces of transience (Clarke 4). This specific space also constitutes the somewhat distant backdrop to Refn's *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*. Rather interestingly, it appears that Refn instinctively reproduces these foundational characteristics of transience; it resides at the very core of each film, seeps into their structure to generate lasting impressions of paralysis and inertia, unease and marginalisation. In fact, not only are the protagonists of each film portrayed as “strangers” – that is to say, characters who are both the “embodiment” and the consequence of modern spaces – but the editing style of each film participates in an aesthetics of cinematic fragmentation that dislocates diegetic temporal and spatial continuity. This is, in part, enhanced by the absence of a “sense of place” to anchor both the diegetic space and narrative, resulting in the subsequent disorientation of the viewer throughout each film, which also appears as a necessary step in the translation of transience on screen (Nairn 63). Additionally, transience manifests itself through alternating sensations of movement and stillness that are expressed haptically and rhythmically, thus interacting directly with the viewer and his/her own body.

### *Transient Characters*

The protagonists of Refn's *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon* seem to be portrayed as transient figures; that is to say characters that do not merely evolve almost solely within transient spaces, but who are also used as pretexts for the exploration of cinematic space, all

the while physically embodying the concept of transience itself and the way it fragments space and time. In fact, each of the films' protagonists seems to have somewhat integrated the distinctive traits of transience to the point of being perceived as alien; in effect, they fit philosopher Bruce Bégout's description of those transient populations that are "*en instance*." They are beings "*about to [act]*, but that haven't yet reached their goal nor decided of their target;" they are distant, "unstable and unresolved entities who move forward without really knowing what they are headed towards nor why" and are thus left to "wander" about the space of the frame<sup>14</sup> (69, 88, my translation). Driven by an obsessive compulsion for movement, the narrative of each film pictures characters that are undeniably the product of supermodernity,<sup>15</sup> and appear thus bound to the "infinite mobility" that Bégout associates with those beings "who have long since renounced the all-too-limiting and outdated notion of place" and live instead within these modern in-between spaces surrendered to transience (70, my translation). Rather paradoxically, Refn identifies both his characters and the spaces they inhabit through their lack of a clearly established identity, severely impeding the process of identification. The protagonists of each film are defined – or more precisely *identified* – primarily as strangers, mysterious figures that visually or even literally collide with the spaces they move through. Similarly, those spaces remain nameless and functional, often kept remote from the idea of place as they are made into transitional spaces, each representing a specific moment or event – perhaps even a memory – through which the substance of each character can be materialised. Turning the characters into "strangers" is a recurrent device in each of the films under study, as well as a characteristic indivisible from the construction of transient characters. According to film theorist David B. Clarke, the figure of the stranger, i.e., "a person who does not know, or is not known in, a particular place or community,"<sup>16</sup> developed itself alongside modernity as "the personification of all that modernity's efforts at cognitive spacing sought in vain to annihilate and merely succeeded in displacing." The stranger became "the very agency necessary for the institutional structures of modernity to function" (Clarke 4). To be more precise, the figure of the stranger is, in many ways, the consequence of modernity's failed "ordering zeal" (Clarke 3) in its

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14 In that respect, they share some of the main traits associated with the characters of the art cinema who, according to Bordwell, "lack defined desires and goals." Additionally, they lead the viewer to inspect cinematic space more closely: the art cinema's "drifting protagonist traces an itinerary, an encyclopedic survey of the film's world" (718).

15 Bégout asserted that, in supermodern settings, urban populations' overall attitudes shifted "abruptly" between "subservience and aggression, utter numbness and hyperesthesia." In short, they are "subjected to intense external stimulation," to which their "nervous system" reacts by oscillating dangerously "between hypersensitivity and desensitisation" (56, my translation). Bégout further remarks that it leads to "apathy," but also – inevitably – to "violence," and even "savagery," as "men [have become] like so many grains of gunpowder: when isolated they remain absolutely inoffensive, whereas they come to fuse together and explode when gathered into a confined space" (57, my translation). Bégout finally states that "the modern man ... has become flexible" and remains "without anchors" in space (70, my translation) Ultimately, supermodern space is surrendered to the transience of perpetual movement and instability, both physically and emotionally.

16 Oxford Dictionary Online, definition of the term "stranger."

structuring of urban planning, as it created purely “*abstract spaces*, which ensured [the] fragmentation and disjuncture” of modern cityscapes and their social fabric (Clarke 4). For instance, “the hallmark of the stranger [...] was that he or she was immediately proximate in *physical* space yet distant in *social* space,” thus affecting “time and space” in such a way that they were “no longer stable, solid, and foundational,” but instead “transitory”, “fleeting”, etc.<sup>17</sup> (Clarke 4). This notion in particular is thoroughly reflected in the protagonists of each of the films under study, as they are all identified as strangers and transient characters, but also because they incarnate Refn’s typical “mythological creature that has a mysterious past but cannot relate to reality because he’s heightened and he’s pure fetish.”<sup>18</sup> In Refn’s 2011 film, *Driver* is introduced as “new here” by Irene and, although he claims that he has been in L.A. for “a while,” he seems estranged from the social

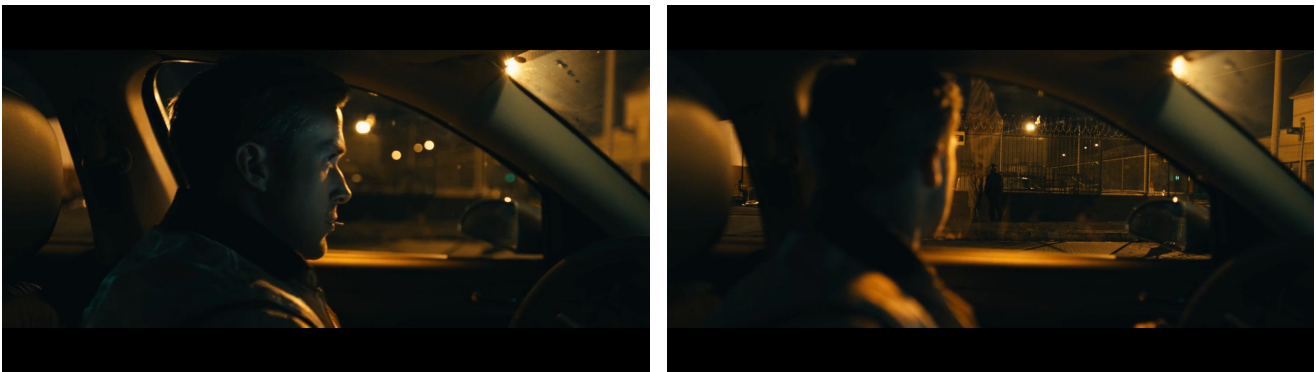


Fig. 1 & 2. Alternation of focal depth between foreground and background in *Drive*.

space as described by Clarke. This is also evidenced by his lack of a proper name and his apparent “inability to experience social bonding for himself,” and it is heightened by the way focal depth is manipulated throughout the narrative in order to isolate him further from his surroundings and the other characters (Vicari 182). All in all, *Driver* is the epitome of the action narrative hero, “a figure who lacks a place within the community for which he fights” (Vicari citing Tasker 180). The cityscape appears to be systematically blurred whenever *Driver* (or a part of his body) is in focus (and vice versa, fig.1 & 2), carefully keeping him apart from the space of the city outside his car’s windshield at all times, seemingly identifying him as living on the margins of the city’s social space and rules and underlining the idea that the space of the film is “blurred and indeterminate” (Christiansen 132). The car’s constant movement makes it impossible to grasp a sense of depth and the specifics of space, effectively rendering the even textures and “smoothed surfaces” of

17 Again, this impression intensified throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, until they appeared to have been rendered somewhat obsolete in contemporary conceptions of space (i.e. post-modern, supermodern and hypermodern spaces).

18 Barlow, Helen. “*Only God Forgives*: Nicolas Winding Refn Interview.” SBS (July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013). In a series of interviews with online magazine */Film*, Refn identifies that character as being *Driver* in *Drive*, Chang in *Only God Forgives*, and the female characters of *The Neon Demon*.

transience, thus creating a lasting sense of disorientation (Virilio 107). Similarly, focal depth is manipulated to fragment space in such a way that Driver's figure is almost never shown on the same focal plane as the other characters surrounding him. The only exception to that process occurs after he has taken Irene and Benicio on a drive, establishing a brief visual closeness with her as their relationship reaches its climax before they drift apart once more immediately after exchanging a first kiss in their building's lift. It seems that this omnipresent contrast is only avoided in spaces that are fabricated (in the aforementioned sequence, filmic space is reshaped by a change in lighting) or in the few spaces in which a sense of place has been reintroduced.

*Only God Forgives* resorts to the same device to depict the estrangement of the foreign characters from their Thai surroundings. Bangkok's turbulent streets comprise a blurry background against which the white characters, Julian and his brother Billy, stand out (fig. 3). The film also uses a relatively tight framing, and most shots are designed to include an overabundance of elements to produce frame-within-the-frame composition (often several doors or windows) so as to mark Julian's expatriate status. The Thai characters, on the other hand, appear fully incorporated in the cityscape through the use of an increased depth of field and broader framing (fig. 4). The opening



Fig. 3. Medium close shot of Julian.



Fig. 4. Long shot of Chang.

title slides of *Only God Forgives* also hint at a type of transient character that differs slightly from *Drive* or *The Neon Demon*. As a matter of fact, the title is spelled out in Thai over a faint blood-splattered background and above a blood-stained sword bathed in orange light. The use of Thai, first and foremost, causes the viewer to be placed in the exact same position as the film's American characters: that of a stranger in a foreign country as, presumably, they are unable to decipher the title. Throughout the film, "all the white characters" will reveal themselves to be "glorified tourists (they do not speak Thai), existential journeymen with karmic debts to settle" (Vicari 194). Unable to speak Thai, they are, therefore, completely disconnected from a sense of place in that, although they do interact with Thai characters and culture (notably through the boxing gym), they are mostly disconnected from Thai society, traditions and values that are, in part, incarnated by Chang, and



they very clearly operate outside of its laws. Finally, the orphaned protagonist of *The Neon Demon*, Jesse, has just barely moved to L.A. at the beginning of the film and is isolated through her positioning as the centre of attention in each shot (she is also usually placed at the literal centre of almost every shot she is in), as well as through the predominant use of medium close-ups here as well (fig. 5 & 6).



Fig. 5. Long shot of Jesse at the center.



Fig. 6. Medium close shot of Jesse.

The most obvious correlation between transient spaces and the films' protagonists is the predominant sense of anonymity that can be tied back to both diegetic space and the protagonists. As Bégout noted in his analysis of motels as the archetypal transient space and potential non-place, "the minimalist codification of space rubs off on its occupants' behaviour," while anonymity allows "the subjects to keep themselves from being tightly connected to a reference system (family-wise, socially, and so forth)" (17, 144, my translation). Bégout further asserts that, rather than signifying a "refusal" to accept one's identity, anonymity allows the individual to "experience the profound nature" of his/her identity: the individual "exists only *in* and *for* [him/her]self, as though detached from any contextual or heteronomous determiner" (144, my translation). Conversely, Yann Roblou remarks that Driver "obtains an identity, or even an existence," that is to say a form of tangibility, "only" through his driving and "his presence behind the wheel," much like Jesse is able to obtain hers by being gazed upon, in other words, by fulfilling her desire to be the focal point and fetish object of everyone's gaze. Similarly, the "sexual guilt," the sentiment of "castration" and the "incestuous" trauma that characterise Julian are re-enacted through the overbearing presence of frame-within-the-frame in each shot which looks to assimilate *Only God Forgives'* dark and oppressive diegetic space to intrauterine spaces (Vicari 196, 198). The correlation between transient spaces and the specific traits of the protagonists of each film contribute to showing that the films' spaces may very well "reveal the profound structure of a mental apparatus" much in the same way transient spaces do according to Bégout (71). Ultimately, although there is nothing bland or trivial about the protagonists, each of them is shrouded in a more or less potent aura of mystery due mostly

to their blurry origins and narrative paths, as well as their lack of a clearly established and stable identity. From the absolute anonymity of *Drive*'s protagonist identified by his function as “driver” in the end credits and then turned into “a character whose designation and function are interchangeable” (Roblou 3, my translation), to the omission of Julian's name in the first half-hour of *Only God Forgives* or to Jesse's vague backstory, lack of a surname and unstable character in *The Neon Demon*, it appears that the protagonists' identities are mostly veiled and unclear. Moreover, both the films' structure and space is designed to express the characters' identity along with a latent idea of “mobility” and of a notion of transience that is inherently relative to the characters introduced on screen.

In his article on “Collision and Movement in Nicolas Winding Refn's *Drive*,” Steen Ledet Christiansen remarks that “there is never a clear sense of where the characters are in relation to a greater whole, nor is there a sense of progression” (132). In the film's opening shot, once the protagonist is finally shown facing a window, he is immediately associated with an idea of transience and movement through that of the camera, but also through the image of the cars passing by below that can briefly be observed in the bottom right corner of the frame. This particular image also shows the first instance of a recurrent pattern throughout the film in which cars and vehicular motion are omnipresent from sequence to sequence. Paradoxically, the only element of connection and continuity in *Drive* and its various spaces is the constant presence of two paragons of transience somewhere in the background behind Driver's figure: cars and roads. Moreover, the relatively tight framing and the rapidity of *Drive*'s introductory shot prevents the audience from apprehending space in its entirety, as barely enough time is given to grasp the visual cues placed on the screen. For instance, at one point during the shot, the spectator is shown a TV screen displaying a basketball game that will be used to fill the gap left by the lack of a visual connection between the different spaces of the sequence that precedes the opening credits. Indeed, over the next few scenes, Driver is seen listening to the same game on the radio all the way through the car chase and up until he abandons the car in the parking of the stadium where the basketball game just came to an end. The shot ends by showing a closed bag Driver seems to keep in the trunk of his car whenever he leaves his sparsely furnished apartment, yet another sign of his lack of anchoring in social space.

Ultimately, it should be noted that although the interdependent relationship between character-building and the general construction of film space as transient, anonymous, and unstable entities may initially appear to signify a definite erasing of notions such as identity and history – the two core notions on which place and place-making are built, and without which Marc Augé's initial definition of the non-place thrives – neither the films' protagonists nor film space are entirely foreign to the viewer. As is suggested by Vicari, “[Refn's] role is that of a mythmaker, creating

compelling characters who exemplify great themes such as loss of innocence, heroism, and the universal oneness of existence” (14). To counter the shaky grounds and blurry landmarks of the transient narratives, Refn chooses to cite “myths and fairytales” from various sources, including the “Brothers Grimm and Western cowboy movies,” infusing his narratives with familiar structures and universal archetypes (Vicari 23). The mythification of cinematic space enables the establishing of landmarks by relying on the idea of a collective (un)conscious, as myths are “*stories* that cement the actual history within mass consciousness” and “obey certain constant patterns – good and evil, strength, spiritual values – in order to reassure people that these elements have not been lost along the way of progress” (Vicari 8, 37). As such, mythmaking enables the anchoring of the films’ narratives within the bounds of a history shared by a collective. This is further supported by Jung’s analysis of the “collective unconscious” as a “deeper layer” of the individual’s unconscious. While the latter is “limited to denoting the state of repressed or forgotten contents” and “exclusively personal [in] nature,” Jung asserts that the collective unconscious “does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn,” and therefore based on the experience of a common history (3).

The contents of the collective unconscious, on the other hand, are known as *archetypes*. [...] The term 'archetype' thus applies only indirectly to the 'représentation collectives,' since it designates only those psychic contents which have not yet been submitted to conscious elaboration and are therefore an immediate datum of psychic experience. [...] Another well-known expression of the archetypes is myth and fairy tale (Jung 4, 5).<sup>19</sup>

However, it is essential to note that myths displace and isolate – in short, marginalise – the mythic heroes and settings into a remote time-space; “the pretence of myth is that it is always somewhere outside of history, no matter that it serves historically determined functions,” myths are “ahistorical” (Vicari 23). The codification of cinematic space is thus partly constructed around this idea, notably through lighting (film tinting), camerawork (the prevalence of low-angle shots to depict mythic figures), and sound design. For instance, in *Drive*, atemporality is expressed most visibly through the recurrent golden lighting cast onto most sequences, and the light wash of sepias that bathe the surface of the screen, tinting the images represented underneath with this soft hue reminiscent of faded photographs and times bygone (fig. 9). In *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon*, the mystical atmosphere that surround mythic figures is established quite insistently

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<sup>19</sup> Throughout his filmography (and especially *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*), Refn regularly depicts characters and concepts in a way that echoes Jung's dual archetypes and myths. Although Refn has never indicated he could be Jungian, he is known to have been largely influenced by other directors such as Stanley Kubrick and Alejandro Jodorowsky (to whom he also dedicated both *Drive* and *Only God Forgives*) whose work often recalls Jung's concepts. For instance, in his work on *Les Origines de la Maladie* Antonio Bertoli notes that “many of Jodorowsky's main ideas ... are at least partly inspired by Jungian theories” and resurface in most of his work including “*El Topo*,” “*The Holy Mountain*,” and “*The Incal*” (201, my translation). The first two production cited here have already been referenced as influential of Refn's style in the introduction to this thesis.

through the films' sound design, whether it be through the exacerbated metallic reverberation of Chang's weapon, as well as the ominous drums and mystical tinkling of bells surrounding Chang's apparitions, or the lighter chimes peppering *The Neon Demon*'s soundtrack.

During his first appearance on screen in *Only God Forgives*, Chang is shown walking down silent, narrow alleys by night. Under the loud and even thudding noise of his footsteps, a series of disquieting and irregular metallic reverberations and higher screeching noises can be heard, faintly fading in and out, each time louder than before. The final reverberation occurs as Chang reaches his destination (the place where Billy just murdered a young prostitute) and is finally shown in a close shot, looking straight down the eye of the camera. The sound echoes in ripples, low and heavy at the forefront of the film's quiet soundscape, its prolonged duration stretching out the instant of this first interaction between Chang and the audience. This sound, which reappears in nearly all sequences featuring Chang is, in that last instant, uncomfortably invasive in its intensity. Towards the end of the sequence, after the girl's father has avenged her by violently killing Billy, the relative silence is broken again by a loud rumbling minor chord and the ominous rhythmic thumping of drums which articulate the transition to a new diegetic space just as much as they signal an episode of violence (or is it divine punishment) issued by Chang (again, these sounds are used several times throughout the film, always in association to Chang's character). Finally, the sequence ends with Chang drawing his sword out – seemingly of his own body<sup>20</sup> – and the echoing noise of the metallic slide of the blade as it is unsheathed recalls the earlier metallic screeches that punctuated Chang's first apparition on screen, establishing an undeniable link between the two. This reverberation intensifies once more and culminates as he cuts off the prostitute's father's hand, and it is also intermingled with the mystical tinkling of bells that emerges whenever Chang draws out his sword, perhaps highlighting the seemingly divine (or at the very least cleansing) purpose behind his violent acts of punishment. Overall, Chang's presence in the film extend beyond his physical representation and seeps into the film's extradiegetic space, as is shown by the establishing of a link between his appearances on screen and the film's score and sound design.

Similarly, the soundtrack of *The Neon Demon* highlights the pull Jesse's magnetic beauty has on the film's other protagonists with the recurring, rather delicate sound of electronic chimes, introducing an undercurrent of artifice to her character; these chimes are used in almost every single one of the songs composed by Cliff Martinez for the film, in sync with close-ups of Jesse appearing on screen in the film. The soundtrack is constructed in a way that almost mirrors the environment depicted in the film, where Jesse's pure beauty is constantly threatened by the other characters. In

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<sup>20</sup> Chang always pulls the blade out from behind his back, but its sheath is never visible, and neither is the bulk it should add to Chang's police uniform.

fact, the light sound of the chimes is almost always counterbalanced by a deep rhythmic bass, a loud and stuttering buzzing, or a shaky reverberation in the background (most of these elements are used in Martinez’s “Neon Demon,” and “Kinky”).

The redundancy of some of the aural cues used in *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon* also betrays a form of atemporality as it enforces a cyclical pattern. In *Drive* and *Only God Forgives*, atemporality is also evoked through the films’ blurry timeline. In fact, the narrative of *Only God Forgives* seem to be perpetually mired in the deep hours of the night, and representations of daylight in *Drive* sometimes confounds temporal landmarks. While it is clear the film occurs over several days, perhaps even weeks, the lighting makes it seem as though we were moving from nighttime (the opening of the film) to dusk the following day (the closing scene). The few nighttime sequences that intervene throughout the film are all very brief and usually occur within indoor spaces, thus avoiding representations of the darkening skies. Early on in the film, the first daylight sequence shows what could be construed as morning to midday light, the sun still low in the white sky (fig. 7 & 8). This lighting is maintained throughout the first half of the film, until Driver takes Irene and Benicio on a drive down the dried up bed of the L.A. river. At this point in the film, the light takes the more golden colours of late afternoon that will follow through to the end of the film (fig. 9 & 10).

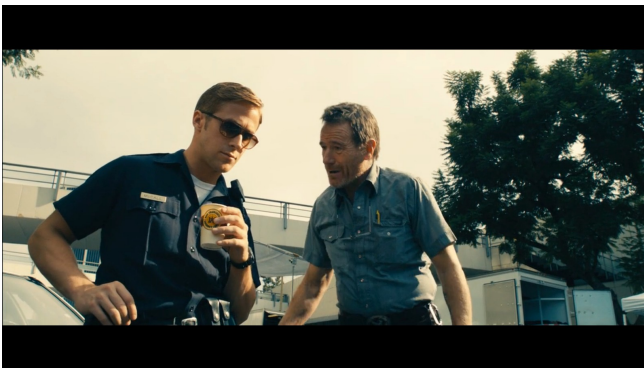


Fig. 7 & 8. The mid-morning/midday white skies.



Fig. 9 & 10. The golden lighting of late afternoon.

In *The Neon Demon*, the surface layer of the screen is also periodically disturbed and distorted by smudges of light that participate in making the viewer aware of the camera and of the factitious quality of the images on screen. In fact, although it is often tempting to link the images in which these smudges of light appear to subjective viewpoints (i.e. those of the film's photographers, watching through the lens of their cameras), their presence is not always reconcilable with those. For instance, shortly after Jesse's murder, a sequence depicts Jack on set for a photoshoot when the flares of a white spotlight and another couple of red lights spreads out in a series of lines smudging the surface of the screen, even in the shot showing the photographer taking the models' picture (fig. 11). In that sequence, the lighting effect seems to emphasise the artificiality of the fashion world (which itself contains the sequence's photoshoot set). However, haptic smudges of light can also be observed in sequences that depict spaces that should be conceived of as separate from this carefully



Fig. 11. Jack taking photographs of Sarah and Gigi.



Fig. 12. Ruby after Jesse's photoshoot with Jack.

crafted microcosm. In the sequence following Jesse's first professional photoshoot with Jack, she is seen talking to Ruby in a backstreet outside the warehouse where the photoshoot just took place. The buildings surrounding the two characters are such a perfectly pristine white that they might just as well be part of the set Jesse just left. This impression is further reinforced by the similarities in the colour palette used in that sequence, and in the softness of the lighting, which establishes a continuity between the fabricated sets of L.A.'s fashion industry and the "real" world of the diegesis. The soft golden and lilac smudges of light spreading out within the frame solidify this impression that this daylight scene is artificial, unreal, practically dream-like (fig. 12). The space depicted here is so far removed from any of the other, more realistic, daytime scenes of the film that it may severely impact the viewer's willing suspension of disbelief, or at the very least blur the lines between diegetic dream and reality throughout the entire film.

Easily identifiable landmarks are also reintroduced through the characters themselves, as they often embody fairy tale archetypes, such as that of the hero "who comes in and protects the innocent from evil, sacrificing himself for purity" (Driver), the damsel in distress, the virgin, and a

slew of ambivalent figures, villains or monsters, vampires and witches (Vicari 23), as well as other mythic figures (Oedipus, the Countess Báthory, Médéa, etc.). However, Refn constantly engages the viewer by challenging the established archetypes, forcing them to remain on unstable grounds: the hero resorts to shocking hyperviolence; the damsel in distress is not always rescued; the virgin is repeatedly objectified, hypersexualised and ultimately murdered precisely for having refused to have sex (in a way that is diametrically opposed to the conventions of the slasher film genre referenced throughout *The Neon Demon*), etc. Moreover, Refn manipulates film genre conventions in each film to produce familiar filmscapes and identifiable markers. For Bordwell and Thompson, “genres are based on a tacit agreement between filmmakers and audiences. What gives films of a type some common identity are shared *genre conventions* which reappear in film after film” (52). *Drive*, for instance, references the dark, oppressive and threatening cityscapes and chiaroscuros of film noir to construct a “cynical” and “highly individualistic dystopian view of Los Angeles,” the accelerated narratives and constant mobility of the action film “continuously raise[d]...to something like a renewal of ancient mythology in a current urban setting,” the mutic and fetichised hero of the Western (Vicari 56, 72). Similarly, *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon* employ noir’s low-key lighting and relatively tight framing to denote anxiogenous and menacing spaces, as well as a variety of increasingly garish fill lights and baroque gothic elements (especially in *The Neon*



Fig. 13. from top to bottom and left to right: Mario Bava's *Planet of the Vampires* (1965), Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977) and its obsessive symmetry, Refn's *Only God Forgives* (2013) and *The Neon Demon* (2016).

*Demon*), evoking the influence of Mario Bava<sup>21</sup> and Dario Argento's giallo films, which combine horror and eroticism (fig. 13), but also that of Kubrick (the colour palette, the predominance of tracking shots, as well as a few explicit references to *The Shining* throughout *The Neon Demon*, starting with a "red rum" coloured lipstick towards the beginning of the film). By referencing myth in transient spaces, and using highly connoted transient spaces in the collective psyche, Refn produces familiar, impactful, and highly symbolic images.

### *Transience and Corporeality*

The most recognisable feature of transience and transient spaces is the apparent lack of distinct markings, the relentless erasure of the asperities observed in the landscape, as it favours what Virilio has aptly termed the "aesthetics of disappearance" in the title of his 1980 publication on hypermodern spaces. This idea also appears to favour the emergence of a haptic visuality. In fact, according to Laura Marks, "the term *haptic* emerges in Deleuze and Guattari's description of 'smooth space'" (13). Transience, it seems, is primarily experienced as resulting from the depiction of "even textures" and "smoothed surfaces," forcing the eye to merely gloss over vast expanses of space<sup>22</sup> – ideally without ever being stopped by any obstacle or attention-grabbing elements – and thus allowing for a certain fluidity.<sup>23</sup> It is this fluidity that is all but mirrored in the filming and editing of *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon* (Virilio 107). "Smooth space" is further defined by Sobchack as "a space that must be moved through by constant reference to the immediate environment, as when navigating an expanse of snow or sand. Close-range spaces are navigated not through reference to the abstractions of maps or compasses but by haptic perception, which attends to their particularity" (10). Refn seems to similarly apprehend cinematic space as a structure designed to recreate rather than reproduce sensorial experience.

Contemporary analysis of cinematic space, as noted by Gaudin,<sup>24</sup> largely relies on concepts and conventions borrowed from other art forms (painting, theatre, architecture), as well as the implicit acceptance of space as being "systemic, perspective and static," all the while failing to address the "notion of a plastic cinematic space" (2, my translation). It seems Refn's representation

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21 The 2016 4k restoration of Bava's 1965 film *Planet of the Vampires* was in part financed by Refn.

22 According to Marks, "haptic looking tends to rest on the surface of its object rather than to plunge into depth, not distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is a labile, plastic sort of look, more inclined to move than to focus" (Marks 2, 8).

23 Vicari notes that *Drive* notably displays a latent impression of "sinuous" and almost artificial "smoothness" (180).

24 Gaudin, Antoine. "L'Image-Espace: Proposition Théorique pour la Prise en Compte d'un "Espace Circulant" dans les Images de Cinéma." *Miranda* 10 (2014): *Images on the Move: Circulations and Transfers in Film*.



of transient spaces in *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon* directly challenges this failure to address plasticity. For in these movies, space is seldom (if ever) depicted as objective, absolute or unchanging, but, rather, as mobile, transient and impermanent. In each film, cinematic space is used as plastic, organic matter, stretched and distorted, moulded into an entity mirroring the body and identity of the films' characters. In order to fully explore the plasticity of cinematic space, Gaudin proposes that this space be apprehended as a two-fold process directly engaging the audience and its body, inviting the viewer to first consider the "object-space" – that is to say the "space represented by the film: [...] concrete, recognisable and 'liveable' [and] that we are culturally educated to perceive" – before it is possible to enter the core of the image: the sensation produced by the film, the "felt signal-space" (6, my translation). Represented space becomes the concrete manifestation of a fluid cinematic scape slowly dissolving into a universe of sensations: it is an invitation to feel, rather than to merely watch the film or consider its space in empirical terms.

In *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*, the movement towards sensation is also operated through the gradual erasure of any differentiation between represented space and represented bodies or viewpoints. Additionally, considering that "the image of a place *is* its identity," the space represented in these films can be viewed as a metaphysical space informing the audience on the protagonists' identity more thoroughly perhaps than the protagonists' bodies and actions do<sup>25</sup> (Relph 56). Identity, however, remains a slippery notion, also accounting perhaps for the way gender perception is manipulated through the gaze, as well as the seemingly amorphous quality of space in Refn's last three films. This initial perception of diegetic space is itself enhanced by the films' cinematic space and their "felt signal-space," the space which is carved out "within the body of the film" itself (Gaudin 6, my translation). By approaching film as organic matter, Gaudin suggests that film is not just a vehicle for sensation; film *is* sensation. This implies that a film should not be considered as mere "spatial spectacle," an idea that is also rejected by Gaudin. Instead, Gaudin writes, "[a film] should also be considered as a *spatial phenomenon in its own right*, as it affects the spectator's body as a whole" and solicits both the viewer's "sight and hearing (which are directly challenged)," as well as its "proprioceptive perception" (3, my translation). As such, cinematic space is perceived according to the duration of the "exposure" of the viewer to various sensorial devices, thus determining the "sensorial impact" and the "imprint of space" produced by that image (Gaudin 4, my translation). This further suggests that there is a form of direct contact or link between the body of the film and that of the viewer and, as we shall see, that the film may potentially act on the viewer's body through exposure to the various components of

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25 Relph goes on to explain that the "image of a place [...] has been defined by Boulding (1961) as a mental picture that is the product of experiences, attitudes, memories, and immediate sensations" (56).

cinematic space. Gaudin further argues that film space is “constantly sculpted by the phenomena of staging and editing,” and it is also constantly “folding” and “unfolding” around the protagonists according to a diastolic or systolic movement”<sup>26</sup> that either creates an impression of “anxiety” linked to their experience, or has the exact opposite effect as it “dilates open structures.” In short, the film *breathes* (4, my translation).

In *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*, this movement is in part expressed through focal variations, as well as variations in shot sizes and lighting, but also through the dilation of structures such as time and movement, creating a lasting impression of tension between perceived sensations of speed and inertia in each film. Moreover, while Gaudin goes on to explain that the depth of that movement and its “rhythm” are expressed through “volume[s]” of “light” and the “sensed” volumes of “emptiness” “within the frame,” it seems that Refn also recreates “respiration” through volumes of sound and music, as well as colour saturation (9, 10, 11, my translation). Through these visual and aural haptical devices, each film is made into a living, breathing entity, thence enabling the creation of a direct sensorial link between the body of the viewer and the body of each film, to the point where it might establish a strong sense of identification between the two.

Exposures to substantial volumes of emptiness – that is to say a large portion of empty space or of circulating air within the frame or the soundscape – are far and few in *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*, making them all the more jarring and noticeable. In *Drive*, they are systematically linked to speed and acceleration; in *Only God Forgives*, the only visual occurrence signifies Julian’s impending deliverance (fig. 14), while aural volumes of emptiness highlight a lasting anticipatory impression of tension; and throughout *The Neon Demon*, they are associated with the fabricated spaces of photoshoot sets (fig. 15). Moreover, large volumes of emptiness



Fig. 14. Julian is depicted outside during the day for the first time. Fig. 15. The set of Jesse's first photoshoot.

<sup>26</sup> In his work on *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Deleuze evokes a similar effect stating that the “rhythm runs through a painting just as it runs through a piece of music. It is diastole-systole: the world that seizes me by closing around me, the self that opens to the world and opens the world itself” (42-43).

perceived within each film are often used in such a way that they somewhat antithetically reinforce alienating sensations of entrapment and stillness.

For instance, the soundtrack of *Drive* opens with a discreet diegetic fade-in accompanying a dark background. The faint hum of the outdoors ambient sound<sup>27</sup> resembles a first inhalation, which is barely disturbed by the wooshing noise of a distant car rushing by. The audience is projected outside on a silent roadside and, through this first sound cue, it is encouraged to expect a similarly wide space in the film's opening shot (or at the very least, a space that matches the sounds heard). This expectation mostly stems from the way this first combination of sounds is constructed; indeed, it is similar to what Michel Chion has termed a "superfield"<sup>28</sup> and which, in spite of being "quasi-autonomous" from the "visual field," is key in "provid[ing] a continuous and constant consciousness of all the space surrounding the dramatic action" (150, 151). The open space suggested in those first few seconds is rapidly pushed back into the soundscape's background by the insistent pulsation of the music introduced after the imperceptible (though ominous) faraway wailing of a police car's siren. The opening shot that immediately follows directly contrasts the film's opening soundscape with its tight framing and shallow focus, as it pans around Driver's apartment. The potent sensation of enclosure that results from this juxtaposition is enhanced by the anguishing, low heartbeat-like noise resonating quietly under the voice-over, and which progressively increases in intensity throughout the opening sequence. As Driver exits the room, the camera slowly zooms in to capture the dark outlines of the cityscape and its neon lights, while the ambient outdoor sound increases and comes to occupy the foreground of the soundscape once again (fig. 16). This last shot exemplifies the way Refn undermines volumes of emptiness to signify



Fig. 16. The city skyline outside Driver's window.

<sup>27</sup> This baseline sound that reappears quite often throughout *Drive* is practically a "fixed sound," highlighting the idea of inertia and stillness that is inherently tied to vehicular movement in the film. It should be noted that Chion defines "fixed sound" as capable of "suggest[ing] stasis" (10).

<sup>28</sup> Chion defines "superfield" as "the space created, in multitracks films, by ambient natural sounds, city noises, music, and all sorts of rustlings that surround the visual space and that can issue from loudspeakers outside the physical boundaries of the screen" (150). The outdoors ambient sound of the *Drive's* opening follows through to the beginning of the opening credits.

alienation throughout the film. While the audience's gaze is drawn outside by the camera movement and a second expansion of the spatial depth implied by the soundscape, the cityscape shown onscreen appears as a flattened dark mass, peppered by a few lights outlining a group of buildings that can hardly be distinguished from the night skies or the dark interior of Driver's apartment. The vanishing point highlighted by the film's sound design turns out to be fallacious and leads to a visual dead-end. Throughout the entire film, ambient sounds suggesting wide open spaces offscreen are similarly (and almost systematically) contrasted with close shots and frame-within-the-frame compositions.

Visual volumes of emptiness are also far and few throughout *Drive* and *Only God Forgives*, as Refn tends to favour stifling ratios of light to darkness even in daylight sequences<sup>29</sup> (fig. 17 & 18). In *Drive*, phenomena resembling the deep inhalations of Gaudin's concept of "respiration" only



Fig. 17. *Drive*.



Fig. 18. *Only God Forgives*.

truly occur during the film's car chases, when sensations of speed reach their full intensity and are the most violent – that is to say when the film's sound is at its loudest and speed is also expressed visually.<sup>30</sup> In these sequences, the camera repeatedly breaks away from the film's usual tight and constricting frame-within-the-frame compositions to either hurtle forward over the asphalt or follow the blurry body of the car which is, in that moment, the vessel affirming Driver's identity and skills. These moments are liberating and testify to Driver's own brief deliverance from the stasis that characterises him. In the first car chase, this idea is suggested by a couple of momentary disappearances of the heavy, oppressive and unrelenting beat of the music (the heartbeat-like noise evoked earlier) that has permeated the frame for most of the film up to this point. The rhythmic pounding is overpowered by the roar of Driver's engine; these sequences are also somewhat unified by the lengthy high notes that go crescendo at the end of each sequence. In the first car chase as in those that follow, everything disappears beneath the throb of the engine and the squeal of the tires;

<sup>29</sup> In that respect, Refn keeps in line with film noir traditions, thence fully establishing *Drive* as a neo-noir film.

<sup>30</sup> The film thus operates synaesthesia (i.e. the blurring and intermingling of sight and sound to recreate a perceived sensation of speed).

nothing distracts from the raw sensations produced by the cars' movement.

Of course, the increase in physical velocity appears not to be concomitant with progression, and those brief breaks in the film's sound design always lead back to the heavy electro-pop beat of the music and sound design. As it often the case throughout *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*, the score and the sound design are thus tightly interconnected, and intermingled in such a way that the divide between the two is repeatedly confused. The deep and inexorable rhythmic pounding is often doubled and not unlike a heartbeat.<sup>31</sup> Its pace, perpetually stuck somewhere between anxiety-ridden (Chromatic's "Tick Of The Clock," and Cliff Martinez's "Kick Your Teeth," "Skull Crushing," "On The Beach") and implacable (Kavinsky & Lovefoxxx's "Nightcall," Desire's "Under Your Spell," and College's "A Real Hero"), is supplemented by the loud volume at which it is usually played. However, the music does not merely illustrate and highlight diegetic events. In fact, several fairly recent studies indicate that

passive listening to music increases blood pressure, heart rate, and the LF:HF<sup>32</sup> ratio (thus suggesting sympathetic activation) proportional to the tempo and perhaps to the complexity of the rhythm. [...] The ratio of tempo to respiratory rate was close to the music structure in the slowest (in raga and classical slow, about one breath for four crotchets) and fastest tracks (in techno and classical fast, one breath for eight crotchets), suggesting respiratory entrainment, but this was clearly absent in the intermediate rhythms. All variables were related to the tempo but not to music preference. This suggests that perhaps both respiratory entrainment by music and direct arousal were coexistent and interrelated – in fact, the increase in breathing rate in itself might have contributed to the increase in sympathetic activity (Bernardi, Porta and Sleight 449-451).

This study evidenced that there is a strong sensorial link between music – or at least a rhythmic pattern – and its listener's physiological response and breathing rate. Interestingly enough, in *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*, Refn privileges musical genres that apparently favour phenomena such as sympathetic activation and respiratory entrainment: fast techno beats and slow orchestral pieces.<sup>33</sup> The effect has been noted by several critics of Refn's work, including Vicari who evokes the hypnotic quality of his soundtracks.<sup>34</sup> In *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon*, respiration seems to be recreated almost solely through sound (sound effects, music, and even silence), as well as colour saturation. Much like *Drive*, *Only God Forgives* is characterised by a visually constricted environment due to the use of frame-within-the-frame composition or (in the few instances utilising long shots) over-crowded backgrounds with no vanishing points. Visual dilation of film space is also drastically undermined by the general lack of natural light and the

31 This sound appears to mimic and reproduce "objective-internal sounds," that is to say sounds such as the "physiological sounds of breathing, moans or heartbeats" (Chion, 76).

32 In this study, "LF" and "HF" refer to "low" and "high frequency" (445). The results of this study are further corroborated and discussed in another study carried out by Ken Watanabe, Yuuki Ooishi and Makio Kashino (see sources).

33 This may explain the overall sensation of slowness oozing out of *Only God Forgives*, the soundtrack being mainly constituted of slow instrumental pieces punctuated by long silences.

34 "His films, sometimes set to trancelike techno music, seem to go into fugue states right before your eyes" (Vicari 7).

predominance of over-saturated lighting throughout the film, which impedes the audience's ability to perceive the depth of represented space (fig. 19; this is also the case in a few of *The Neon Demon*'s scenes, see fig 20). Bernardi, Porta, and Sleight's study suggests a sharper auditory focus when sound is played, evoking a movement similar to the systolic tightening evoked by Gaudin when detailing his concept of "respiration."

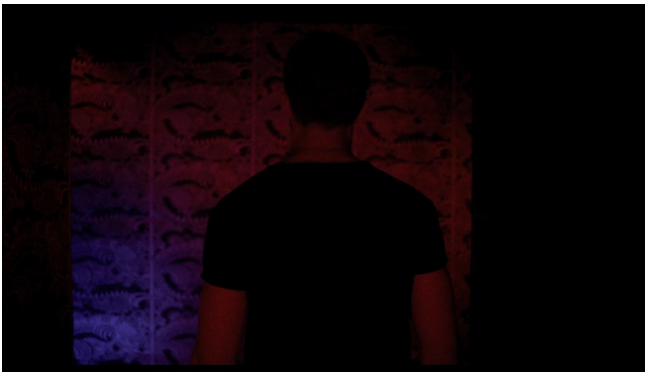


Fig. 19. *Only God Forgives*.



Fig. 20. *The Neon Demon*.

Conversely, the diastolic movement signifying a moment of relaxation and expansion may be contained within instants of durable silence. This notion seems to fit rather accurately the way *Only God Forgives*'s score operates: its long, drawn-out notes are punctuated by lengthy pauses that usually remain undisturbed by any diegetic sounds. The intensity and depth of silence in *Only God Forgives* is emphasised by the way the layers of sounds are manipulated. Silence is often absolute and stifling, while most diegetic sounds are much like discrete whispers in the soundscape's background, easily ignored or missed, and music (nondiegetic or otherwise) is blasted out at the audience at a much higher volume and cannot be avoided. This process is also repeated throughout *Drive* and *The Neon Demon*, though silence is not used as often nor with such weight. As Chion noted,

the impression of silence in a film scene does not simply come from an absence of noise. It can only be produced as a result of context and preparation. The simplest of cases consists in preceding it with a noise-filled sequence. So silence is never a neutral emptiness. It is the negative of sound we've heard beforehand or imagined; it is the product of a contrast (57).

Throughout *Only God Forgives*, silence is anticipatory and filled with tension, and this effect is enhanced by the contrast produced by the way it is systematically preceded by much louder sounds that abruptly fade away repeatedly throughout the film (for instance, the opening intertitle, after Chang cuts the hand of the man who has murdered Billy, etc.). It should also be noted that absolute silence usually precedes a violent event or an uneasy confrontation (for instance, before Julian is reunited with Crystal, or before his first meeting with Chang, etc.). Orchestral pieces grow louder, and their composition more dissonant, more chaotic, as we approach the end of a sequence and

(oftentimes) the violent event (thus suggesting its imminence) before resolving itself into one final, long-drawn cluster of notes fading out into silence. The most notable instance of this use of the soundtrack occurs just after Chang has pierced the eardrums of Byron (a drug dealer who had previously put out a hit on Chang), and when Julian finally goes to confront Chang. For a couple of minutes, intradiegetic sound disappears under a series of long-drawn, high screeches and an irregular drum beat as Chang is shown singing karaoke, his voice barely piercing through the chaotic score every once in a while. The static positioning of the camera, and the absence of movement from anyone other than Chang also participates in stretching out the temporality of the sequence before the soundtrack fades out.

In *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon*, sound and volume are also used to impact the temporality of the image as, more often than not, the music fades in and out gradually, stretching out anticipatory moments (this effect is periodically emphasised in slow-motion sequences). In *The Neon Demon*, the depth of the film's "respiration" is not as obvious as it is in *Drive* and *Only God Forgives*, mostly because it is slow-paced and distributed out throughout the entire film. The frame seldom expands into long shots and, as in *Drive* and *Only God Forgives*; the movement is thwarted by the accumulation of frame-within-the-frame composition and/or dim or low-key lighting. Nonetheless, when studying the film shot per shot, it soon appears that over-saturated sequences with shallow focus give way to the deep focus of brightly lit daylight scenes every fifteen minutes or so throughout the entire film. This movement is mostly regular, and the length of daylight scenes is generally equivalent to that attributed to other sequences occurring later in the day and at night, thus evoking the preternatural symmetry of the film's spaces and the way different parts of the soundtrack echo and respond to one another. It seems that *Drive*, *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon* are paced rhythmically, each film functioning like a breathing body, animated by the carefully crafted and steady pulse of their sound design that acts directly upon the film viewer's own body, further enhancing the latent sensations of entrapment and stillness that can be perceived in the films' transient spaces.

### *Transient Spaces*

The earlier, more gritty films of his Danish period excepted,<sup>35</sup> Refn's visual identity remains

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35 The types of shots he typically uses most throughout his entire filmography remain the same ones used in those films for the most part. However, the overall texture of cinematic space in the *Pusher* trilogy and *Bleeder* is much more rough around the edges (probably in part due to the use of film), and – combined with the handheld camera – those films appear to mimic the tropes of guerilla filmmaking.

fairly consistent throughout his filmography, notably by relying heavily on a succession of extreme angles, medium close shots, abundant tracking shots, and by favouring a shallow depth of field and, for the most part, smooth camera movements. In *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*, each of these devices appears to be manipulated so as to better establish the transient properties of cinematic space and exacerbate the artificiality of represented space, seemingly erasing the asperities usually introduced into the landscape by notions such as that of place and identity. Tracking shots in particular often seem to be used so as to break away from visually static sequences or spaces, introducing momentum into the frame. This impression is especially prominent when coupled with long shots, so as to form what Virilio calls a “travelling shot, speeding up and pretending to communicate [...] a kind of vehicular drunkenness [..., the] velocity of the course” to both the audience and the character’s body (63). Such shots are rare and usually undermined by extreme high angles that crush the image, as is notably the case in the opening credits of *Drive*. When in other sequences of the film (e.g., in the car chases, especially the second one following the pawn shop robbery), the camera films the car’s movement at road-level in a way that highlights vehicular speed (e.g. through the blurriness of the car for instance, fig. 21), the opening credits place the camera at an extreme high angle and with a speed similar to that of



Fig. 21. Driver's car in the film's second chase. Fig. 22. The camera tracking Driver's car in a overheadshot.

Driver’s car (fig. 22). The movement of the car and its potential speed are diminished by the concomittant movement of the camera. The intertwining of smooth camera movements and speed (of both the camera and profilmic objects being filmed) in Refn’s films appears to be at the onset of spatial instability, as it favours the depiction of “accelerated” spaces (however illusory the movement may be). A prime example of the gradual erasure of time and spatial boundaries is the “accelerated voyage,” set to enhance the picnoleptic<sup>36</sup> properties of archetypal transient spaces such as the movie theatre or the car (Virilio 60, 61). The compulsion for movement and kinetic impulse

<sup>36</sup> Virilio defines the term “picnolepsy” as signifying a “‘lapse,’ an ‘absence’ in which the person becomes suddenly unaware of time’s passing around them:” “the senses function but are nevertheless closed to external impressions” (9).



behind the appearance of transience in modern spaces is paradoxically crystallised within the eerily still bodies of the movie-goers and of the driver, both of whom are passive spectators of vehicular motion placed in the position of an external intruder, a “voyeur-voyageur”<sup>37</sup> (Virilio 65). The “voyeur-voyager” position is assigned to the viewer exclusively in the case of *The Neon Demon*, as the character of Jesse is established as the bearer of the gaze (be it that of the audience or that of the diegetic space and characters).<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, *Drive* and *Only God Forgives* establish both their protagonists and viewers as “voyeur-voyagers” through a metafilmic and reciprocal process of identification.<sup>39</sup> In each film, the protagonist is placed in a passive, somewhat contemplative position that appears to mirror the protagonist’s aimless wanderings (and which also reflects Refn’s avoidance of goal-oriented narratives). *Drive* even appears to be a perfect fit for Virilio’s description of the “voyeur-voyager in his car” for whom it is “natural” “to go nowhere, even to ride around in a deserted quarter or a crowded freeway,” his movement undercut by tracking shots that often keep the moving car at the centre of the frame by adopting a similar pace (67). This yearning for purely artificial kinetic movement, “devoid of intent,” is pursued by *Drive* several times throughout the film, in particular during the opening credits and the scenes in which he is in his own car with his love interest, Irene (Bégout 88). Excluded from the world outside his metallic shell, the driver advances into the landscape under a complete and utter impression of “dread,” and subjected to the “absolute *strangeness* of his surroundings that ultimately forces him to constantly be on his guard;” his symptomatic “disorientation” can only be appeased by the “ordinary of daily life” (Bégout 91, my translation).

Similarly, Julian, in *Only God Forgives*, is most often depicted in a position that reflects the viewer’s own; he appears as though frozen in place, a static outsider compared to the accelerated bodies of the violent conflict depicted in the narrative. Instead, he sits (in his hotel room, in a series of hostess bars and clubs, in a boxing gym, etc.) and observes (Mai, Chang, the audience, etc.); and through his eyes, the audience often gets lost in jarring hallucinations that can hardly be told apart from diegetic reality. The confounding power of the hallucinations results mostly from a recurrent shift in the positioning of the camera in those sequences. While the camera often initially places the viewer in a position of optical alignment with Julian, it then shifts back to an external ambiguous viewpoint that depicts spaces that do not always appear to pertain to the spaces of Julian’s hallucinations.<sup>40</sup> In *Only God Forgives*, lateral tracking shots are used to convey a tension between

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37 The term “voyeur-voyageur” is used by Virilio to describe the static observer of the “accelerated voyages” which can be sonic as much as visual or physical. (see *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, pp. 60-68).

38 This is heavily enhanced by the limited camera movement, and the numerous shots tracking forward and backwards.

39 The protagonist’s passive and often seated position of observation is eerily similar to that of the viewer.

40 See fig. 31.

movement and stillness, more precisely between a sense of a lack of progression and the simultaneous unfolding of the diegesis. Although those shots initially seem to convey momentum and perhaps even narrative progression, as they mirror the movement and pace of the bodies they follow, it soon becomes obvious that they highlight a clear divide between Julian and every other protagonist: tracking shots systematically depict movement to the right, forward or backward, except when the camera follows Julian's movements, at which point the camera reverts to a self-reflective tracking shot towards the left which remains evenly paced throughout the entire film. This particular device may connote a movement inwards, deep into Julian's psyche, and signify his repressed desires. The movement can be observed on many occasions, including during the opening sequence of the film, in which the device is first introduced through a rapid succession of a few leftward and rightward lateral tracking shots, while a boxing match is underway. In this sequence, although the lateral tracking shots to the right gradually accelerate, the momentum picked up in the frame is immediately and repeatedly cancelled out by a slower, more evenly paced shot of Julian moving to the left, which also enhances the chaotic, disorienting atmosphere introduced through the noisy crowd watching the fight unfold. Viewer, diegetic spaces and characters ultimately seem torn by a tension between the unusual dissociation of movement and progression through which stasis takes hold of the image.

In both *Drive* and *Only God Forgives*, “disorientation” is but the lasting effect of fragmentation. Used to dislocate both the bodies of the protagonists and that of cinematic space in each film, fragmentation prevents the viewer from grasping a sense of space in its entirety. The multifaceted characters so dear to Refn are thus depicted in fragments. Driver's gaze is forever trapped in the rearview mirror of the cars he inhabits, and his disembodied hand lies steady on their steering wheels (fig. 23). Julian's hands are almost systematically kept separate from his own body through tight framing; they seem foreign, an embodiment of his sexual guilt and desires (fig. 24). Finally, Jesse's face is shown over and over again in a medium close-up looking down at the



Fig. 23, Driver's reflection in the rear-view mirror. Fig. 24, Julian's hands visually “cut off” from his body.

audience, the composition making her gaze the focal point of our attention. It should also be noted that the tight framing maintained throughout each film further undermines the main characters' capacity of agency, severely constricting their actions and movements, all the while fragmenting their bodies and the spaces surrounding them into fetishised units.

The impression of movement and instability introduced by the movement of the camera and/or characters is effected more fully through the way each film interacts with the spectator's gaze. The editing and framing techniques used by Refn force the films' spectator's eyes to roam the frame whenever the camera remains unmoving by fragmenting the screen into meaningful units. The narration further highlights this invitation to visually journey through film space, thus imposing movement on the spectator's own body. In a short video essay on *Drive*,<sup>41</sup> video editor Tony Zhou notices that Refn tends to construct his frames according to a quadrant<sup>42</sup> within which different kinetic and framing cues are packed together into an often "unconventional" ensemble of fragmented shots that can be, according to him, both "tightly composed and weirdly unpredictable." "the right side of the frame tells an entire story about these characters on its own," he remarks, "and the left side tells another complementary story. And a shot that could have told one thing actually tells two. Instead of being bored our eyes are constantly switching between the two halves of the screen," alternating between left and right, top and bottom. Rather interestingly, whenever the camera is static, this framing device immediately resurfaces, forcing the viewer's gaze to move constantly even when the camera might not be doing so. It also highlights the impermanent properties of the filmic space as new characters are introduced within the frame. For instance, in one of the sequences analysed in the video and in which Driver meets Irene's husband, Standard Gabriel, an exit sign placed over Driver's shoulder happens to foreshadow at once Standard's death and Driver's departure at the end of the film, but it also signifies Irene's desire "for Driver and for an exit from her current life:"

The articulation of...[space] takes an unexpected turn. Visually, the hallway becomes one of Deleuze's any-space-whatevers in the deep, dark anonymous shadows, the oversaturated pools of light casting the characters in dim light, a peculiar liminal state with a framing that paradoxically ties Irene and Driver together but also anticipates their eventual separation (Christiansen 134-135).

Although Zhou focuses solely on *Drive*, this is also the case in both *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon*. For instance, a few minutes into *Only God Forgives*, we see Julian leading a young Muay Thai fighter to a boxing ring. The camera, placed slightly overhead and at a high-angle, follows the characters through the crowd. When the shot begins, Julian is placed right in the centre of the image and becomes a logical point of focus for the eye, but as the shot progresses, the

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41 Zhou, Tony. "Drive (2011) – The Quadrant System."

42 This is further underlined by the remarkable symmetry of diegetic space and of the editing in each film.

viewer's eyes are gradually compelled to shift slightly so as to apprehend both sides of the screen (and in order for the viewer to not lose sight of Julian). Julian is no longer in the centre of the frame but on the left, and the audience's gaze can either follow his own movement or the (hardly noticeable) line of his eyesight directed at the lit up ring on the right side of the screen. In spite of this eye-line match, the viewer's gaze may still hesitate between left and right, as neither the shot nor the different actions unfolding on screen are depicted according to a specified and hierarchised order of importance.

The process is slightly more insidious in *The Neon Demon*. It is often achieved by placing numerous mirrors within the image, constantly manifesting the vacuity and artificiality of the spaces and industry depicted in the film, but also mirroring the dialogues' numerous double entendres. One such instance occurs shortly after the opening to *The Neon Demon* when Jesse is shown wiping fake blood from her body in front of a mirror, in which Ruby (the make-up artist) is also reflected. The viewer's gaze hesitates slightly between Jesse's moving and out-of-focus body that takes up half of the screen, her reflection and Ruby's doubled reflection that also shows her moving slightly. The initial hesitation seems contained in the out-of-focus image of Jesse's hand, which almost touches the mirror several times throughout the scene, pulling the audience's gaze back to Jesse's unfocused form, forcing it to hesitate between her physical form and her mirrored double. The reverse shot is composed in a similar manner to further underline that hesitation as, this time, Ruby's body is in the foreground. The last shot is an almost exact mirror image of the scene's first shot, except this time Ruby is beside Jesse as she helps her out. Ultimately, the viewer is invited to search the frame and constantly explore the fragmented image as, even though the camera may not be moving, movements within the frame always distract the audience from one (or several) obvious focal points.

More importantly, the editing of each film is paced by redundant sensations of collision with the image that act as a sort of sensory-motor shock. As we have seen, this impression of collision is created by the audience's sudden incapacity to locate itself within cinematic space, whether it be due to the disappearance of specific landmarks, camera movements, or the erasure of time. This device, used by Refn to produce "viscerally arresting images," allows the audience to fully enter the image, to "crash into" it (Christiansen 137). In so doing, it reaches what Deleuze, discussing the spectator's relation to sensation, has described as a form of "unity of the sensing and the sensed" (35). To understand collision in Refn's films, it is necessary to realise that it results from a process of "acceleration," usually associated with the action film. According to Schubart, "two themes are central in the action film: passion and acceleration. [...] The second has to do with speed and spectacle, affect and exhilaration [...], aggression turned into kinetic energy, [...] explosions, pure

speed, [etc.]” (192). However, Schubart’s “*acceleration* has nothing to do with increase of physical velocity or number of cuts per second in a film. The theme of acceleration signifies a change of thematic, a transformation of body, a shift in desire,” and it “always results in stasis and inertia: the movement never moves anything” (198, 199). In Refn’s films, the sensation of collision stems mostly from the films’ emphasis on “arresting moment[s]” (Vicari 29), generally achieved using a cinematic process similar to what Deleuze has termed to be the sudden “expansion of the totality of space and the stretching of time” (59). Interestingly enough, Deleuze asserts that these phenomena are more easily tied to the representation of a “dream” space. This in turn suggests that what is depicted on screen might be an illusion (as is often the case in *The Neon Demon*, either due to the lighting and the music, or simply from the simple fact that the film is about appearances), a dreamlike scene of peaceful serendipity (such as the sequence bathed in golden light in which Driver takes Irene and Benicio on a drive), or a hallucination (as it is the case during the fashion show in *The Neon Demon* and throughout *Only God Forgives*).

The latent tension between movement and stillness expressed through the dual positioning of both the audience and the films’ protagonists is further explored through the fragmentation of diegetic space in each film. In fact, Christiansen “points out that *Drive* is dominated by transitory places such as motels, restaurants and convenience stores that speak to a city under dissolution. [...] The constant movement through the city gives us a feeling of anonymity and being swallowed up by a larger entity,” striking the viewer with a lasting sense of paranoia (or at the very least tension) that also seems to invade the cinematic space of Refn’s following works (Gebauer et al. 21). A mere list of the film’s places “reveals the anonymity and interchangeability” of the different spaces depicted on screen: all the “primary locations”<sup>43</sup> appear to be “transitory and impersonal, either meant for business transactions or temporary residences” (131). The primary locations of *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon* follow a similar pattern, stitching together transactional spaces (a boxing gym, hostess bars and brothels, restaurants, dive bars, a modelling agency), transitory spaces (hotel rooms, a motel, back lots and back alleys, shady streets, dressing rooms, photo shoots, bathrooms, a funeral house), and spaces of transition (notably the elevator in *Drive*, Julian’s hotel’s corridors in *Only God Forgives*, and the fashion show in *The Neon Demon*). Yet in *Drive*, “for all the generic urban locations, there is no sense of wholeness, coherence or unity to the city,” as “there is also a lack of establishing shots of new locations” to anchor different spaces (131, 132). They are entirely absent from *Only God Forgives*, used once in *The Neon Demon* and with such tight framing

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43 i.e. “Parking garages, the auto shop where Driver works, the race tracks, an Italian restaurant, a supermarket, a diner, a motel, a strip club and the pawn shop of the ill-fated robbery” (131).



Fig. 25 &amp; 26. The Motel.



Fig. 27. Annotated map of downtown Los Angeles.

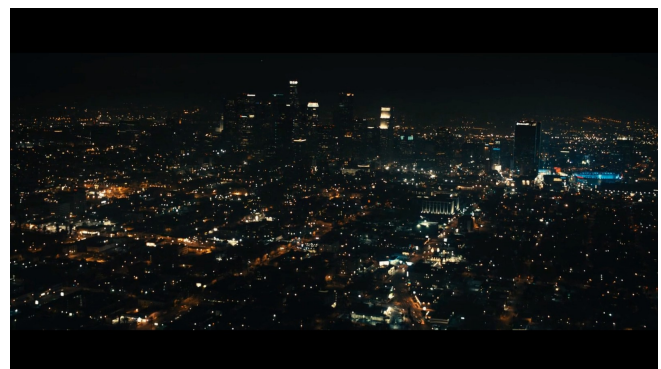


Fig. 28. First establishing shot of Los Angeles.

that the space of the motel Jesse is staying in appears as a vaguely surreal, self-contained space completely isolated, while disconnected from the cityscape (fig. 25 & 26).

In both of these films, the city is a vague presence sometimes glimpsed in the background, a whitish spectral blur in the corner of the frame, indicating the narratives' remoteness from the contemporary city and its social space. The only establishing shot of Bangkok in *Only God Forgives* occurs towards the middle of the film and is almost identical to the establishing shots in *Drive*, where they always depict similar slanted overhead shots of a "vaguely dystopian" downtown Los Angeles by night (Vicari 181). These establishing shots materialise the map (fig. 27 & 28) seen in the first shot of the film in a series of images evoking the tropes of film noir<sup>44</sup> introducing the city as a vaguely threatening, "impersonal" and distant black mass overpowering the shot (Christiansen 133). The impression of unease is enhanced further by the immediate resurgence of the soundtrack's heavy beat and the occasional distant wailing of a siren. The opening fade-in of *Drive* reveals an annotated map of L.A. (fig. 27); the protagonist's voice is heard as he announces that "there's a hundred thousand streets in this city. You don't need to know the route," thus indicating that if the audience is unable to pinpoint its exact location as the first shot of the film unfolds (the name of the

<sup>44</sup> The "establishing...shot or sequence of shots of Los Angeles, usually at or near the beginning of the narrative" are "typical of film noir" (Mennel 52).

city remains unsaid, and the map displayed on screen cannot be deciphered), it will not be able to do so for most of the rest of the film, as even the films' specific and meaningful locations (or places) remain visually disconnected from one another. It should be noted that, although the notion of "place" has been thoroughly eradicated from the narrative of *The Neon Demon*, it is reasserted in both *Drive* and *Only God Forgives*. "Place," in *Drive*, is concomitant with the figure of the mother represented by Irene<sup>45</sup> (her apartment is the quintessential representation of the "home") and that of the (surrogate) father represented by Shannon (his garage acts as a safe haven, where Driver's car is repaired and Driver gets patched up as well), while *Only God Forgives* similarly establishes Chang's residence as a home housing a family (Chang and his young daughter).

Christiansen further argues that, in *Drive*, the sustained impression of disjuncture and fragmentation is established first and foremost through the "deconnected [sic] editing" of the film as – much like in *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon* – the transitions from different spaces are sometimes made through elliptical fades that isolate specific sequences of the films (132). In *Drive*, they frame the opening sequence and credits, while *The Neon Demon* is divided by three elliptical fade-ins, each introducing a new "chapter." The first fade-in intervenes after all the major protagonists have been introduced in the narrative, the second after Jesse has done her first fashion show (potentially the sequence where she becomes the neon demon), and the third is placed towards the end of the film when Jesse goes to stay with Ruby in the house where she will die. Elliptical dissolves<sup>46</sup> (used to signify a blurring or disturbance of the timeline in *Drive* and *Only God Forgives*) are also used as transitions or sudden straight cuts abruptly projecting the viewer into new spaces: "we are thrown into spaces without knowing their relative geography, their interior layout or any other spatial coordinates" (Christiansen 132). The resulting "feeling of dislocation" inherent to each film is, in turn, intensified by constant movement – either that of the camera, the bodies shown on screen or the editing – highlighting the unstable and transient characteristics of the landscape and erasing any sense of place (Christiansen 132). Disorientation remains a predominant sensation even, and perhaps especially, once a new space has been entered, as a series of tightly framed shots are stitched together through jump-cuts. Moreover, wide-angle tracking shots reveal mere fragments of space, never using the same angle, lighting (fig. 25 & 26), or showing quite the same area twice, leaving the viewer unable to grasp a sense of spatial depth, width, and location (see also fig. 31). Similarly, the city "seems more like a mosaic of spaces, a plurality which refuses easy categorization but instead is exactly deconnected [sic] and empty," almost entirely anonymous

45 In *Drive* in particular, Irene seems to fit Janey Place's description of film noir's "opposite female archetype:" "woman as a redeemer. She offers the possibility of integration for the alienated, lost man into the stable world of secure values, roles and identities. She gives love, understanding (or at least forgiveness), asks very little in return (just that he comes back to her), and is usually visually passive and static" (50).

46 i.e. dissolves that also materialise an ellipsis in the films' narratives.

(131). Emptiness in particular is concretely manifested by suddenly showing vast empty spaces breaking away from the tight framing that largely dominates the aesthetics of each film, as well as through the often startling absence of extras (see also fig. 4). When they do (albeit briefly) appear on screen, they are usually blurred or out of focus (see also fig. 3).

Although Christiansen's argument refers to the cityscape of *Drive*, it is interesting to note that this is also true for *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon*, as the sense of isolation, disconnection, and disorientation between the different spaces within which the story unfolds is only made more prominent. The spaces of each film seem to perfectly fit Bégout's description of spaces that have been "surrendered to transien[ce] and mobil[ity]," which he has also deemed to be spaces in which "the loss of the link to the world prevails," constituting the "margins of our daily experience," and representative of "those areas of the city devoid of identity" (14). The lack of a clear progression, the erasure of a goal-oriented narrative, and the foreboding sense of vacuity and entrapment are all resulting factors of this apparent disconnect between each new background in which frame-within-the-frame composition remains predominant. The fragmented interaction between space and characters is heightened by the occasional jumbling of the timeline, or by scenes in which reality and illusions/hallucinations are confused and difficult to tell apart, allowing for an interpretation of cinematic space as discontinuous, atemporal, but also, and more importantly, subjective. This strongly suggests that a parallel can be drawn between the construction of cinematic space in *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*, and the equally fragmented way in which characters are constructed in each film.

### *Conclusion*

The representation of transient spaces in *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon* is primarily expressed through the films' predominantly fragmented aesthetics, exemplifying the ambivalent properties of transience and the symptomatic stillness provoked by its accelerated movement and confused temporality. Conversely, both of these characteristics are embodied by the protagonists, as movement is imposed on the camera and the narrative by the characters' own self-reflective progression through diegetic spaces. Throughout *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*, the viewer's visual perception of diegetic space is often jagged, discontinuous, and this sensation is only slightly abated by the somewhat regular pacing inherent to each film. The viewer is exposed to visual and aural textures that gradually increase and decrease in intensity to manipulate sensations of respiration, but also brutally arrested velocity, entrapment, and inertia.



Moreover, the transient landscapes of each film produce remarkably empty diegetic spaces in spite of their urban settings. The landscape is inhabited only by characters relevant to the narrative and who have been encountered by each film's protagonist; it is as if any peripheral detail had been wiped out or gathered within a few blurred out figures wandering in the background. It seems that the film's cinematic spaces are entirely dependent and reliant upon the perception of the main characters, as though the diegesis of each film were presented as a memory. This idea seems to be supported by the emergence of the characters as transient figures, embodying the paradigm of transience itself, their bodies and identities as blurred and dislocated as the locations through which they evolve.

## CHAPTER 2

### – METAPHYSICAL SPACES –

In establishing his somewhat absolute and disputable concept of “non-place,” Augé envisions contemporary in-between spaces as generic, bland, “[un]concerned with identity,” essentially “functional,” “temporary,” transient (78). However, he goes on to admit that such a paradigm “never exists in pure form,” especially once the “non-place” has been entered and subjected to the individual's experience, identity, history, and perception (78). This chapter will show that the viewer's overall perception of diegetic space in *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon* seems to depend, at least partly, on subjective viewpoints attributed to the protagonists. Upon entering transient spaces, the characters of each film seem to transform their surroundings into a screen, projecting their own corporeality throughout cinematic space until both body and space slowly merge into a single entity. In fact, it seems that each protagonist is, in some way or another, deeply tied to specific spaces that have been established as archetypal of transience. These spaces interact with the characters according to two different modes: either they are the evidence of a symbiotic relationship between some of the represented spaces and the main characters, highlighting the co-dependency of both elements; or they reveal a process of transformation and an ontological shift in our perception of the protagonists and diegetic space. The second mode in particular is often articulated through processes of (re)birth in spaces simulating the female womb, and leading to the emergence of inhuman and transgressive figures and spaces. At this point, it should be noted that transient spaces have sometimes been said to be inherently transgressive spaces, mostly due to their marginalisation and isolation, along with their remoteness from conventional judicial systems, an idea that will be thoroughly addressed throughout this chapter. The immediate and irremediable consequence of transformation and transgression is extreme violence as a means of re-creating and attempting to assert “place” and/or potency for the protagonists in all three films.

#### *Symbiosis in Transient Spaces*

In his 1976 work on *Place and Placelessness*, geographer Edward Relph argued that, though we “experience” space as a fundamentally “amorphous and intangible” concept, it is “not an entity

that can be directly described and analysed” (9). Space is not a fixed construction, but a fluid and shapeless one, entirely dependent on individual experience and perception, and which can be subjected to transformation. In *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*, the integration of the characters in the films’ diegetic spaces leads to the creation of amorphous spaces, sometimes gendered and shaped by the protagonists’ perception, or by his/her identifying traits, to the point where these transient spaces become extensions of the characters’ bodies and psyches. Rather than representing the Cartesian mind-body dualism, the films seem to apprehend cinematic space as a Deleuzian “plane of immanence,”<sup>47</sup> suggesting that mind, body and space are interconnected and interdependent. As it will be shown in this chapter, the notion of amorphous space is, in each film, mostly rooted in the use of transient viewpoints and the avoidance of recurring camera angles to film transient spaces. In *The Neon Demon*, however, key transient spaces are also sometimes constructed so as to be gender-fluid and to transform alongside the characters present within space in order to produce different overtones reflecting certain of the protagonists’ characteristics.

In his work on *L'Espace au Cinema*, André Gardies stated that the topography of diegetic spaces is always “dependent on one or several subjects, whether it be characters, the narrator, [...] or their combination” (115, my translation). Moreover, “the narrative process (most specifically with film as a medium) implies an encounter between protagonist and place [or surrounding space], and it only truly progresses once a relationship of exchange between the two is established. Their copresence erects itself as a narrative necessity, thereby erasing their usual hierarchical relationship” (Gardies 141, my translation). Gardies further argues that, in this context, the “subject” (or protagonist) must either “act so as to blend in” and fit him/herself into represented space, or he may “act upon space so as to transform it” in order to “remain him/herself” (153, my translation). In *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*, the instability of the cinematic spaces seems to depend partly on the characters represented in each film as they appear to act directly upon it, and transform the spaces surrounding them. The mobility of transience is partly rendered by the gradual erosion of diegetic continuity and of the apparent objectivity of the various locations depicted on screen in each film. This, in turn, suggests that the backgrounds are deeply influenced by the characters’ presence. The lack of a clearly defined shape or form to the films’ spaces is, first and foremost, made obvious by the emergence of transient viewpoints: the viewer is submitted to rapidly changing camera angles, but also to ambiguous perspectives that either blur or

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47 In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari conceptualised the “plane of immanence,” a spatial concept which drastically opposes Descartes’ conception of the body and the mind as separate. This plane of immanence is defined as “a fixed plane, upon which things are distinguished from one another only by speed and slowness. A place of [...] univocality opposed to analogy. The One is said with a single meaning of all the multiple. Being expresses in a single meaning all that differs. What we are talking about is not the unity of substance but the infinity of the modifications that are part of one another on this unique plane of life” (254).

enhance the disconnect between different spaces, as well as between different characters. To a certain extent, each film is constructed in such a way that it is hard to even tell whether the narrative itself is objective or subjective. The multiplicity of perspectives enables a dual reading of the films' cinematic scapes and the interpretation of represented space as a reflection of the characters' traits and moods. In the opening sequence of *Drive* in particular, as the first shot unfolds with the camera panning to the left, the protagonist is visually identified, and what may have initially seemed to be voice-over narration addressed directly to the audience is revealed to be a phone call. The “disembodied presence” and “multiple identities” of the protagonist are thus asserted through this ambiguous shift as the viewer

does not know what the character's status is: does his voice reveal the character's omniscience (and what follows is but the up-to-date narration of what happened to him at a given moment of his past) or an intradiegetic interaction? [...] This delayed introduction turns Driver into a sort of game master (the instructions that he gives for the first time in this excerpt – and that will be repeated later in the film – support this assumption) with a ghostly appearance (the camera's mobility along with the fluidity of the editing only add to this effect) and for whom the rules of road traffic hold no secrets (whether it be on paper – on the map – or on the road) (Roblou 6, my translation).

The hypothesis of a retelling of the story through an omniscient narration is also supported by the blurring of the timeline effected by a jumbled editing. Seemingly every sequence is concluded/opened by means of a dissolve, sometimes confusingly merging past and present (for instance, when Shannon and Driver fight towards the end of the film and when Driver calls Irene shortly thereafter), and showing lingering juxtapositions of Driver's face onto a sequence that appears to follow. This last editing device makes it look as though Driver were actually looking on to the image that is slowly revealed through the dissolve (fig. 29 & 30). The mere suggestion that *Drive* could be narrated from a subjective perspective enables a possible reading of the films' spaces as being entirely subjected to pathetic fallacy; cinematic space would then reflect Driver's own peculiar traits and moods. This is, perhaps, represented most literally through the assimilation of the film's diegetic sound to an internal point of view during the sequence in which Rose is shot dead;

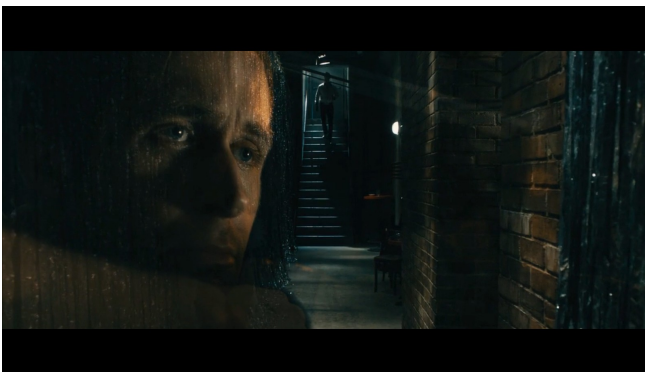


Fig. 29. Driver looking onto himself.



Fig. 30. Playback of Driver's phone call to Irene.

after the shot has been fired, the intensity of the diegetic sound is severely reduced. The muffled shattering of glass and a dull thud on the door sound as though they were heard from a greater distance.

The smoothness of Refn's meticulous visual style – which further exacerbates the artificiality of the cinematic scape – seems to construct itself in the way of a “trompe-l'œil,” experimenting with the “permeability of the frontier between reality and illusion” through the manipulation of the camera gaze. According to Aurélie Ledoux, a cinematic “trompe-l'œil” operates as a “manipulation-mystification” through “subjectivity” by relying on the “spontaneous belief in the visible and the image's face value” (Ledoux 8-9, my translation). The success of the operation fully depends on the viewer's conception of camera viewpoints as either clearly objective or subjective, when they might suddenly turn out to be the exact opposite. *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon* in particular appear to be constructed like the “trompe-l'œil films” described by Ledoux: they produce an optical illusion leading to an “erroneous assumption of reality,” establish a “double temporality” (“illusion-disillusion”<sup>48</sup> dichotomy), constitute a “trap for the viewer” primarily, highlight the viewer's “position” and “sensual” perception (sometimes through both the “narration” and the “audio-visual” depiction), and the trompe-l'œil device is partly responsible for creating the film's “thrill” (Ledoux 30, my translation). In both films, the phenomena are made particularly jarring, as it is often difficult to distinguish scenes of hallucination (*Only God Forgives*) or illusion (*The Neon Demon*), which are seamlessly incorporated into the narration. Reality and hallucinations/illusions are, in effect, radically confused.

In *Only God Forgives*, the first of these sequences occurs fifteen minutes into the film, when Julian watches Mai – a Thai prostitute he later introduces as his girlfriend to his mother – masturbate on the bed facing him, with his wrists tied to the arms of a chair. After a sudden dissolve (that introduces a first discrepancy, a clue that what we are seeing is not real), the audience is unknowingly projected into a series of confusing slow-motion shots, mixing potential POV shots together in such a way that it is impossible to know for sure what Julian is or is not seeing, what is or is not real (see fig. 31). The following sequence showing Mai standing by the room's open door and Julian's untied wrists leads to the assumption that the dissolve ultimately signified an ellipsis, an idea that is belied by the end of the scene when a harsh and discordant mixture of sounds arises, and a close-up depicts Mai back on the bed as she climaxes. Here, it appears that any notion of time or continuity has been thoroughly erased as, even after reaching the end of the excerpt, it is impossible to know whether these few shots depict a moment that occurred just before the sequence

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48 Deleuze also associates the “illusion/reality dichotomy” with the “art cinema” tradition in his article on “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice” (719).



Fig. 31. Intermixing diegetic space and Julian's hallucination.

began or after it ended. As the music dies down, time loops back into itself, the action is depicted at its normal speed once again, and we exit Julian's masochistic dream.

In *The Neon Demon*, the shift from illusion to disillusion is introduced on screen through camera movement. The transitions are particularly violent, in so far as our apprehension of cinematic space is made to shift radically as each sequence unfolds. The camera movements at the beginning of *The Neon Demon* also produce a strong sense of transience, as our perception of the diegetic space is made to change over the first few frames (a device already hinted at in the film's opening credits as the coloured lighting changes every so often). The film's opening shots show what appears to be a corpse, a close-up of Jesse's frozen face and bloody throat, and finally a reverse close-up of a man watching her (fig. 32 & 33). The next shot, however, has the camera



Fig. 32. Jesse.



Fig. 33. The Photographer.

slowly track out from the couch on which the body is laid down to reveal that the space shown in the first two shots is just the set of a photo-shoot that has been put together within a much bigger room. The ontological shift that is here introduced through a mere track-out transgresses the boundaries of objective space; space is thus subjected to transience as the place of murder morphs into the space of a photo-shoot, and the meaning initially tied down to the image by the audience is forced to change. This idea of transience is also progressively associated with the characters as it becomes doubtful that we are seeing a dead body, and the male protagonist is shown to be a photographer rather than a potential attacker. The film's static opening shots can also easily be interpreted as representing the photographer's point of view as he gazes at Jesse's simultaneously dead-alive body. On the other hand, the track out suggest a movement away from this subjective viewpoint, slowly revealing the process of illusion-disillusion as the shot seems to become more objective. However, it should be noted that the threat is not completely erased as the act of photography constitutes, according to Carol Clover, an act of "assaultive gazing" (182); for Susan Sontag, "to photograph people is to violate them ... to photograph someone is a sublimated murder ... The act of taking pictures is a semblance of rape" (Clover 177).

The constant movement between illusion and disillusion is further highlighted by the omnipresence of mirrors in *The Neon Demon*, which distort diegetic spaces and reflect different sequences of the film. Furthermore, visual “trompe-l'œil” are also used to create a break in temporal and spatial continuity, often blurring distances and the edges of the narrative’s different spaces through the use of transient viewpoints. In *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon*, such perspectives often characterise sequences of bodily intrusion in the frame and an insidious invasion of privacy, projecting female observers in the position of voyeur traditionally attributed to male characters. The reversal of gender roles is conducive to a latent, uncomfortable, tension throughout the narrative of *Only God Forgives* in which Crystal (Julian’s mother) sometimes seems to be an omniscient presence perpetually observing Julian. For instance, in a sequence shown shortly after Crystal’s arrival in Bangkok, she appears to intrude on a scene interweaving reality (Julian gazing at Mai standing behind a curtain of red pearls) and hallucinatory vision (Julian now stands directly in front of the curtain as Mai, seated this time, guides his hand between her thighs), as is shown by the discreet change in colour of Julian’s tee-shirt (from black to white). The sequence is intercut by a medium close-up of Crystal, facing the camera, looking ahead as though staring at the couple when she is later shown to be actually looking at the bare bodies of several body-builders performing on stage. Similarly, in *The Neon Demon*, it is impossible to know whether Ruby’s fantasised masturbatory vision of Jesse lying on a red couch isn’t in fact a mirror of diegetic reality and an intrusion of Jesse’s privacy, as Jesse is wearing the exact same clothes in later sequences that are established as objective. Thus, our perception of spatial depth and of diegetic events appears to be at least partially dependent on the films’ protagonists.

In *The Neon Demon*, the construction of a gender-fluid space is most intensely reflected throughout the sequence depicting Jesse’s first professional photo-shoot. Jesse’s photographer, Jack, is first introduced to the audience in a medium close-up of his face, looking cold and expressionless as he unflinchingly stares at Jesse; this initial impression of Jack is further enhanced by his monochromatic clothing against a cold white background (fig. 34). In the subsequent reverse shot, Jesse appears vulnerable to his gaze, throwing a nervous and uncertain glance at Ruby off-screen. Here again, Jesse’s vulnerability is highlighted by a succession of extreme long shots, dwarfing her as she is led to stand in the middle of the enormous white screen of the set’s background. Once she is finally left to stand alone before the white backdrop, Jesse and the pale colours of her dress seem to blend easily into the background. The pure white backdrop begins to connote Jesse’s naivety and overall newness to the modelling industry, her innocence (which is further underlined by her apparent demure attitude and personality at this point of the narrative), but also her virginal purity which others covet (fig. 35). The sequence ends with the lighting being abruptly turned off and, as



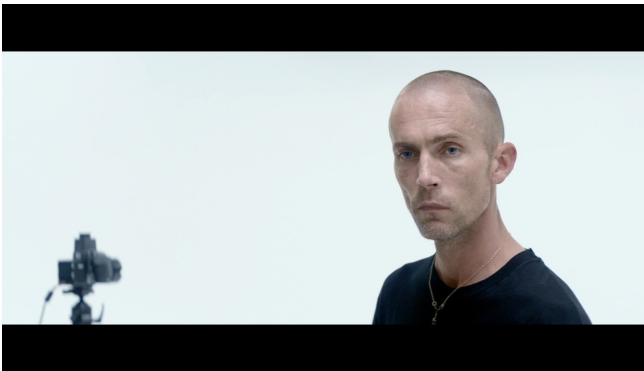


Fig. 34. Jack looking at Jesse.



Fig. 35. Jesse nervously awaiting directions.

the screen is briefly swallowed up by complete darkness, Jesse gets sucked into a space entirely designed by Jack so as to sublimate her body. The final shift from white to black is that of a transformation from a space reflecting Jesse's own corporeality to a space reflecting Jack's and his vision of her, a space in which Jesse is merely a model, that is to say a fetishised object to be manipulated into carefully crafted poses, to be photographed and to be looked at. Her body, now pliable to his will, is grabbed and twisted around, before being painted gold. Her shiny, golden symmetrical makeup is vaguely reminiscent of the man-machine in *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927); and she has already robbed another model, Gigi, of her ironic title of self-proclaimed "bionic woman" and claimed it as hers, even as she appears to have eclipsed it with her more organic "true beauty."<sup>49</sup> Just as the space in which the sequence unfolds seems to function like an anamorphic entity, producing different impressions depending on the angle through which it is viewed or the character which is associated with it, Jesse transforms so as to better fit each new different space. In this case, she goes from being an insecure new girl to a malleable objectified woman exuding charisma.

Moreover, in this sequence like in many others in *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*, it appears that the spaces within which symbiosis is reached are systematically self-contained inner spaces. Relph has noted that

To be inside a place is to belong to it and to identify with it, and the more profoundly inside you are, the stronger is this identity [...]. 'Being inside is knowing where you are.' It is the difference between safety and danger, cosmos and chaos, enclosure and exposure, or simply here and there. From the outside you look upon a place as a traveller might look upon a town from a distance; from the inside you experience a place, are surrounded by it and part of it (49).

This experience of oneness with inner spaces is central to the narrative of each film and while transience does sometimes impact the dichotomy explored by Relph, it is quite faithfully rendered in *Drive*. Throughout the film, Refn uses the car – an object deeply rooted in transience itself – as a space that functions as an extension of Driver's own body. Conversely, as Bégout has suggested, the

<sup>49</sup> To re-use the words of Robert Sarno, a fashion designer her looks move to the point of tears later in the film.

structure of supermodern societies deeply impact the way we interact with objects:

Deprived of the permanence and the reference [system] that made them authentic *topoi*, sedentary spaces (office/home) can no longer represent the repository of a lasting affective investment that would transform that space into an extension of the *Self*, [notably] due to the irregular and unstable visits [they are subjected to]. As though liberated from earthly anchors [...], man then refocuses his plural and fluctuating affection on mobile objects (cars, cell phones, computers, etc.) (Bégout 78, my translation).

A paragon of transience, the car is also a “mobile” and impermanent vessel that can punctually replace the conception of place and in which the sense of self is reconstructed; this might also explain Driver’s ability to seamlessly become one with cars that aren’t his own throughout the film. Christiansen, as we have seen, has attributed the sudden shifts between inside and outside viewpoints to a recurrent and violent sensation of collision maintained throughout *Drive* and which is especially prominent in each car chase. In each of these sequences, this impression is brought about by the accelerated rhythm of the editing and by the intertwining of mostly static shots taken within Driver’s car, as well as low-angle accelerated shots of the road outside the car in rapid succession. Each of the contrasts highlighted by Relph upon differentiating inside and outside spaces are here reproduced in the interspersed frames succinctly projecting the viewer within the relative safety of the low-lit, rumbling interior of the car, and the brutal exposure to the car’s sheer speed on the road, the roar of its engine, and so forth. The shots simultaneously place the viewer in the position of an extra passenger in the car looking out the windshield, or in that of an external, albeit more vulnerable, observer placed outside the car. Although these alternating shots are certainly jarring for the viewer, they are not as disjointed as they might first seem. In fact, they are one of the most obvious signs of the construction of a symbiotic relationship between Driver and the different cars he uses throughout the film. Introduced near the beginning of *Drive*’s first car chase, which occurs shortly after the film’s opening, the link between inside and outside shots is primarily established through the association of outside shots to Driver’s viewpoint, as they depict the various elements on which he is focusing with only a slight difference in terms of angle. For instance, towards the beginning of the sequence, when Driver frowns and ducks slightly forward, the camera cuts to a low road-level shot taken from below the car as it swerves to the right and parks behind a truck so as to hide from a patrolling police car. The following shots comprise a low-angle shot of Driver looking intently off-screen, and an outside shot of the street he is watching showing a police car passing by, thus intensifying the sequence’s tension and placing the viewer in the same position as the car’s passengers. This correlation is made more obvious as the sequence unfolds; it is pursued until, at the height of the chase, almost every single one of Driver’s slight movements and every flick of his eyes can be tied back to an outside shot of the chase.

It is almost as though Driver were one with the machine. He appears to be in a position of utter omnipotence while driving, and it seems as though he were actually able to feel the road under him, the blurry speed and the wooshing noise of the air rushing by: he is simultaneously inside and outside the car. This last point is further highlighted by the gradual erasure of aural differentiation in the film's sound design, as, contrary to the sequence's first few minutes, the intensity of the sound of the car engine remains even throughout the displacement from inside to outside spaces towards the end of the sequence, as does the soundtrack. Moreover, the idea that Driver has become one with the machine is further suggested from the way his body is dislocated within the confines of the car so that a part of it is always associated with the body of the car itself throughout the entire film. In fact, whenever Driver's body cannot directly be seen in the car, it is reflected within it, his gaze always present in the rear-view mirror that is always visible in a corner of the frame (fig. 36). The film's car chases exacerbate this symbiotic relationship, erasing the frontier between Driver and the cars he steers around town, between man and machine, body and armour. Cars in *Drive*, especially the protagonist's own, function like a sort of shell; they are objects that have minimal connotations besides that of perpetual movement and transience, and which appear to shield their occupant from outward threats and dangers or protect him till he recovers once he has been hurt (fig. 37).

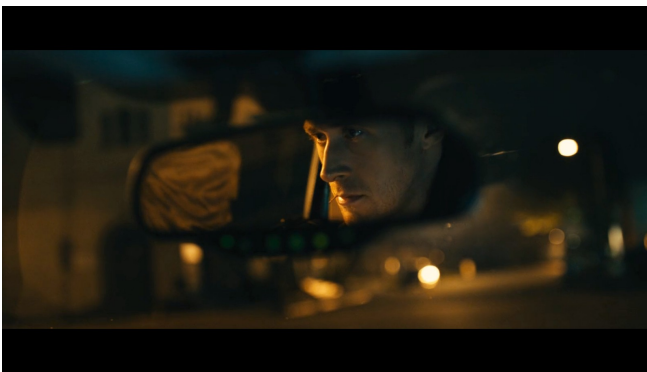


Fig. 36. Driver's gaze in the rear-view mirror.



Fig. 37. Driver in his car after getting injured.

However, none of the cars are differentiated quite as much as his own, inherently a safe space periodically enabling romance, recovery, and rebirth. This last point in particular is illustrated by the film's ending, in which Driver sits in his car after having been stabbed and seems to miraculously come back to life at the end of a static close-up of his face that lasts so long the viewer is led to believe he is dead if only for a short instant—"he may be dead or he may be immortal" (Vicari 191). In that moment, it would not be too far-fetched to assimilate the body of Driver's car (which can also be interpreted as similar to Jung's "hollow object[s]" associated with the "mother archetype") to a female womb (81). Indeed, as Laura Mulvey noted, "an 'inside' space may generate connotations of maternal femininity (the womb, the home)." It seems that this is precisely

what the car embodies in *Drive* (56).

Similarly, in *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon*, inner spaces are mostly gendered female and can be tied to the mother archetype. Some of these spaces are identified as such precisely because they reproduce some of the physical traits or motifs associated with specific female characters. However, instead of anchoring the location within space and enabling the impression of “safety” evoked by Relph, these spaces seem to be constructed so as to mimic the oppressive enclosed spaces of the “terrible place,” as conceptualised by Clover:

The terrible place, most often a house or a tunnel, in which victims sooner or later find themselves, is a venerable element of horror. [...] The house or tunnel may at first seem a safe haven, but the same walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become, once the killer penetrates them, the walls that hold the victim in (30-31).

There are two such spaces in *The Neon Demon*: the motel Jesse is staying at and the place Ruby housesits. At this point, it is important to note that, in itself, the space of the motel is heavily connoted in culture. Shady at best, the motel is identified as “*the place of clandestine rendezvous for illicit love affairs, a hideout for [...] criminals on the run,*<sup>50</sup> ... shielded from prying eyes and gossip, away from the normative centrality” of the city centre (Bégout 19, my translation). To paraphrase Bégout, at worst, the motel is a space in which the “transgression” of the “law” is “tolerated,” so long as it remains “hidden” (20, my translation). It is this transgressive quality that is most often remembered when considering the motel and its ties to modern myths and popular culture.

In *The Neon Demon*, this idea is represented mostly through Jesse’s motel’s manager, who is willing to turn a blind eye on anything for the right price. For instance, he appears ready to pimp out a thirteen-year-old runaway staying in the room next to Jesse’s, and he seems suspiciously unwilling to allow Jesse to call the police when she worries her room has been broken into. Furthermore, according to Bégout, the motel is has “never been quite the same” since the release of seminal works such as Hitchcock’s 1960 film *Psycho*, after which the motel started to spark a “disquieting sense of attraction” for its “ordinary rows of colourless and odourless rooms, where travellers passing through stop for a night that is always too long and that they will not remember” after they have left. Similarly, the motel is also the place that Nabokov’s 1955 novel *Lolita* has made into an “emblem of the shameful satisfaction of that which is forbidden” and taboo (Bégout 106, 109, my translation). The space of Jesse’s motel room appears as rather ambiguous in that it is recurrently invaded, all the while warding off direct attempts of penetration when these are tied to a sexual threat that could compromise Jesse’s virginal purity. In this regard, it seems that the space of the room is an extension of Jesse’s physicality, whereas the space of the motel surrounding that

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<sup>50</sup> As is also the case in Refn’s *Drive*.

room is more directly impacted and distorted by its sleazy manager, a character who also represents yet another threat to Jesse's virginity. Jesse's motel room is, first, invaded and disrupted by a mountain lion (which is perhaps the first warning sign that Jesse should leave its confines), before its boundaries gets tested and bent in a constant effort to get inside of it. It begins with two hands pushing the wallpaper inwards, attempting to claw their way in, while Jesse lays unconscious on her room's floor, after she has successfully avoided the motel manager who is demanding to be paid back for the damages caused by the mountain lion. In the next sequence set in the motel, the viewer is led to Jesse's room through a smooth dolly shot. The quiet echo of footsteps, as the camera progresses down the corridor, seems to indicate a POV shot, a staple horror movie device which, in this case, assimilates the viewer's gaze to that of the unknown character who finally stops in front of a shadowy door. The next shot shows Jesse's room from the inside, as the door is opened and the motel manager sidles in, while Jesse lies asleep on the bed. He then goes to stand by the bed and proceeds to shakily insert his flick-knife – a stand in for his penis<sup>51</sup> – between her parted lips and into her mouth, at which point she wakes and he orders her to open her mouth: “wider... wider.” Jesse then suddenly wakes up again, this time alone on the floor of her room, and it becomes impossible to know whether the sequence that has just come to a close was merely a premonitory dream or whether it did, in fact, occur and the space of the room was finally penetrated (either just then or perhaps earlier in the film, in which case the sequence would be a flashback). She wakes up in the nick of time to lock her bedroom door as its knob is being rattled, thus thwarting the motel manager's attempt to come in.<sup>52</sup> Giving up, the manager moves on to the next room to rape the young, runaway “Lolita” staying there, leaving Jesse's door closed and her virginity (mostly?) intact. The anonymous teen is thus presented as Jesse's double, and were it not for the slight age difference between the two girls (Jesse is sixteen and the “Lolita” is supposedly twelve or thirteen), it would be tempting to interpret the sequence as signifying that Jesse has in fact been raped. The complete darkness of the space outside Jesse's room, where the cries of the girl echo, mirrors the darkness already associated with the film's two photographers (Dean and Jack) and their predatory gazes, but also the dark interiors associated with characters threatening Jesse's virginity.

Ruby's house in particular works in such a way that it follows the exact process of

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51 The correlation in the horror film between phallic objects and knives has been widely discussed. For Clover, a “hard look” in the horror film equates a “hard penis” which is itself often represented by phallic objects such as a “chainsaw,” a “knife,” or a “power drill” (182). This specific sequence is also reminiscent of Dario Argento's *Opera* (1987), in which the killer repeatedly mimics fellatio by inserting knives and scissors into the mouths of terrified – and often female – characters before stabbing them to death.

52 Doing so, she reproduces a scene typical of the horror film (albeit with a slightly different ending) as, according to Clover, “a phenomenally popular moment in post-1974 slashers is the scene in which the victim locks herself in (a house, room, closet, car) and waits with pounding heart as the killer slashes, hacks, or drills his way in. The action is inevitably seen from the victim's point of view; we stare at the door (wall, car roof) and watch the surface open to first the tip and then the shaft of the weapon” (31).

construction of the terrible place as described by Clover. The house is initially established as a refuge away from the motel and a safe haven in which Jesse can finally safely rest precisely because it is the place in which Ruby resides. Ruby's protective attitude toward Jesse, which has led the latter to place Ruby in the position of a reassuring feminine presence, if not a surrogate mother of sorts, is transferred onto the house itself. In *The Neon Demon*, although the promise of safety is later explicitly reiterated by Ruby herself ("Come here, you're gonna be safe") upon inviting Jesse to stay with her, the low-lit, darkened and enclosed corridors evocative of the gothic aesthetics<sup>53</sup> of the horror genre tell another story altogether by mimicking the intra-uterine settings evoked by Creed.<sup>54</sup> In turn, these spaces foreshadow the threat posed by Ruby's androgynous body and her interest in initiating a sexual relationship with Jesse (thereby announcing her homosexuality). Once this final threat to Jesse's virginal purity has been made obvious, as, shortly after Jesse's arrival in the house, Ruby attempts to seduce her, the house begins to reflect the more nefarious nooks and crannies of the terrible place. Its entrance assumes a striking likeness to the entrance of the funeral house where Ruby works (fig. 38 & 39), especially as both spaces are filmed in a similar way – long or very long

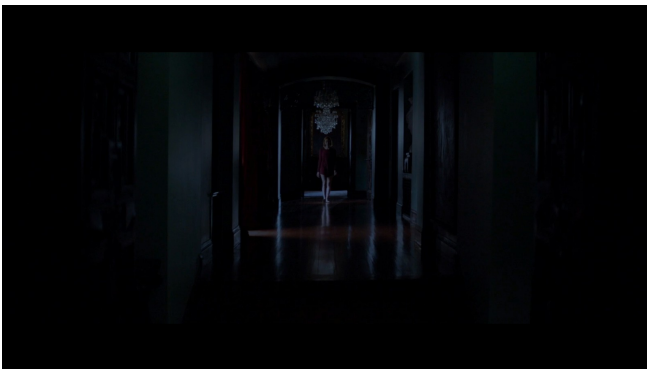


Fig. 38. The entrance to Ruby's house.

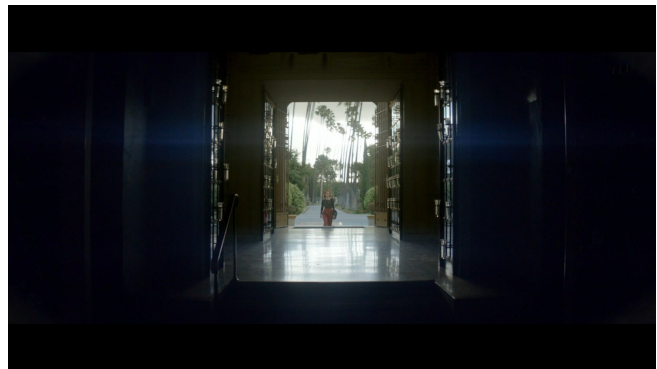


Fig. 39. The entrance to the funeral house.

shots, always symmetrical, showing deep, dark corridors). Both types of spaces are also interconnected throughout the short sequence showing Ruby's masturbatory fantasy. Additionally, a clear parallel can be drawn between the funeral house and its corpses, and Ruby's house which contains a wide variety of stuffed animals (also reminiscent of the taxidermied birds in Norman Bates' house in *Psycho*). A leopard, which Jesse notices as she walks by, can briefly be seen among them. Incidentally, the leopard potentially represent Ruby and the threat she poses to Jesse's virginity as the animal recalls earlier productions such as *Cat People* (Paul Schrader, 1982) or

53 Gothic highlights are also maintained in later scenes showing the house's inner spaces, notably through the props used to decorate the house (antique golden mirrors and ornate bedframes or sofas, a predominance of darker shades, etc.).

54 "In many films the monster commits her or his dreadful acts in a location which resembles the womb. These intra-uterine settings consist of dark, narrow, winding passages leading to a central room, cellar or other symbolic place of birth" (53).

*Leopard Man* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943) in which leopards evoke repressed female sexuality.<sup>55</sup> The leopard (as well as a few large stuffed animals seen in the background after her death) may also be a throwback to the mountain lion that invaded Jesse's motel room earlier in the film. In that sequence, it is possible to make out two diametrically opposed reactions: one presenting a threat (initially perceived by Jesse and then transferred onto the sequence's two male characters once they see the mountain lion), and the other depicting Jesse's fascination, maybe even a short moment of communion between Jesse and the mountain lion that is manifested through the editing (a brief slowing down of the action, the return of the music, and a reverse close-up of Jesse's face). The ominous contrast between the living animal and the stuffed one simultaneously suggests the threat Jesse is under, her entrapment, and her imminent murder. Ultimately, Ruby's house is the space in which the figure of the "killer" evoked by Clover takes its final shape; it emerges from the monstrous womb constructed from the house's inner spaces and, at long last, manages to get close enough to Jesse to carry out its murderous intents.

In *Only God Forgives*, space is similarly subjected to the pervading presence of the mother figure embodied by Crystal. From the outset, Crystal is made into a "goddess of Chaos" whose mere presence in the narrative sparks a gradual contamination of the diegesis and its spaces (Vicari 195). Her name, perhaps an implicit "reference to methamphetamine," might very well be a first clue that her sole presence seems to dictate the film's structure (and especially its lack of landmarks and fluctuating temporality), as well as the behaviour of her two children, Billy and Julian (Vicari 195). In fact, the aggression that characterises Billy's behaviour and Julian's numerous hallucinations are common symptoms associated with methamphetamine consumption.<sup>56</sup> There are quite a few references to drugs in the film that seem to corroborate such an interpretation; Julian and Billy run a boxing gym that is a front for drug trafficking, and there seems to be an elusive reference to "cannabis" in the "vibrant green of clustered growing plants" that appear in the background of a the sequence near the end of the film in which Julian and Chang are outside (Vicari 196).

In both *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon*, the monstrous mother archetype achieves perfect symbiosis with her surroundings, and sets out to consume the protagonist of each film. The construction of interior transient spaces as disproportionate oppressive wombs is, however, even more obvious throughout *Only God Forgives*, in which such spaces quite clearly represent Crystal's corporeality and, through her omnipresence in the background, her apparent omnipotence and omniscience. It should be noted that Crystal's omnipotence is, of course, belied by her murder,

<sup>55</sup> The leopard motif is also used in *Only God Forgives*, notably on a dress worn by Crystal.

<sup>56</sup> These symptoms are listed in the 2013 FDA notice on Desoxyn (Methamphetamine Hydrochloride, see sources). [https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/drugsatfda\\_docs/label/2013/005378s028lbl.pdf](https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/drugsatfda_docs/label/2013/005378s028lbl.pdf) (Consulted on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017)

further suggesting that the visual devices that participate in creating this impression coalesce with Julian's own perception of his mother rather than an objective viewpoint. The background space, and the space of Julian's hotel in particular, are thus turned into a representation of the return of the repressed and of the Œdipal drama in the film. The correlation between filmic space and the figure of the mother seems to be rooted in the very settings of the narrative – according to Jung, “the underworld and its inhabitant are presided over by the mother” (81). Both elements appear indivisible throughout the narrative. The first manifestation of Crystal's omnipresence is established even before she is introduced into the narrative through the dragon motif on the hotel's wallpaper, as well as another large dragon painting placed over a red backlit wall in the boxing gym, which signify both the repressed unconscious and the mother. In fact, in his analysis of the mother archetype, Jung noted that the monstrous mother was often represented by using “evil symbols such as the witch, the dragon (or any devouring and entwining animal such as a large fish or serpent), the grave, the sarcophagus, deep water, death, nightmares and bogies (Empusa, Lilith, etc.)” (81-82). Jung also insists on the idea that “on the negative side the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark, the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrible and inescapable like fate” (82). It seems that *Only God Forgives* is the film among the three under study in which the line between diegetic reality and the protean spaces delineating an artificial mindscape (that is to say a space that is entirely dependent on the narrative's protagonist(s)'s perception) is most heavily blurred. Crystal's body and her womb, which Julian never managed to escape, are not merely reflected onto the landscape and its numerous red-lit spaces; they constitute the very site of the narrative. Inside the hotel's suffocating atmosphere, Julian appears to be literally surrounded by symbols representing the phallic mother, suggesting that he is still trapped within her womb and is thus reenacting the mother-child relationship as it was when Crystal was pregnant with Julian: “When I was pregnant with you, it was strange, you were different. You wanted me to terminate. I wouldn't. And you were right.” Crystal's constant dismissal of Julian's masculine potency only enhances this idea,<sup>57</sup> as she repeatedly likens him to a

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57 In this respect, Crystal appears to fit Creed's description of the monstrous mother whose “perversity is almost always grounded in possessive, dominant behaviour towards her offspring, particularly the male child” (139). Conversely, Crystal appears to embody “male fears of engulfment by the womb, a terrifying return to the origins in which the subject is swallowed up by the same apparatus that sent him forth into the world” (Greven 24). Moreover, according to Jung, “the mother archetype forms the foundation of the so-called mother-complex. [...] The effect of the mother-complex differ according to whether it appears in a son or a daughter. Typical effects on the son are homosexuality and Don Juanism, and sometimes also impotence. [...] The effects of the mother-complex on the son may be seen in the ideology of the Cybele and Attis type: self-castration, madness, and early death” (85). Throughout *Only God Forgives*, “self-castration” is associated with Julian's obsession with his hands and his desire to have them removed (especially because they are the tool with which he murdered his father as a child), as well as his self-restriction and bondage in sexual situations. On the other hand, the descent into “madness, and early death” are associated with his older brother Billy who commits brutal murder within the confines of a bedroom representing the same womb-like spaces that surround Julian.



“paranoid,” “jealous” child, “a very dangerous,” albeit impotent, “boy;” he is thus unable to assume the position of the father he killed or the brother he lost.

The hotel is laid out much like Ruby’s house, its dark, labyrinthine corridors ominously crushing the characters, and ultimately recalling the female womb. This impression is furthered by the predominantly red lighting used inside the hotel. This is the case in the short sequence in which Julian’s bathroom’s tap water suddenly turns a deep blood red, almost black, as it gushes down onto his hands. This last event is set directly before Crystal’s entrance into his bedroom, foreshadowing her arrival, and simultaneously evoking the source of the Œdipal drama revealed towards the end of the film (i.e., the fact that Julian “killed his own father with his bare hands”). Located at the core of the narrative, the hotel seems to be constructed in a way that is reminiscent of Clover’s conception of the terrible place in its structure, but also of Creed’s “uncanny house” in the way Julian interacts with it; it is “haunted by the ghost or trace of a memory which takes the individual back to the early, perhaps foetal, relation with the mother” (cited in Mulvey 14). Moreover, its structure is clearly mirrored in most (if not all) of the other spaces depicted in the film (usually filmed and framed in a similar way and representing similarly narrow locations, such as clubs’ corridors, or backstreets and alleys). The insidious insertion of Crystal’s physicality into the film’s background is most obviously implemented through a reflection of the patterns of her dresses onto the spaces surrounding Julian. The motifs of those dresses, most often of a dark colour and with a variety of red flowers (sometimes roses) printed on them, recur throughout the film (fig. 40). For instance, the dress Crystal wears when she is first reunited with Julian displays a pattern similar to that of the roses sown into the couch Julian sits on in the previously analysed sequence in which Crystal briefly seems to be watching Julian and Mai; its pattern also echoes that of the wallpaper above Julian in that sequence. A more exact replica of that first dress’s pattern is later seen spread out, yet again, on a wallpaper behind Mai, as she waits for Julian (fig. 41). It is also interesting to note that Crystal’s dresses sometimes function like pathetic phallacy, mirroring her mood and



Fig. 40. Crystal's first dress.

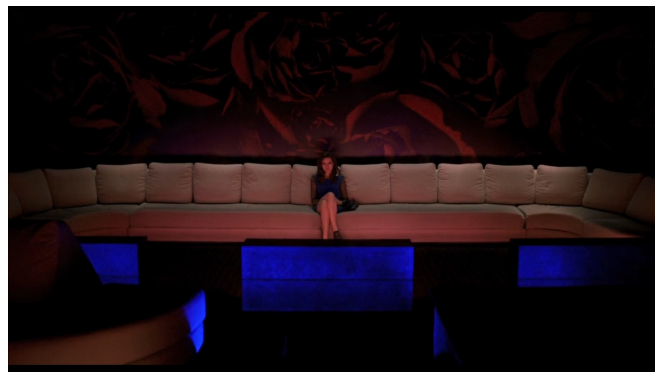


Fig. 41. Reflection of Crystal's dress on a wallpaper.

displaying her wild and violent character through a leopard pattern (most notably during the sequence of the diner with Julian and Mai).

Ultimately, the womb is not just merely a space that is re-created so as to connote the monstrous femininity of characters such as Ruby or Crystal. Although they are always tied to ominous environments and a resurgence of on-screen violence, womb-like spaces are also used to lead the narrative towards the representation of processes of transformation, birth, or re-birth. In fact, each film is structured around the construction of ambiguous figures. This ambiguity stems mostly from the way the protagonists transform alongside space and progressively morph into inhuman entities. Their bodies, through their apparent symbiosis with archetypal transient spaces, gradually dissolve into represented space as the characters' corporeality spreads outwards so as to dictate the aesthetics of each new space. It seems that this process directly results from the use of transient spaces as spaces facilitating transgression and transgressive behaviours. The transient spaces of each film appear to be spaces that are not systematically bound by fixed gender codification, and in which the female apparatus is often reproduced, but also spaces in which violence is not only normalised, but expected.

### *Death and the Emergence of the Inhuman in Transient Spaces*

The narratives of the films under study are so centred on the mythic figures of their protagonists that they seem to draw the viewer inwards, into a series of inner spaces that progressively reveal the essence of each of these characters and their gradual transformation into inhuman<sup>58</sup> entities attracted by deathly paths. Paradoxically, this effect is achieved through the extension of the characters' own physicality outwards into cinematic spaces. In spite of the initial sense of protection broadcasted by the transient spaces most intimately tied to each protagonist, these spaces progressively reveal themselves to be overlaid with the stench of death. These spaces become tightly laced with more morbid traits and violent impulses or sensations, as the characters attempt to simulate death (that is to say both the act of dying and death itself). The first clues of this oncoming violence are disseminated throughout the background of the frame and plot in an effort to normalise this violence and render it specific to the spaces in which it occurs. Additionally, the use of colour (washes and smudges) on the surface of the screen gradually corrupts diegetic space, insidiously introducing violence and violent sensations on screen before they are visually enacted

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<sup>58</sup> They progressively turn into entities "lacking human qualities of compassion and mercy" and are, above all "not human in nature" (definition from the *Oxford Dictionary* online).

by the films' characters.

In *Extreme Cinema: the Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture*, Frey notes that conventional tactics make violence palatable by three means: First by locating violence in a setting or era far away from the spectator's normal life (e.g. Western, science fiction, or horror); second, by providing exceptional, 'morally justifiable' narrative situations in which violence is the only logical choice (war, rape-revenge, or vigilante films); or, third by contextualizing violence in a comedy or satire (slapstick, spaghetti Western, post-modern cynicism) (28-29).

The depictions of violence in Refn's recent films abide by these conventional criteria, placing the narrative in the remote (a)temporality of myth or of the Western and horror genres, and justifying violence through the themes of revenge or vigilantism (*Drive*, *Only God Forgives*). When violence is not implied through the functionalities of represented space (e.g., the stunt car, the boxing gym), this normalisation of violence in the transient spaces of *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*, occurs through the use of props and lighting (vibrant orange and red lights, low ratio of light to dark, etc.), hinting at violence or violent behaviours (knives, guns and bullets, etc.). In *Drive*, each of these props often seem to come in pairs, usually suggesting two different events: one in which violence is issued upon an innocent – or at the very least unsuspecting character – and the other in which Driver delivers retribution for this first act of violence.<sup>59</sup> The bullet given to Benicio by the men threatening his father is thus forced back down the throat of one of the characters responsible for issuing the threat; the shotgun used to kill Rose is turned back against its users; and Bernie, the mobster who killed Shannon by slitting his wrists open, is stabbed to death by Driver.

The instrument of violence (or a similar one) is sometimes reused against its initial user/owner in *Only God Forgives* as well. Billy kills with his bare hands and is then brutally killed in a similar way; Julian's closed fists, which he used to kill his own father, are useless to him in his fistfight with Chang; and there is also a brief instance in which Julian seems to consider the possibility of using one of Chang's swords against him before the latter uses it to murder Crystal. The normalisation of violence is also signified through numerous images leading back to scenes of sheer violence that occur later in the films' narratives. These images are created through a variety of objects in the background (e.g., the stuffed animals in Ruby's house, the painting of the ocean in the corridor between Irene and Driver's flats which evokes the film's last car chase and Nino's murder, the gloves Driver systematically wears when engaging in criminal or dangerous activities, the numerous mirrors littering the insides of each new transient space in *The Neon Demon*, etc.). They are also hinted at through the introduction of blood and gore right at the film's onset, as is the case in *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon*. These images associate diegetic transient spaces with a latent sense of violence that escalates throughout each film to culminate in a scene of (re)birth that

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<sup>59</sup> In *Only God Forgives*, Chang resorts to violence in a similar way.

further establishes the protagonists as mythic figures.<sup>60</sup> Such scenes are systematically located in the spaces where symbiosis has been attained, the synergy of body and space crashing into a simulation of death before the film's protagonist emerges as a death-like figure him/herself.

In the introduction to *Nicolas Winding Refn and the Violence of Art*, Vicari remarked that, for Refn, “birth processes are unique forms of violence” (3). This process can be “enacted by men as bloody fistfights in which one male returns the other to goo-spattered infancy and the possibility of being reborn, for good or ill,”<sup>61</sup> and is also “akin to murder in intensity and bodily vulnerability” (Vicari 199). In *Only God Forgives*, Julian is returned to that stage of “infancy” by Chang during their fight, although the latter then begins to “wage war against” Crystal in order to “help set [Julian] free” from his shackles (Vicari 198). Vicari further notes that

Both Billy and Julian are fragmentary men held together by hieratic poses and by a speech that resents having to become verbalized. They have been rendered out of whack with the cosmos, virtual zombies. Refn uses lights to make their faces almost look like Francis Bacon portraits: Billy’s eyes are lit but his mouth is wiped out, or his mouth flaps inhumanly from the bottom of a head that has been foreshortened by shadow. After being beaten up by Chang, Julian’s face has the pulpy, meatlike look of one of Bacon’s screaming-blurs; likewise, the bashed-in face of Billy’s corpse, whose upper lip appears to be where his nose once was, and whose eyes seem to have been knocked to either side of his cranium. Ultimately, both brothers are consumed by the death drive (200).

Throughout the scene which signals the beginning of Julian’s rebirth, Julian’s inhuman demeanour is finally stripped away from him even as his face is mashed into a mess of blood and swollen bruises. On the other hand, Chang’s inhumanity is affirmed once more, and he stands as the vessel for a “supernatural entity” that punishes and “kills through [him]” (Vicari 195). Towards the end of the fight, Chang’s stance becomes eerily similar to that of the statue of the boxer that Julian attempts to mimic several times throughout the film, and an insert of a close-up of the statue assimilates Chang to it, as both man and statue look down at Julian curled up on the floor (fig. 42 &



Fig. 42. Chang adopting the stance of the statue.

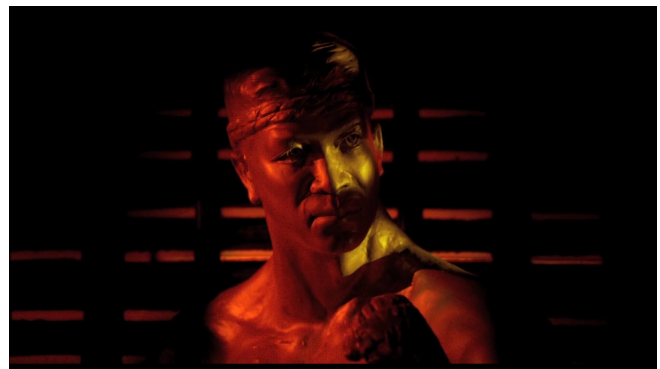


Fig. 43. The statue.

<sup>60</sup> In his work on *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard notes that “mythic birth” is a process in which “collective metamorphoses or destructions” are “preambles to act of foundation and creation” (242).

<sup>61</sup> This representation of birth processes which is used in *Drive* and *Only God Forgives*, is implemented by Refn in many of his films, and most notably in *Bronson* (2008).

43).

In *Drive*, the first shift towards the transformation of Driver into an inhuman entity befitting “the living corpse”<sup>62</sup> begins in the cars he drives and is ultimately fulfilled inside the lift of Driver’s apartment building, shortly after Standard’s death. As we have seen, *Drive* establishes a marked difference between Driver’s car and the others that are used for criminal activities or to demonstrate his skills (i.e., the race car and the stunt car). On the other hand, spaces such as Driver’s car or his apartment building’s lift are used as safe places in which Driver can heal and rest, as well as key locations to the development of the romantic subplot. However, as the narrative unfolds, the clear demarcation Driver has created between his shady jobs and his personal life gets blurred, until Driver’s own car is used to re-enact the scene in which he pilots a stunt car that he has to crash during a shoot, simulating the death of a policeman. Driver’s potential morbid fascination for violent sensation is fulfilled, as he has become the character he killed once more by wearing the latter’s silicone mask. In “The Violence of a Perfect Moment,” Leo Charney remarks that “violence can become an effort to restore sensation, to feel something, which means to feel present” (Charney in Slocum 55), to restore place via pure presence.

On the other hand, the space of the elevator, which has thus far been used as one of the places of encounter for Irene and Driver, transforms into a space laden with death as it descends to the building’s parking lot. In that instant of transition between place to place, the elevator’s movement crystallises Driver’s transformation from hero to monster, and the line between the two is henceforth irremediably blurred. The sequence begins as Irene and Driver’s romance reaches its climax, and the two characters exchange their first and only kiss. The lights dim drastically to bathe Irene and Driver in bright golden light, all the while hiding away the other man (an armed hitman) present in the lift. The spell is brutally broken once Driver pulls away and turns to assault the hitman, bashing his face in until the man’s skull splits open under Driver’s heel (see fig. 57). The extreme violence displayed by the character who has, up till now, ostensibly been portrayed as a hero is shocking and leaves Irene stunned. Once the doors of the lift open and Irene stumbles out, Driver slowly turns around, his white jacket splattered with blood. He emerges an inhuman figure, the livid pallor of his clammy and slack face recalling the unfazed expression he wore after Blanche’s murder in the motel and his subsequent killing of two other hitmen (fig. 44 & 45). His stiff body seems to have reached this “supreme moment of cold-restraint [in which it] has become nothing more than rigor mortis”<sup>63</sup> (Mitchell in Slocum 185). Throughout the film, and especially at the issue of that sequence, Driver seems to have become a character typical of the “violence-laden

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62 According to Creed, “several of the most horrific figures are 'bodies without souls' (the vampire), the 'living corpse' (the zombie), corpse-eater (the ghoul), and the robot or android” (Creed 10).



Fig. 44. The motel.



Fig. 45. The elevator.

films of the 1970s”: “in these later films all that clearly distinguishes the hero from other characters is emotional detachment – a style that seems like nothing so much as death itself, with the hero's body become a corpse, as motionless and stark as desert landscape” (Kinder in Slocum 183). Driver, much like Jesse in *The Neon Demon*, emerges wearing a new mask, that is to say one of the objects which René Girard identifies as

Stand[ing] at the equivocal frontier between the human and the ‘divine,’ between a differentiated order in the process of disintegration and its final undifferentiated state – the point where all differences, all monstrosities are concentrated, and from which a new order will emerge. There is no point in trying to determine the ‘nature’ of masks, because it is in their nature not to encompass all natures (168).

Like one’s reflection in a mirror, masks “juxtapose beings and objects separated by differences:” “they are another aspect of the monstrous double” (Girard 168). Girard further states that “the ritual ceremonies that require masks are reenactments of the original experience. [...] The mask is no apparition drawn from the thin air; it is a transformation of the antagonists’ normal features” (Girard 168). This monstrous mask/other is then led to its death once its task is complete in *Drive*, while in *The Neon Demon*, it appears to burst at the seams as glitter bleeds out onto Jesse’s face. The protagonist of each film is searching for “pure presence” (a state of sensory overload that restores them to life) through violent sensation, Driver’s imperturbable mask cracking to reveal apprehension and loss under a sheen of perspiration, Julian pursuing punishment and bodily harm to begin a new life on his own terms, and Jesse endeavouring to thrive only under watchful eyes to seduce (Charney 55).

In *The Neon Demon*, the normalisation of violence is further brought about by its ritualisation: Jesse is clearly marked as the victim, especially once her palm has been pierced by a shard of glass, leaving a blood red stigma at the centre of her hand. Much as in *Drive* and *Only God*

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63 This expression was used by Mitchell to characterise a typical moment in the Western film in which the hero has become so tense with self-restraint that he has completely anchored his body in stoicism, dispassionate contemplation and mutism, effectively transforming himself into a moving breathing corpse rather than a living being.

*Forgives*, the diegesis is constructed so as to progressively lead the protagonist through a process of transformation<sup>64</sup> established in one of the narrative's transient spaces (in this case the runway of her first and sole fashion show) from which she will emerge as an inhuman entity. In *The Neon Demon*, Jesse communes with the spaces "in front of the camera"<sup>65</sup> and is led to simulate death and her own bloody murder right from the outset (fig. 32). She reaches symbiosis within spaces in which she is placed at the centre of all gazes (sets and runways that are impermanent by definition) and she adapts to them by being turned into a fetish object, moulded into a variety of artificial images. Her objectification, rather than reducing her to a state of impotence like Julian's, highlights her own powers of attraction over those surrounding her. Nonetheless, they also reveal a lack of agency and movement that participates in her turning into a corpse-like figure similar to the protagonists of *Drive* and *Only God Forgives*. It is only fitting that her transformation into an inhuman figure occurs on the runway of her first fashion show, in which she finally comes face to face with the eponymous neon demon represented by three neon triangles, which make a few brief appearances throughout the first half of the film. In this sequence, shortly after the reappearance of this neon symbol lit up in blue, a very long shot reveals Jesse's dark form emerging from a diamond-shaped, vagina-like opening, similarly lit up in blue (fig. 46). Her shadow is reflected on the slick, water-like texture of the runway that has morphed into a dark and empty artificial womb. Jesse advances further into the room, eyes wide open and unblinking as she stares at the neons, and it looks almost as though she were hypnotised. As she reaches the end of the runway, her eyes widen in surprise and a reverse shot shows a dream-vision of a perfect doppelganger of herself glaring at her and simultaneously reflected in a couple of mirrors overhead. Kissing each of her reflections, Jesse completes her transformation and is united as one with her alien doppelganger, the lighting changing to a deep red colour, and she walks back out the (now red-lit) diamond-shaped opening. The "process of transformation" followed by Jesse is similar to that of "indirect rebirth" described by Jung: "here the transformation is brought about not directly, by passing through death and rebirth oneself, but indirectly, by participating in a process of transformation which is conceived of as taking place outside the individual. In other words, one has to witness, or take part in, some rite of transformation" (Jung 114-115). Jesse emerges from the runway scene as the physical embodiment

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64 The characters go through a process of marginalisation (described in the first chapter), and then one of "selection" (Driver is the "hero," Julian an Oedipus figure, Jesse a branded victim) that then leads to a scene of "sacrifice" (Driver sacrifices himself so that Irene and Benicio remain safe, Julian allows himself to be beat up, Jesse is murdered and eaten so that the other female characters may preserve/restore their youth), and finally the "vengeance/resurrection" depicted at the very end of each film (Schubart 194-196). This process, developed at length by Girard in his work on *The Scapegoat* (1989), is summed up by Schubart in a relatively succinct article (see sources).

65 That space is both that which is in front of the diegetic characters (the photographers and the other characters), and that through which the viewer watches the film.

of the neon demon, no longer quite human, an artificial being made out of light. When she parts the string curtains of a bar's entrance in the next sequence, she is no longer the picture of dewy-eyed innocence she had been introduced as. She appears older, more heavily made up and dressed in golden glitters (fig. 47).

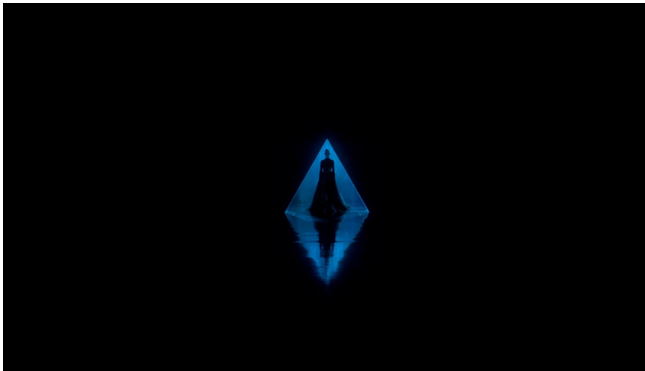


Fig. 46. The runway.

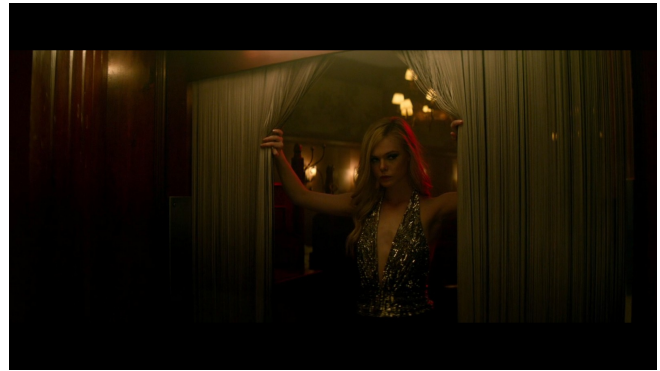


Fig. 47. Jesse immediately after the fashion show.

As has already been noted, the back-and-forth movement in visual and aural intensity throughout *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon* appears to draw the audience deeper into the image, all the while mimicking the erotic oscillation of haptic listening/viewing. According to Laura Marks, “haptic images invite the viewer to dissolve his or her subjectivity in the close and bodily contact with the image,” while “the oscillation between the two creates an erotic relationship, a shifting between distance and closeness. [...] The haptic image indicates figures and then backs away from representing them fully – or, often, moves so close to them that for that reason they are no longer visible”<sup>66</sup> (13, 16). The figure, defined by Deleuze as being the “sensible form related to a sensation” that “acts immediately upon the nervous system” and the “flesh” (34), is also “the remnant of a force” latent to the image (Aumont 25, my translation). This force “acts within the forms” and the resulting “tension between forms and forces” emerges as a “symptom within the figurative order of representation” from which the “signs of a disfiguration may emerge” (Vancheri 146, 147, 61, my translation). In each of the films under study, haptic devices (notably focal variations, or representations of speed, acceleration and deceleration through sound, lighting or camera movement) are used to evoke the figure of transience and its impermanence, as well as to emphasise its ambiguous movement. However, it is also through these devices of haptic perception that disfiguration is made apparent in each film. Refn uses colour and sound concurrently, both oscillating between the background and the surface of cinematic space (the surface of the screen and the surface of the sound design<sup>67</sup>). Both elements are always manipulated so as to constitute

<sup>66</sup> Marks further argues that “changes of focus and distances, switches between the more haptic and the more optical visual styles, describe the movement between a relationship of touch and a visual one” (16).

<sup>67</sup> The “surface” of the sound design encompasses the aural elements placed on the foreground of the film’s sound design.



either an insidious underside or an overwhelming wash of textures at the foreground of the audience's perception. In *The Neon Demon* in particular, Refn maintains a close proximity between the eye of the viewer and the screen as the viewer is forced to contemplate the image by resorting to a form of haptic visuality, in which “the eyes themselves function like organs of touch” (Marks 2).

*The Neon Demon* opens on a static close-up depicting textured frosted glass backlit by coloured lighting that oscillates slowly from crimson red to magenta, deep purple, and shades of blue so dark they are almost black. The lighting appears to highlight the asperities of the glass pane's surface, all the while distorting it. The shift is slow and subtle, almost imperceptible, partly because of the contrasting colours used during the opening credits. In fact, the various neon colours used to spell out the names of the main cast are so bright and so heavily contrasted with the textured background that each letter seems meant to be burned directly onto the viewer's retina, leaving behind a white imprint over it as the names spelled out onscreen fade out into the darkening background (fig. 48). The texture of the letters is just as ambiguous: they fade in, showing a rounded surface textured by discrete shadows and almost immediately flatten out as their colours become brighter. The observed sensation of burning is reiterated a few seconds after the end of the opening credits when, in the opening sequence, Jesse's body is almost completely burned right off the screen by the vivid and intrusive white lights of Dean's flash (fig. 49). Ultimately, the textured



Fig. 48, Opening credits.

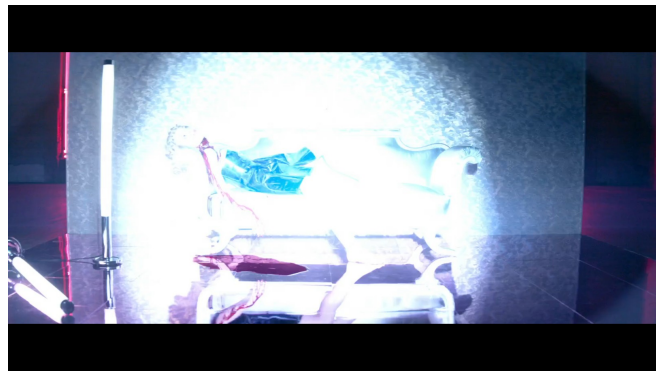


Fig. 49, The flash of Dean's camera.

surface of the opening credits gradually fades under heaps of falling glitter that surround the film's title, the shimmer distracting the eye away from it even as the intensity of the letters' colour increases. The contact established between the eye and the screen (or more specifically the recurrent neon colours used in *The Neon Demon*) during the opening credits is both aggressive and invasive, but it also potentially underlines Refn's intent to impress sensations on all of the viewer's sensory organs throughout the film.

Colour is seen before form, which is itself perceived before motion<sup>68</sup> (and of course sound),

<sup>68</sup> This has been shown by a number of studies, including a 2001 study by Paolo Viviani and Christelle Aymoz referenced at the end of this thesis.

and its use is primordial in that it constitutes the most immediate and direct mode of perception and, therefore, communication. In the films under study, colour is a thin membrane on the surface of the screen that textures and distorts everything that lies beneath it, impacting diegetic progression, perception of depth, and the meanings tied to the image. Deleuze conceptualised the “surface-colour” as “pervasive” and “absorbent”:

The surface-colour of the great uniform tints [*grands aplats*], the atmospheric colour which pervades all the others, movement-colour which passes from one tone to another. [...] In opposition to a simply coloured image, the colour-image does not refer to a particular object, but absorbs all that it can: it is the power which seizes all that happens within its range, or the quality common to completely different objects. There *is* a correspondence between a colour and an affect (green and hope...). Colour is on the contrary the affect itself, that is the virtual conjunction of all the objects which it picks up (118).

As we have seen in the first chapter, the sensations of violence are most visibly conveyed through visual and aural representations of sensations of movement and collision. In *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*, violence and violent sensation are irremediably tied to the appearance of a blood red stain onscreen, which is usually the resulting effect of that violence, its symptom. The surface of the screen is often awash with it and, considering that colour constitutes the very surface of the image, red tints or undertones are often a first point of contact between the eye and the screen.

In *Drive*, the colour scheme appears to be fairly restricted, and the screen usually combines some shade of blue (usually darker ones) with any other shade of yellow (from the light yellows of midday scenes or neon lights, to the golden overtones of more idyllic sequences, or the various shades of red-yellows<sup>69</sup> that are omnipresent throughout the film). These colours, and especially the predominant deep blue shades and the darker red-yellows, are placed on opposing ends of the colour spectrum and are also usually associated with diametrically opposed characters. Different hues of blue tending towards black, that are reminiscent of *Drive*'s night-time scenes, are omnipresent both in Driver's environment and in the clothing he wears (darker shades and blue neons); Standard seems to be similarly surrounded by slightly more diluted shades of blue. On the other hand, the warmer, more earthy tones depicted onscreen all seem to lead back to Irene, to the way she is lit, to her dresses and the scarlet stain of her work uniform (see fig. 50, 51 & 52). These burnt oranges and sienna colours that permeate the frame are somewhat ambiguous throughout the film. In fact, both hues are tied back to daytime and night-time sequences, and symbolically connote the home (the warm hues worn by Irene) and the faded colour of blood. For instance, as the film progresses, they take on more grim undertones as they deepen into darker muddy browns or reddish

<sup>69</sup> In his *Theory of Colours*, Goethe refers to orange and orange shades as “red-yellow,” that is to say a mix primarily made out of yellow to which varying quantities of red are applied, whereas vivid red (crimson) is referred to as “yellow-red” (308, 309).



Fig. 50, 51 & 52. Irene and Driver/Standard at opposite ends of the colour spectrum.

tints and move away from the golden sheen of earlier sequences and the warm glow of the lift's interior or of the streetlights by night. The intermixing of the two colours embodied by the first encounter between Irene, Standard and Driver in the corridor separating their two flats results in unpleasant, tarnished colours that signal the oncoming on-screen violence that soon follows. In fact, in the sequence that immediately follows, the warmer hues of *Drive*'s colour scheme darken into a mix of crimson red, dull brown and black, each colour attached to the various stages of the drying of Standard's congealing blood (fig. 53 & 54). From then on, the warmer tints that characterise Irene's clothes and the interior spaces in which she is shown systematically recall the red squares of tape layered over the front windows of Nino's restaurant and the dull, viscous colours of drying blood, which is then repeatedly splattered in thick heaps over the screen.



Fig. 53. Driver and Standard's first encounter.



Fig. 54. Following scene, Standard on the ground.

In his *Theory of Colour*, Goethe argues that yellow and other warm colours are negatively impacted by those hues that are widely considered as emitting more cool undertones:

If, however, [yellow] in its pure and bright state is agreeable and gladdening, and in its utmost power is serene and noble, it is, on the other hand, extremely liable to contamination, and produces a very disagreeable effect if it is sullied, or in some degree tends to the *minus*<sup>70</sup> side. Thus, the colour of sulphur, which inclines to green, has a something unpleasant in it (Goethe 308).

Similarly, the warmer tints of *Drive*'s colour scheme are gradually corrupted by its cooler colours, the two mixing together<sup>71</sup> to create the murky shade of brown used to depict blood in both *Drive* and *Only God Forgives*. It has the consistency of “congealed” blood, in Girard's words, the “blood that dries on the victim [and] soon loses its viscous quality and becomes first a dark sore, then a roughened scab. Blood that is allowed to congeal on its victim is the impure product of violence, illness, or death” (36). The thick texture and the colour of that dark blood are similar to that of drying blood, even at the very moment where it is spilled (fig. 55, 56, 57 & 58). To this sullied colour and texture, Girard opposes those of fresh blood: “In contrast to this contaminated substance is the fresh blood of newly slaughtered victims, crimson and free flowing. This blood is never allowed to congeal, but is removed without a trace as soon as the rites have been concluded” (36-



Fig. 55, 56, 57 & 58. The dull brownish colour of freshly spilt blood.

<sup>70</sup> Goethe classifies colours in one of two categories such as the “plus” side in which he places various characteristics such as “warmth,” “action,” “light,” and the colour “yellow,” or the “minus” side in which he places the colour “blue” and other terms such as “coldness,” “negation,” “shadow,” etc (276).

<sup>71</sup> Brown shades result from the mixing of orange (red-yellow) with varying quantities of blue.

37). This process is effected throughout *The Neon Demon*, in which Jesse's blood spreads out rapidly and in increasing amounts throughout the film. In *Drive*, the colours on the surface of the screen – and thus on the surface of the audience's perception – whether warm or cool, are connected to violence; their textures, which oscillate between the deep blue/black of visual deprivation and the slow viscous ooze of thick blood, produce a lasting sensation of disquieting unease. Reddish tints eat away at the screen until violence suddenly explodes onto it.<sup>72</sup> These shades of yellow-red (or rather, the shades of blood) reappear in *Only God Forgives* (fig. 59 & 60), although they do not really stand out from the rest of the image on which they appear and are not as visually striking as the saturated colour lighting that wash over the entire screen periodically throughout the film. They create a stain that cannot be removed, although it sometimes resorbs itself into masses of purplish bruises.



Fig. 59. Chang piercing Byron's eye.



Fig. 60. Crystal's body.

In *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon*, washes of colours are applied – through the lighting of the image – on the surface of the screen, forming a thin veil absorbing most of the light and impeding the audience's perception of depth, thus inviting the viewer to consider the image through a haptic gaze. In *Only God Forgives*, the heavily saturated light, combined with the grainy texture of film and the focal variations, blurs the space surrounding the characters, ultimately emphasising the colours' symbolism. Sequences where the characters (especially Julian and Jesse) are bathed in oversaturated dark blue, indigo, purple, or – more often – red lighting tend to create the illusion of a flat space that is seldom disturbed by diegetic sounds or the soundtrack (fig. 61 & 62). This impression seems to perfectly validate Goethe's idea that, “in looking steadfastly at a perfectly yellow-red surface, the colour seems actually to penetrate the organ. It produces an extreme excitement, and still acts thus when somewhat darkened” (310). Rather than diving into the

<sup>72</sup> This process is reminiscent of Goethe's description of the transition from yellow to yellow-red. He states that “As pure yellow passes very easily to red-yellow, so the deepening of this last to yellow-red is not to be arrested. The agreeable, cheerful sensation produced which red-yellow excites, increases to an intolerably powerful impression in bright yellow-red” (309). It should be noted that the French translation of this excerpt links red directly to a sense of “violence” (269).

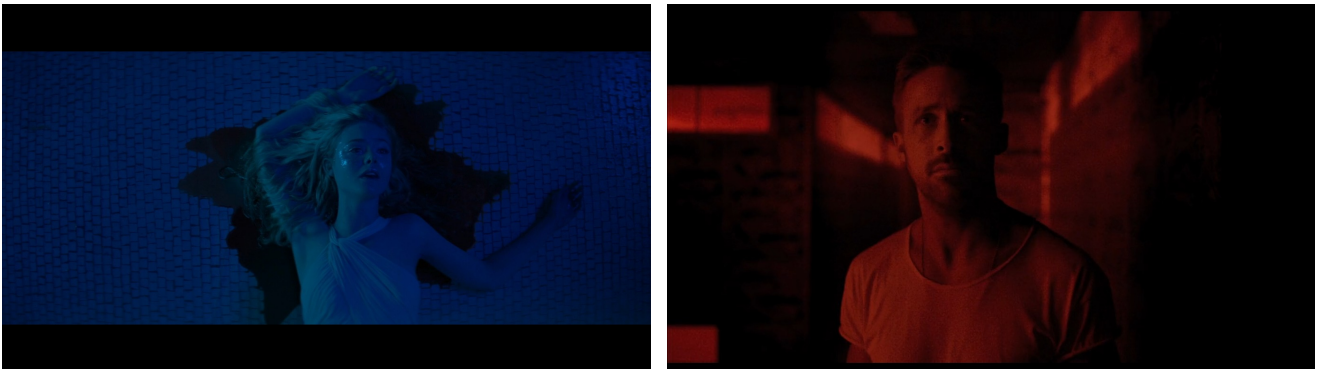


Fig. 61 & 62. Colour saturation and flat space in *The Neon Demon* (left) and *Only God Forgives* (right).

image to perceive depth, the viewer's attention is restricted to its surface, and his/her eye is invaded by a yellow-red colour that obliterates anything beneath it. Colour thus often becomes the sole vehicle of sensation on screen. The intensity of the imprint left behind depends exclusively on the colour's vividness. In *Only God Forgives*, intensities of red vary slightly depending on the degree of Julian's malaise or the dangerousness of the situation, occasionally deepening when Crystal is near or placed in the position of the voyeur. On the other hand, in *The Neon Demon*, over-saturated colours gradually shift from the "red-blue" (indigo) colour that Goethe characterises as slightly "disturb[ing]" to a deeper "blue-red" (purple) colour, pursuing a progression that Goethe describes as instrumental in intensifying a feeling of "unquiet" (312, 313). It is worth noting that *The Neon Demon* associates both shades with the female characters surrounding Jesse and their disquieting predatory presence as the colour immediately reappears whenever Ruby, Sarah, and Gigi are around Jesse. It is in these sequences that the terms of the sacrificial ritual of Jesse are delineated and ultimately enacted (fig. 61). These shades are thus used when Jesse is introduced to Gigi and Sarah by Ruby, but also in the sequences showing Ruby, Sarah and Gigi bathing in Jesse's blood after having murdered her.<sup>73</sup> The chromatic progression culminates in a few scenes overlaid with a veil of saturated crimson lighting. During the scene in which Jesse watches the art performance, the colour seems to enhance the visceral sensations the show and its music may procure Jesse, but also the danger she is in, as well as her recent designation as the victim of the three women she has just met. This is emphasised by a series of shots depicting Ruby, Sarah and Gigi as they stare at Jesse, and particularly a succession of close-ups of Jesse in which Ruby is shown looking at her in the background (fig. 63 & 64). The following sequence (with crimson lighting) similarly foreshadows Jesse's demise, as her position of victim is confirmed when she seems to be reborn into a live incarnation of the neon demon during her first fashion show. Finally, a more magenta lighting is briefly used one last time when Jesse is being chased to her death by Ruby, Sarah and Gigi.

<sup>73</sup> Lilac shades also resurface in small dabs over the screen from that point on in the film.



Fig. 63 & 64. Gigi, Sarah and Ruby staring at Jesse in the foreground.

Ultimately, it seems that, throughout *The Neon Demon*, washes of heavily saturated, unnatural colour on the surface of the screen evidence the sensations of disquiet and violence (whether implied or explicit) that are contained within the diegesis. Refn's use of colours as foreshadowing elements shows that they also play a narrative function introduced through bodily contact between the image and its viewer.

The characters deep need for pure presence – a state where they are bodies on overdrive, able only to feel to the point of brutal violence – reveals their corpse-like state and inhumanity which are further evidenced by their muteness and stoicism (Driver, Julian), or their angular facial features (Jesse, Ruby, Gigi, Sarah). Driver seeks speed, exists, lives and loves only behind the wheel of the cars he steers through dark, empty streets or crashes into roads and other unmoving vehicles with murderous or possibly even suicidal intents. Julian entraps himself within the womb he never wanted to be birthed from, commits to bondage, silence and stillness in hopes of not violently snapping like his brother Billy. His self-restraint seemingly affects the film's very pace, and his return to the space of the womb, preceding the initial trauma of birth where he can re-enact the mother-child relationship in an effort to break free from it is so complete it is impossible to tell whether diegetic space is not an entirely subjective construct altogether. Lastly, Jesse's desire to be looked at and envied for her youth, her beauty, her sheer radiance are mademanifest in the way she is placed at the centre of the frame, the centre of attention, and also in the way light is concentrated on and around her body until that light look to seep back out in heaps of purplish glitter.

### *Conclusion*

*Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*, are films in which transient spaces are used to reflect the main characters' bodies and, to a certain extent, create openings into their

psyches, displaying more obviously their motivations, their obsessions, their addictions. The depiction of symbiotic and immanent relationships between the characters and some of the spaces surrounding them highlights this pattern, all the while reinforcing the impression that the films' diegetic spaces are but an artificial, anamorphous and subjective construct. This idea in particular is represented through the emergence of transient viewpoints confusing the apparent delineations of objective spaces with subjective viewpoints. The oftentimes seamless shift between the two indicates a (con)fusion of the protagonist's inner perception with diegetic space and soundscape. Additionally, the viewer's own perception of diegetic and cinematic spaces appears to be in part distorted by the transforming bodies of the protagonists as their physical beings seem to spread outwards into the surrounding transient spaces. Moreover, the marginalisation inherent to transient spaces and transient figures leads to the normalisation of violent behaviours and violent sensations in each of the films under study. As the characters morph into new, inhuman entities, the spaces surrounding them slowly shift to emanate similarly deathly qualities that also gradually spread on the very surface of the screen. Every image appears to lead back to the characters and their pursuit of sensation. It often seems as though the films' structures were slowly retracting inwards, into the character's psyche and mindscape, just as the characters' physicality spreads outwards and corrupts seemingly objective diegetic spaces. The protagonists dissolve into the landscape, into a mass of overwhelming sensation.



## CONCLUSION

On film, the bodies of the characters and the spaces surrounding them are usually expressed as an indivisible unit, feeding off of one another, of their differences and similarities, to convey meaning. There is no relation of hierarchy, and no efficient way to establish one as the ruling force over the other. In the end, the viewer's experience of space is at the very least partly dependent on the way the two interact with one another. In *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*, Refn confuses that relationship until the tenuous frontier between the two gets blurred, and ultimately disappears. The cinematic space surrounding the main protagonists of these films often appears to be more than a mere background, an idea that is supported by the jarring intensity of the films' visual and aural scapes and their highly stylised aesthetics. Moreover, in constructing each of the films under study around the interweaving of genre film conventions with art cinema tropes, Refn appears to approach film as plastic matter. This oft overlooked plasticity of film and cinematic space is fully exploited by Refn in his construction of space. The fabricated space of each film is thus formed so as to produce various impressions that drastically impact the audience's perception, not only of the diegetic space, but also of the diegesis and the protagonists. In each of the films under study, cinematic space can easily be apprehended as a text through which the essence of the characters is conveyed. Its analysis is essential as it yields a wealth of elements informing the narrative and the main characters. As it has been noted previously, Refn's primary concern resides in the pursuit of the recreation of raw experience through the medium of film, and to do so he turns cinematic space into a means of imprinting sensation not just on the film and the figures it materialises, but also on the body of the viewer him/herself. This in turn suggests that cinematic space is a construct that depends heavily on the spectator's haptic perception of the surface of the screen.

Throughout *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon*, Refn chooses to recreate transience and transient sensation through cinematic space. In each of the films, Refn establishes transient figures; that is to say characters that evolve almost solely within transient spaces all the while embodying the very concept of transience itself. Synonymous with constant indetermination and perpetual movement, transience establishes spaces in which identity markers and the notion of placemaking are weakened to such an extreme degree that they are almost rendered obsolete. The main protagonist of each film is thus made into an alien entity lacking the foundations for a stable identity, and marginalised from the few social spaces that are sometimes delineated on the edges of

the narrative. As such, they are not bound by society's rules and laws, and can freely operate outside of these laws' reach. This idea is further underlined by the way each character is mythified and made into the embodiment of the familiar ideals associated with fairytale and mythical figures – heroes and monsters. Excluded from the original intimacy attached to the concept of place, the characters are left to wander about the fragmented spaces depicted on screen, turning into a pretext to the exploration of the cinematic space that slowly folds and unfolds around them. This diastole-systole movement is established primarily through visual and aural volumes of emptiness and in such a way that it impacts the body of the spectator him/herself. The cyclical pattern that is enforced through this movement turns cinematic space into a self-contained entity that breathes rhythmically, evidencing latent sensations of atemporality, but also the entrapment and inertia that are further reflected within diegetic space. Paradoxically, the constant mobility the films associate with transient spaces reveals itself to be fallacious, the characters answering a basic kinetic pulsion that appears to be so void of intent that it – rather antithetically – suggests an absolute lack of progression. Through transience, each film depicts protagonists, diegetic and cinematic spaces that testify of a strong sense of disconnect from any notions of continuity or progression. Moreover, the instability of the films' cinematic space is exacerbated by the emergence of transient viewpoints, blurring the lines between objective and subjective perceptions of space, suggesting that the films' spaces are deeply influenced by the main protagonists' presence. The multiplicity of perspectives enables a dual reading of the films' cinematic scapes and the interpretation of space as being shaped through pathetic fallacy (that is to say space often reflects the main characters' traits, gender and moods). Whilst the narrative of each film seems to be centred around an inwards movement drawing the viewer deeper into the characters' psyche, the characters' physical presence slowly bleeds outwards into the surrounding visual and aural spaces of each film. Ultimately, the space of each film appears to be heavily laden with violent images and sensations. The colour palette of each film, the sound design, and the texturing of the surface of the screen reflect symptomatic patterns that usually announce oncoming violence from the very start of each film. In the end, the transient, smooth surfaces and textures of cinematic space in *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon* appear to convey sensation through both haptical and optical perception. Space is conceived of as anamorphous as it is visibly distorted, moulded and shaped by the extension of the films' main protagonists' physical presence into the spaces surrounding them. The surface of the screen and the overall structure of space within the frame is established as favouring close, bodily contact with the viewer. Conversely, diegetic spaces are tightly interconnected with the films' protagonists physical presence and traits, therefore transgressing the boundaries between the body and objective space. This suggests that the transient spaces of each film are indeed – to some extent – metaphysical

spaces; that is to say spaces that are expressed and perceived primarily through the figural and its latent sensations, rather than through their objective physical manifestation.

Thus far, Refn's work has mostly been noticed for its depiction of violence and masculinity. Certainly, both of these themes are central to the quasi-entirety of Refn's films, and – as such – they have been widely discussed by film critics and theorists. The lack of attention given to cinematic space and its relevance throughout Refn's filmography is not all that surprising considering theorists' apparent overall tendency to overlook cinematic space, and to dismiss it as a mere stylistic device the importance of which is subsequent to plot and characters. However, Refn's use of cinematic space and sound design has consistently been remarkable, testifying of the filmmaker's intent to recreate the raw and vivid intensity of direct experience. The central role of audio-visual space in Refn's work has been evidenced – amongst other things – by his minimalist plots, and his attachment to shooting each film chronologically, sometimes leading him to writing or re-writing the screenplay at the very last minute. For Refn, film is a material that is above all organic, its shaping depends on layer upon layer of aural and visual devices destined to overwhelm the senses. *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon* are but the latest additions to a series of films testing the physical boundaries of the screen so as to attempt to impress sensation onto the viewer. The cinematic scapes of *Bronson* and *Valhalla Rising* in particular, seem to be similarly centred around their main characters, the former producing a theatricalised and dissociative experience of space whilst the latter guides its viewers through hypnotic soundtracks and misty landscapes.

Ultimately, it seems that contemporary conceptions of cinematic space follow one of two paths. Most often, contemporary film productions dismiss cinematic space as a background element playing a supportive role and used to anchor the narrative and diegetic space (as is most often the case in mainstream productions). However, cinematic space is still very much relevant and heavily exploited especially in films that fall in line with the art cinema tradition (e.g. Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) which uses the erosion of audio-visual space as a metaphor for the main character's depression) or genre films – and especially the horror genre which seems to be heavily reliant on sound design (e.g. John Krasinski's *A Quiet Place* (2018) which narrates most of the story through the aural viewpoint of a deaf girl named Reagan).

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