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Gangstas, Thugs, Vikings, and Drivers

Cinematic Masculine Archetypes and the Demythologization of Violence

in the Films of Nicolas Winding Refn

By

Christopher John Olson, B.A.

Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

DePaul University

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

Media and Cinema Studies

DePaul University

August 2014

Dedication

For my dad, who inspired me,

and CarrieLynn, who kept me going.

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I would first and foremost like to thank my lovely and patient partner, Dr. CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, for putting up with me during this whole process. I appreciate her willingness to listen to my ideas, and to help me talk them through on the numerous occasions I would get stuck. I am eternally grateful to her for repeatedly proofreading my work, and for her invaluable suggestions on how to improve the project as a whole. Most importantly, however, I am thankful for her love and support, as well as her seemingly unwavering belief in me, all of which allowed me to continue working on this project despite my many, many moments of self-doubt. Thank you, Princess…I couldn't have done this without you.

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July 26, 2014

Abstract

Gangstas, Thugs, Vikings, and Drivers

Cinematic Masculine Archetypes and the Demythologization of Violence

in the Films of Nicolas Winding Refn

By

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DePaul University, 2014

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This thesis considers how the depictions of masculinity in the films of Danish director Nicolas Winding Refn function as a critique of mainstream Hollywood cinema's perpetuation of the notion that violent male behavior represents a heroic ideal for men to emulate. In films such as *Pusher*, *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising*, and *Drive*, Refn constructs and presents his male characters by drawing upon recurring archetypal figures such as the gangster, the gangsta, the gunslinger, and the samurai. These figures recur throughout popular culture and across genres, and they perpetuate and reinforce a specific version of masculinity that emphasizes individualism, stoicism, and violence. Mainstream Hollywood films in general and male action cinema in particular often present this narrow and rigid vision of masculinity as a heroic manly ideal, and this, in turn, can inform how male viewers construct their own masculine personae. The male

characters in Refn's films serve to critique and destabilize this ideal by demonstrating how an insistence on appropriating or conforming to this sort of violent masculinity results in negative consequences for both the individual and the society around him.

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Introduction: Nicolas Winding Refn and Cinematic Depictions of Masculinity

INTRODUCTION

In an article written for the website *Slate.com*, author Jessica Grose (2010) observes that, "the image of the American woman has gone through several upheavals since the 1950s, but the masculine ideal seems fixed in cultural aspic" (para. 3). Jack S. Kahn (2009) notes traditional notions of masculinity have long been associated with concepts such as competition, aggression, and heterosexuality, particularly in Western cultures. He also argues that violence sometimes represents an important factor in the construction of masculine identities, often functioning as a way for men to align themselves with dominant sociocultural ideals regarding manliness. According to Roger Horrocks (1994), societies frequently frame male violence as a cultural norm, even as they penalize men for indulging their violent masculine impulses. Mark H. Moss (2011) argues that popular culture tends to celebrate and thus normalize violence, and regularly offers visions of masculine violence in films, television, and video games. Indeed, popular texts commonly feature male characters who exemplify a heroic masculine ideal primarily defined by competitiveness, aggressiveness, heterosexuality, and violence. Examples include hypermasculine cinematic action figures portrayed by the likes of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, and Jason Statham, and tough, individualistic televisual heroes such as Jack Bauer in *24* and Michael Westen in *Burn Notice*.

According to Amanda D. Lotz (2014), popular entertainment at the turn of the millennium increasingly turns its attention to investigating issues surrounding contemporary masculinity. In her analysis, she explores how male characters in contemporary popular culture frequently negotiate the tensions surrounding the question of what it means to be a man in the

modern era, including when and how to be violent or aggressive. For instance, Lotz argues that television programs such as *Breaking Bad* and *Dexter* offer to their viewers complex depictions of violence and masculinity that serve to contextualize and problematize the social, cultural, economic, and political discourses that reflect and inform contemporary definitions of masculinity. Contemporary cinema also explores these tensions and anxieties surrounding masculinity, and popular films often serve as the model for modern conceptions of manliness (Schudson, 2012). For example, many of the so-called "bromance" films explore complex male relationships, such as those in films like *21 Jump Street* and *Bad Boys*. A culture's conceptions of masculinity often become defined by the onscreen heroes popularized and received as idols and ideals of manhood by a mainstream audience. Therefore, given the significance of the messages regarding masculinity regularly conveyed by cultural texts, more research needs to be done to understand how they contribute to the overarching definition of what it means to be a man in contemporary society.

The films of Danish director Nicolas Winding Refn regularly feature complex but altogether troubled men who navigate the tensions surrounding contemporary notions of violence and masculinity (Romney, 2010); thus his films represent useful case studies when examining how popular culture associates masculinity with violence. The male characters in Refn's film regularly rely on violence in the construction of their masculine identities, which draw upon archetypal male figures that represent a very narrow and rigid form of violently aggressive masculinity. These figures recur onscreen in various iterations, appearing in everything from Westerns to crime thrillers to action blockbusters, and they frequently perpetuate the notion that violent male behavior represents a heroic or noble ideal. In this way, Refn's films exist within a broader sociocultural narrative that frequently normalizes male violence. Western cultures in

particular often measure masculinity in relation to notions of toughness or physical strength, and in order to compensate for a perceived lack of masculinity, men frequently engage in acts of violence as a way of asserting their manliness (Jhally, Earp & Katz). Many societies draw a link between violence and masculinity, conditioning men to act violent and aggressive, and the assertion of masculinity through violence not only becomes culturally acceptable, but often actively encouraged (Horrocks, 1994). Persistent cultural maxims such as "boys will be boys" reflect this attitude by seeking to excuse violent or misogynistic behavior as something simply inherent to the masculine experience (Roffman, 2006).

Thus, in Western societies, the sociocultural narrative in which Refn's films occur links masculinity with violence and this link becomes globalized through contemporary mass media. Popular culture frequently reinforces this perception of masculine violence by celebrating violent male behavior as a heroic ideal worthy of emulation (Sparks, 1996). Hollywood, in particular, tends to perpetuate this violent masculine ideal on a global scale as they seek to produce films that hold a universal appeal for international audiences. Tyler Cowen (2004) argues that Hollywood dominates the global film market primarily because its studios specialize in crafting entertaining, highly visible films specifically designed to appeal to viewers around the world and across cultures. Furthermore, Hollywood increasingly markets films to non-English speaking audiences, and therefore, movies that feature action or broad slapstick comedy tend to be favored over more dialogue heavy films (Cowen, 2004).

Despite this attempt to create films which hold universal and broad appeal to international audiences, Hollywood movies nevertheless reflect the cultural values of the United States, particularly those regarding heroism, individualism and romantic self-fulfillment (Cowen, 2004). Furthermore, both Moss (2011) and Mark Gallagher (2006) argue that the dominance of

American popular culture has led to the universalization of the type of masculinity often associated with the competent, emotionally tough action hero. Indeed, Hollywood films frequently feature male characters that conform to Western conceptions of masculinity, such as Tony Stark in *Iron Man*, who reflects the wealthy, competitive, sexually aggressive, and often violent ideal emphasized in American conceptualizations of masculinity. Because the Hollywood model tends to dominate on an international scale, and because specific thematic messages surrounding masculinity persist in its cinema, the concept of American masculinity becomes normalized on an international scale.

The male characters in Refn's films tend to reflect the standardized and globalized notion of tough and ruggedly individualistic notion of masculinity put forth by Hollywood cinematic heroes. Refn contends, however, that his films neither celebrate nor condone the sort of violence often associated with these recurring characters, but rather they function as a response to the sort of violent masculinity that Hollywood regularly packages and renders acceptable to modern audiences (Westcott, 2006). Therefore, his movies highlight and emphasize the negative consequences that result from conforming to the sort of violent or aggressive masculinity depicted by archetypal figures. These consequences include isolation, incarceration, injury, and death. Furthermore, Refn's films illustrate how these negative consequences affect not only the protagonists, but also those around them. The male characters in films such as *Pusher* and *Bronson* often create fronts or personal mythologies for themselves as tough guys by constructing masculine identities that draw upon recurring archetypal figures. The films position these characters in such a way that they must confront their mythological or mythologized natures, thereby creating tension within the narratives. Ultimately, characters experience downfalls that result from their unwillingness or inability to completely divorce themselves from

the archetypal figures and the violent masculinity associated with them. In other words, Refn's films draw upon the sort of cinematic masculine archetypes that perpetuate a heroic or desirable notion of violent masculinity in order to explore the negative effects of such masculinity, and thus the films serve to both reflect and critique the violent and aggressive masculine ideal frequently perpetuated by global popular culture.

This thesis examines how Refn aligns his characters with recurring cinematic masculine archetypes in order to critique Hollywood's reliance on and perpetuation of violent masculinity as a heroic ideal. Through a textual analysis of four of Refn's films, this thesis considers how he draws upon archetypal figures in order to both reflect and critique the pervasive Hollywood model of heroic male violence. While all of Refn's feature films explore issues of violence and masculinity, this thesis focuses specifically on *Pusher*, *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising*, and *Drive*. This study focuses on these four films in particularly because they appear to encapsulate all of the recurring thematic and stylistic obsessions that appear throughout Refn's body of work, particularly in regards to violence and masculinity. Moreover, by focusing on these four films rather than Refn's entire body of work, the scope of this project will allow for a more nuanced examination of how each film functions within the larger scholarly and public discourses surrounding violence and masculinity.

NICOLAS WINDING REFN: THE DIRECTOR AND HIS FILMS

Refn was born in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1970. His father is noted Danish film director and editor Anders Refn, and his mother is Danish photographer and cinematographer Vibeke Winding. In 1978, Refn's family relocated to the United States and settled in New York (Refn, 2012). After graduating high school, Refn briefly attended the American Academy of

Dramatic Arts, but was soon expelled because he bristled against what he considered an unbearable and oppressive environment (Smith, 2011). Refn moved back to Denmark where he briefly attended the Danish Film School before dropping out (Smith, 2011). Not long after, however, a short film that Refn wrote, directed, and starred in aired on a Danish cable channel, and this exposure allowed him to secure the funding needed to write and direct his first feature film, *Pusher* (Westcott, 2006).

In interviews, Refn often cites *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* as his favorite film, and the one that inspired him to become a director (Westcott, 2006; Foundas, 2012). Other films and filmmakers, however, appear to have had a much more lasting impact on his work, particularly in the way he portrays masculinity on screen. Refn cites Sergio Leone as one of his favorite directors, and explains that the depictions of masculinity in Leone's westerns – primarily Clint Eastwood's portrayal of the Man With No Name, the iconic central gunslinger figure in Leone's "Dollars Trilogy" – serve as a direct inspiration for the way he depicts masculinity in his own films (Tobias, 2011; Gilchrist, 2012). Additionally, on the DVD commentary for *Pusher*, Refn names director Sam Peckinpah as a primary influence (Refn, 2006). In films such as *The Wild Bunch* and *Straw Dogs*, Peckinpah often associates masculinity directly with extreme violence and tough self-reliance, and Refn draws upon this same sort of violent and individualistic masculinity in the construction and presentation of his own male characters. Other filmmakers that have inspired Refn's violent, mass culture infused cinematic aesthetic include Martin Scorsese, William Friedkin, Michael Mann, and Walter Hill, and he cites films such as *Mean Streets*, *The French Connection*, *Thief* and *The Driver* as influencing his own work (Refn, 2006). Each of these filmmakers tends to make use of recurring figures such as cowboys, gangsters, and tough guys when constructing their male characters. For instance, Scorsese's films frequently

feature tough guy gangster figures, while films such as *Thief* and *The Driver* focus on stoic loner figures who exemplify the notion of the strong, silent type so ubiquitous in mainstream Hollywood movies and male action cinema.

Refn's own decidedly post-modern films tend to evoke the films and filmmakers that influenced him by referencing and appropriating specific characterizations, narratives, and themes from these texts, particularly in the construction of his male characters. Nearly all of Refn's male characters reflect idealized figures such as gangsters and gunslingers in a number of ways, but this becomes especially evident in *Pusher*, *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising*, and *Drive*. The narratives contain similar stories of men who desire to become something more or different from their initially established circumstances. Indeed, the films of Martin Scorsese, Sergio Leone, and Sam Peckinpah regularly feature male characters who desire to establish themselves as powerful men worthy of respect and dominance. The themes of these films frequently reflect the same concerns regarding the definition of masculinity as individualistic and violent. In fact, this type of violent, solitary masculinity often functions as a survival trait in the films. For instance, Henry Hill in the film *Goodfellas* must embrace and perform violence in order to survive and thrive in the criminal underworld presented in the film. Similarly, Joe in *A Fistful of Dollars* must rely on his specific brand of male violence in order to navigate Leone's harsh and unforgiving Western landscape.

Occasionally, Refn's characters also seek to transcend their humble origins, and often use violence to achieve their goals. Conversely, Refn's characters sometimes seek to abandon their violent lifestyles, but soon discover that they cannot change their natures because situations arise that require them to revert to type. *Pusher*, *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising*, and *Drive* reflect the idea that Refn has been influenced by the filmmakers listed above in the construction of his

narratives. Ultimately, the four films chosen for this thesis epitomize the trajectory of Refn's examination of the relationship between violence and masculinity across his body of work. With *Fear X* perhaps representing the only significant thematic outlier in Refn's oeuvre, the remainder of his filmography focuses on similar characterizations, stories, and themes as the four films chosen for this study. Therefore, *Pusher*, *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising*, and *Drive* function as exemplary texts to analyze in this study.

Initially released in Denmark in 1996, Refn's first feature film, the gritty and violent *Pusher*, quickly became a worldwide cult phenomenon. The film garnered international critical acclaim for Refn, as well as a Best Supporting Actor award for Zlatko Buric at the Bodil Awards, the Danish equivalent of the Oscars (Westcott, 2006). Because of its enduring international cult following, *Pusher* eventually spawned two remakes, a Hindi version in 2010 and a British version in 2012. The original film follows Frank (Kim Bodnia) and Tonny (Mads Mikkelsen), a pair of low level wannabe drug dealers struggling to establish themselves in Copenhagen's thriving criminal underground. Frank teams up with a former cellmate to sell some heroin to a group of wealthy Germans, but to get the dope from Frank must borrow from his regular supplier, the genial but vicious Serbian drug lord, Milo (Zlatko Burić). Frank does not have enough money to cover the cost of the heroin, but Milo agrees to let Frank take it anyway provided he return immediately with the money after completing the deal. Unfortunately, the police bust Frank in the middle of the deal, but not before he manages to dump the heroin in a nearby lake. The cops don't have enough evidence to hold Frank indefinitely, so they release him after twenty-four hours. Later, back at Milo's place, Frank tries to explain the situation, but the drug lord does not believe Frank's story and demands he pay back the money by the end of the week or face dire consequences. Desperate to avoid Milo's brutal punishment, Frank

immediately sets out to raise the money, but each attempt results in a dead end. As he struggles to obtain the cash that will save his life, Frank grows increasingly violent and aggressive toward those around him. When his final attempt fails, Frank is left all alone, facing serious injury and possibly even death at the hands of Milo and his thugs.

In the years immediately following the release of *Pusher*, Refn directed two more features, including his Hollywood debut, *Fear X*, in 2003. The film gained a small amount of critical success but failed commercially, ultimately bankrupting Refn's production company, Jang Go Star (Westcott, 2006). In the years following, Refn returned to Denmark to recoup his losses by writing and directing two sequels to *Pusher*. In 2008, he would return to the European art house circuit with his sixth feature film, *Bronson*. Released to great critical acclaim, the film won numerous awards including Best Film at the Sydney Film Festival in 2009. A decidedly unconventional biopic, Bronson chronicles the tumultuous life of Michael Peterson (Tom Hardy), a working class bloke in Britain who desires fame and respect more than anything else. Peterson's first taste of fame comes when a judge sentences him to seven years in prison for robbing a post office. During his time behind bars, Peterson sets out to create a reputation for himself as Britain's most violent prisoner. While incarcerated, Peterson unleashes all of his violent impulses, attacking guards and other prisoners alike. Later, the government commits Peterson to a psychiatric ward where they keep him sedated at all times. This commitment does not stop Peterson from nearly killing another patient, however, and as a result he winds up in Broadmoor, a high-security psychiatric hospital, where he incites a large-scale riot that earns him a reputation as "Her Majesty's most expensive prisoner." Following this incident, Peterson inexplicably receives parole, and during his time on the outside he gains a small amount of notoriety on the illegal underground bare-knuckle boxing circuit under the name Charlie

Bronson, inspired by iconic tough guy actor Charles Bronson. Eventually, however, Peterson returns to committing crimes and winds up back in prison.

The following year, Refn directed *Valhalla Rising*, an existentialist Viking epic that follows a mute warrior named One Eye (Mads Mikkelsen) as he struggles to survive in the harsh land of Scotland in the year 1000 A.D. For years, a Norse pagan chieftain named Barde (Alexander Morton) has held One Eye captive and forced him to fight other prisoners to the death. Nothing is known about One Eye's past or identity, but his captors believe that he emerged from Hell itself and possesses supernatural strength. One Eye eventually kills his captors and escapes along with the slave boy, Are (Maarten Stevenson). Almost immediately, they encounter a group of Christian Vikings on their way to Jerusalem to fight in the Crusades. One Eye and Are join them, and together they all set out for the Holy Land. After spending several days lost in an ominous fog, One Eye and his companions end up in a strange and unknown land where they come face to face with their own mortality. The film received a mixed reaction, with some critics considering it forgettable and pretentious (Antani, 2010), and others hailing it as a compelling though somewhat confusing meditation on masculinity (Tobias, 2010). According to the website Box Office Mojo, *Valhalla Rising* only made around $30,000 at the domestic box office (there are no figures for the international box office totals), though it was only released in two theaters for three weeks. The film has become something of a cult classic, however, and Refn has talked about directing a sequel set in modern-day Tokyo (Lussier, 2013).

Refn's next feature and second American film, *Drive*, was released in 2011, and garnered great critical and commercial acclaim, earning over $76 million dollars worldwide and several awards, including the prestigious Palme D'or at Cannes. In the film Ryan Gosling portrays a nameless stuntman and auto mechanic living in Los Angeles who moonlights as a getaway driver

for the city's criminal element. After a tense opening sequence that establishes Driver's almost preternatural driving abilities, he moves into a new apartment and almost instantly develops feelings for his attractive neighbor, Irene (Carey Mulligan). The burgeoning relationship between the couple grows complicated, however, when Irene's husband, Standard (Oscar Isaacs), returns home following his release from prison. Meanwhile, Driver's partner, Shannon (Bryan Cranston), borrows money from a Jewish mobster named Bernie Rose (Albert Brooks) in order to purchase a stock car and set up a race team led by Driver. Standard also owes money to one of Bernie's underlings, and Driver agrees to help Standard pull off a pawn shop robbery in order to settle his debts. Unfortunately, Standard is shot and killed during the heist, and Driver soon learns that the job was simply a set up to cover the theft of some Italian mob money. Driver offers to return the money stolen during the heist, but Bernie and his associate, Nino (Ron Perlman), reject the offer. Driver returns home to explain the situation to Irene, but first he must deal with the hit man who has come to kill Irene and her son, Benicio. Fearing for Irene's life, Driver kisses her good-bye before viciously dispatching the hit man in front of her, and then sets out to take down Nino and Bernie Rose once and for all.

In each film, Refn draws upon the sort of violent masculinity frequently associated with the masculine figures that regularly recur throughout popular culture. For instance, in order to convey a sense of powerful masculinity, the characters in *Pusher* portray themselves as tough guy drug dealers by drawing upon the sort of archetypal imagery and iconography often associated with the gangster or gangsta (Refn, 2006). Similarly, *Bronson* chronicles the exploits of a man who uses violence to transform himself into a legendary figure reflecting iconic cinematic tough guys (Refn, 2008). The characters of One Eye in *Valhalla Rising* and Driver in *Drive*, meanwhile, both function as personifications of various violent masculine archetypes that

recur across literature and film, including the Man With No Name and the samurai. This thesis considers how these characters reflect and negotiate their identities by drawing upon or reflecting these archetypes, and how the films ultimately trouble such behavior by highlighting the negative consequences that result from adhering to the violent masculine ideal represented by such figures. Before beginning this analysis, however, the concepts of violent masculinity and cinematic archetypes need to be further addressed and explained.

VIOLENT MASCULINITY AND CINEMATIC ARCHETYPES

Across different cultures and historical periods, violence has often been considered a primary characteristic of masculinity. Horrocks (1994) contends that many societies have socialized and conditioned men to "carry out the violence of the whole culture" (p. 135). Similarly, Elizabeth Badinter (1992) identifies four imperatives of masculinity, which she links to violence in one form or another. According to Badinter, society dictates that men must be physically strong, competitive, emotionally rigid, and willing to take risks and engage in acts of violence. In fact, violence and men's relationship to/with it frequently functions as an important factor in the construction of masculine identities around the world and throughout history (Connell, 2005). Studies have repeatedly shown that men, particularly young men, tend to comprise the majority of those who engage in violent acts (Novikova et. al., 2005). Sut Jhally, Jeremy Earp and Jackson Katz (1999) argue that society itself often positions violent masculinity as a cultural norm, and mass culture artifacts such as films, television programs, and video games repeatedly reinforce and perpetuate this notion, especially among boys and young men. Indeed, popular cinematic representations of men frequently link masculinity directly to concepts such as machismo or toughness (Pecora, 1992).

Hollywood films commonly present violent masculinity as little more than an entertaining spectacle, and films such as *Commando*, *Die Hard*, and *Rambo III* offer masculine violence as entertainment designed purely to thrill and excite audiences without considering the negative consequences of the violence (Jeffords, 1994; Neale, 1993). Such films position violent masculinity as a heroic ideal, providing inspiration and aspiration for men (Sparks, 1996). It must be noted, however, that Hollywood is not alone in depicting violent masculinity as spectacle or a heroic ideal. Global media tends to follow a Western model, and international film industries often emulate Hollywood content in order to produce films with a broad international appeal (Cowen, 2004). Indeed, as international box office becomes more important to bottom line, films become more broad-spectrum and simplistic in order to appeal to audiences on a global scale. The incorporation of and reliance on recurring tropes or archetypal figures rather than on nuanced depictions of characters represents one method by which films can become more generalizable and amenable to a global audience. Refn frequently makes use of these archetypal figures in his own films, which feature characters that conform to prevailing cinematic conceptions of the gangster, the tough guy, and the Man With No Name. Rather than using these figures to appeal to general audience expectations, however, Refn includes them to ultimately critique the idealized version of masculinity they represent.

According to Carl Jung (1959/1980), archetypes represent a set of universal, often recurring patterns and images that originate from a collective unconscious. These patterns and images function as autonomous and hidden forms or potentials that become transformed when actualized by individuals and cultures, at which point they are rendered recognizable at a conscious level (Feist & Feist, 2001). In other words, archetypes exist in the collective unconscious and only become known in a conscious sense when constructed and presented

through representation. Because they inhabit the unconscious, archetypes can only be inferred through an examination of sociocultural activities such as behavior, images, art, myths, religions and dreams. Archetypes obtain specific context through historical, cultural, and personal representations known as archetypal images (Stevens, 2006). While the number of archetypes could be considered limitless, Jung argues that some archetypal images recur across cultures, appearing repeatedly in the myths and stories that those cultures create, particularly those stories relating to human behavior (Jacobi, 1959).

Unlike Jung, Robert N. Bellah (1991) argues that archetypes do not reside in the collective unconscious. Instead, they exist within an individual's unconscious as the result of the interaction between the individual and his or her social and physical environments during early childhood. Thus, rather than sharing archetypes with others in a culture, individuals may develop ideal images specific to his or her own lived experiences, which are then further refined when coming into contact with similar idealized figures. Bellah contends that archetypal images resemble one another across cultures due to similarities in the socialization process. He points to the concept of motherhood as an example of this phenomenon; when a child interacts with its mother, it develops an ideal conception of "mother" which then becomes the archetype by which all mothers are measured. Furthermore, archetypes reflect popular sentiments and behavioral or cultural values, making them similar to stereotypes, only without the negative connotations that occasionally accompany such categorizations (Barrett 1989). Indeed, Barbara Greenfield (1983) contends that contemporary notions of gender stereotypes emerge from Western myth, and therefore hold great social, cultural and psychological significance.

In each case, archetypes represent a sociocultural ideal: a model for how to think and act reinforced and perpetuated through recurring patterns, forms and figures. These models of

behavior are then passed down by the stories that people tell and the images they produce. Cinema and other mediated messages, then, have the potential to produce their own models for ideal types of people or behavior, and thus their own archetypes. The images appearing in media often function as a reflection of cultural values and attitudes, while simultaneously connecting "contemporary experience with primordial figures that express similar psychological and social content" (Wiegmann, 2004, p. 399). For example, characters in films can be constructed to reflect prevailing sociocultural notions of gender stereotypes, particularly as represented within popular culture, in order to function as a form of cultural critique (Wiegmann, 2004). The "Hawksian woman," for example, represents one instance of this phenomenon (Robbins, 2014). Initially identified by Naomi Wise during her examination of the films of Howard Hawks, this figure recurs throughout popular culture and functions as an ideal of transgressive womanhood that challenges and subverts notions of male spectatorship through expressions of androgynous eroticism (Robbins, 2014). Other examples of transgressive feminine figures that recur throughout popular culture include the "spider woman" and the "panther woman," both identified by Mira Wiegmann (2004) in her examination of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. While the specific characters that display or conform to the idiosyncratic traits of these idealized figures or roles may not recur throughout popular culture, the images and roles themselves often do, including across different historical and cultural contexts. This process has the effect of rendering such figures or roles as archetypal, and in turn informs the construction and presentation of characters in various media texts such as films.

The same repetition and thus construction of archetypes can also be found in the creation of masculine figures. Indeed, patterns emerge in how films construct male characters, and these patterns become considered cinematic archetypes, regardless of the culture in which the pattern

appears. For example, the “over-the-top hard-boiled action man” represents a significant recurring archetypal figure in the decades following the 1980s (Beasley, 2009, p. 65). Initially perpetuated primarily by Hollywood, the violently macho male action hero typified by characters like John McClane and John Rambo has managed to transcend its specific American cultural roots, and become a fixture of many international productions to the point that it now represents a nearly universal trope in global action cinema (Beasley, 2009). Examples of international macho action heroes include the unnamed gunman in *Sukiyaki Western Django* (Japan), Rama in *The Raid: Redemption* (Indonesia), Grégoire de Fronsac in *Brotherhood of the Wolf* (France), and Michael Kohlhaas in *Age of Uprising: The Legend of Michael Kohlhaas* (Germany/France). In other words, violent masculinity has become a defining feature of many of the archetypal male figures that recur throughout popular culture in a variety of cultural and historical contexts, and Refn and many other filmmakers around the world frequently draw upon these cinematic masculine archetypes in the construction of their own male characters.

Cinematic masculine archetypes often reflect and reinforce prevailing sociocultural attitudes regarding masculinity. Steven Cohan (1997) contends that even though films frequently offer depictions of non-traditional or alternative masculinities, mainstream cinema in general and Hollywood films in particular tend to reflect and reinforce stereotypical notions of gender. He points to the sort of characters regularly played by Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne and Sylvester Stallone as examples, and indeed, Sam Spade, Tom Doniphon and John Rambo all perpetuate a rigid notion of masculinity that emphasizes emotional toughness, rugged individualism, and violent behavior. Furthermore, Moss (2011) observes that the dominance of American popular culture on an international scale renders cinematic masculine archetypes such as the cowboy or the pioneer as universally appealing. These figures continue to resonate with modern audiences

through contemporary versions that recur throughout popular culture and perpetuate notions of individualistic achievement and emotional fortitude (Moss, 2011). In other words, global audiences consume and internalize American constructions of masculinity through repeated exposure to American popular culture such as Hollywood films, and this in turn informs how other cultures construct their own notions of masculinity. In this context, Refn's films function as important artifacts because they offer characters from different cultures that draw upon recurring cinematic masculine archetypes in order to reflect and convey prevailing sociocultural attitudes regarding masculinity and what it means to be a man. Like the Hawksian woman, however, Refn's male characters become somewhat transgressive because they challenge or critique prevailing cultural notions surrounding violence and masculinity.

Film critic Peter Canavese (2013), a member of the Online Film Critics Society and the San Francisco Film Critics Circle, identifies four specific cinematic masculine archetypes which he terms the Tough Guy, the Beast in Me, the Stoic Man, and the Greek God. Though not a scholar, Canavese's taxonomy reflects the observations of film scholars, and thus his descriptors provide a useful categorization for the types of recurring archetypal masculine figures seen in popular culture. These archetypes appear in various forms throughout different media across historical and cultural contexts, and they manifest in recurring figures such as cowboys, outlaws, mobsters, gangstas, and soldiers. These cinematic masculine archetypes reflect pervasive cultural notions that link masculinity to physical toughness, and perpetuate the idea that men must exist as rugged individuals capable of enduring great pain while repressing their emotions (Jhally, Earp & Katz, 1999). Many films – particularly Hollywood action films, which are some of the most popular among international audiences – make use of these archetypes to quickly establish the heroic nature of a male protagonist (Sparks, 1996). For instance, in the Australian film *Mad*

Max Beyond Thunderdome, a character diegetically refers to the protagonist as "The Man With No Name," thus linking "Mad" Max Rockatansky to a recurring archetypal male figure initially developed in an Italian cinematic context and often associated with a distinctly American type of masculinity primarily defined by strength, emotional steadfastness, violent action and a strict code of honor. Therefore, associating Max directly with the Man With No Name figure not only provides knowledgeable viewers with a familiar intertextual reference point, but it also serves to quickly establish the extent of the character's power, demeanor and heroic nature. Thus, as Canavese's four cinematic masculine archetypes recur within popular culture around the world, they come to reinforce the notion that violent masculinity represents a heroic ideal.

According to Canavese, the Tough Guy archetype represents a masculine ideal that conceptualizes men as physically and emotionally indestructible. Tough Guys show no sign of pain when physically wounded, and they refuse to acknowledge any sort of emotional sensitivity or vulnerability (Canavese, 2013). They frequently appear in the form of cowboy or gunfighter characters such as Rooster Cogburn in *True Grit* and the titular protagonist of *Shane*; gangsters and mobsters like "Little Caesar" Bandello in *Little Caesar* and Don Corleone in *The Godfather*; and gangstas and outlaws such as Nino Brown in *New Jack City* and Tony Montana in *Scarface*. These figures reflect stereotypical cultural ideas surrounding masculinity, particularly those that associate the concept directly with violence and aggression. Cultural attitudes surrounding masculinity often implore men to take risks at the expense of their own safety (Kimmel, 2001), and Tough Guys embody this notion. The type of men who subscribe to this brand of masculinity convey their toughness in a variety of ways, such as persevering in the face of overwhelming odds or engaging in violence and aggression against themselves and others (Kahn, 2009). The Tough Guy archetype perpetuates and reinforces these ideas of masculinity by emphasizing

violence, aggression, and physical strength as the most desirable masculine traits (Canavese, 2013).

Tough Guys commonly appear onscreen as men of few words who act quickly, and in these cases they overlap with another of Canavese's cinematic masculine archetypes, the Stoic Man. This archetype commonly manifests in the form of the strong, silent type. While the enigmatic gunslinger known as the Man With No Name from Leone's *Dollars Trilogy* may represent the most widely known iteration of this particular archetype, the recurring figure of the samurai more closely reflects the ideal of the Stoic Man. Indeed, Ted M. Preston (2003) argues that the samurai code of *bushido* shares much in common with classical Stoicism, and therefore cinematic figures such as the unnamed samurai in *Yojimbo* and the quietly powerful Hanshiro Tsugumo from *Harakiri* function as manifestations of the Stoic Man archetype. These characters primarily associate themselves with notions of emotional determination and an ability to endure in the face of adversity. Other cinematic examples of the Stoic Man archetype include existential hit man Jef Costello in Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le samouraï*; silent and deadly Mr. Lee in Robert Clouse's *Enter the Dragon*; and emotionally-reserved drifter Nada in John Carpenter's *They Live*. These figures frequently appear onscreen as emotionless loners who lead solitary existences and rarely speak while facing any and all challenges or hardships with a grim determination. They reflect sociocultural notions of masculinity that place an emphasis on stereotypical male traits such as solitude, individualism, emotional rigidity and reticence with language (Kahn, 2009; Horrocks, 1994; Neale, 1993).

Despite this emphasis on emotional rigidity, however, characters that conform to the Stoic Man archetype often express anger (Canavese, 2013). According to Horrocks (1994), many societies condition men to indulge feelings of anger and aggression. Furthermore, dominant

sociocultural notions of masculinity often dictate that men repress emotions that might make them appear weak, particularly fear, anxiety, or uncertainty (Greene, 2008). Drawing upon the work of William Pollack, Moss (2011) notes that the culture at large often places pressure on boys and young men to suppress any emotions other than anger. As a result of this repression, popular culture often depicts men as rage-filled ticking time bombs, and Canavese argues this particular conception of masculinity represents another masculine archetype which he terms "the Beast in Me" (2013, online). In many ways, this archetype functions according to Jung's notion of the Shadow, in that it often represents an unconscious aspect of the personality normally hidden from the conscious ego (Jung, 1959/1980). The Beast in Me also represents all the destructive and aggressive impulses that men tend to repress, and therefore reflects another of Jung's archetypes, the Monster. Greenfield (1983) explains that the Monster represents all of man's instinctual desires, primarily aggression. This archetype recurs throughout popular culture, appearing in songs, poems, novels, comic books, television programs and films. The werewolf represents the most prominent example, but characters such as Mr. Hyde, Dexter Morgan, Walter White, and The Incredible Hulk all conform to the Beast in Me archetype (Canavese, 2013). While these characters regularly project a front of stoic emotional reserve or even outright meekness, they nevertheless possess an explosive rage which frequently results in violence.

Finally, Canavese identifies a fourth cinematic masculine archetype which perpetuates a pervasive stereotype that links masculinity to muscularity. He refers to this archetype as the Greek God, and argues that it reinforces the notion that "real men have muscles" (Canavese, 2013, online, para. 3). This archetype reflects a prevailing cultural attitude that associates muscles directly with masculine strength and power (Dyer, 1992). According to Murray Drummond (2011), muscularity often represents the defining characteristic of the archetypal

heterosexual male body, and anything that exists outside of this narrow definition of masculine power automatically enters the realm of the feminine. Similarly, Peter Lehman (1993) argues that muscular men display their strength and fortitude through their muscularity, which functions as a physical and visual indicator that they possess the ability to exert power over others. Muscular men occasionally convey their physical power through exhibitions of aggressive strength, such as fighting or other violent activities (Canavese, 2013). More importantly, however, men and boys often engage in acts of violence in order to compensate for lacking the sort of powerful muscularity that indicates they possess masculine power (Jhally, Earp & Katz, 1999). The Greek God archetype commonly manifests in the form of comic book superheroes and their cinematic counterparts, most notably Captain America, who undergoes an experimental treatment that transforms him from a 98-pound weakling to a powerfully muscled action hero. Similarly, contemporary action stars such as Brad Pitt, Jason Statham, Vin Diesel and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson perpetuate the idea that muscles equal masculinity through their chiseled physiques. Even aging action stars such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Dolph Lundgren and Jean-Claude Van Damme maintain their powerfully muscled physiques well into their 50s and 60s, perpetuating the notion that age does not represent a barrier to the muscular masculine ideal (MacLennan, 2013).

I should note that Canavese's categories do not comprise a comprehensive list of contemporary masculine archetypes. Indeed, contemporary cinematic masculine archetypes may defy the above categorizations and the expectations that arise from them, presenting a changing and evolving conception of screen masculinity in the process. Nevertheless, the four masculine archetypes detailed above encompass many recurring archetypal figures that persist throughout popular culture, most prominently in Hollywood cinema regardless of genre. Indeed, the male

characters that conform to the Tough Guy, the Stoic Man, the Beast in Me, and the Greek God archetypes appear in a variety of films, from Westerns to action films to crime thrillers to blockbusters. Therefore, Canavese's archetypes lend themselves to the consideration of the role cinema plays in the construction and perpetuation of contemporary notions of violent masculinity. If cinema does indeed serve as a way of reflecting and reinforcing notions of masculinity and gender order, and if global media and popular culture does follow the Hollywood content model, then these cinematic masculine archetypes represent important factors in the construction and presentation of contemporary masculinity.

The male characters in Refn's films draw upon many of the recurring male figures that conform to Canavese's archetypes, and thus his taxonomy provides a useful foundation for discussing the protagonists of *Pusher*, *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising*, and *Drive*. For instance, Frank and Tonny align with the Tough Guy figure through their creation and performance of violent, emotionally tough gangster fronts. One Eye and Driver, meanwhile, conform to the notion of the Stoic Man, because the films emphasize the idea that each character embodies traditional masculine qualities such as silence, individualism, and emotional rigidity. Thus, they reflect many of the "No Name" figures that frequently appear in male action cinema. In *Bronson*, meanwhile, Michael Peterson functions as an almost literal personification of the Beast in Me archetype, because of his tendency to indulge all of his aggressive and violent impulses. Finally, the characters in each of these films also reflect Greek God archetype, because they either possess the sort of powerfully muscled hard bodies of the Hollywood action heroes, or they attempt to compensate for lacking such a body. In each instance, Refn's characters align themselves with the sort of recurring male figures that conform to Canavese's archetypes, or the films construct and present them in such a way that they function as embodiments of these same

figures. Therefore, the taxonomy Canavese generated allows for a detailed examination of how Refn's characters relate to the recurring masculine tropes commonly found in popular culture.

CONCLUSION

The masculine archetypes that recur throughout popular culture tend to perpetuate and reinforce a correlation between violence and masculinity, and position violent masculinity as a heroic or desirable ideal. The powerful, muscle-bound figures that exemplify the Stoic Man, Tough Guy, and Greek God archetypes frequently function as ruggedly individualistic heroes who rarely speak, preferring to let their violent actions speak louder than their words. The enigmatic "Mad" Max Rockatansky of the *Mad Max* films, the unnamed protagonist of *Yojimbo*, and The Man With No Name of Leone's "Dollars Trilogy" all exist as violent figures who reinforce the masculine ideal of the strong, silent type. Even violent, rage-filled Beast in Me figures like the Hulk in *The Avengers*, the hard-bodied werewolves of the *Twilight* series, and Mr. Hyde in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* have been appropriated as heroic figures, thus further perpetuating the notion that violent masculinity represents a desirable ideal. Therefore, it becomes important to identify pop culture artifacts that make use of these archetypes specifically to critique or challenge the notion of violent masculinity.

Nicolas Winding Refn aligns his male characters with the recurring cinematic masculine archetypes represented by the Tough Guy, the Stoic Man, the Beast in Me, and the Greek God in order to critique their traditional depictions in mainstream male action cinema. In each film, Refn constructs his characters by drawing upon the type of emotionally rigid, individualistic, and violent masculine ideal perpetuated by archetypal figures such as the gunslingers, samurai, and gangsters described above. Refn's protagonists establish their masculine identities primarily

through displays of violence and aggression, but in each case their need to perpetuate this version of masculine power ultimately results in negative consequences including isolation, incarceration, injury, and even death. Furthermore, these negative consequences not only affect the protagonists but also the characters around them. Such negative consequences serve to demonstrate that violent masculinity often represents a destructive force that not only harms the individual, but also the society he inhabits. Therefore, while Refn's male characters tend to reflect the recurring figures that conform to Canavese's cinematic masculine archetypes, they nevertheless critique the idea that male violence represents a heroic or desirable ideal by reframing the tropes in such a way that that they serve to highlight the harmful and destructive effects of violence on both the individual and society.

Through close textual analyses of *Pusher*, *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising*, and *Drive*, this thesis considers how Refn's male characters draw upon the cinematic masculine archetypes in order to challenge or critique the notion that violent masculinity represents a heroic or noble ideal. The examination of the films draws upon film critic Matt Zoller Seitz's (2014) video essay regarding the mythology of cool in director Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. According to Seitz, Tarantino visually and textually mythologizes characters such as Marsellus Wallace and Mia Wallace as cool and larger-than-life by having other characters talk about them, while also providing tantalizing glimpses of them before they ever appear on screen in full. Similarly, other characters self-mythologize as a way of establishing their cool personae, such as when the character of Lance talks about the quality of his drugs. However, such self-mythologizing creates tensions when the film challenges these constructed identities. Seitz argues that those who do not learn from such tensions meet disastrous outcomes. Refn's films function in a similar manner, establishing the male characters as larger-than-life tough guys by having characters such as

Frank or Michael Peterson self-mythologize, or by having other characters establish the legends of protagonists such as One Eye and Driver. Thus, Seitz's analysis of *Pulp Fiction* provides a framework with which to analyze Refn's films and how they ultimately demythologize the violent masculine ideal perpetuated by the cinematic masculine archetypes.

Chapter One discusses how Refn aligns his characters with the violent masculine ideal represented by cinematic masculine archetypes through repeated characterization motifs such as violence, stoicism, and individualism. Therefore, the first chapter considers how the films mythologize the characters through their construction as representations of such archetypes. Chapter Two considers how Refn presents these characters as constructing and perpetuating their masculine personae by drawing upon archetypal male figures, and the tensions that manifest when these performances encounter situations that challenge the fabricated nature of their own fronts or personal mythologies. Chapter Three considers how Refn troubles the violent masculine ideal by highlighting the dangerous and negative consequences that result from these tensions. The chapter considers the consequences the characters face upon failing to resolve the tensions through the abandonment of the archetypes and their violent masculinity. Thus, this thesis contends that Refn focuses on these negative consequences in order to illustrate and reinforce the idea that alignment with these archetypes represents a destructive force for both the individuals and those around them.

Chapter One: Aligning with the Archetypes

INTRODUCTION

In a video essay produced for RogerEbert.com, film critic Matt Zoller Seitz (2014) explains that in the film *Pulp Fiction*, director Quentin Tarantino establishes his characters as cool and larger-than-life by visually and textually enlarging their personae before they ever appear onscreen. Seitz points to the characters of Marsellus Wallace, Mia Wallace, and Winston Wolfe as examples, explaining that Tarantino creates ideas of these characters long before they actually appear onscreen. In *Pulp Fiction*, other characters talk about Marsellus and Mia before they ever appear onscreen, and the film offers brief, tantalizing glimpses of both characters before finally revealing them in full. Seitz argues that this serves to mythologize these characters in the minds of the audience, and that they attain the status of legendary figures as a result.

The male characters in Nicolas Winding Refn's films function in a similar manner, only instead of coolness, they seek to establish themselves as tough or rugged individuals by drawing upon archetypal male figures. Both Frank in *Pusher* and Michael Peterson in *Bronson* frequently acknowledge and assert their own physical and mental toughness, while many of the characters in *Valhalla Rising* and *Drive* stand in awe of and speak about One Eye's masculine power or Driver's stoic toughness. These presentations have the effect of mythologizing Refn's male characters, and rendering them as legendary figures akin to the stoic tough guys of films such as *Bullitt*, *Death Wish*, and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. Furthermore, mythologizing his characters in this manner provides Refn with a way to critique the repeated use of cinematic masculine archetypes, because it allows him to explore the tensions that arise when the characters' self-mythology clashes with outside forces.

This chapter considers how Refn's male characters align with and represent this mythology of masculinity. Stereotypically masculine traits such as stoicism, individualism and violence tend to function as the defining characteristics of the recurring male figures that conform to film critic Peter Canavese's (2013) four cinematic masculine archetypes. In order to align his male characters with these figures, Refn constructs and presents them as violent, emotionally rigid loners who evoke recurring figures such as the gunslinger, the gangster, and the samurai. This chapter considers how the men of *Pusher*, *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising* and *Drive* align with recurring archetypal male figures through acts of mythologizing; that is, their appearance, dialogue, and behavior align with the tropes of the cinematic masculine archetypes. The first section describes how the characteristics of stoicism, individualism and violence define recurring archetypal figures such as the samurai, the cowboy or gunslinger, and the gangster, while the sections that follow discuss how Refn draws upon these figures and the stereotypical masculinity they represent in the construction and presentation of his own characters.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CINEMATIC MASCULINE ARCHETYPES

The archetypal male figures that most closely conform to Canavese's (2013) taxonomy place an emphasis on three primary masculine traits: stoicism, individualism, and violence. Whereas classical Stoicism emphasizes austerity, self-governance, and the ability to navigate notions of morality with relation to sociality, modern conceptualizations of stoicism tend to focus on qualities such as solitude, emotional rigidity, and physical endurance (Calhoun, 2014). Contemporary interpretations of stoicism also place emphasis on silence (Coen, Oliffe, Johnson & Kelly, 2013). Traditional notions of masculinity frequently align with this modern approach to stoicism, and popular culture reflects this idea through repeated depictions of muscular,

emotionally reserved tough guy characters who let their actions speak louder than words. Peter Lehman (1993) argues that the strong, silent type commonly found in male action cinema functions as cinematic shorthand to convey the idea that the hero possesses an excess of power, and therefore does not need language. Iconic screen tough guys regularly project this type of quiet stoicism, from Charles Bronson in the *Death Wish* films to Steve McQueen in *Bullitt* to Jason Statham in *The Transporter* series. Additionally, Steve Neale (1992) contends that verbal reticence often accompanies emotional reticence, and the recurrence of male characters that exert careful control over both their language and emotions lends credence to this assertion. Indeed, popular culture regularly reinforces the idea that men must remain emotionally tough or aloof at all times (Jhally, Earp & Katz, 1999). Characters such as Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*, Batman in the *Batman* comic books, and Kratos in the *God of War* video game series all serve to perpetuate the myth of the emotionally impassive loner who rarely speaks but is quick to act.

Stoicism defines many of the figures that align with the Stoic Man and Tough Guy archetypes. For instance, gangster figures often conform to the stoic ideal. Tea Torbenfeldt Bengtsson (2012) asserts that emotional reserve plays a central role in the gangster subculture. Indeed, Dana L. Cloud (1992) contends that iconic screen gangsters frequently reflect this tendency, and stereotypical gangster figures project a stoic pragmatism as evidenced in characters such as Roy Earle in *High Sierra*, James Conway in *Goodfellas*, and Harold Shand in *The Long Good Friday*. Nearly all permutations of the gangster archetype around the world conform to the stoic masculine ideal in one form or another. For example, Japanese *yakuza* films regularly depict characters that exemplify the concept of stoic endurance (Barrett, 1999), and characters such as Tetsuya Hondo in *Tokyo Drifter* and Aniki Murakawa in *Sonatine* all exhibit an unemotional and calmly resolute demeanor. Similarly, as Miles White (2011) explains, the

outlaw figures in gangsta films and rap videos regularly project a stoic hardness meant to convey notions of power and self-reliance. Characters such as Frank Lucas in *American Gangster*, Anthony Curtis in *Dead Presidents*, Bishop in *Juice*, and Ordell Robbie in *Jackie Brown* convey the sort of emotional toughness and quietly powerful masculinity often associated with modern notions of stoicism.

Similarly, movies frequently depict the cowboy or gunslinger figure as an embodiment of stoic individualism (Smith, 2003). The loner gunslinger or drifter characters portrayed by Clint Eastwood in the early part of his career conform to modern colloquial conceptualizations of stoicism (Calhoun, 2014). Indeed, characters such as Joe in *A Fistful of Dollars*, Blondie in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, or the unnamed stranger in *High Plains Drifter* all display a sense of emotional rigidity and steadfast resolve. The myth of the stoic cowboy also manifests in other genres, and informs depictions of action heroes, hard-boiled detectives, outlaw bank robbers, adventurers, soldiers, and more (Kaulingfreks, Lightfoot & Letiche, 2009). For instance, in *The Empire Strikes Back*, enigmatic bounty hunter Boba Fett conforms to the idea of the stoic gunslinger, as does the quietly menacing convict Napoleon Wilson in *Assault on Precinct 13*. Similarly, in the post-apocalyptic film *The Road Warrior*, "Mad" Max Rockatansky displays the same sort of unemotional determination that defines more contemporary characters such as Llewelyn Moss in *No Country for Old Men*. Though not traditional cowboy or gunslinger figures, these characters nevertheless align with the stoic ideal represented by these recurring masculine archetypes.

The samurai also reflects the stoic masculine ideal, though Ted M. Preston (2003) argues that these figures tend to align more closely with classical conceptions of stoicism rather than the modern colloquial understandings discussed above. According to Preston, the samurai code of

bushido – a synthesis of Zen Buddhism, Shinto, and Confucian ethics – resembles the ideals of classical stoicism. Similarly, Gregory Barrett (1989) explains that samurai traditionally possess complete control over their emotions, allowing them to conquer their fear of death and wade into violent battle against countless enemies. Cinematic samurai commonly reflect this historical ideal through repeated depictions as taciturn, emotionless warriors who remain unaffected as they endure great hardships. Notable examples include Kambei Shimada in *Seven Samurai*, Ogami Ittō in the *Lone Wolf and Cub* film and comic book series, Miyamoto Musashi in the *Samurai* trilogy, and the titular protagonist of the long-running *Zatoichi* film series. These characters exemplify the tenets of classical stoicism, which place an emphasis on strict self-control and acknowledgement of the moral community. At the same time, however, they embody many of the ideals associated with modern conceptions of stoicism, particularly individualism and emotional resolve. For instance, in the *Lone Wolf and Cub* series, Ogami Ittō seeks revenge for the death of his wife, with no companion aside from his infant son. In the process, Ittō abandons his connections to communal society, and represses all emotions other than the need for revenge. Ogami Ittō's characterization serves as an example of how the samurai figure also frequently functions as a recurring manifestation of the Stoic Man archetype.

Stoic figures such as those in American gangster films or the Spaghetti Westerns of Sergio Leone often appear as rugged loners who typify Western masculine values of individuality and self-reliance. According to R. W. Connell (2005), individualism often represents a central characteristic of contemporary masculine identities, particularly in capitalistic Western nations. Indeed, William G. Doty (1993) asserts that American frontier narratives frequently place great emphasis on the concept of male self-reliance, and that the recurring image of the lone cowboy has perpetuated and reinforced the idea that rugged

individualism functions as a defining characteristic of masculine power. Tyler Cowen (2004) contends that mass culture regularly reflects this notion of masculine individuality, and that Hollywood films in particular propagate a myth of heroic individualism through repeated depictions of lone action heroes. American movie heroes regularly appear as rugged individualists who survive because they possess physical toughness and great personal skills, and this depiction has its roots in the gunslinger figure (Robinson, 2014). Indeed, the macho heroes portrayed by Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, and Bruce Willis often convey a notion of mythic heroism chiefly defined by individualism (Jeffords, 1994). Furthermore, as media becomes increasingly globalized, this egocentric individualism informs depictions of masculinity on an international scale (Connell, 2005). Characters such as Ting in the Thai kickboxing film *Ong-bak*, "Terry" Takuma Tsurugi in the Japanese martial arts film *The Street Fighter*, and Oh Dae-su in the South Korean revenge thriller *Oldboy* all display qualities that align them with the ruggedly individualistic masculine ideal established by American frontier narratives and then perpetuated by Hollywood cinema.

In addition to being emotionally rigid figures, the recurring male figures that epitomize the Stoic Man and Tough Guy archetypes often appear as defiantly individualistic characters that embody notions of self-reliance and inner strength. For instance, whereas George S. Larke-Walsh (2012) argues that the relationships featured in gangster films frequently serve to repress notions of individualism in order to enforce masculine hierarchies within a larger collective, Andrew Nestingen (2008) contends that the gangster or gangsta figure represents the ultimate individual. Indeed, cinematic gangster figures regularly represent a site of resistance against an oppressive social order, and therefore they establish a character's rebellious or individualistic nature (Cloud, 1992). The characters in gangster films such as *Scarface*, *Black Caesar*, and even

Pusher feature characters who attempt to establish their reputations by asserting their tough individualism within the hierarchies of a criminal collective. Similarly, cowboy or gunslinger figures such as those featured in the films *Shane* and *Django* epitomize the idea of individual action. As a genre, Westerns frequently explore the tensions between the individual and society (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004). Furthermore, the persistent myth of the cowboy or gunslinger establishes him as "the epitome of individuality," and this figure regularly disregards social conventions and shuns consensus (Kaulingfreks, Lightfoot & Letiche, 2009, p.152). Films regularly portray these gunslinger characters as powerful individualists unable to exist within the confines of collective society, such as Wyatt Earp in *Tombstone* and Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*.

The Viking represents another recurring archetypal male figure frequently defined by the stereotypical masculine qualities of competition and individualism. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir et al (2012) argue that clichéd depictions of Vikings as stoic, self-reliant warriors have overshadowed historical understandings of Viking society. For instance, Viking relationships in films tend to focus on notions of competition and grudging respect rather than friendship, cooperation and affection (Sklar, 2011), which aligns cinematic Vikings with other individualistic archetypal figures such as the gangster or the gunslinger. Indeed, much like the gangster, popular depictions of Viking relationships often emphasize competition and self-reliance within masculine hierarchies. Comic books like *Northlanders* and television series like *Vikings* reflect this idea, presenting Viking clans as analogous to the familial crime syndicates of mafia films. In addition to One Eye in *Valhalla Rising*, other depictions of individualistic Vikings include the title character of the popular French comic book and film series *Asterix*, Rolfe in the film *The Long Ships*, and, more recently, Ragnar Lothbrok in the television series

Vikings. Much like the cowboy/gunslinger or gangster figures, the Vikings of popular culture frequently highlight the tensions that exist between masculine individuality and collective sociality.

While stoicism and individuality may overlap, they may also not always exist in cinematic depictions of masculinity. Violence represents the one trait most commonly attributed to all four of the cinematic masculine archetypes, just as it represents the trait most commonly associated with traditional conceptions of masculinity. Roger Horrocks (1994) contends that many societies frequently condition their men to act violently, particularly Western nations such as the United States, which tend to celebrate destructive activities such as war or violent sport as indicators of manly achievement. Similarly, Michael Kimmel (2001) asserts that violence often exists as the defining factor in sociocultural notions of masculine power. Cinema regularly reflects this assertion, as the stoic, tough guy characters in films like *Blast of Silence* or *Once Upon a Time in the West* often resort to violence when settling scores. Similarly, characters that conform to the Beast in Me archetype, such as the Joker in *The Dark Knight* or the Hulk in *The Avengers*, tend to function as a reflection of the violent impulses often linked to masculinity. Violence even defines the Greek God archetype, because muscularity often signifies masculine power and male aggression. Powerfully muscled male bodies often function as a visual representation of the physical strength and power which allow men to exert their will over others, often through violence (Drummond, 2011). Jackson Katz (2003) argues that these existing sociocultural power relations often position physical size and strength as indicators of masculine violence, and popular culture frequently reinforces this perception. Indeed, the screen action heroes embodied by the likes of Sylvester Stallone, Vin Diesel, Channing Tatum, and Dwayne

“The Rock” Johnson all use their the excessively muscled bodies to convey physical toughness and the threat of masculine violence.

Nearly all of the recurring male figures discussed in this section associate themselves with violence. For instance, the cowboy or gunslinger figure has come to represent the American frontier myth, and they project an attitude of dangerous masculine strength and ability that signals their willingness to do battle with those who would challenge them (Kimmel, 1996). In many ways, the brutal Western landscape that these figures often inhabit reflects the violent attitudes of the characters themselves (Calhoun, 2014). Westerns regularly depict hard men who do not hesitate to use violence to settle disputes, such as those in films like *Red River*, *For a Few Dollars More*, and *The Great Silence*, Similarly, mafia films depict gangster figures as violent individuals who wouldn’t think twice about shooting an enemy or even a companion. For instance, the sequence in *Scarface* in which Tony Montana introduces the police to his “little friend” has become something of a defining moment in the annals of violent screen gangsters, and a defining image of masculine power for many disenfranchised young men (Prince, 2009).

Refn’s films construct and present the male characters in *Pusher*, *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising* and *Drive* so as to convey the same sort of stoic individualism and violent power associated with the recurring archetypal male figures described above. Indeed, the characters in each film personify or appropriate the stereotypical masculine qualities frequently associated with the figures that align with the Stoic Man, Tough Guy, and Beast in Me archetypes in order to establish themselves as powerful men capable of emotional toughness, solitary self-reliance, and physical violence. The following sections examine how each film textually conveys the idea that the male characters in Refn’s films align with archetypal male figures such as the gunslinger, the gangster and the samurai.

THE MEN OF *PUSHER*

In his examination of the mafia film *The Funeral*, Larke-Walsh (2012) contends that the film functions as a gangster movie primarily because "it involves characters who act like gangsters and refer to themselves and their actions through the mythology of gangsters or, more precisely, the Italian Mafia" (p. 76). This argument also applies to *Pusher*, because while the central characters never explicitly refer to themselves as gangsters, the film represents them in relation to the persistent gangster mythology perpetuated and reinforced by recurring archetypal figures. Frank and Tonny in particular seek to create a reputation for themselves as tough guy drug dealers, and they accomplish this by aligning their masculine personae with the stoic and violently individualistic ideal represented by the gangster or gangsta archetype in order to convey an emotional toughness and self-control which they otherwise lack.

For much of the film, Frank and Tonny exude a tough stoicism that chiefly manifests in their adherence to emotional rigidity and rebellious individuality, and the film conveys this mainly via the presentation and exploration of their relationships. Indeed, neither Frank nor Tonny nurture any close emotional attachments with others, and in fact appear to actively distance themselves from such relationships, even with one another. In her discussion of *Pusher*, Mette Hjort (2005) refers to Frank in particular as "emotionally constipated" (p. 262). This tendency toward emotional constipation manifests in Frank's relationship with Tonny, which feels less like a friendship and more like a convenient business partnership that reflects the sort of masculine hierarchies common to mafia films. Frank and Tonny's relationship evokes similar mafia or gangster duos, particularly the relationship between Johnny Boy and Charlie in *Mean Streets*, which Refn cites as a primary influence on the entire *Pusher* series (Refn, 2006).

While the two characters frequently rely on one another during the first half of the film, such as when they go to sell drugs from a couple of men who refuse to pay the initially agreed upon 50,000 kroner, their relationship nevertheless appears founded on competition and one-upmanship rather than friendly affection. For example, early in the film Frank and Tonny wrestle and pretend to stab one another at a coffee shop, and while it clearly begins as a bit of good-natured roughhousing, it quickly becomes competitive as both men attempt to gain the advantage over the other. Rather than an act of homosocial affection or emotional closeness, the wrestling represents a way to establish a hierarchy between the two characters. Later, Tonny, who clearly occupies the subordinate position in the relationship, attempts to perform a roundhouse kick, but ends up twisting his ankle in the process. The act nevertheless represents an effort to demonstrate his physical superiority over Frank, and thus the film further reinforces the idea that Frank and Tonny are not actually friends but rather competitive associates. Their need to assert their masculine power through acts of violent competition and self-reliance prevents them from forging any sort of meaningful bonds, and this inability to establish friendly affection or close relationships stems mainly from their alignment with archetypal male figures that emphasize individualism and emotional reserve.

Frank and Tonny's emotional constipation also indicates that they lack empathy, and this manifests in the way they objectify others, especially women. This includes Frank's mother and his girlfriend, Vic. An example of Frank's indifference toward Vic occurs near the beginning of the film, when he brings her a large stuffed gorilla in what initially appears to be a romantic gesture. Before giving her the gift, however, Frank and Tonny both kick it around the hall of her apartment complex. This act indicates that both men harbor contempt for the type of sensitive, caring masculinity often associated with romantic love, and further reinforces Frank's aloofness

in regards to his relationship with Vic. Similarly, Frank displays indifference toward his own mother when he asks to borrow money from her to pay back the debt he owes to Milo, and his lack of feeling for her is evident throughout the scene. Frank's mother claims she can only afford to give him 6,000 kroner, which is far short of the 230,000 he owes to Milo. Frank appears disappointed for a moment, but quickly reasserts his stoic façade and takes the money. As he gets up to leave, his mother tries to give him a hug, but Frank shrugs her off and walks out the door without another word. Frank's dismissal of his mother's affections further suggests that he has no emotional attachment to her. She means nothing to him beyond her ability to assist in solving his problem, and when she fails to do that, Frank goes right back to ignoring her. Additionally, Frank's emotional indifference toward his mother's failure to solve his problem also demonstrates that even though he is turning to her for assistance, he nevertheless maintains his manly façade of stoic self-reliance in order to appear tough. This attempt to suppress his fear and emotional distress further aligns Frank with the Tough Guy archetype, and the reserved gangster figures who often exemplify it onscreen.

The sequence in which Frank beats Tonny with a baseball bat serves as another indication of the character's emotional detachment, reinforcing the notion that he does not possess any actual affection for his closest partner. At the same time, this violent outburst further reinforces Frank's alignment with the hard, aggressive figures commonly found in gangster or gangsta films. After a drug deal goes bad, the police arrest Frank and hold him for questioning. Prior to his arrest, Frank manages to dump the drugs in a nearby river. Therefore, he knows the police don't have any evidence against him, and so he acts tough and refuses to talk. The police, however, inform him that Tonny signed a confession implicating Frank in the crime, and this causes Frank's tough guy front to wavers momentarily, though he quickly regains his composure

and remains disaffected and detached. This sequence recalls similar sequences from films such as *The Usual Suspects* and *Scarface*, in which tough guy mobsters or gangstas act hard and refuse to talk. More importantly, however, it reinforces the notion that Frank seeks to project a masculine persona rooted in the steely reserve and emotional control often associated with archetypal figures such as the gangster or gangsta.

Upon his release, Frank tracks Tonny down and beats him with a baseball bat. This act serves to reinforce the idea that violence represents a crucial aspect of Frank's masculine persona, which in turn emphasizes his alignment with the gangster figure. Indeed, Tonny's beating evokes a similar sequence in *Casino*, in which a group of tough wise guys beat the characters of Nicky and Dominic with baseball bats before burying them alive in a remote Indiana cornfield. Throughout *Pusher*, Frank repeatedly uses violence or the threat of violence as a way to assert his masculine power, and establish himself as a tough guy akin to popular gangster figures like Tony Montana or Nino Brown. For instance, when Frank and Tonny go to collect drug money from some clients early in the film, Frank asserts his masculinity by intimidating them with threats of violence while Tonny hops on the sofa and waves a gun around. This sequence recalls a similar one in *Pulp Fiction* in which Jules and Vincent go to retrieve Marsellus Wallace's briefcase from Brad and his friends. Rather than project a menacing coolness, however, Frank and Tonny convey a violent toughness in order to intimidate the other men into paying what they owe. Later, Milo's flunkies verbally and physically intimidate Frank when he tries to settle his debts by selling them what he thinks is heroin, but turns out to be a combination of lactose and sugar. Being smaller and weaker than the physically intimidating Radovan, Frank cannot fight back against the abuse. Therefore, he instead takes his anger out

first on Vic, and then on his regular customers, lashing out at them in an aggressive and violent manner in order to regain the respect and power he lost due to his own incompetence.

The film presents all of the male characters in *Pusher* as relying on violence and stoic self-reliance in the conveyance of their masculinity. For instance, laconic Serbian drug kingpin Milo closely resembles stereotypical mafia figures like Don Corleone in *The Godfather* or Al Capone in *The Untouchables*. Indeed, Milo conforms to these mythical Italian mobster figures in a number of ways; he owns a restaurant where he cooks large meals for his henchmen and associates, dresses in expensive suits (or at least suits meant to look expensive), and surrounds himself with a coterie of tough flunkies who resemble the wise guys of film and television. Similarly, Milo's hulking enforcer, Radovan, recalls other countless onscreen mob hit men, from Goro Hanada in *Branded to Kill* to Frank Nitti in *The Untouchables*. A large, muscle-bound man of few words, Radovan often looms in the background as a quietly intimidating presence. When it comes time to act, however, he does not hesitate to use violence, such as when he throttles Frank for trying to pass off lactose and sugar as heroin. The film mythologizes the male characters by aligning them with the gangster archetype through their words and actions, creating characters that are stoic, individualistic, and violent.

THE MEN OF *BRONSON*

Bronson mythologizes Michael Peterson as a dangerous and violent man through the repeated acknowledgement and assertion of his physical toughness, emotional hardness, and aggressive individuality. At one point in the film, an unseen character questions Peterson's account of his own life, and Peterson coldly responds by saying, "You don't want to be trapped inside with me sunshine. Inside, I'm somebody nobody wants to fuck with do you understand? I

am Charlie Bronson, and I am Britain's most violent prisoner." This response serves two primary functions; first, it presents Peterson as a tough, dangerous, and violent individual through his threatening dialogue. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it associates the character directly with the actor Charles Bronson, an iconic screen tough guy who epitomizes notions of stoicism, individualism, and violence through appearances in films such as *Once Upon a Time in the West* and *Death Wish*. Thus, the film makes use of voiceover narration and direct address to demonstrate that Michael Peterson reflects the recurring male figures that align with the Tough Guy archetype.

Despite being allowed access into the Michael Peterson's inner life, the film nevertheless manages to keep the character emotionally and psychologically removed from the audience, and thus establishes his emotional isolation. Film critic Landon Palmer (2011) of the website *Film School Rejects* asserts that while the stage framing device in *Bronson* provides a glimpse into the protagonist's mind, it never ascribes a motive to Peterson's behavior beyond his desire to achieve fame and recognition through the projection of a masculine persona that establishes him as a manic criminal capable of violence. The character frequently functions as an unreliable narrator, hiding his true feelings from the viewer even as the film provides visual insight into his emotional state. For instance, early in the film, Peterson is arrested for robbing a post office and sentenced to seven years in prison. Peterson smiles and acts jovial as the guards lead him to his cell, but he appears to break down in tears when they lock him inside. Rather than linger on his despair, however, the film immediately cuts to a shot of Peterson onstage looking directly into the camera with a wide smile on his heavily made-up face. This narrative device establishes Peterson's emotional fortitude by underplaying the weaknesses in his character.

In addition to these acts of mythologizing, the film visually aligns Peterson with cinematic tough guys primarily through the presentation of his body. Peter Lehman (1993) asserts that muscles function as a signifier of masculine power, because they indicate that a man is able to physically dominate others. Michael Peterson embodies this notion through his extreme muscularity, which functions as the ultimate expression of his manliness and physical power. Peterson possesses what Horrocks (1994) refers to as a penis-like or phallic male body, which he describes as erect, tense, deeply veined and ribbed with a massive head. Rigidity represents the most crucial aspect of the phallic male body, because it mirrors the emotional rigidity traditionally associated with tough men (Horrocks, 1994). Peterson reflects this idea in the way he holds himself throughout the film; his body remains tense and rigid at all times, particularly when he flexes his muscles in order to intimidate or impress others. For instance, when fellow inmate Paul Daniels openly admires Peterson's massive frame, Peterson responds by flexing his muscles as if to further emphasize his strength and power.

Peterson's excessive muscularity also functions as a physical indicator of violence. The physical rigidity of the phallic male body indicates a readiness to erupt into violence at any moment (Horrocks, 1994), thereby linking Peterson with the Beast in Me archetype. Peterson exemplifies this idea, and frequently explodes in fits of violent rage at the slightest provocation, as evidenced by a montage of still images that document Peterson's daily rampages and battles with the prison guards. Not only does this sequence establish the character's physical power and endurance, it also serves to reinforce his personal mythology as a Tough Guy. Indeed, according to Peterson's narration, his violent behavior directly results in fame and recognition, and the film demonstrates this by displaying newspaper headlines that proclaim Peterson as Britain's most violent prisoner. Indeed, despite his initial breakdown, Peterson thrives in prison, because it

represents an environment that actively encourages the sort of violent aggression that defines Peterson's masculine persona. The film frequently positions Peterson as an almost literal personification of violent machismo, and suggests that he derives pleasure from fighting and intimidating others. This representation might explain why Peterson has such a difficult time adjusting to life at Rampton Secure Hospital, an insane asylum where Peterson spends much of the film's second act. The doctors and orderlies at Rampton attempt to suppress Peterson's violent rage with sedatives, and thus suppress the core of his masculine identity. Peterson repeatedly attempts to reassert his repressed masculinity, lashing out violently at the orderlies when they try to sedate him, and he finally attacks another inmate in order to be sent back to prison, where he can once more indulge all of his violent impulses.

The film reinforces Peterson's tendency toward violence in sequences that feature him stalking around his prison cell, not unlike a tiger that has been caged and is now unable to indulge its predatory nature; he simply paces back and forth, waiting to violently pounce on his captors when they make that one little mistake. Additionally, when Peterson proves to be too violent even for his human opponents on the underground fighting circuit, the men in charge decide to have him fight large dogs, as though they acknowledge that inhumanly violent personality. By presenting Peterson as something less than human, the film aligns him directly with the sort of inhuman monsters that frequently conform to the Beast in Me archetype. Creatures such as the Hulk in *The Avengers*, Mr. Hyde in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (both the comic book series and subsequent film adaptation), or the title figure of *An American Werewolf in London* represent the violent impulses frequently associated with masculinity. Therefore, Peterson's close identification with these same sort of violent impulses

indicate that the character aligns with recurring figures that perpetuate cultural notions that associate masculinity with violence and aggression.

THE MEN OF *VALHALLA RISING*

According to Refn (2009), the character of One Eye represents a fusion of archetypal figures such as the gunslinger, the samurai and, most notably, the Viking. As discussed above, these figures have come to exemplify notions of stoic endurance and rugged individualism through repeated depictions across various media. *Valhalla Rising* visually establishes the character's archetypal nature early on. Following a title card that proclaims, "In the beginning, there was only man and nature," the film opens on a wide shot of a lone individual slowly trudging across a vast, desolate landscape shrouded in fog. This opening image immediately establishes that the film takes place in a harsh and lonely world that practically forces individuals to develop the type of self-reliance that will allow them to survive in such an unforgiving place. Similar to how the bleak landscapes of Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns convey the brutality of the gunslingers and outlaws that populate those films, the landscape of *Valhalla Rising* reflects One Eye's quietly menacing stoicism and individuality.

Valhalla Rising presents the completely mute One Eye as the ultimate embodiment of the strong, silent type. He exists as supernaturally powerful and defiantly individualistic warrior with no past and no identity who conveys meaning almost entirely through his violent actions. Unable to speak, One Eye repeatedly demonstrates that he has no need of language precisely because he possesses an extreme excess of physical power. For instance, early in the film, a Viking chieftain holds One Eye captive and forces him to fight to the death against prisoners from other clans. One Eye handily defeats these other captives, dispatching them in increasingly brutal fashion,

such as when he crushes another man's skull by bashing it repeatedly with a large rock. One Eye never exhibits any sort of emotion during these battles, as he casually breaks a man's neck and then tears another man's throat out with his teeth. Instead, the character's face remains impassive at all times, even when he escapes the men who have held him captive for five years by violently and methodically killing them. Even after he calmly slices open the belly of one of his tormentors and pulls out the man's entrails, One Eye displays no sense of triumph, satisfaction or even regret over his actions. Rather, he remains completely emotionless and unaffected at all times. This steely resolve indicates that the character possesses the sort of emotional rigidity often associated with contemporary notions of stoicism, and thus the film aligns him with the stoic masculine ideal represented by the cinematic archetypes.

One Eye cannot speak, and therefore he cannot verbally acknowledge or assert his own masculine power. Therefore, the film has the other characters establish his mythological masculine persona for him, particularly the slave boy Are, who often speaks for One Eye. For example, after escaping from their captors, One Eye and Are encounter a group of Christian Vikings. The leader of the Christian Vikings draws his sword and advances on One Eye, but stops short when one of his men says that he has heard that One Eye has a reputation as "one of the biggest savages in Sutherland." The man explains that One Eye killed a chieftain's son, along with most of his men. Later, one of the Christian Vikings asks Are if he knows where One Eye came from. The boy hesitates for a moment, and then says "He was brought up from hell." Exchanges such as these serve to establish One Eye's reputation as a powerful and violent figure. More importantly, however, they function as a means of establishing One Eye as inhuman or more than human, and thus the film positions him as an archetypal figure rather than a fully-formed character.

One Eye's relationship with the Christian Vikings denotes another way that the film aligns him with archetypal figures. The Christian Vikings represent a collective, albeit one based on a strict hierarchical structure that recalls the gangs of mafia or gangsta films, while One Eye represents the rugged individual who struggles against their oppressive social order. One Eye joins the Christian Vikings on his journey, but he never truly becomes one of them. The relationship between One Eye and the Christian Vikings consists almost entirely of mistrust, competition, and violent aggression, and both sides continually struggle to assert their masculine power and dominate the other. Indeed, One Eye and the Christian Vikings hold no friendly affection for one another whatsoever. One Eye's relationship with the Christian Vikings represents another way the film reinforces his individualism; he remains apart from the other characters at all times, even when they ostensibly invite him to join their collective.

THE MEN OF *DRIVE*

In an interview with Scott Tobias (2011) of the website *AVClub.com*, Refn explains that Driver comes out of movie mythology, and the character deliberately evokes archetypal screen figures like Shane or the samurai. Similarly, in *The Rough Guide to 21st Century Cinema*, Adam Smith (2012) contends that while *Drive* takes place in modern day Los Angeles, it nevertheless recalls both the neo-noir thrillers of the 1980s and the Spaghetti Westerns of the 1960s. Smith's comprehensive description of Driver and how the film visually and textually aligns the character with specific genre tropes and iconic screen figures is worth quoting in its entirety. He writes:

> 'Driver' is the epitome of movie cool: sporting a bizarre satin jacket emblazoned with a yellow scorpion (perhaps a nod to Kenneth Anger's cult 1963 short *Scorpio Rising*, as well as the fable of the scorpion and the frog), which could only look hideous on anyone else, and with a toothpick constantly wedged between his teeth, he brings to mind Steve McQueen in *Bullitt* or even Clint Eastwood in one of his 'no name' roles. His face remains a study of (undeniably

> handsome) impassivity, whether he's ferrying Los Angeles's criminal fraternity to and from jobs or reducing a thug's cranium to a bloody mulch with his boot. (2012, p. 79)

In addition to associating Driver with iconic figures such as the Man With No Name and Frank Bullitt, the film also positions Driver as a superhero figure. Refn has stated in interviews that he considers *Drive* to be a superhero film, and that Driver seeks to establish himself as noble hero figure through his violent actions (Tobias, 2011). In a review of the film written for the *Journal of Religion & Film*, Desiree de Jesus (2012) argues that the character's preternatural driving skills and quick wits represent extraordinary powers, and his choice to use them to fight crime and protect the innocent aligns him with traditional comic book heroes. Superheroes frequently appear as extreme loners who battle evil using violence, and this reinforces cultural notions linking maleness to machismo (Pecora, 1992). Thus, the film emphasizes Driver's stoic individualism through his association with archetypal figures such as the gunslinger, the samurai, and the superhero.

Similar to the way the bleak landscape of *Valhalla Rising* reflects One Eye's emotional toughness, Driver's environment often serves as a visual reflection of his own stoic individualism. For instance, the opening sequence of the film establishes that the character owns few possessions and has no fixed address, and thus it reinforces his solitary nature. Following an opening shot of a map laid out on a table, the camera slowly pans left to reveal Driver dressed in his signature scorpion jacket as he discusses a job with a potential client over the phone. Driver speaks in a clipped manner, using as few words as possible as he tells the client exactly how the job will go down. The character's manner of speaking serves to establish him as a man of few words, and immediately connects him to the strong, silent type commonly found in male action cinema. The camera continues to pan left to reveal an old television set next to a double bed, on

which rests a duffel bag stuffed with unknown contents. The room contains no pictures or anything else that might convey a sense of the character's identity. Instead, the room simply appears bare and anonymous. Driver finishes his conversation by asking whether or not the client understands the terms of the agreement, he pauses to listen, and then ends the call by saying "you won't be able to reach me on this phone again" before tossing the handset on the bed. Driver never identifies himself, and in fact the character never receives any sort of identity beyond a designation that links him to his profession as a wheelman. Driver then picks up the bag and walks out of the room. The film never establishes whether this sparsely furnished room represents a studio apartment or simply a temporary motel room, but in either case, it serves as a reflection of the character's solitary, emotionally reserved persona.

The film further demonstrates Driver's stoicism during the sequence that immediately follows the one described above, in which Driver acts as a wheelman for a trio of bank robbers. After the robbery goes bad, two of the criminals burst out of the bank and dive into the back seat of Driver's car as the sound of police sirens grows louder in the distance. Driver steps on the gas and peels away from the bank, and the next five minutes of the film consist of a tense chase sequence in which Driver manages to elude the police, all while remaining cool, calm, and calculating. When the police finally close in, Driver turns into the parking garage of a sports stadium, parks the car, and then gets out and walks away without saying a word or changing his expression, abandoning the criminals to their fate. This sequence serves to establish Driver's emotional rigidity and verbal reticence, and thus align him with the type of quiet loners who typify the Stoic Man archetype.

Unlike the mute One Eye, Driver can speak, but the film quickly establishes him as a man who prefers to let his actions speak louder than his words. Both characters possess an excess of

emotional and physical power conveyed through their hesitance with or complete lack of language. Furthermore, Driver displays the sort of emotional rigidity that defines modern ideas of stoicism; he remains calm and detached at all times, even during tense situations, such as the chase sequence that follows Standard's death, in which Driver must push his preternatural driving skills to the limit in order to escape from some of Bernie and Nino's thugs. Following this sequence, Driver learns that Cook, the man who set up the job that resulted in Standard's death, works at a strip club. Driver enters the club, and without uttering a word he crushes Cook's hand with a hammer. Cook falls to the floor clutching his hand and wailing in pain. Driver calmly pulls a bullet out of his pocket and asks Cook if it looks familiar before placing it against the man's forehead and threatening to hit with the hammer. Driver quietly demands to know who set him up, and the terrified Cook quickly reveals that it was Bernie Rose's associate, Nino. Driver rewards Cook by making him swallow the bullet. Throughout this sequence, Driver rarely speaks, preferring to let his actions convey his deadly intent. Additionally, he remains emotionally disaffected throughout his altercation with Cook, and only ever loses his cool when he finally speaks to Nino on the phone, as indicated by the sweat on Driver's brow and the creak of his leather glove as he tightens his grip on the hammer. Driver personifies the strong, silent type, and this places him in the company of other calm, cool and collected characters like Jef Costello in *Le samouraï* or Joe in *A Fistful of Dollars*.

In addition to emotional rigidity and verbal reticence, the film aligns Driver with other stoic tough guy figures by emphasizing his violence throughout the film, but never more graphically than during a sequence in which Driver crushes a man's head in an elevator. Late in the film, Driver and Irene find themselves in an elevator with a hit man who has been dispatched to kill them. After quickly assessing the situation, Driver kisses Irene tenderly, and then proceeds

to calmly but viciously beat the hit man to death by knocking him down and then stomping on his head until it bursts. When the elevator stops and the doors open, Irene stumbles out and away from Driver, who glances back at her over his shoulder. The look in his eyes indicates that he feels no remorse over what he has just done, and this moment conveys his violent nature. This sequence also serves to reinforce the character's stoic endurance and rugged self-reliance, because while other characters such as Irene may rely on Driver for protection from Bernie and his thugs, Driver relies only on himself and his particular set of skills to ensure his survival.

Like Marsellus Wallace or Mia Wallace in *Pulp Fiction*, both of whom have their reputations elevated to legendary status through other characters speaking about them, Driver has his reputation enlarged by Shannon, who mythologizes Driver to Bernie Rose when trying to borrow money to purchase a stock car and start a race team. Bernie wants to know why he should lend Shannon the money on such a risky venture, and Shannon assures him that with Driver at the wheel, they cannot possibly lose. Bernie dismisses him, saying there are countless drivers out there, but Shannon insists that he's never seen anyone like Driver. He claims that Driver is special, saying "You put this kid behind the wheel, and there is nothing he can't do." With this statement, Shannon effectively mythologizes Driver, elevating him to the status of a legendary figure rather than a human being merely skilled at driving. When considered alongside his lack of history or identity, Driver's supernatural skills, and other characters' reactions to them, position him as an archetypal figure rather than a fully formed character.

Aside from Driver, other male characters in *Drive* also align with recurring archetypal male figures, particularly Bernie Rose and Nino, both of whom represent violent masculinities that evoke the stereotypical masculine figures of mafia films. Their relationship immediately evokes the masculine hierarchies of films like *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas*, and, similar to

Frank and Tonny in *Pusher*, it appears to be based on competition and antagonism more than actual friendship or affection. For instance, early in the film, Bernie has Chinese takeout delivered to Nino's pizzeria, which clearly upsets Nino. This act represents a way for Bernie to assert his masculine power over Nino, and reinforce the hierarchy that exists between them. Furthermore, the fact that Nino owns a pizzeria and wears expensive suits like the stereotypical gangster figures of popular culture demonstrates that he seeks to align himself with such archetypal figures. The film reinforces this alignment through Nino's involvement in violent acts, such as when he orchestrates the job that results in Standard's death. These moments recall mafia films in which the tough mob boss orders a hit on someone who crossed the family, such as in *The Godfather* or *Goodfellas*. Bernie, meanwhile, directly engages in violent behavior, such as when he sticks a fork in his henchman's eye, or when he kills Shannon by slicing his wrist with a straight razor. Both Bernie and Nino align with archetypal male figures like the gangster through their violent and individualistic behavior, while Driver aligns with more heroic archetypes through similar actions.

CONCLUSION

Many of the archetypal male figures that recur throughout popular culture tend to perpetuate and reinforce a very narrow and rigid form of masculinity defined by stoicism, individualism and violence. Figures such as the gunslinger, the gangster, and the samurai often appear as tough, solitary men who rarely speak and settle scores through acts of violence. Refn frequently aligns his male characters with the mythical or mythological masculine ideal represented by these recurring archetypal figures. The films present some characters, such as Frank and Tonny in *Pusher* or Michael Peterson in *Bronson*, in relation to these figures in order

to convey that they conform to traditional sociocultural notions of manliness. Other characters personify this ideal, such as One Eye in *Valhalla Rising* or Driver in *Drive*, both of whom are meant to function as manifestations of archetypal figures rather than fully-formed characters. In each case, the characters draw upon or embody stereotypical masculine traits such as stoicism, individualism and violence, which then become the defining characteristics of their manly identities.

Chapter Two explores how the male characters in Refn's films negotiate between these archetypal male figures represented in pop culture and the physical, mental, and emotional limitations of their real lives. In the case of the characters in *Pusher* and *Bronson*, the men seek to continuously construct persona to align with these figures, but they find themselves in situations where they must confront the constructed natures of their fronts that result from such self-mythologizing. Each film depicts the characters as consciously seeking to present themselves in certain ways, and highlights the tensions that arise when they encounter outside forces that underscore the artifice of such constructions.

Valhalla Rising and *Drive*, meanwhile, illustrate the tensions that result when the ideal masculinity typified by the archetypes encounter the imperfect circumstances of a man's material life. In *Valhalla Rising*, for instance, One Eye does not experience tensions, but instead he serves as an example of dominant masculinity that the other men in the film attempt to emulate. These men endeavor to follow One Eye's example, but tensions arise when the situations they encounter reveal that they do not possess the necessary characteristics to live up to the dominant ideal he represents. Similarly, Driver experiences tensions when he attempts to perform a version of masculinity that does not necessarily reflect the rigid and narrow version of violent masculine ideal he epitomizes. During the course of the film Driver attempts to suppress his violent and

stoic impulses, only to encounter situations that cause him to revert to these qualities. At the same time, similar to the male characters in *Valhalla Rising*, the other male characters in *Drive* seek to align themselves with Driver's dominant masculine ideal. Characters like Shannon and Nino attempt to perform the tough guy archetype that Driver emblematizes, but encounter tensions similar to those experienced by Frank and Tonny in *Pusher* when their tough guy fronts become challenged.

Chapter Two: When Archetypes Encounter Reality

INTRODUCTION

Drawing upon Erving Goffman's (1959) contention that individuals often actively present a constructed self through an overt or active performance meant to control how others perceive them, this chapter explores how Nicolas Winding Refn's films often place an emphasis on the idea that masculinity exists as part of an active performance. Many of the characters in Refn's films perform violent masculine fronts in order to create personal mythologies for themselves as aggressive, emotionally tough individuals who reflect the violent masculine ideal put forth by popular culture. Whereas Chapter One focused on how the films construct and present the male characters to reflect cinematic masculine archetypes, this chapter examines how the characters themselves engage in acts of self-mythologizing in order to construct personae that convey their continuing alignment with the archetype. Characters like Frank and Tonny in *Pusher* and Michael Peterson in *Bronson* actively attempt to align their masculine personae with recurring archetypal male figures like the gangster and the tough guy, and they accomplish this by appropriating and emphasizing traditionally masculine characteristics such as stoicism, individualism and violence in the construction of their masculine personae. Similarly, the Christian Vikings in *Valhalla Rising* and the other male characters in *Drive* seek to emulate the dominant masculine ideal epitomized by the central figures of One Eye and Driver. Across all four films, male characters perform these fronts because they believe these larger-than-life tough guy personae will result in recognition and respect. These fronts, however, become problematic for the characters when the films present situations that challenge the mythologies they have constructed for themselves.

As reflected in the analysis of Chapter One, characters like One Eye in *Valhalla Rising* and Driver in *Drive*, meanwhile, function as personifications of archetypal cinematic figures such as the Man With No Name and the superhero. In real life, these pop culture figures represent powerful masculine ideals for men to emulate or perform in order to convey their own manliness. Refn's films reflect this desire through the performances of the other male characters in each film, who construct their own masculinity in relation to One Eye and Driver. As with Frank and Michael Peterson, these other characters experience tensions, however, when they discover that the larger-than-life identities they attempt to perform do not necessarily reflect their individual circumstances.

While characters such as Shannon and the Christian Vikings construct and perform their tough guy fronts, One Eye and Driver, however, do not need to consciously engage in such activities. The films depict both characters as embodiments of the physical and emotional toughness possessed by archetypal figures. Indeed, throughout the film, One Eye's actions do not waiver from this tough guy persona until the very end. In the case of Driver, the film portrays the character as consciously behaving in ways that run counter to his archetypal nature; Driver's performance indicates a desire to become something other than a violent and stoic individual. His attempts to become more connected to those around him encounter challenges, however, and in such instances Driver's behavior indicates that he reverts to his archetypal nature. In other words, both *Valhalla Rising* and *Drive* present the characters with opportunities to construct personae that deviate from the version of masculinity associated with archetypal tough guy figures, but One Eye and Driver nevertheless continue to behave in ways that align with the violent masculine ideal perpetuated by such figures. Through these various methods, all four

films comment upon the means by which men develop and perform fronts to project a masculine identity they wish others to see.

MASCULINITY AS PERFORMANCE

Goffman (1959) observes that social interaction often functions in a manner similar to a theatrical performance, and that individuals frequently engage in the creation of what he terms a "front" meant to convey carefully controlled information regarding the presentation of the individual's self. A front consists of various pieces of expressive equipment including clothing, sex, age, racial or ethnic characteristics, physical size and looks, patterns of speech, facial expressions, and body language (Goffman, 1959). While some of these signifiers remain relatively fixed over time and across various situations, such as outwardly visible racial characteristics, others vary at any given moment during a performance, like facial expressions or body language (Goffman, 1959). Furthermore, Goffman suggests that gender constitutes an aspect of performance, and that gender display often functions as evidence of the performer's sexual alignment and how they wish to be identified (Saco, 1992). In other words, gender display functions as a way of establishing or transmitting information regarding a performer's preferred sexual orientation, and can alert observers to the performers alignment as heterosexual, homosexual, male, female, masculine, feminine, etc. Ultimately, performance serves to convey information about the social identity of human beings, and as these displays become ritualized through repeated social interaction, they come to signal specific information regarding notions of gender such as masculinity (Saco, 1992).

Anoop Nayak and Mary Jane Kehily (2008) suggest that masculinity exists as a sign encoded with a great deal of cultural significance. Men convey this sign through the way they

perform masculinity in regards to their decisions, actions, costumes, and attitudes, which are often influenced by various cultural institutions such as family, religion, education and media (Kahn, 2009). While men may adopt, resist, or negotiate the meaning of the sign in their performances, Roger Horrocks (1994) contends that society at large conditions men to act violently, and therefore they tend to incorporate violence in the construction of their identities. Similarly, Mark Moss (2011) argues that violence and aggression often represent significant characteristics in contemporary constructions of masculinity, and media portrayals reflect this by celebrating violent or aggressive activities as examples of masculine achievement. Indeed, much of mediated culture centers on male violence, from Hollywood action films to violent sporting or athletic events like the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), the National Football League (NFL), or World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), as well as violent and misogynistic music such as rap and heavy metal (Moss, 2011).

The idea that popular culture celebrates male violence becomes vital to the consideration of how media images inform men's ideas regarding masculinity, especially if, as Moss (2011) argues, media images represent a significant factor in the construction of masculine identities. Indeed, appropriation of media images often informs the development of identity, and media consumers frequently construct their identities based on their engagement with a media text (Reinhard, 2008). Furthermore, research reveals that media appropriation commonly contributes to the construction of cultural and sexual identity (Durham, 2004; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000). For instance, Jeanne R. Steele and Jane D. Brown (1995) observed that adolescents actively appropriate specific aspects from the media texts they consume, and incorporate elements from those texts into the presentation of their own emerging identities. Additionally, Diana Saco (1992) explains that gender performance in social situations often conforms to displays of gender

in media texts. Thus, men can learn how to perform masculinity from engaging with media texts, which often include archetypal figures that perpetuate and reinforce notions of male violence and sexual aggression.

The male characters in *Pusher* and *Bronson* exert conscious, active control over their personae by performing a version of masculinity informed by the violent male figures that recur throughout popular culture. Frank and Tonny draw upon images from gangster films, action movies, and rap and heavy metal music in order to perform a masculine front that conveys notions of violence and sexual aggression, and they do this in order to gain respect from and exert power over others. Michael Peterson, meanwhile, appropriates and performs a persona that conforms to iconic Hollywood tough guys in order to compensate for a perceived lack of masculine power resulting from his low socioeconomic status. Both One Eye in *Valhalla Rising* and Driver in *Drive* function as personifications of recurring violent archetypal figures in pop culture such as the gunslinger, samurai, superhero, and Viking, while the men surrounding them perform tough guy identities in order to be more like the ideal represented by One Eye or Driver. Additionally, Driver attempts to perform other versions of masculinity in order to establish a sense of humanity that contradicts his archetypal nature. In one way or another, all of Refn's male characters perform a masculinity influenced by pop cultural notions of manliness, which often result in constructing and perpetuating violent, tough guy fronts.

The following sections explore how the characters in Refn's films construct and/or present their masculine personae through performance, and how they then navigate the tensions that arise when their constructed identities or mythological natures encounter reality. This clash between personal mythology and reality is similar to that experienced by the characters in *Pulp Fiction*, many of whom construct larger-than-life cool fronts for themselves through the act of

self-mythologizing, but then experience tensions when outside forces challenge their personal mythologies (Seitz, 2014). For instance, Vincent Vega presents himself as a cool and competent hit man throughout the film, yet *Pulp Fiction* continually challenges his constructed persona by placing him in situations where his coolness and competency come into question. The most notable instance occurs following Mia Wallace's overdose after she mistakes heroin for cocaine: Vincent panics and drives the dying Mia to the house of his dealer, Lance. While there, the two argue about who will give her the adrenaline shot which should revive her, and Vincent admits that he has no idea what to do in this situation. The panicking and admission represent a crack in his cool façade, and thus demonstrates that tensions can arise when a character's self-mythology encounters reality. For characters such as Vincent, situations presented in the film challenge how they see themselves as cool; they can then either acknowledge the constructed nature of their personae, or they can ignore these challenges.

Similarly, in Refn's films, male characters construct tough guy fronts in how they present themselves to others, but then find themselves in situations that challenge the reliance they have on such performances. The films present tensions wherein the characters could acknowledge the futility of such performances to their lives but choose not to. The following analysis considers how Refn's male characters self-mythologize by aligning their masculine identities with a violent masculine ideal, and how they subsequently experience tensions when those identities encounter the realities of their personal circumstances.

THE MEN OF *PUSHER*

Both Frank and Tonny enact the sort of violent and aggressive masculinity most closely associated with the gangster/gangsta archetype in order to establish fronts that will allow them to

gain the sort of power they desire. Through their choice of costume, body modification, the music they listen to, and the way they interact with others, Frank and Tonny both seek to perform a violent and hypersexual version of masculinity. Frank and Tonny incorporate elements from pop culture into their own identities in order to project a front of violent, sexually aggressive machismo they associate with notions of respect and power. The film, however, repeatedly places the characters in situations in which they must confront the artifice of their performance, and tensions that arise during these confrontation between personal mythology and reality reveal the tough guy fronts as problematic for the men's lives.

Contemporary media texts repeatedly offer glamorized and idealized images of tough urban youth striking cool poses, and thus the hyperviolent black male body and urban street style have become powerful images of manhood or masculine power for boys and young men regardless of ethnicity (Jhally, Earp & Katz, 1999). Furthermore, the stereotypical image of the angry, hypervirile, hypermasculine gangsta rapper has emerged as the chief conceptualization of black masculinity on an international scale thanks to the increasing globalization of media (Rehling, 2009). Men around the world frequently appropriate this image into their own masculine personae in order to project a front of coolness, virility, and toughness associated with this idealized version of black masculinity (Rehling, 2009). This cool pose serves to emphasize physical or emotional hardness, and thus reinforce an individual's manliness while simultaneously hiding or suppressing feelings of insecurity and self-doubt (Greene, 2008). Men will often affect this front in order to gain admiration and respect through an emphasis on emotional toughness, physical strength, and the threat of violence (Jhally, Earp & Katz, 1999).

Respect represents a vital component of masculinity, and many men consider a lack of respect as a challenge to their authority or power (Moss, 2011). The notion that wealth, power,

and physical toughness all contribute to a man's respectability has been perpetuated and reinforced by gangster films as diverse as *The Godfather*, *Goodfellas*, *Mean Streets*, *Scarface*, *Black Caesar*, and *New Jack City*. In *Pusher*, both Frank and Tonny hail from the sort of low socioeconomic conditions that do not automatically grant them the sort of wealth, power, and respect they desire. In order to compensate for this shortcoming, they project a form of classed and racialized masculinity that demands such respect: gangsta and hip hop. In many ways, Tonny's "RESPECT" tattoo, prominently displayed on the back of his shaved head, represents perhaps the most significant visual sign in the film, because it explicates his desire for respect. Frank and Tonny both belong to a generation of young males for whom black culture and urban style define coolness and toughness; both men came of age during the 1980s and early 1990s, when pop culture institutions such as MTV brought increased awareness to rap and hip hop music, allowing urban black street style to enter mainstream culture (Jhally, Earp & Katz, 1999). In an attempt to emulate these glamorized images of the black male, Frank and Tonny wear uniforms consisting almost entirely of track suits, hoodies, sneakers and gold chains. Clothing constitutes an important aspect in the realm of performance, and often functions as a way for a performer to convey or inhabit a particular social role (Goffmann, 1959). Frank and Tonny's masculine costumes carry significant cultural overtones due to an association with hip hop and gangsta rap, as well as gangster culture (Bengtsson, 2012). Frank and Tonny incorporate these visual signifiers into their appearance so as to present a hypervirile and hyperviolent form of masculinity they otherwise do not possess and thus gain respect from others.

Beyond clothing, the film provides other visual cues meant to convey the idea that Frank and Tonny appropriate media images into their constructed masculine persona. For instance, the pictures and posters that decorate the walls of Frank's apartment indicate that he actively

constructs his persona in relation to archetypal media figures such as the gangster and the hyperviolent, hypersexualized black male. During their study of adolescent bedroom culture, Steele and Brown (1995) observed that media appropriation frequently manifests in the form of room decorations, and they contend that posters, collages, and other media artifacts often provide insight into the identity of the individual. *Pusher* reflects this observation, particularly during an early sequence in which a shirtless Frank admires himself in a mirror. The shot composition reveals two pictures taped to the mirror: one of Tony Montana during the climactic shootout in *Scarface*, and the other of John Shaft brandishing a large gun in the movie *Shaft*. Montana represents an example of the archetypal gangster figure, while Shaft represents an example of the idealized black male figure that has come to be closely associated with notions of male coolness and toughness. These images function as intertextual references indicating that Frank constructs his own masculine persona in relation to these iconic media figures in order to compensate for his low socioeconomic status and physical shortcomings. Earlier in this same sequence, the film reveals that Frank has a poster featuring then-popular heavy metal band White Zombie hanging on his bedroom wall, which indicates that he also draws upon the imagery and iconography of heavy metal music and culture in the construction and presentation of his self.

Heavy metal music and culture represent key aspects of Frank and Tonny's masculine personae, and the film primarily conveys this through the music they listen to, which consists almost entirely of thrashing guitars, pounding drums, and wailing vocals. Heavy metal lyrics often emphasize violence and sexuality, and heavy metal music videos and performances frequently offer exaggerated or stereotyped imitations of masculine behaviors through aggressive posturing and sexual gestures (Denski & Sholle, 1992). Frank and Tonny incorporate these notions of violence and aggressive sexuality into their own masculine personae through visual

imagery such as tattoos that feature the sort of demonic, violent imagery often associated with heavy metal.

The film further reinforces this appropriation of heavy metal during a sequence in which Frank dances around Vic's apartment to a heavy metal song, playing air guitar while holding a skull in a manner that echoes images from numerous heavy metal videos. This brief sequence suggests that Frank has incorporated aspects of heavy metal into his masculine performance, in order to convey specific information regarding his toughness and sexuality. Furthermore, heavy metal also functions as a way to counteract the sense of disenfranchisement that results from Frank and Tonny's lower socioeconomic status. Heavy metal primarily appeals to working-class individuals with low levels of education, because the music and culture represent a way for alienated individuals to establish a sense of self, and reclaim a sense of power in the face of limited opportunities (Denski & Sholle, 1992). Heavy metal frequently offers disenfranchised young men images of wealth, power, and aggressive sexuality, and Frank and Tonny actively appropriate these images into their own personae in order to convey that they also possess such qualities. Therefore, by appropriating and incorporating aspects of heavy metal into their masculine personae, Frank and Tonny indicate a desire to assert their masculine identities and transcend their lower class origins.

In effect, Frank and Tonny have constructed mythologies for themselves as violent, tough guy drug dealers in order to compensate for a perceived lack of masculine power. These constructed personae, however, do not necessarily reflect Frank and Tonny's realities, which involve circumstances and situations that often serve to counteract or destabilize the larger-than-life masculine front that both men seek to project. Similar to the characters in *Pulp Fiction*, such as Winston Wolf (who flatly announces that he solves problems) or Jody (who regales her guests

with tales of her numerous piercings), Frank and Tonny continually enlarge their own masculine personae through acts of self-mythologizing. Tensions arise, however, when their personal fronts or façades encounter outside forces, such as the reality of their lives and the narrative events of the film.

The film repeatedly challenges Frank and Tonny's desire for respect by emphasizing that other characters actually have little respect for either of them. Indeed, despite their mutual desire for respect, Frank and Tonny do not even appear to respect one another. For example, during the sequence in which the two men brag about their sexual conquests, Tonny jokingly declares that he had sex with Frank's mother, and then mocks Frank for getting upset. Rather than disrespecting Frank's mother, however, Tonny's comment represents an attempt to situate himself as superior to Frank, as indicated by his disregard for Frank's feelings. Tonny's actions frequently indicate that he does not respect Frank, such as when they visit a fancy restaurant near the beginning of the film. Tonny asks if he can taste Frank's cognac, and when Frank offers him the glass, Tonny dips his finger in and laughs when Frank becomes upset. Rather than apologize, Tonny takes the glass and downs the contents, only to spit them back into the glass and hand it back to Frank. Later, when Tonny attempts to demonstrate a roundhouse kick and twists his ankle in the process, Frank initially laughs at him. Furthermore, Frank's clients repeatedly disrespect him through their refusal to pay him on time, or in their attempts to pass off lactose and baking powder as heroin. These sequences indicate that even though both characters construct and perform tough guy personae meant to inspire respect, they do not receive respect from others, which represents a tension between their personal mythologies and the realities of their individual situations.

The film also reinforces the contradiction that Frank and Tonny do not physically conform to the types of muscular, hypermasculine bodies often associated with the masculine ideal perpetuated by media images. Frank, in particular, does not embody the physical qualities most often associated with the hard bodied male figures displayed in gangsta rap videos or action films. During an early sequence, Frank walks around his apartment without a shirt, revealing his soft body and pronounced gut. He clearly does not possess the sort of powerfully muscled male body often associated with the action heroes he clearly admires. The film accentuates this when Frank sits beneath a *Mad Max* poster hanging on the wall above his couch; the shot composition emphasizes the idea that Frank does not measure up to muscular cinematic icons like Mel Gibson. Frank then admires himself in a mirror next to a poster of Bruce Lee from the film *Fists of Fury*, and the juxtaposition highlights that Frank's soft, doughy body falls far short of the hypermasculine ideal represented by Lee's hard, lean, and sinewy muscularity. Later, after Frank's drug deal goes bad, he flees from the police, but cannot lose them, so he jumps into a nearby lake and dumps the heroin. As the police fish him out, Frank laments his lack of physical prowess, breathlessly muttering "I'm out of shape." Each of these incidents reinforces the idea that Frank's physical reality does not match the mythologized ideal he seeks to emulate through the construction of his manly persona.

Finally, while Frank projects an image of hypervirility and hypersexuality, he never engages in any sexual activity with women in the film, outside of some shameless flirting at a dance club. For example, early in the film, Frank boasts that he regularly has sex with Vic, but then later admits to Tonny that he hasn't actually slept with her because she works as a prostitute and he refuses to pay for sex. Frank appears nervous during this confession, which may indicate anxiety over how Tonny will react to the information, but could also represent a larger fear of

sex on Frank's part. The film reinforces the notion that Frank might harbor anxieties regarding sex later in the film, when Vic attempts to initiate intercourse to thank Frank for buying her new lingerie. Vic crawls into Frank's lap and starts kissing his neck, but rather than go along with it, Frank slaps Vic and pushes her away. This act reinforces Frank's violent persona, but it also serves as an indication that sex makes Frank uncomfortable, which does not align with the sexual aggressiveness he performs in order to establish his masculine power. In highlighting Frank's lack of respect, physical shortcomings, inability to control his emotions, and sexual anxiety, the film demonstrates that tensions arise when his performance of his personal mythology encounters the limits of his reality.

THE MEN OF *BRONSON*

Like Frank, Michael Peterson attempts to mythologize himself by performing a violent masculine identity rooted in the screen personae of iconic Hollywood tough guys like Charles Bronson. Peterson's low socioeconomic status and discernible lack of talent does not automatically afford him the sort of power and respect he craves, and this lack compels him to perform a violent masculinity that he believes will allow him to attain these things. Furthermore, Peterson spends much of his adult life in prison, an environment designed to suppress individual identity, and therefore Peterson must overcompensate in the construction and presentation of his persona in order to reclaim a sense of identity. According to Yvonne Jewkes (2002), imprisonment frequently represents a dehumanizing experience that consists of deprivations designed to weaken a prisoner's sense of self. Additionally, the prison environment often encourages traditionally masculine values such as aggression, violence and dominance, and inmates who wish to survive and thrive in this environment actively construct fronts designed to

project these qualities (de Viggiani, 2012). Therefore, in order to establish a reputation for himself as "Britain's most violent prisoner," Peterson constructs and performs an extreme tough guy persona specifically designed to exert power and dominance over others while commanding notions of fear and/or respect. The film reinforces Peterson's need to display his physical power and emotional toughness through choices in blocking and cinematography. Refn employs these techniques to highlight the tensions that occur when Peterson's front or personal mythology encounters outside forces such as authority or the limits of his own physical power.

Bronson opens with Peterson staring directly into the camera and announcing, "All my life I wanted to be famous." He explains that he believes he was meant for better things, and that he "had a calling" but cannot sing or act. The film then cuts to a shot of Peterson naked in a cage preparing to fight, followed by a series of shots in which the camera lingers on his thickly muscled body as he stalks around the cell, doing push-ups and shadow-boxing. A group of prison guards enter and attack Peterson, who eagerly fights back in a thrillingly shot and choreographed sequence that utilizes long takes to emphasize the violence. The sequence recalls the violent spectacle of macho Hollywood films such as *Commando, 300,* and *Rambo III*, in which a lone, hard bodied hero battles against overwhelming odds. The guards ultimately prevail, leaving Peterson a bloody mess on the floor, but the film immediately cuts to a shot of Peterson looking into the camera and laughing. This shot indicates that Peterson enjoys the violence, and seems to realize it represents his ticket to fame.

In order to achieve his goal of fame and respect, Peterson actively performs an over-the-top version of masculinity that draws heavily upon the violent iconography of archetypal Hollywood tough guys, particularly in the construction of his alter ego, Charlie Bronson. Peterson develops this persona during a meeting with Paul, a former cellmate who agrees to help

him break into the underground bareknuckle boxing circuit. Paul suggests that Peterson adopt a fighting name, and Peterson suggests "Charlton Heston." Paul dismisses the idea, and proposes the name Charles Bronson instead. For a time in the 1970s and early 1980s, Bronson was considered the quintessential Hollywood tough guy (Downing, 1983), and by appropriating his name and persona Peterson constructs and embodies an identity primarily associated with physical and emotional toughness.

Peterson's masculine performance also includes his powerfully muscled body, which represents the ultimate physical expression of his tough guy persona. Peterson possesses what Peter Lehman (1993) terms a "phallic male body" (p. 51). The phallic male possesses a body that connotes masculine power through its penis-like qualities, which include pronounced veins, a massive head, and remaining erect and tensed for action at any moment (Horrocks, 1994). Furthermore, muscles act as a visual signifier of masculine power, and signal an ability to physically dominate others through strength (Lehman, 1993). More importantly, the male body often represents a location for visual spectacle in cinema, particularly through the display of muscularity (Lichtenfeld, 2004). This type of display situates the body as a site of punishment and endurance, and establishes reverence for the physique by highlighting its exaggerated nature and agility (Lichtenfeld, 2004).

Michael Peterson's phallic body allows him to visibly convey his tough guy persona through extreme muscularity and physical strength. For instance, the opening sequence described above immediately establishes Peterson's masculine power by highlighting his physical strength and aggression. Later, Peterson takes a prison librarian hostage and torments him before stripping naked, covering himself with grease and once again fighting with the prison guards. During this sequence, Peterson puts his massively muscled body on display as a way of

intimidating the physically smaller and less powerful man. Similarly, during the film's climax, Peterson strips naked when he takes the prison art teacher, Mr. Danielson, hostage. Ben Shupe (2012) argues that *Bronson* codes Danielson as effeminate through his appearance and behavior; unlike the powerfully masculine prisoners he oversees, Danielson prances around and makes limp-wristed gestures when he speaks, and his body lacks any sort of muscular definition. Shupe contends that this depiction establishes Danielson as weak and emphasizes his lack of masculine power, especially when compared to the obviously more physically powerful Peterson. At the same time, however, Danielson works for the prison system that seeks to suppress Peterson's violent masculinity, and therefore he represents power and authority. Thus, Peterson's display of his phallic body during this sequence represents an attempt to visually assert his physical power over a man who embodies another, less physically imposing version of masculinity, as well as an attempt to establish his dominance over authority.

The film also utilizes this sort of phallic imagery to challenge Peterson's tough guy performance. Richard Dyer (1992) observes that the phallus represents an important symbol of male power, and that it has often been equated to a weapon men use to terrify or establish supremacy over others. *Bronson* frequently makes use of phallic imagery as a way of conveying Peterson's own desire to assert his masculine dominance. For instance, early in the film, Peterson robs a bank with a sawed off shot gun, holding it near his crotch while thrusting his hips suggestively. This shot links the weapon to the power of the phallus, and provides visual overcompensation for Peterson's lack of social power. Later, the prison art teacher encourages Peterson's artistic talent, and this causes Peterson to briefly consider a new mythology for himself as a famous and well-respected painter. Believing that this newfound interest in art indicates a desire to reform, the art teacher arranges a meeting between Peterson and the warden.

As they approach the warden, Peterson holds the rolled up pages of his artwork near his crotch in a manner clearly meant to evoke his penis, indicating that Peterson's artwork, which includes some rather violent and disturbing imagery, now functions as an extension of his masculine persona. The art teacher takes the paintings from Peterson, who initially refuses to relinquish them, and hands them to the warden, who dismisses them. This act not only represents a symbolic castration or emasculation of Peterson's phallic power, it also has the effect of diminishing the new self-mythology he has crafted for himself. Therefore, in order to regain a sense of power and reassert his tough guy persona over those who would suppress it, Peterson takes the art teacher hostage and torments him during the film's climax. Thus, repeatedly throughout the film, Peterson's phallic compensations result in tensions between the front he constructs and the reality of his incarceration.

The film further reinforces Peterson's overt "performance" of violent masculinity by depicting him on stage performing for a live audience, or having him speak directly to the camera as he relates his life story to the viewer. Rather than allowing the viewer to actively experience Peterson's mental or emotional subjectivity, the conceit of placing the character on stage instead allows him to consciously reinforce his tough guy front. Peterson takes control of his persona during these sequences, and counteracts moments in the film during which his tough front becomes destabilized. This framing device allows Peterson to overtly control his identity through the conveyance of selected information in a manner that reflects Goffman's (1959) assertion that individuals will actively highlight certain characteristics in order to control how others perceive them. For example, following his court hearing, the guards escort Peterson to his cell and lock him inside. Peterson begins to cry, an act that reveals his tough and emotionally rigid persona as nothing more than a false front. Rather than explore the effects of Peterson's

emotional trauma, however, the film immediately cuts to a shot of him on stage and facing the camera, painted like a clown and laughing in an exaggerated manner. Through this edit, the film contrasts his emotional breakdown in the real world with that of the tough guy persona he has constructed for himself in his own mind. The clown makeup further reinforces Peterson's attempt to hide any sign of emotional weakness, and allows him to appear jolly despite his fear and anxiety regarding his imprisonment. Furthermore, Peterson claims during this sequence that he considers himself a comedian, implying his expression of "weak" emotions represents a joke rather than the truth. This sequence serves to reinforce the idea that Peterson actively seeks to convince the viewer that his fear and anxiety constitute a performance, while his tough guy persona constitutes reality.

While Peterson physically conforms to the hypermasculine ideal often associated with Hollywood tough guys, the film frequently uses the presentation of his body destabilize his tough guy front. Peterson often appears naked throughout the film, and in these sequences he seeks to display his extreme muscularity to signal his physical power and establish dominance over others. During these nude scenes, however, Peterson's penis remains flaccid and limp, which serves to weaken his masculine power and reinforce the idea that his toughness exists as part of his masculine performance. The erect penis represents an important symbol of male power and achievement, while the flaccid penis indicates weakness and an inability to perform as a man (Plummer, 2005). Thus, the juxtaposition of the phallic body with the flaccid penis represents a tension between Peterson's performance of strength and the reality of his vulnerability. The film reinforces Peterson's weakness through his nakedness, particularly during the sequences in which he takes the librarian hostage and torments the prison art teacher. Both sequences end with a naked Peterson battling the prison guards, who wield nightsticks that recall a fully erect and

engorged penis. Peterson manages to hold the guards off for a time, but ultimately he succumbs to their assault, his flaccid penis no match for the overwhelming power of their phallic weaponry.

Additionally, while the sequences in which Peterson appears on stage allow him to perpetuate his tough guy persona, they simultaneously highlight the tensions that arise when his performance of masculinity encounters his reality. For instance, early in the film, prison guards escort Peterson to a new cell while other inmates cheer for him as he passes. The cheering grows steadily louder as non-diegetic orchestral music swells on the soundtrack. The cheers eventually become disproportionate to the number of inmates shown, and this incongruity indicates that much of the adulation exists in Peterson's mind and does not reflect the reality of his situation. The film reinforces this perception as the other inmates and guards that Peterson passes do not seem to be overly impressed with him. Later, Peterson attempts to kill a fellow inmate at Rampton Secure Hospital, because he believes this violent act will send him back to prison. Following this incident, however, Peterson sits in a tiny cell looking dejected and almost remorseful, because his personal mythology has encountered an undesirable reality. The film then dissolves to a shot of Peterson onstage with half his face painted to resemble the nurse who informs him of the decision to send him to Broadmoor Asylum for the criminally insane. During his reenactment of the conversation, Peterson grows physically upset and anxious, revealing an emotional vulnerability that diminishes his toughness. As with similar moments throughout the film, this sequence serves to highlight the tensions that arise when Peterson's personal mythology encounters outside forces such as governmental authority, and the break in his emotionally tough façade reinforces his need to perform such a constructed masculine performance.

THE MEN OF *VALHALLA RISING*

Whereas the male characters in *Pusher* and *Bronson* draw upon media images in the construction and presentation of their masculine personae, the protagonists of *Valhalla Rising* and *Drive* function as manifestations or personifications of archetypal male figures that recur throughout popular culture and perpetuate and reinforce a specific version of masculinity. *Valhalla Rising* in particular situates its lead male character as an idealization of a violent masculinity rather than an actual character. In a review written for the magazine *Film Comment*, critic Jonathan Romney (2010) refers to One Eye as the "mythical ur-thug of a distant age, before the Norse lineage devolved" (p. 29). In other words, rather than develop One Eye as a fully formed character, the film instead constructs and presents him as the personification of an archetypal masculine ideal primarily associated with physical violence, emotional toughness, and individualism. Nothing from One Eye's actions suggest he could be otherwise. Furthermore, the Christian Vikings attempt to align their own personae with this ideal in order to be successful in the world of the film. As the film demonstrates, however, this performance often clashes with outside forces that challenge their constructed fronts, producing tensions between what they seek to convey and the reality of their circumstances.

As previously discussed, the film presents One Eye as an archetypal figure through his construction as a highly violent, stoic, and individualistic character. The film furthers this construction through his lack of identity. In his examination of the "No Name" figures in Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns and Clint Eastwood's later domestic Westerns, Dennis Bingham (1994) asserts that the absence of an identity frees the "No Name" figure from direct connection with any historical or societal context. Furthermore, Bingham contends that this figure recurs

throughout popular culture, appearing in films such as *High Plains Drifter*, *The Road Warrior*, and *They Live*, rendering the figure an archetype completely detached from the designation of "character." *Valhalla Rising* establishes One Eye as another manifestation of this "No Name" figure by highlighting his lack of distinctiveness; he possesses neither a name nor identity of his own. Furthermore, none of the characters in the film appear to have any conclusive knowledge regarding One Eye's origin, indicating that he does not have a history, thus detaching him from any sort of historical or societal context. The only indication of where he originated comes from the repeated assertion that One Eye emerged from Hell, suggesting a mystical origin that further separates One Eye from those around him.

In addition to a lack of identity, the film also highlights One Eye's lack of agency in order to establish him as an archetypal figure rather than a fully-developed character. Writing about Refn's male protagonists, film critic Langdon Palmer (2011) asserts that One Eye displays little sense of agency throughout the film, beyond ensuring his own survival through acts of violence. Palmer's interpretation echoes Bingham's (1994) assertion that the "No Name" figure's entire existence concerns nothing beyond his own Darwinian survival needs, thus positioning him as a manifestation of the ego whose actions center primarily on notions of self-glorification and furthering his own existence. In *Valhalla Rising*, One Eye's only real agency manifests in the form of acts of extreme violence meant to ensure his own survival, such as when he kills his captors during his escape. Following this act, one of the Viking chieftains explains that hate motivates One Eye to survive, and this represents the only explanation the film offers for One Eye's actions. Otherwise, he remains a largely passive character, allowing others to dictate his actions, such as when he joins the Christian Vikings on their crusade simply because they ask him to, or later when he drinks a powerful hallucinogenic simply because they offer it to him.

One Eye appears to have little conscious choice over his actions, except when the situation involves survival.

Additionally, One Eye shows little to no interest in making connections with those around him. Indeed, when he first encounters the Christian Vikings, the film frames One Eye as separate from their community. The film conveys this through a series of shots that emphasize One Eye's solitary nature, while simultaneously reinforcing the communal aspect of the Christian Vikings. After their first encounter with One Eye and Are, the film cuts to a shot of the Christian Vikings seated close together and facing the camera. The framing of the shot serves to establish their close-knit group unity. The film then cuts to a shot of One Eye and Are seated apart from the group. More importantly, while One Eye and Are sit near one another, the film nevertheless positions them at opposite ends of the frame with a noticeable gap between them. This series of shots emphasizes and reinforces One Eye's construction and presentation as a solitary individual, one that he perpetuates through his actions; while he may enter the community, he can never truly become a part of it. Thus, a tension exists between the Christian Vikings and One Eye during their first encounter, and at other times in the film, as the Christian Vikings come to question their decision to follow him. They do follow him, however, because of the archetypal ideal he represents.

Rather than a fully developed character, the film positions One Eye as an embodiment of the violence, cunning, and emotional toughness required to survive in the harsh and violent world of *Valhalla Rising*. Therefore, he comes to function as a manifestation of the dominant masculine ideal that defines this world, existing within the narrative as an archetypal figure that other male characters seek to emulate for their own survival and their own glorification of self. According to Jack S. Kahn (2009), dominant masculinity represents a societal ideal that often

dictates male behavior. In the excessively brutal world of *Valhalla Rising*, being male consists primarily of violence, and One Eye reflects this through his violent nature. The Christian Vikings seek to align their personae with the dominant ideal that One Eye represents in order to ensure their own survival in the world of the film. As the film repeatedly demonstrates, however, this desire ultimately results in tensions for these other characters, as they attempt to perform a masculinity that does not completely align with their true nature. This tension echoes Kahn's (2009) assertion that dominant masculinity remains out of reach for most men, because they do not meet the prerequisite characteristics of this societal ideal.

The Christian Vikings begin to experience these tensions upon meeting One Eye, while the film simultaneously conveys their desire to appropriate his powerful masculinity when they invite him to join their crusade. The film introduces the Christians Vikings in the aftermath of a battle that killed men and left women naked and huddled in fear; however, the film does not clearly demonstrate that these Vikings were the ones responsible for the battle, as they could have arrived afterwards and claimed the victory as their own. Thus, the film suggests that the Christian Vikings may not be embodiments of the masculine ideal needed for success in this world. Indeed, they may be aware of their lacking, as the chieftain of the Christian Vikings in particular appears eager to One Eye join them on their journey to Jerusalem because he considers One Eye a good fighter. This acknowledgement of One Eye's defining ability as a warrior indicates that the chieftain recognizes his violent power, and inviting him into the group signifies a desire to align with that power. Indeed, the chieftain speaks of the glory and riches that await them in the Holy Land, and his enthusiastic desire to incorporate One Eye into the group seems to indicate that he believes it will be easier to attain these rewards if he associates himself with

One Eye's powerful presence. The chieftain sees One Eye as a model for success in this world, and believes that One Eye's presence will help them emulate the behaviors necessary to succeed.

At the same time, however, some of the Christian Vikings regard One Eye warily, and appear apprehensive about letting him join their group. Some of the men even seem to fear his power, such as the chieftain's son, who retreats rather than fight One Eye during their initial confrontation. These sequences serve to establish that tensions exist among the Christian Vikings, who seem to desire One Eye's presence and power, and yet fear it at the same time. While the Christian Vikings seek to align with or acquire One Eye's power, they never draw physically close to him as Are does, indicating their constant state of wariness regarding that power. Furthermore, after their ship has been blown off course and they find themselves lost in a strange land, one of the Vikings condemns One Eye for leading them there in the first place. This condemnation suggests an anxiety on the part of the Christian Vikings, who seem to realize that their insistence on incorporating One Eye's dominant masculinity into their own personae has caused them to lose their way. During the film's climax, however, the remaining Christian Vikings follow One Eye through this strange new land, trusting that he will lead them to salvation. Thus, while they appear distrustful of the sort of dominant masculine power that One Eye represents, they nevertheless desire it and seek to align with it throughout the film.

Furthermore, a tension exists in One Eye's competence compared to that of the Christian Vikings. While the Christian Vikings express a desire to be viewed as powerful and violent men, the film never shows them actually engaging in such violent performance. Instead, the film simply displays the aftermath of such violence, or conveys their desire to engage in violence, but only One Eye ever actually performs violence within the film. The Christian Vikings seem incapable compared to the ideal before them. Additionally, *Valhalla Rising* repeatedly positions

One Eye as the symbolic man able to survive in this world; he knows when to drink the water after being adrift on the ocean for days; he knows how to handle the hallucinogenic the Vikings imbibe before going into battle; and he knows where to go to find the ocean at the end of the film. The Christian Vikings, meanwhile, represent both inability and incompetence, which the film conveys by showing them drink salt water, repeatedly losing their mental and emotional stoicism, and being unable to determine where to go when they find themselves lost in the strange new world. The Christian Vikings follow One Eye down a path they believe will bring them riches and glory, but in following him and chasing after these things, they ultimately lose themselves. Thus, throughout the film, their attempt to emulate the dominant masculine ideal results in tensions within and among the Christian Vikings as they proved unable to align their true nature with One Eye's example of dominant masculinity.

THE MEN OF *DRIVE*

As with *Valhalla Rising*, *Drive* positions Driver as a personification of the masculine ideal perpetuated in men's action cinema, and uses the other characters to explore how men appropriate and incorporate this ideal into their own personae through performance. Furthermore, the film demonstrates that this particular masculine ideal often remains incompatible with more socially acceptable forms of masculinity through Driver's attempts to suppress his archetypal male power and forge relationships with his neighbor, Irene, and her son, Benicio. Ultimately, the film highlights the performances of the male characters in order to demonstrate that the type of violent yet heroic masculinity perpetuated by Hollywood represents an unsustainable model for men, and those that attempt to align their personae with it encounter tensions when it conflicts with their personal realities.

Similar to how *Valhalla Rising* positions One Eye, *Drive* emphasizes Driver's lack of identity in order to position him as an archetypal figure rather than a fully-developed character. Desirée de Jesus (2012) observes that Driver remains as anonymous as the cars he drives during his heist jobs. Indeed, none of the characters in the film have any knowledge about Driver's origins or where he came from, and the film makes this explicit when Shannon tells Irene, "You know, he walked into my shop here about five or six years ago, right out of the blue." Furthermore, none of the characters seem to know Driver's real name, instead referring to him simply as Kid or Driver throughout the film. Like One Eye, the film constructs and presents Driver as one of the "No Name" figures described by Bingham (1994), and thus he exists as an archetypal figure rather than a fully formed character.

Through his positioning within the film, Driver primarily functions as an embodiment of the heroic masculine ideal, particularly through his construction and presentation as a superhero figure. Superheroes represent a popular symbol of maleness and machismo, and they reinforce a stereotypical masculine ideal associated with notions of power, control, and violence (Pecora, 1992). *Drive* positions Driver as a superhero figure, complete with his own costume and emblem in the form of a silver jacket with a golden scorpion on the back. He even sometimes wears a mask when dispatching evildoers, such as when he kills Nino near the end of the film. Furthermore, Driver's positioning as a Man With No Name figure serves to reinforce his construction as a superhero. Neale (1992) contends that these "No Name" figures often possess unchecked, nearly godlike powers within a film's narrative, and thus they become positioned as idealized figures that reflect male fantasies and desires, not unlike the superhero figure.

Like One Eye, then, Driver exists within the film as an embodiment or personification of the dominant masculine ideal, and, at times, his performance reinforces his stoic, violent, and

individualistic nature. He rarely speaks or shows any emotion; his violence is sudden; and he seeks to solve problems on his own. Unlike One Eye, however, Driver displays more agency throughout the film, particularly in his attempts to suppress or contain his archetypal self. Driver often acts in ways that represent a desire to perform an identity that will allow him to forge a connection with others, and thus connect with his own sense of humanity. Driver actively attempts to perform a more sensitive and emotionally vulnerable form of masculinity when he tries to develop a close, familial relationship with Irene and Benicio. Driver spends the early part of the film endeavoring to establish these relationships, and the film demonstrates the fondness he feels for them through sequences meant to convey his attempts to forge either romantic or familial bonds. For example, Driver takes them for a drive through the Los Angeles aqueducts in order to impress Benicio and spend time with Irene. The film reinforces Driver's connection to Irene during a sequence in which they hold hands, and the camera slowly zooms in on their intertwined fingers. Furthermore, this relationship allows Driver to connect or reconnect with his own human emotions as demonstrated through Driver's smile, which only appears when he spends time with Irene and Benicio.

However, tensions arise for the character due to this performance, and these tensions result in his reversion back to the archetypal nature. When Irene's husband, Standard, returns home from prison, he interrupts Driver's attempts to connect and prevents him from attaining his goal of appearing human. Following Standard's return, Driver immediately retreats into his archetypal persona, as evidenced during a sequence when he stops at a diner. A man approaches Driver, explaining that they worked together, and that he would like to hire Driver for an upcoming job. Before the other man can launch into his pitch, however, Driver fixes him with a steely-eyed gaze and says, "How 'bout this? You shut your mouth. Or I'll kick your teeth down

your throat and I'll shut it for you." The other man backs away in fear, and Driver quietly goes back to eating as though nothing had happened. Driver's violent retort represents a sharp contrast from the behavior previously shown in his scenes with Irene and Benicio. This crack in his more tender front illustrates the tension that exists between an archetypal cinematic masculinity and a more grounded or realistic version.

Additionally, the film explores how this type of masculinity affects men by highlighting the tensions that arise when other characters attempt to perform or align their personae with it. Such tensions can be seen particularly with Shannon and Nino, whose realities do not necessarily reflect the fronts they attempt to project. Throughout the film, Shannon attempts to align his own masculine persona with the ideal that Driver represents in order to establish himself as a powerful figure. Much like Are and One Eye, Shannon follows and devotes himself to Driver. Whereas *Valhalla Rising* positions Are as a surrogate son to One Eye, Shannon functions as a father figure to Driver, but still lives in his shadow. Even though the film situates Shannon as Driver's boss, Driver nevertheless occupies the dominant position in their relationship; during their criminal activities, Shannon tends to work behind the scenes because his leg injury has left him weak and unable to exert the sort of power that Driver personifies. According to Lehman (1993), leg injuries signal a man's loss or limitation of power, and Shannon is left powerless and unable to act. By highlighting his lack of power, the film reinforces Shannon's desire to construct and perform a front that will afford him the respect he desires. Driver, on the other hand, does not experience such limitations, and frequently exerts his power and dominance over Shannon. An example of this dominance occurs late in the film, after Shannon has told Bernie Rose about Driver's connection to Irene, thus putting her life in danger. Driver confronts Shannon and physically intimidates him, causing Shannon to cower in fear. To compensate for

his lack of power, Shannon actively attempts to associate himself with Driver, who represents a far more powerful masculine ideal.

Like Frank, Tonny, Michael Peterson and the Christian Vikings, Shannon longs to be powerful, well-known, and well-respected. While he owns and operates his own auto mechanic business and also works as a stunt coordinator on Hollywood films, Shannon nevertheless desires more. Therefore, he seeks to borrow money from Bernie to purchase a stock car and form a racing team because he believes this will allow him to gain the wealth and notoriety necessary to establish his masculine power. Shannon's front consists primarily of being a competent mechanic and a shrewd businessman, but the film frequently reveals that this front does not align with his reality, particularly in the way others disrespect him. For instance, Bernie asks why Shannon wants to borrow money to buy the stock car. Shannon explains that his regular business does not make the kind of money he desires, while the Hollywood directors he works with often dismiss his stunts by cutting them out of the movies, signaling their disrespect or dismissal of Shannon and his abilities. Later in that same scene, Nino enters and rudely tells Shannon to leave, but then immediately explains he was simply joking, and this dismissal and disrespect clearly upsets Shannon. This sequence serves to reinforce Shannon's lack of power, and demonstrate why he seeks to align himself with Driver's powerful masculinity.

Similarly, Nino seeks to construct a masculine identity that aligns with the dominant ideal represented by Driver's archetypal nature. Through one of his employees, Nino hires Driver to act as the getaway driver for the pawn shop robbery, and thus he willingly aligns himself with Driver's idealized masculine power. While he does not hire Driver directly, Nino nonetheless relies on Driver's power, in a way similar to how the Christian Vikings seek to utilize and

thereby emulate One Eye. Thus, while the film positions Nino and Driver as enemies, Nino nevertheless constructs himself in alignment with the masculine ideal that Driver represents.

Nino constructs and performs a tough guy gangster front to compensate for a lack of power and respect. As with Frank and Tonny, Nino's front consists of wearing track suits meant to evoke the sort of gangster mythology often perpetuated by mobster films such as *Goodfellas* or television shows like *The Sopranos*. Furthermore, the film implies that he owns a pizzeria primarily to align his identity with stereotypical Italian mobster culture, and thus reinforce his tough guy mobster persona. Nino expresses annoyance toward Bernie for eating Chinese food in his restaurant, Bernie sarcastically responds by asking, "What's a Jew doing running a pizzeria?" Nino frequently experiences tensions like this when his front encounters his personal reality. For instance, he complains that the real Italian mobsters he regularly deals with refuse to take him seriously or treat him with respect, and that they refer to him as a "kike" while pinching his cheeks as though he were a child despite the fact that he's nearly 60 years old. This lack of respect has the effect of undermining or destabilizing Nino's masculine performance, which he constantly tries to reinforce through being tough, stoic, and violent. Both Nino and Shannon seek to become more like the archetypal masculine figure that Driver seeks to escape. Thus, through these various tensions, the film suggests that the ideal masculinity represented by the archetypes does not represent a useful model for everyday life.

CONCLUSION

Frank, Tonny, and Michael Peterson all draw upon recurring male figures in the construction of their personae, and perform a specific type of masculinity meant to bring them wealth, power, respect, and recognition. Mass media frequently perpetuates the notion that these

qualities convey masculine power, and that to lack such things indicates that an individual lacks manliness. Frank, Tonny, and Peterson all hail from lower class socioeconomic backgrounds that do not automatically afford them these things, and to compensate they appropriate and perform an idealized version of masculinity similar to that perpetuated and reinforced by media images. All three men seek to mythologize themselves by drawing upon the archetypes that recur throughout popular culture, and to which they have been exposed throughout their lives. The characters' self-mythologies encounter challenges from outside forces, particularly in the form of other characters that possess real power, and this results in a series of tensions that serve to destabilize their masculine performances.

Driver and One Eye, meanwhile, function as personifications of these archetypal figures, and thus they represent the masculine ideal frequently perpetuated by mass media. In their respective films, they are constructed as a reflection of a dominant masculine ideal, against which the other male characters attempt to construct their own personae. Each film, however, explores the tensions that arise when these other characters discover that their personal mythologies do not reflect their actual individual circumstances. The Christian Vikings, in seeking glory, try to become more like One Eye, but their following of him leads them astray. Shannon and Nino try to live up to the idea of toughness illustrated by Driver, but each has weaknesses that illustrate how they are just constructing fronts whereas Driver is the real deal. Similarly, tensions occur when an archetypal figure like Driver attempts to suppress his true nature and step into a more socially acceptable role that does not necessarily equate with traditionally masculine qualities such as violence and aggression; this indicates that such a mythology is incompatible with reality.

In highlighting these tensions, Refn's films illustrate the potentially damaging effects that can result from attempting to live up to a masculine ideal that positions violence, emotional reserve, and individualism as desirable traits. Failure to live up to this ideal can leave many men feeling lost and unable to cope when they encounter situations that demonstrate the futility of violence or stoic solitude. Ultimately, this type of self-mythologizing as a stoic tough guy can render men unable to function within the actual circumstances of their everyday lives. The next chapter explores how the characters in Refn's films become subject to negative consequences when they refuse to abandon their personal tough guy mythologies and acknowledge their own limitations.

Chapter Three: The Consequences of Conforming to the Archetypes

INTRODUCTION

Film critic Matt Zoller Seitz (2014) contends that the characters in the film *Pulp Fiction* actively construct larger-than-life personae through the act of self-mythologizing. The characters establish themselves as cool individuals simply because they frequently refer to themselves as such. According to Seitz, these cool personae represent a trap, and the film frequently places the characters in situations specifically designed to test their personal mythologies. Some characters encounter and recognize the constraints or limitations of their own self-mythologies, which leads them to actively question their constructed nature and make a conscious choice to drop their cool fronts. For instance, Jules encounters something beyond his grasp when he and Vincent survive the shootout with the man hiding in the bathroom of Brett's apartment, and this causes Jules to question his own legend and ultimately make the choice to abandon his cool persona. Other characters refuse to relinquish their cool fronts, however, and as a result they experience damaging or even fatal consequences. Vincent, in particular, refuses to change following the shootout, and he pays for this decision with his life later in the film (Seitz, 2014).

Thus, according to Seitz, *Pulp Fiction* deconstructs the idea of coolness by demonstrating that an insistence on engaging in the act of personal mythmaking sometimes leads to negative, even fatal consequences. Dennis Bingham (1994) puts forth a similar argument regarding the rhetorical function of violence in the film *Unforgiven*, arguing that it demythologizes violent behavior and thus serves to dissuade viewers from idolizing or emulating such behavior. This chapter explores how the films of Nicolas Winding Refn similarly demythologize male violence

and therefore function as critiques of the violent masculine ideal often perpetuated by popular culture.

The male characters in Refn's films frequently engage in acts of personal mythmaking by drawing upon the violent imagery associated with recurring archetypal male figures like the gangster or the gunslinger. Characters like Frank in *Pusher* and Michael Peterson *Bronson* actively construct and perform a front of violent machismo in order to establish or assert their masculine power, and they attempt to align their personae with the powerful figures in gangster films, male action cinema, and rap and heavy metal music. *Valhalla Rising* and *Drive*, meanwhile, construct and present the central male figures as archetypal figures rather than fully-formed characters, and thus they function as personifications of the heroically violent masculine ideal associated with recurring male figures such as the Man With No Name and the samurai. At the same time, the other men in these films construct tough guy fronts in relation to the dominant masculine ideals portrayed by One Eye and Driver.

More importantly, however, Refn's characters often encounter situations that highlight the inconsistencies between their personal mythologies and their individual realities. Those men who refuse to learn from these situations and abandon their tough guy fronts encounter negative consequences. Violent personae often result in form of dehumanization, to the individual and to others, as well as other consequences such as incarceration, isolation, and death. Moreover, these consequences occur not only to the central male characters, but others, as well. Thus, the depictions of male violence in Refn's films serve to deconstruct the sort of archetypal tough guy figures that perpetuate the notion of violent masculinity as a heroic ideal.

DEMYTHOLOGIZATION OF MALE VIOLENCE AS HEROIC IDEAL

Popular culture frequently reflects and reinforces sociocultural notions regarding what it means to be a man, and what qualities men should possess if they desire to survive and thrive within a sociocultural context (Jhally, Earp & Katz, 1999). Indeed, popular media constitutes one of the most powerful influences in the construction of masculine identity (Moss, 2011). Steve Neale (1992) argues that cinema in particular appeals to men because it regularly offers male figures that reinforce male fantasies regarding notions of masculine power and control. From The Man With No Name to Hercules, from Mad Max to Superman, mainstream cinema regularly offers images of violent men as heroes and role models. These characters possess great power and skill that may occasionally be challenged, but otherwise this power remains unchecked and unqualified (Neale, 1992). These male figures tend to reflect and perpetuate a specific version of masculine behavior, one closely associated with physical strength, emotional toughness, and individual power. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, violence often represents a central component of this particular depiction of masculinity, and associating violence with heroic figures has the effect of rendering masculine violence as noble or heroic.

Richard Sparks (1996) contends that nearly every mainstream cinematic genre offers such images of violent masculinity as a heroic ideal. Similarly, Nicola Rehling (2009) observes that many popular narratives center on men reclaiming or reasserting their masculine power through acts of violence or masochistic endurance. This trope of regenerating masculinity through violence can be witnessed in nearly every genre, from Westerns to crime thrillers to action blockbusters (Neale, 1992). For instance, the “No Name” figures commonly found in Spaghetti Westerns often experience torture and great bodily harm at the hands of the villain, only to rise again during the film’s climax to reassert their tough masculinity by outwitting and

killing their enemies (Hughes, 2004). Characters like Joe in *A Fistful of Dollars* or the title character in *Django* have their masculine power stripped from them, only to later reclaim it through violence. Hard bodied action heroes such as John Rambo or John McClain face similar physical and emotional hardship, only to rise up and violently dispatch the bad guys by film's end (Jeffords, 1994). Indeed, in the absence of a more traditional sympathetic protagonist, even gangster characters like Tony Montana in *Scarface* represent a non-mainstream but nonetheless desirable heroic ideal. Rob Prince (2009) contends that characters such as Nino Brown in the film *New Jack City* or Omar in the television series *The Wire* function as heroes to disenfranchised youth, particularly within the gangster/gangsta subcultures, because they represent a pinnacle of masculinity defined by power and respect. Men in the media repeatedly rely on violence to solve problems and save the day, and this has the effect of linking violent actions to notions of heroism.

Such heroic screen violence often drives popular narratives, and many of these narratives perpetuate the idea that violence represents an integral component in the construction of masculinity or male identities. Therefore, it becomes vital to contextualize the meaning, aesthetic concerns, and potential moral lessons offered by this violence when considering its effects on the construction of male identities. Benjamin R. Bates and Thurmon Garner (2001) contend that studies of mediated violence regularly conclude it "teaches that violence is acceptable" (Bates & Garner, 2001, p. 141). Bates and Garner consider these studies flawed, however, because they ignore the dramatic or narrative context of mediated violence. As a result, when critical pieces regarding violence in the media draw upon these flawed studies, they tend to reach the conclusion that mediated violence serves no rhetorical purpose, rendering its depictions within media texts unjustified and gratuitous. Bates and Garner, however, argue that mediated violence

frequently serves a rhetorical function within popular culture, and the dramatic context of mediated violence must be considered when examining its effects. They point to the film *Shaft* as an example of how violence can contribute to the social, cultural, and racial construction of a text's central character. They contend that John Shaft's violence reflects the violence of the Black resistance movement of the 1970s, and serves to situate the character's sociocultural position against and within a predominantly white environment (Bates & Garner, 2001). Thus, the violence in *Shaft* serves a rhetorical function in relation to the historical period of its production and reception, and therefore cannot be considered merely gratuitous.

Likewise, the depictions of male violence in Refn's films serve an important rhetorical purpose. Unlike the exciting violent spectacle offered by many mainstream movies, Refn includes depictions of violence in his films in order to shock and unsettle the viewer (Whitney, 2013). His films function as a critique of glamorized media violence that has been packaged and rendered palatable for audience consumption and identification (Westcott, 2006). The violence in Refn's films often serves to dehumanize individuals, which reinforces the idea that violence should be avoided rather than considered heroic or noble. Characters become dehumanized as a result of their desire to cultivate violent masculine personae. Frank in *Pusher* and Michael Peterson in *Bronson* insist on performing violent tough guy fronts that ultimately cause them to lose touch with their humanity. One Eye in *Valhalla Rising* and Driver in *Drive*, meanwhile, begin each film from a place of dehumanization, because the films construct and present them as personifications of masculine archetypes.

This dehumanization through violence often results in other negative consequences, as the characters refuse to make choices that would upset the tough guy fronts they perform. The male characters in Refn's films also experience mental and physical isolation and actual

incarceration as a result of their violent impulses. The men in each film become isolated from society, either through incarceration or through the alienation of those around them. Additionally, the films highlight how these characters become subject to injury or even death as a result of refusing to abandon their violent, individualistic, and emotionally tough masculine personae. While notions of masculinity often favor stoicism and individuality, indicating that men are not supposed to emotionally connect with other people, Refn's films position both the inability to connect and the tendency to dehumanize others as a negative consequence of adherence to this type of masculinity. Thus the films critique the sort of violent, individualistic, and stoic masculinity often embodied by archetypal male figures by demonstrating the negative consequences that can result from losing touch with a sense of humanity.

In this way, Refn's films do not present violent injury or death as a heroic or noble act. Instead, they contextualize these fates as the brutal and inevitable result of poor choices made when attempting to conform to the violent masculine ideal put forth by cinematic masculine archetypes. Ultimately, the men in Refn's films either construct personal mythologies for themselves as tough masculine heroes, or the films position them as representations of the mythology of the male action hero. In each instance, however, narrative circumstances serve to contextualize these characters as cautionary figures, meant to highlight the damaging effects that can occur from personifying or conforming to the masculine ideal perpetuated and reinforced by violent masculine archetypes. In each film, the characters' insistence on maintaining their self-mythology results in a demythologization of the archetypes they either perform or represent.

THE MEN OF *PUSHER*

In *Pusher*, all of the central male characters construct tough guy fronts by drawing upon the archetypal gangster or gangsta imagery that recurs throughout popular culture, particularly films and music. In order to position themselves as powerful individuals deserving of respect, Frank, Tonny, Milo, and Radovan all attempt to align their masculine personae with violent gangster figures like Tony Montana, or cool black heroes like John Shaft. The reality of their personal or individual situations do not always reflect these constructed fronts, however, and their insistence on cultivating these personae frequently lead to destructive consequences, both for themselves and others. Frank's fate, in particular, directly results from his masculine performance. Frank does not change or learn from his mistakes, despite repeatedly experiencing tensions as a result of performing his tough guy front throughout the film. Frank's refusal to abandon his tough guy front leads him to alienate or destroy those around him, and therefore he winds up alone, afraid, and unable to alter his fate by the end of the film. When Frank finally realizes he cannot solve his problems on his own, he has no one left to whom he can turn, and the film makes it clear that this represents the inevitable result of his refusal to abandon his violent masculine persona.

Frank insists on cultivating his tough guy front throughout the film, and this insistence directly results in negative consequences for him such as isolation, injury, and possibly even death. For instance, an example of injury occurs late in the film, when Frank calls Milo to cancel the meeting in which he was supposed to pay Milo the money he owes. Milo threatens to break Frank's legs if he does not make the meeting, but Frank simply hangs up on him. This reaction from Frank illustrates his continued determination to mythologize himself through playing the tough guy; Frank's casual dismissal of Milo represents an attempt to exert dominance within

their relationship, and subsequently reclaim and reassert his own masculine power. In the next scene, however, Vic returns home to find Frank sitting on the couch looking anxious and uncertain. She attempts to initiate sex, but Frank pushes her away and slaps her. This response indicates that Frank has begun to succumb to the pressure of living up to his tough guy front, and that his fear and frustration have resulted in a destabilization of his constructed masculine persona. Frank spends the next two days attempting to avoid Milo and his thugs, but Radovan eventually tracks Frank down and brings him to Milo's place, where they torture and electrocute Frank. Prior to this point, Frank had not been at the receiving end of violence in the film. The injuries he sustains during this sequence near the film's end of the film represent the culmination of his continued insistence to act tough, even though the film repeatedly demonstrates that his constructed persona does not reflect his actual self and he cannot physically live up to the performance.

Throughout the film, Frank encounters situations that function as moments where he could reflect upon and consider abandoning his violent masculine façade, but he refuses each time, making the conscious choice to continue performing his tough guy front. Frank's reliance on his performance compels him to act violently towards others in order to assert his power and dominance over them, and this leads him to dehumanize people in order to get what he needs from them. Following his arrest during a botched drug deal, the police convince Frank that Tonny signed a confession implicating Frank in the crime. The police have no evidence, however, and therefore cannot hold Frank. Upon his release, Frank immediately tracks Tonny down and physically assaults him as retribution for the perceived betrayal. Rather than trying to talk things out with Tonny, Frank immediately proceeds to take his frustration out on Tonny in a violent manner, essentially treating Tonny like an object, a punching bag meant to absorb all of

Frank's anger, fear, and frustration. After Frank beats up Tonny, however, the film cuts to a shot of Frank leaving the bar covered in Tonny's blood and crying. This break in Frank's masculine persona indicates he feels remorse over what he has just done, and it also represents an outward display of the emotional and mental toll that can result from conforming to an archetypal tough guy ideal that run's counter ton one's self.

Despite this destabilization of Frank's masculine persona, he nevertheless reasserts his tough guy front in the next sequence, as he and Radovan go to collect money from one of Frank's deadbeat junkie clients. During the drive, Radovan talks about his desire to become a chef, indicating that he seeks to abandon his own tough guy persona. Frank does not express any agreement with Radovan's desire, and in the very next scene attempts to intimidate the junkie through tough guy posturing. Frank's façade slips during this sequence, however, and he appears fearful and anxious as Radovan bullies the junkie into robbing a bank to pay back his debts, eventually driving the weaker man to shoot himself. This death affects Frank so much that he appears remorseful in the immediate aftermath, but nevertheless returns to performing his gangster front in the following sequence, which evokes the well-known tracking shot in *Goodfellas* in which Henry Hill escorts Karen through a nightclub. Shot from behind, Frank makes his way through a strip club, mingling with other patrons while projecting a tough guy front. This sequence indicates that while Frank appears conscious of the mental, emotional, and physical effects that result from his front, both to himself and others, he nevertheless refuses to abandon his personal mythology. This adherence to the violent masculine ideal results in Tonny being wounded, another man committing suicide, and Frank being isolated from anyone who might be able to assist his plight.

When Frank finally does acquire the money to pay off his debts and escape serious harm, he immediately loses it because he reasserts his tough guy persona and further isolates himself from others. After escaping from Milo following the torture sequence, Frank retreats to Vic's place and asks her to run away with him to Spain. Needing money for the trip, Frank steals heroin from Radovan to sell to a client. During the deal, Frank receives a call from Milo, who reluctantly agrees to settle their debt for less money. Following this conversation, Frank informs Vic they aren't running away, and that she was foolish to think it was a good idea. The money has given Frank a newfound confidence and allows him to reassert his tough guy persona by acting cool and emotionally rigid toward Vic. Having finally had enough of Frank's lies and abuse, Vic steals the money and leaves Frank alone to face Milo's wrath. Frank's behavior during this sequence reflects dominant sociocultural attitudes linking wealth to masculinity. In Western nations, in particular, wealth represents an important aspect of masculine power, along with aggression and competitiveness, and those men who possess great wealth frequently possess great power and privilege (Kahn, 2009). Throughout the film, Frank's main concern has been the acquisition of money to pay back Milo, and this motivation functions as a metaphor for Frank's desire to attain the masculine ideal. Therefore, the money he acquires during the film's climax represents a symbol of Frank's masculine power, whereas the circumstances surrounding the loss of the money indicates the tough guy front does not represent a stable source of power. The film makes it clear that Vic's actions directly result from Frank's macho posturing, which has alienated or harmed those around him, and thus he winds up isolated and facing potential death by the end of the film.

In the end, *Pusher* positions Frank as a cautionary figure rather than as a heroic or noble one. In addition to repeatedly reinforcing his status as an unsympathetic protagonist, the film

ends on an ambiguous note meant to convey Frank's fear and uncertainty, which serves to destabilize or demythologize his violent masculine front. After Vic steals Frank's money, the film cuts to a shot of Radovan laying plastic sheets on the back room floor of Milo's place. The film then cuts to a brief shot of Milo's other hired thugs as they grab their guns and head out to find Frank. These shots imply the violent and most likely fatal injury that awaits Frank. The film reinforces this idea by intercutting between these shots and shots of Frank standing outside the club looking anxious and uncertain as he watches the cab carrying Vic and his money leave him behind. The film then cuts to black.

While this ending heavily implies the potentially fatal injury that awaits Frank, it nevertheless leaves his ultimate fate uncertain. The viewer never learns if he lives or dies, and this uncertainty serves to weaken the appeal of Frank's violent actions. Frank's fate can be compared with that of Tony Montana in *Scarface*, a film Frank clearly admires and seeks to emulate. Montana dies, but does so in a heroic and definitive fashion, using violence to protect his empire from those who would challenge it. Instead of having such a noble and definitive end, Frank's ultimate fate remains deliberately ambiguous, and leaves him feeling scared and uncertain. The fear and ambiguity implied by this final shot combine to destabilize Frank's tough guy front, which in turn functions to demythologize his tough guy behavior. The film makes it clear that Frank's fate results directly from his refusal to abandon his masculine performance; had he not injured or alienated those around him through his insistence on performing his tough guy front, he would not be left alone to face the threat of imminent injury and possibly death. The mythology he relied upon has brought him to this fate, indicating that such a mythology does not provide a man security, safety, or even survival.

THE MEN OF *BRONSON*

Similar to Frank and Tonny, Michael Peterson performs a tough guy front rooted in media images that perpetuate and reinforce a specific type of masculinity marked by violence, individualism, and emotional rigidity. According to Nick Haslam and Steve Loughnan (2014), violence and aggression frequently result in antisocial behavior, which causes aggressive individuals to dehumanize their victims or perceived enemies. Furthermore, such behavior often causes the violent and aggressive individual to also become dehumanized, as his or her actions become equated to those of a nonhuman animal (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). Peterson's performance of violent and excessive masculinity similarly dehumanizes him, and his refusal to act differently results in a continuous cycle of incarceration and injury.

The film demonstrates this dehumanization of Peterson in a variety of ways. For instance, after Peterson proves too powerful for his human opponents on the underground fighting circuit, the men in charge of the organization make him fight large dogs instead, which indicates that these men acknowledge Peterson's violence marks him as no longer human. The film further emphasizes Peterson's dehumanization during this sequence by directly implying that his violence has caused him to revert to an animalistic state. As Peterson advances on the dogs, the soundtrack momentarily drops out to replace his howl of rage with a beastly roar. This particular stylistic choice serves to reinforce the idea that Peterson's decision to perform his violent tough guy persona renders him as animalistic and inhuman. The film reinforces this lack of humanity during brief sequences in which Peterson stalks around his prison cell, pacing back and forth like an animal at a zoo. All of these sequences serve to dehumanize Peterson and position him as a raging, inhuman monster that embodies all the violent impulses often linked to masculinity. Nick Haslam (2006) argues that positioning individuals as animals serves to dehumanize them, and

that this represents a negative act because it delegitimizes the individual's thoughts, emotions, and beliefs. This dehumanization has the effect of excluding the individual from any sense of humanity or community, and causes them to lose any sense of compassion or moral emotions, leading to viciousness and deindividuation (Haslam, 2006). Thus, rather than presenting the Beast in Me archetype as a good, *Bronson* renders the archetype as negative, because it reduces Peterson's sense of humanity.

The film also draws a direct link between Michael Peterson's performance of violent masculinity and his subsequent injuries. During his time on the underground fight circuit, Peterson regularly emerges from his fights triumphant, but only after being severely beaten and bloodied in the process. Indeed, he spends nearly the entire film covered in cuts and bruises. Peter Lehman (1993) contends that scars presented in a cinematic context serve to represent a man's heroic strength, and they connote notions of masculine power and superhuman strength. Therefore, Peterson's injuries could be considered visual signifiers meant to convey his own excessive power and toughness. At the same time, however, films like *Fight Club* depict the male body as a site of anxiety and in this context scars and bruises function as outward representations of the limits of masculine power and endurance (Bainbridge & Yates, 2005).

Peterson's injuries appear to serve a similar function to those in *Fight Club*: rather than exist as visual signifiers of his emotional and physical strength, they instead represent the limitations of his tough guy front. Throughout the film, the prison guards savagely beat Peterson whenever he attempts to assert his tough persona, and each time they leave him bloodied, bruised, and whimpering on the floor of his cell. Furthermore, these sequences tend to end with Peterson restrained and shackled. His violent actions frequently leave him a drooling, grunting mess barely able to move or even verbally express himself. All of this indicates that while

Peterson possesses great physical strength, he nevertheless encounters the limits of his own masculine power each time he tries to assert it over others. Furthermore, by linking Peterson's injuries directly to his attempts to mythologize himself through performing a violent hypermasculinity, the film demythologizes Peterson's violent behavior and renders him a cautionary figure rather than a heroic one.

Bronson ultimately suggests that Michael Peterson's particular version of violent, aggressive, emotionally rigid, and altogether destructive masculinity represents a danger to himself and others, and therefore must be contained and isolated. While Sally Robinson (2000) contends that violent and aggressive impulses often serve as a site of liberation for men, Peterson's expression of those same impulses functions as the catalyst for his eventual incarceration. Indeed, Peterson spends the entire film confined in one way or another, either in a literal prison cell or the metaphorical prison cell that results from his adherence to his tough guy persona. Throughout the film, the prison system shuffles Peterson from one institution to another, and he often appears shackled or muzzled, indicating a further attempt to restrain his violent masculinity. Furthermore Peterson's insistence on referring to his cells as "hotel rooms" represents an unwillingness to abandon his tough guy performance and accept the reality of his situation.

The final shot of the film shows a bloody and bruised Peterson locked in a tiny cell as he whimpers in pain and anguish. The prison guards close the doors to the cavernous room that contains Peterson's cell, leaving him confined in darkness with another barrier between him and society. This ending indicates that Peterson's excessive and violent masculinity has at last been repressed and isolated from civilized society, and it conveys a sense of claustrophobic aloneness that positions Peterson's fate as the inevitable and altogether undesirable result of his adherence

to the tough guy persona. More importantly, though, Peterson's frustration and anxiety throughout this sequence serve to destabilize his masculine front. The ending has the effect of rendering him a tragic figure rather than a heroic one, and therefore the film demythologizes the violent masculine ideal he represents.

THE MEN OF *VALHALLA RISING*

Unlike *Pusher* or *Bronson*, in which men perform their tough guy personae, *Valhalla Rising* constructs and presents One Eye as a personification of the archetypal masculine ideal associated with recurring figures such as the gunslinger and the samurai. One Eye thus becomes a manifestation of the dominant masculinity for the world, and he represents an ideal the other male characters in the film repeatedly attempt to appropriate, emulate, and follow. While consideration of One Eye's violent performance exists, the film primarily focuses on the performances and actions of other male characters in order to explore the destructive nature of the violent masculine ideal put forth by archetypal male figures. Characters such as the Christian Vikings attempt to align their personae with One Eye's masculine power and toughness in order to either ensure their own survival, or to establish themselves as powerful men. This insistence on appropriating or aligning with One Eye's example ultimately proves damaging for the individuals, however, as they experience negative consequences such as loss of self, personal injury, and death as a direct result of their refusal to abandon their pursuit of the violent masculine ideal.

As with Michael Peterson, One Eye's violent archetypal nature leads to his dehumanization by those around him. When the film opens, One Eye's captors keep him locked in a cage like an animal. They appear to consider him as little more than a dog bred solely for

fighting; between bouts, One Eye remains caged, fed from a bowl, and occasionally bathed in a river not far from his makeshift cell. Additionally, his captors keep him chained even while fighting. Furthermore, they treat One Eye as property, trading him back and forth with other pagan Viking tribes. This type of active objectification leads directly to the pagan Vikings' downfall, and the film demonstrates this during a sequence in which they trade One Eye to another tribe. One Eye frees himself by killing his captors in spectacularly violent fashion. He then returns to the pagan Vikings' camp and kills their chieftain, placing the man's head on a pike. Within the diegesis of the film, these acts of violence function as One Eye's retribution for his cruel imprisonment. More importantly, it establishes that One Eye's captors are also violent men who often acted brutally toward One Eye, and as such they become subject to negative consequences as well, which in this case takes the form of their graphic deaths. Thus, these violent acts indicate that the pagan Vikings' tendency to dehumanize others through violence leads directly to their own violent deaths. This sequence implies that indulging or surrendering to these types of violent masculine impulses leads to ruin not only for the individual, but also for society as a whole.

Overall, *Valhalla Rising* suggests that the community experiences damaging or destructive consequences when it encounters the powerful individualism of violent archetypal masculinity possessed by figures such as One Eye. Given One Eye's thematic positioning as an archetypal "No Name" figure, the film demonstrates how violent and individualistic masculinity represents a destructive element within society. According to David H. Calhoun (2014) this type of loner figure represents a threat to the idea of community, as his presence frequently breeds suspicion, and allows for temporary alliances or indifferent acquaintances rather than close communal relationships. One Eye functions as a personification of these figures, and he therefore

represents this notion of temporary alliance and indifferent acquaintance. When the Christian Vikings incorporate One Eye into their group, they become subject to the isolating effects of his individualistic masculinity. Furthermore, this disunity serves as the catalyst for the Christian Vikings' downfall, as their mistrust, infighting, and inability to work together ultimately leads to their deaths.

As previously discussed, the first meeting with the Christian Vikings highlights the tension between the individualistic nature of the sort of archetypes One Eye represents and the communal reality of the Christian Vikings who have banded together in order to accomplish their idea of success. This sequence also serves to demonstrate the consequence of such individualism; while One Eye may join the Christian Vikings' group, he will never fully become a member of their community, and will remain isolated and alone. At the same time, this sequence also establishes that the Christian Vikings express a desire to have One Eye join their quest to Jerusalem, which indicates that they wish to align themselves with his archetypal masculine power. When the Christian Vikings allow One Eye into their group, however, their journey almost immediately becomes subject to a series negative consequences.

During the sea voyage to Jerusalem, the Vikings' ship enters a mysterious fog that causes them to lose their direction and become lost in unfamiliar territory. Later, as they make their way through the strange new land, their group unity begins to break down as the men succumb to increasing anxiety and uncertainty, which then leads to infighting and feelings of mistrust. By the end of the film, the Christian Vikings violently turn on one another, and the chieftain stabs the priest in the back. This mistrust climaxes when the chieftain's son, Gorm, decides to stop following One Eye. Are claims that One Eye knows that Gorm will die, but Gorm doesn't believe him, and begins to question why he even followed One Eye in the first place. He then

decides to abandon his pursuit of One Eye and rejoin his father. This questioning and conclusion represents Gorm's acknowledgment that he cannot align with One Eye's ideal, but this realization comes too late. By this time, Gorm's father has been killed and his community has been destroyed, all because they sought to emulate One Eye's destructive power.

The Christian Vikings' journey through this unknown land represents the isolation – first from society and then from each other – that can result from attempting to align with the archetypal masculine ideal often perpetuated by popular culture. The ideal stresses individualism, and therefore represents a challenge to the community. Furthermore, the Christian Vikings experience death or loss of self, and this reflects the damaging and self-destructive nature of the violent masculinity sometimes associated with masculine archetypes. Thus One Eye represents a threat to their communal relationship, which indicates that his type of archetypal masculinity not only damages individuals, but also represents a threat to society.

The film's ending further emphasizes the destructive nature of the dominant masculine ideal perpetuated and reinforced by archetypal male figures frequently found in violent entertainment. The Christian Vikings spend the entire film attempting to align their masculine personae with One Eye's idealized strength and power, but it ultimately proves overwhelming and unattainable as their insistence on conforming to this type of masculinity results in their deaths, abandonment, and loss of self. Indeed, while they may show signs of acknowledging the futility of this alignment, such acknowledgement appears to be either too late, as in the case of Gorm, or never followed up on. Soon after they land in the unknown territory, a Viking named Hagen declares, "He brought us here," and this represents an acknowledgment that the Christian Vikings actively pursue One Eye's masculinity throughout the film. Hagen makes this statement as the group experiences fear and uncertainty regarding their situation, which implies that some

of the Vikings understand they made a mistake in following One Eye. Indeed, one of the Christian Vikings even reflects that he had a dream in which he could not find his way home, and then realized he was dead. While this reflection represents an acknowledgement of the harmful and destructive consequences of violent masculinity, it does not change the man's behavior, which ultimately leads to his death.

One Eye's death during the film's final moments represents a negative consequence, not just for himself, but perhaps more importantly for Are. One Eye and Are encounter what appears to be a war party of indigenous people; they are covered in war paint and carry weapons such as clubs and bows and arrows. In the only moment of nonviolent physical contact in the film, One Eye tenderly touches Are on the shoulder, as though to say good-bye to the boy. One Eye then allows the indigenous warriors to beat him to death, leaving Are alone to fend for himself in a strange new world filled with dangers he must learn to navigate or perish himself. One Eye's death at the hands of the indigenous people could be considered a noble ending, because he appears to sacrifice himself in order to save Are, who came to serve as One Eye's voice. One Eye defends Are throughout the film, and the boy represents the only individual One Eye touches in a nonviolent manner. This touch seems to indicate that One Eye holds at least some affection for Are, and his final act represents an attempt to ensure the boy's wellbeing.

Nevertheless, Are does not appear to possess the skills necessary to survive in the brutal and violent world of the film. Indeed, the boy initially aligns himself with One Eye in order to ensure his own survival. One Eye could have chosen to fight the natives, and the movie to that point presents him in such a way that his success against them would not seem odd. Instead, he essentially chooses to die, which could be an indication of his desire to free himself from the violence that has been his nature. At the same time, One Eye abandons Are and condemns him to

an uncertain fate. Thus, One Eye's death leaves Are's ultimate fate in question, and this has the effect of rendering his death as a selfish or ignoble act, more suicide to ease his own pain than heroic act to save another.

THE MEN OF *DRIVE*

Like One Eye, Driver functions as a personification of recurring archetypal figures. The character reflects the dominant masculine ideal of the film, and his depiction emphasizes the sort of violence, individualism, and emotional rigidity associated with archetypal figures like the gunslinger, the superhero, and the samurai. The film demonstrates that Driver's inability to establish a connection with humanity results from the individualism and violence that define his persona. Despite his efforts, Driver remains isolated from those around him due to his violent impulses, which characterize him as a personification of archetypal male figures. The other male characters attempt to align with the ideal he represents, however, and they, like Driver, suffer consequences for their actions. While antagonists such as Nino and Bernie may be positioned as deserving their deaths, being the antagonists of the film, the film reflects on the death of characters such as Shannon as more cautionary.

Driver begins the film from a place of dehumanization because of his positioning as a personification of the archetype. The designation "Driver" reinforces the character's link to automobiles, and this in turn reinforces his link to a form of archetypal masculinity. Moss (2011) contends "the car has become a supreme masculine emblem" (p. 147). Similarly, Murray Forman (2001) observes that popular media frequently associate men with automobiles, to the point that cars now function as a primary masculine signifier, particularly within mainstream cinema. Films such as *American Graffiti* or *The Fast and the Furious*, in which the male characters come to be

defined in relation to their cars in a variety of ways, serve to illustrate the automobile's importance within the construction and presentation of masculine identity. *Drive* links Driver's very identity to automobiles via his professions, which include stunt driver and auto mechanic in addition to the less reputable getaway driver. Additionally, Shannon wants to hire Driver to lead his stock car racing team. By linking the character's identity directly to automobiles, the film further positions Driver as a personification of archetypal or idealized masculinity rather than as a fully developed character. Furthermore, according to Haslam (2006), individuals who utilize another person for their own goals may dehumanize that person by associating the individual with a mechanical object. In this case, linking Driver to automobiles by ascribing his driving skills as his main identifiable feature serves to dehumanize the character. The film further reinforces this mechanical dehumanization by initially characterizing Driver as cold and rigid, given how he interacts with the men who have hired him. Only by trying to connect with other people does Driver begin to undo this dehumanization.

Driver's archetypal nature as a stoic, violent individual isolates him from Irene and Benicio, the very people who connect him to any sense of humanity. In order to position himself as a real human being rather than an archetypal figure, Driver seeks to contain his excessive violent, stoic, and individualistic masculinity and establish an identity as partner to Irene and father to Benicio. He does this by treating them to an afternoon out, taking Irene on a date, and spending time watching cartoons with Benicio. These sequences and visual cues highlight the importance of the relationship to Driver, and provide his motivation to protect them later in the film. At the same time, however, the film suggests that Driver's violent and individualistic nature due to his positioning as an archetype prevent him from fully connecting with others.

His violence after the botched pawn shop job results in Standard's death, and causes him to lose Irene. Following Standard's death during the failed heist, Driver saves Irene from one of Nino's thugs by crushing his head. This sequence occurs in an elevator that is going down, its trajectory symbolic of the Driver's journey away from his humanity as he regresses toward a more violent, aggressive, and isolated existence. Although Driver uses his violent hypermasculinity toward a noble cause – the protection of Irene – the sequence nevertheless reinforces the idea that this violence causes him to become isolated from her and, by extension, the rest of humanity. Indeed, the moment the elevator doors open, Irene stumbles out of the cramped car and fearfully recoils from the Driver, whose look implies that he realizes his violence prevents him from engaging in any sort of meaningful relationship with her. Rather than making him a heroic figure, Driver's violence represents the cause of his isolation, and therefore he becomes a tragic figure due to his inability to contain his violent impulses. These impulses impede on his ability to connect with others. Thus, the film presents Driver's violent behavior as improper, which in turn demythologizes the idealized violent masculinity associated with archetypal figures.

As previously discussed, numerous male characters engage in activities meant to align themselves with Driver's idealized masculinity, beginning with Shannon, the wounded male character who serves as Driver's father figure. This alignment with Driver, however, ultimately results in Shannon's death. Following Standard's death, Shannon tells Bernie Rose about Irene and Benicio, and this causes a rift between Driver and Shannon. Shannon's actions cause Driver to use his violence to protect Irene and Benicio from Bernie and Nino. Soon thereafter, Bernie kills Shannon because Driver now represents a threat to Bernie's operations. Shannon's association with Driver, then, serves as the catalyst for his death at the hands of Bernie Rose.

This narrative choice indicates two things. First, Driver's violent hypermasculinity not only harms himself, but others as well. Second, even though a male character may not engage directly in violent hypermasculinity, simply being involved with or reinforcing it can also result in injury or, as in Shannon's case, death. Had Shannon not tried to be a tough guy within this world, he might not have died. Thus, the film contextualizes violent hypermasculinity as something not only harmful to the individual, but also to those individuals who associate with the violent individual, and thus society at large for endorsing such an individual.

Driver's injury and possible death during the film's ambiguous ending function as the final statement regarding the demythologization of the violent masculine ideal. After Driver kills Nino, he meets with Bernie to make a deal, but Bernie double crosses him. Driver kills Bernie, but suffers a potentially fatal wound; however, he does not return to Irene or go to a hospital for help. Instead, Driver simply drives down a lonely highway at night, an act which echoes the ending of many Westerns that often conclude with the lonely cowboy riding off into the sunset. Unlike these heroic Western heroes, such as Joe in *A Fistful of Dollars*, Driver's wounds render his ultimate fate uncertain, and this represents a further destabilization of the masculinity associated with archetypal figures. Driver's uncertain future suggests what could happen to individuals who try to align themselves or embody this particular masculine ideal. Driver uses his power to triumph over evil by dispatching the villains and protecting Irene and her son but he nevertheless ends up wounded and alone, isolated from both society and his humanity. Therefore, the film suggests that while the injury he suffers can be considered heroic or noble act, it nevertheless indicates that violent masculinity has negative consequences for those would conform to or personify it, regardless of whether they are heroes or villains or something in-between.

CONCLUSION

Refn's films contextualize violence so that it functions to demythologize the masculine ideal often perpetuated and reinforced by cinematic masculine archetypes such as the gangster, the gunslinger, or the samurai. Films such as *Pusher*, *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising* and *Drive* highlight the negative consequences that often result from insisting on performing a violent tough guy front in order to illustrate how this version of masculinity harms both individuals and society as a whole. The characters in these films either draw upon the iconography and imagery of violent archetypal figures, or they personify the ideal represented by these figures. Either positioning illustrates how violent behavior, emotional toughness, and stoic individualism often have a negative impact upon the individual and those around him. The negative consequences that result from the performance or personification of such behavior include dehumanization, incarceration and isolation, and finally injury and death. Furthermore, the films position each outcome as the inevitable and ignoble result of embodying or conforming to the sort of violent and aggressive masculine ideal perpetuated by violent archetypal figures in order to critique the ideal they come to represent.

In each film, violence results in ambiguous or definitively undesirable outcomes for the male characters that perform or idealize these violent personae. This rhetoric connecting violence to negative or undesirable consequence represents a critique of media texts that offer violence as spectacle, and thus render it palatable or acceptable for mass audiences. Furthermore, because the violence in Refn's films serves to demythologize the violent behavior frequently performed by archetypal male figures, the films challenge the notion that male aggression represents a heroic or noble act. Thus, these films also serve to critique the notion of violence as heroic and a

desirable means by which to solve problems. Indeed, the films represent a critique Hollywood's propagation of and reliance on this particular masculine ideal via these cinematic masculine archetypes.

Refn's films do not glamorize or glorify violent masculinity the way many Hollywood films do, but rather they present it as something destructive and damaging to both the individual and those around him. Indeed, while Refn's films routinely punish individuals who conform to the stereotypical masculine ideal represented by the recurring masculine archetypes, the fallout of their actions frequently impacts other characters, including those who could be considered innocent. This indicates that these films do not celebrate the stoic, individualistic and violent masculine ideal represented by the Stoic Man, Tough Guy, Beast in Me and Greek God archetypes, but rather they seek to trouble or challenge this narrow and rigid conception of male behavior.

Conclusion: Refn and the Demythologization of Violent Masculinity

Currently, little scholarship exists surrounding the films of Danish director Nicolas Winding Refn, and this study represents an attempt to address this lack of scholarship by considering the dominant themes that appear to be consistent across his filmography. Prior to the release of *Drive* in 2011, Refn's notoriety was mostly limited to his homeland of Denmark, though he was considered something of a cult figure throughout Europe (Westcott, 2006). Following *Drive*'s release, however, Refn's popularity has steadily increased among critics and audiences on an international scale (Tobias, 2013). This growing critical and public awareness indicates a need to examine Refn's body of work within a scholarly context, particularly as his films frequently include themes regarding violence and masculinity. All of Refn's films to date explore issues surrounding contemporary notions of masculinity and male violence on a global scale. Refn's films deliberately foreground the tensions and consequences of violent masculinity in order to critique or problematize its prevalence within popular culture. In this way, films such as *Pusher*, *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising*, and *Drive* represent useful texts to analyze for considering how they engage with other pop culture texts and tropes, and thus how they often function as a critique of the role mass media plays in the construction of masculine identity.

This study explored how Refn's films appear to actively appropriate recurring cinematic masculine archetypes and archetypal figures in order to critique the violent masculine ideal often perpetuated and reinforced by popular culture, particularly mainstream cinema. Drawing upon film critic Matt Zoller Seitz's (2014) examination of how the film *Pulp Fiction* deconstructs its characters' cool personae and constructed personal mythologies, this study employed textual analysis to examine how the male characters in Refn's films draw upon archetypal male figures

in order to critique or demythologize the notion of violent masculinity as a heroic ideal. Additionally, this study contextualized the close reading of the four films by situating them within current scholarly discourses regarding screen masculinity. Furthermore, this analysis drew upon critical and popular discourse surrounding Refn's films, as well as interviews with the director in order to compare his perspective to what the examination of the texts uncovered.

The analysis revealed how the characters in *Pusher*, *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising*, and *Drive* self-mythologize by constructing or personifying violent tough guy fronts that place an emphasis on traits such as stoicism, individualism, and violence in order to align with cinematic masculine archetypes or archetypal figures. Furthermore Refn's films highlight the idea that masculinity consists of an active performance in order to explore the tensions that frequently arise when an individual's constructed front or personal mythology encounters the reality of his personal circumstances. Finally, Refn's films highlight the physical and emotional consequences that often result from the characters' insistence on performing violent male behavior in order to demythologize the idea that violent masculinity represents a noble or heroic ideal. Overall, the male characters in these four films reflect the identity construction process men often undergo in real life. By demonstrating the problematic nature of attempting to align with idealized cinematic masculine archetypes, however, the films simultaneously illustrate the danger of constructing masculine identities through the appropriation of pop cultural representations of masculinity.

Considering the messages regarding cinematic masculine archetypes uncovered by this analysis, the results indicate that Refn's films offer valuable insights regarding cinematic depictions of violent masculinity and the potential impact they have on men around the world. In many ways, his films illustrate how violent entertainment impacts the way men construct their masculine identities. The images of masculine violence that often appear in popular culture

frequently inform how men construct their own masculine personae as they seek to emulate what they see or experience (Moss, 2011). Cinema in particular offers images of male violence as a thrilling spectacle designed to entertain (Jeffords, 1993). Refn's films appear to confront this phenomenon head on, as they present violence in such a way that it challenges or destabilizes the heroic conception of male violence regularly offered by mainstream cinema. For instance, *Valhalla Rising* presents a variation on this phenomenon during its first act, in which One Eye has been captured and forced to fight for the amusement of his captors in sequences that recall the violent spectacle of mixed martial arts fights (such as UFC) or professional wrestling (such as WWE) matches, or the excessively violent fight scenes in action films like *Rambo* and *The Expendables*. The film situates One Eye's captors in the position of the viewer or audience, and the film emphasizes this through the inclusion of shots in which the men watch as One Eye battles other captives to the death. By explicitly displaying One Eye's violent masculinity in this manner, the film highlights the idea that popular entertainment frequently associates masculinity directly with violence.

Furthermore, these sequences suggest that One Eye's captors desire to take hold of his symbolic masculine power and co-opt it for themselves, which the film demonstrates by revealing how his captors have placed him in a cage or on a leash. This possession of One Eye reflects how a man might identify with and appropriate media images when constructing his own masculine identity. Similar to the way Frank, Tonny, and Michael Peterson aspire to be like the archetypal figures they encounter through consumption of popular culture, One Eye's Viking captors, and the Christian Vikings later in the film, possess him in order to gain glory and prestige from the masculine ideal he represents. Thus, these men construct part of their masculine identities through their control of this representation of violent masculinity.

Each film links the male characters to the sort of violent spectacle commonly offered by popular culture, either because they attempt to emulate it, or because they function as manifestations of it. Indeed, Frank, Tonny and Michael Peterson construct and perform personae that almost exclusively draw upon Hollywood's idealized version of masculinity. They seek to align with violent fictional characters such as Tony Montana and Shaft, or real life figures such as Charles Bronson, who nevertheless represent an over-the-top version of macho toughness. *Drive*, meanwhile, functions as a metaphorical commentary on both the film industry in particular and violent entertainment in general. Driver works as a stunt driver on Hollywood films, and frequently puts his masculine skills to use in service of creating entertaining spectacle. Similarly, Bernie Rose explains that he used to work as producer overseeing action films, thus linking him to the entertainment industry and the idea of violent spectacle as well. By associating Driver and other characters in the film directly with violent spectacle, *Drive* underscores the idea that the sort of violent archetypal masculinity they represent often functions as entertainment. Thus, all four films offer metaphorical depictions of men building their identities based on violent entertainment, thereby serving as commentaries how individuals often construct their own identities in real life situations.

While Refn's films may not have the same sort of widespread appeal and recognition of other similar texts, they nevertheless function to illustrate and reinforce the overall need to determine and understand the rhetorical function of mediated violence. Both critics and scholars sometimes dismiss mediated violence as simply gratuitous and unjustified, thus ignoring any potential moral or sociocultural lessons such depictions of violent behavior might offer viewers (Bates & Garner, 2001). Indeed, even mass media that offers violence as a thrilling or entertaining spectacle, such as Hollywood blockbusters or male action cinema, often impart

important lessons regarding the impact of male violence on both the individual and society (Sparks, 1996).Thus, rather than dismiss all violence as gratuitous or spectacle, scholars should understand the context in which it appears.

Although many texts include depictions of heroic male violence in order to thrill or excite the audience, others seek to contextualize the meaning and aesthetic concerns of violence in order to convey potential moral lessons to the viewer (Bates & Garner, 2001). A text could contain a contextualized message about violence that underscores or nuances the idea of violence as a heroic ideal. This possibility indicates that texts depicting violence should be critically appraised for their message or messages about violence. In other words, scholars should consider the depiction of violence in relation to the other possible messages offered by the text. Indeed, while the polysemous nature of contemporary postmodern texts allows for multiple meanings, a dominant reading or meaning often emerges based on the text's rhetorical use of themes and motifs (Perks, 2010). This dominant meaning could be a moral lesson about the role of violence in society. Furthermore, while a text may have a dominant message, the audience can nevertheless opt to disagree with the value of this dominant reading if it does not resonate with their own particular schema or experience (Perks, 2010). This tendency to actively resist the dominant meaning of a text speaks to the need to contextualize the themes contained within media texts in order to uncover or determine whether a primary or dominant reading exists.

Because audiences regularly demonstrate this type of polyvalent reception of a text, it becomes vital to examine and explore how viewers identify with or seek to emulate violent figures or characters, even when the text actively contextualizes them as "bad." For instance, writing about the television series *Breaking Bad*, film critic Devin Faraci (2014) of the website *Badass Digest* observes that the show "isn't pro-meth but, man, sometimes you get a real rush

when Walter White pulls off a new villain move" (para. 6). Similarly, a film like *Fight Club* positions Tyler Durden as the primary antagonist in the film by ultimately exposing his violent philosophy as destructive to both the narrator in particular and society in general, but many disenfranchised young male viewers position Durden as a role model and seek to align their masculine personae with his example (Nungesser, 2010). *Scarface*'s Tony Montana represents another example of this phenomenon, and the character offers disenfranchised young men a desirable anti-hero figure who perpetuates the idea that violence and violent death equate with notions of power and respect, and thus represent a noble and heroic act (Prince, 2009). Indeed, the entire gangsta sub-culture appropriated much from popular mythology surrounding gangsters, as young black males sought to emulate popular depictions of powerful Italian mobsters in order to compensate for their own perceptions of similar oppression (Jhally, Earp & Katz, 1999). These examples illustrate that popular culture frequently idealize male violence as heroic, and motivated audiences will sometimes choose to emulate violent villains or anti-hero as a result.

Thus, determining the contextualized rhetorical function of mediated violence can serve to challenge or deconstruct the idea that violent behavior connotes a heroic ideal. The text's dominant message about violence needs to be determined so as to illustrate the undesirability of appropriating violent masculinity. Refn's films could be examples of texts that present such dominant messages. This study has determined that Refn's films function as useful examples for considering the rhetorical function of screen violence primarily because of how they draw upon and incorporate recurring archetypal male figures in order to demythologize violent behavior. Refn's characters often construct and present their own personae in relation to masculine archetypes and archetypal male figures like the gunslinger or the samurai, and their violence

serves a very important contextual and rhetorical function within each film. In each case, the films demonstrate that the insistence on performing such violent masculine personae leads to undesirable consequences. This contextualization of violence has the effect of rendering the notion of male violence as ignoble and harmful rather than heroic and desirable. Thus, Refn's films represent potentially valuable texts for considering how mediated violence could function as a critique of violent male behavior. The films consciously and overtly engage with themes of both violence and masculinity in order to illustrate what leads men to engage in specific masculine performances, and what happens when they refuse to disengage from such performances. Understood within the context of the narrative, each male character's ultimate downfall could be seen as an example of how not to be a man.

The films chosen for this study primarily engage with a limited number of archetypes and archetypal figures. The characters in *Pusher*, *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising*, and *Drive* all conform to the Stoic Man, Tough Guy, Beast in Me, and Greek Good archetypes identified by film critic Peter Canavese (2013). Moreover, characters such as Frank, Michael Peterson, One Eye, and Driver directly engage with archetypal male figures such as the gangster, the gunslinger, the samurai, the superhero, and even iconic screen tough guys such as Charles Bronson and Steve McQueen, who represent a very narrow and rigid type of violent and emotionally tough masculinity. Thus, going forward, it would be beneficial to examine the rest of Refn's body of work to determine if films such as *Bleeder*, *Fear X*, and *Only God Forgives* engage with any other recurring masculine archetypes or archetypal male figures. Such an analysis might yield further insight regarding Refn's approach to the sort of mediated violence regularly offered by male action cinema and Hollywood blockbusters, which in turn would provide a foundation for considering the sociocultural role and impact of violent male behavior.

Additionally, this study could be expanded to include an examination of the types of films that influenced Refn, to determine whether or not the depictions of violence in those films could similarly serve to critique the notion of male violence. For instance, films such as *Scarface*, *Mean Streets*, *Death Wish*, and *A Fistful of Dollars* could be analyzed to uncover whether the depictions of violent male behavior offer any sort of message regarding the destructive or harmful nature of male violence. Furthermore, it would be useful to examine films contemporary to Refn's work to determine whether or not they also engage in this sort of demythologization or deconstruction of mediated violence. Films such as *Pulp Fiction*, *The Raid: Redemption*, *The Fast and the Furious*, *The Avengers*, *Man of Steel* and *The Expendables* all contain themes and depictions of masculinity and male violence in one form or another, and thus it would be useful to examine them to determine what types of thematic messages regarding violent masculinity.

Such textual analyses could be supplemented with reception studies to understand how filmgoers interpret and appropriate the messages in the films. For instance, interviews could be conducted with viewers, or they could be asked to fill out questionnaires after watching such movies in order to understand how they make sense of the messages they receive. This type of reception analysis could be useful in understanding the phenomenon discussed above, wherein filmgoers may be motivated to root for and emulate the villains or antiheroes. Furthermore, the study could be expanded to include ethnographic and audience reception studies, which would help with understanding how viewers appropriate the films' messages regarding masculinity and violence into their own lives and experiences. For instance, my research into Refn's films has uncovered that men frequently cosplay as Driver, wearing his signature sunglasses, scorpion jacket, and driving gloves, and they appear to consider him a positive role model in a number of

ways. Such studies would be useful in making sense of the role media plays in the construction of masculine identity, and whether or not Refn's films have a different effect on viewers than other similar films.

Overall, the films *Pusher*, *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising* and *Drive* could be understood as interesting instances of media literacy. They represent the work of a media literate director who draws upon the globalized media imagery of violence and masculinity. According to this analysis, he appears to construct a message regarding the role of mass media and pop culture in the lives and identity construction of young men. These four films, therefore, can be considered useful texts that could potentially assist young men to become literate about the impact of media on their own lives, particularly in the construction of their masculine identities.

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