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FROM CREATOR TO CURATOR TO AUTHOR AS CONTENT: NICOLAS WINDING REFN, TRANSDISCURSIVE AUTHORSHIP, AND SELF-BRANDING IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY MEDIA

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by

Christopher J. Olson

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation traces Danish director Nicolas Winding Refn's development from

creator and curator to author as content within an evolving media ecology driven by capitalist

ideology. A close critical study of Refn's career from 1996 to 2019 offers insight into

contemporary techniques of creating, collecting, and curating media texts, as well as the

phenomenon of presenting oneself as content via discursive branding. Given that Refn's career

coincided with the emergence of the World Wide Web and the rise of digital platforms, he thus

emblematizes what it means to be a creator working within an increasingly interconnected media

ecology. Refn initially established himself as a traditional auteur as defined by scholars such as

Peter Wollen. During this time, he took the first steps toward developing his mediated persona,

which consists mainly of discourse fragments generated by critics, scholars, fans, and Refn

himself. Eventually, however, Refn emerged as a transmedia auteur whose works span various

media and platforms while still retaining his signature stylistic and narratological tendencies.

Around the same time, Refn gained a reputation as a collector and fan curator through projects

such as the coffee table book *The Act of Seeing* and the branded streaming platform

byNWR.com, both of which position him as a cultural intermediary who shapes the tastes of

others. Eventually Refn's likeness was used by game developer Hideo Kojima in the video game *Death Stranding*, which demonstrates how a creator's brand can be appropriated and used ludically by other creators in their own works. Refn's brand becomes a significant text, as he uses it to discursively reject corporate cinema and celebrate regional exploitation cinema even as he frequently replicates aspects of corporate cinema in his own films. Drawing on the theories of polymediation and transdiscursivity, the analysis considers how late-stage capitalism shapes Refn's career trajectory, which points toward potentially new forms of commodification and exploitation as authors become yet another form of branded content.

For CarrieLynn

I could not have done it without you, Princess

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project came about partly because of my fandom surrounding Nicolas Winding Refn and his works, but also due to my time spent living in Refn's home country of Denmark. From February 2010 to December 2010, I lived in Roskilde, Denmark, working as a research assistant on the Virtual Worlds Research Project at Roskilde University under the supervision of Sisse Sigaard Jensen, PhD. While there I saw Refn's film *Valhalla Rising* in a Copenhagen movie theater, after having previously only watched his biopic *Bronson*. Since then, I have consumed nearly all his works, and have come to consider him a fascinating figure who straddles the line between the pre- and post-digital eras. Given how Refn expertly navigates a highly interconnected media environment, I believe he perfectly encapsulates the contemporary moment. Thus, I wanted to analyze his career to uncover what he and his works can tell us about how production and authorship have evolved during the twenty-first century.

I would first like to thank my advisor, Dr. Tami Williams, and the esteemed members of my committee, Dr. Stuart Moulthrop, Dr. Michael Z. Newman, and Dr. Art Herbig. I appreciate all your feedback on my writing and my ideas, as well as the support I received from each of you throughout this project. I still do not know if the ideas contained in this dissertation are completely sound, but I know that they are much stronger thanks to the suggestions of each committee member.

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Finally, I would like to thank Nicolas Winding Refn for not only producing some of my favorite films and television series of the past 25 years, but also pointing me toward several films and shows made by other creators that have provided me with hours upon hours of entertainment. While I readily admit that Refn's works are not for everyone, they are one hundred percent for me, and I appreciate every single one of them. I would not want to live in the brutal yet stylish worlds that Refn creates, but I absolutely want to luxuriate in them.

Introduction

My dissertation traces Danish director Nicolas Winding Refn's development from creator and curator to author as content within an evolving media ecology driven by late capitalist ideology. A close critical study of Refn's career from 1996 to 2019 offers insight into contemporary techniques of creating, collecting, and curating media texts, as well as the phenomenon of presenting oneself as content via discursive branding. Refn's career took flight soon after the emergence of the World Wide Web and he thus emblematizes what it means to be a creator working within a polymediated environment. An analysis of Refn and his career demonstrates how a twenty-first century author develops a mediated persona comprised of both fragments of discourse and branded content. This study pays particular attention to the discursive dichotomy that defines Refn's brand; Refn discursively rejects media conglomerates and celebrates an outsider film industry – in this case, regional exploitation cinema – even as he frequently replicates (on a smaller scale) aspects of corporate cinema in his own films. The current analysis considers the contemporary political and economic conditions of late-stage capitalism and platform capitalism while attending to the emergence of potentially new forms of commodification and exploitation.

This introductory chapter establishes the foundational theories and concepts used throughout the dissertation. First is polymediation, which posits that all media are increasingly interconnected, and that mediated communication occurs across multiple intermingled media technologies. This theory helps to illuminate how Refn builds and spreads his brand across numerous interlinked media and texts. Next is intertextuality, which here focuses on the idea that

one text references another text to create a link between them.[1] This concept applies to both

Refn's brand and his works, as they all contain implicit and explicit references to other texts,

creators, and/or discourses. Finally, this introduction presents the significance of Michel

Foucault's concept of transdiscursivity, which suggests that some authors create discourse(s) that

establish theories, traditions, or disciplines within which other creators can develop their own

works and discourses. Transdiscursivity provides a useful framework for analyzing how Refn

constructs his brand, which spans his own works but also encompasses and unites works

produced by other creators. In addition, Refn's branding allows other creators to appropriate

Refn's mediated persona "Refn" and put it to creative use in their own work, as Hideo Kojima

does in the video game *Death Stranding*.[2]

Introducing Refn and "Refn"

An analysis of Refn's career from the release of his first film *Pusher* (1996) to the release

of *Death Stranding* (2019) reveals how he transitions from creator to a curator to content, all

while remaining consistently recognizable thanks to his brand. In this dissertation, I use the term

"creator" to refer to someone responsible for creating texts, either within a single medium or

across various media. I use the term "curator" to refer to someone who collects artifacts

produced by other creators and presents them in a way that they become an extension of the

curator's own brand. Finally, I use the term "content" to refer to an interactive text that can be

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[1] As Jonathan Gray notes, however, the concept of intertextuality "is powerfully chameleonic" and thus difficult to define. Gray observes that intertextuality sometimes operates as "a mere synonym for deconstruction and/or post-structuralism" while other times it is used to refer to the acts of "influence and allusion." Gray further contends that intertextuality is sometimes used to describe "the infinitely open space of textual interaction" while "in other contexts it simply means 'all texts considered." For more see Jonathan Gray, *Watching with The Simpsons: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.

[2] Refn allowed his likeness to be used in the game, serving as the 3d scan model for the character of Heartman. However, actor Darren Jacobs provided Heartman's voice while Zega performed the motion capture.

manipulated by a creator or a curator. "Author as content," meanwhile, refers to the idea that a

creator's brand or mediated persona becomes so recognizable it can be appropriated and

manipulated by other creators. Because Refn conforms to all these ideas, tracing the different

phases in his work reveals a new twenty-first century authorship in which the creator ultimately

emerges as branded content that can be appropriated and used ludically by others. In other

words, "Refn" becomes both a signifier and a piece of content that other creators can play with in

their own work.

The texts produced by Refn span a variety of media and platforms, including film,

television, print, and digital streaming. In addition, Refn launched his own free streaming

service, byNWR,[3] in 2017 to collect and present films directed by Curtis Harrington, Larry E.

Jackson, Bert Williams, and others, many of whom influenced Refn's own work. Significantly,

Refn's brand, henceforth referred to as "Refn," remains consistent across various media,

platforms, and texts and can therefore be appropriated and played with by other creators. Thus,

Refn demonstrates how twenty-first century authors transition from creators to curators to

content, as well as how the political economic structures of the contemporary media ecology

have evolved since the advent of streaming technologies to accommodate and even necessitate

such shifts.

The ideas outlined above echo Peter Wollen's argument that an author is comprised of a

series of codes that can be traced across the texts they produce.[4] However, as Wollen notes,

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[3] While the site initially served as a highly curated streaming service offering access to digital versions of exploitation films produced between the 1960s and 1980s, Refn also uses byNWR to promote his own works, such as *Copenhagen Cowboy* (2022-2023), a six-episode miniseries produced for Netflix. Starting in January 2023, byNWR.com simply consisted of a single landing page emblazoned with the words "Copenhagen Cowboy" and "byNWR," and in place of the rotating volumes of films are selections from the show's score composed by Julian Winding, Cliff Martinez, Peter Peter, and Peter Kyed. In September 2023, byNWR relaunched with an updated user interface and a new collection of supplemental features along with the original lineup of films.

[4] Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, 5th ed. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 58-96.

while coded texts consist of "discrete units," a performance is "continuous, graded rather than coded."[5] Wollen illustrates his point by explaining that a musical score is a set of instructions that remain "constant and durable," while a performance of that score is "occasional and transient."[6] This idea can be applied to Refn and "Refn"; while Refn could be considered a coded text comprised of a series of discrete units, "Refn" as brand is instead an occasional and transient performance constructed out of fragments of discourse. In other words, Refn uses discourses generated by himself as well as those advanced by critics, scholars, fans, and other creators to construct and perform "Refn," a "constant and durable" mediated persona that can nevertheless be discursively altered based on Refn's whims. This brand allows him to navigate an increasingly interconnected mediascape in which the distinctions between different media are growing ever more blurred and creators themselves are being turned into content.

Refn's brand is that of a maverick intent on challenging established ideas about filmmaking, narrative, taste, etc. For example, journalist Peter Bradshaw writes that Refn "is a fascinating and provocative figure" who belongs to a tradition of subversive filmmaking and self-promotion.[7] Film critic Drew McWeeny describes Refn as someone "driven by some very particular and identifiable fetishes, a guy who has always seemed to have a strong aesthetic voice but a marked disinterest in narrative."[8] Dan Solomon simply states that Refn makes "divisive art."[9] Rather than refute the ideas put forth by these and other critics, Refn tends to embrace

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[5] Ibid., 87.

[6] Ibid., 86.

[7] Peter Bradshaw, "Nicolas Winding Refn: 'Cinema is Dead. And now it is Resurrected,'" last modified July 9, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jul/09/nicolas-winding-refn-cinema-is-dead-bynwrcom.

[8] Drew McWeeny, "Review: Refn's 'Only God Forgives' strands a bored Ryan Gosling in a beautiful bloody mess," last modified July 22, 2013, https://uproxx.com/hitfix/review-refns-only-god-forgives-strands-a-bored-ryan-gosling-in-a-beautiful-bloody-mess/.

[9] Dan Solomon, "'Only God Forgives' Director Nicolas Winding Refn on The Creative Freedom That Comes with Making Divisive Art," last modified July 19, 2013, https://www.fastcompany.com/1683424/only-god-forgives-director-nicolas-winding-refn-on-the-creative-freedom-that-comes-with-maki.

them, especially in his own interviews and essays, which sometimes come across as facile, simplistic, and aggrandizing. As Josh St. Clair observes, Refn frequently appears "arrogant and bombastic," making it "difficult to discern which of his comments are sincere and which are simply trolling."[10]

Refn uses such discourses as the foundation of his brand, which in turn serves to unite his various works and those produced by others under a specific type of aesthetic or ideology. For instance, in an essay written for the *Guardian*, Refn claims that "good-taste art" is "the chief enemy of creativity."[11] Here, Refn takes ownership of the discourse(s) generated by himself and others to position himself at odds with a cinema that, in his words, "comes to us via a small number of conglomerates whose sole purpose is the bottom line." In many ways, this idea recalls Thomas Schatz's assertion that early proponents of the auteur theory often claimed that the only worthwhile directors were those "whose personal style emerged from a certain antagonism toward the studio system at large – the dehumanizing, formulaic, profit-hungry machinery of Hollywood's studio-factories."[12] A similar ideological stance lies as the core of "Refn," a brand co-created via fragments of discourse generated and/or advanced by Refn, critics, scholars, fans, and others.

The goal of this project is not to study how Refn creates, preserves, and repurposes texts, but rather to focus on the discursive aspects of his brand and consider what this mediated persona reveals about the changes in the political and economic structures of media since the introduction of streaming technologies. Ultimately, my dissertation considers how the nature of both

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[10] Josh St. Clair, "Nicolas Winding Refn Welcomes All Your Hate," last modified June 13, 2019, https://www.menshealth.com/entertainment/a27966824/nicolas-winding-refn-too-old-to-die-young-interview/.

[11] Nicolas Winding Refn, "Our Times Need Sex, Horror, and Melodrama," last modified July 4, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jul/04/nicolas-winding-refn-apocalyptic-times-cult-movies-can-save-us-bynwr.

[12] Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 5.

authorship and contemporary media have evolved during the first two decades of the twenty-first century through an analysis of Refn and "Refn."

Refn and Branding

A brief discussion of branding is necessary to understand how Refn discursively creates "Refn." The term "brand" simply refers to a trademarked name used to identify a product, service, or organization. However, a brand also involves the positive qualities people associate with a widely recognized name, whether a product, a service, a celebrity, or some other commodity. Quentin Vieregge explains that, in the twenty-first century, brands "have become a part of our identities," helping us socialize with others, define our communities, and provide information about ourselves.[13] Rob Walker coined the portmanteau "murketing" (combining "murky" and "marketing") to describe the process by which consumers become advertisers via the clothes they wear and the products they use to decorate their homes, as well as through transformative activities such as writing fanfiction.[14]

According to Vieregge, such engagement signals the transformation from a successful brand to a cult brand. Per Vieregge's conceptualization, cult brands "somehow convince customers to act and talk with much greater intensity about their product" while simultaneously encouraging "freedom of thought and individuality, two values we prioritize in our democratic society."[15] Cult brands accomplish such investment by allowing consumers to participate in the creation of the brand, thereby providing them with a sense of identity. For Vieregge, cult brands

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[13] Quentin Vieregge, "Whose Brand is it Anyway? How Brands Become Cults by Becoming Inclusive," in *Cult Pop Culture: How the Fringe Became Mainstream Vol. 3: Everyday Cult*, ed. Bob Batchelor (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015), 71.

[14] Rob Walker, *Buying In: The Secret Dialogue Between What We Buy and Who We Are* (New York: Random House, 2008), xvii.

[15] Vieregge, 73.

become "more than representations of products" and instead serve as markers of a consumer's character, announcing "who they are as people, what they love, and how they live their lives."[16] Ultimately, cult brands allow consumers to "creatively contribute to something larger than [themselves]" because of how they "help to facilitate some of the values of our democratic system: individuality, participation, creativity, and community."[17] Vieregge's claim that consumers can help co-create a brand recalls Roland Barthes' assertion that, within the realm of textual analysis, there are two primary types of readers: "consumers" who read a work for stable meaning, and "readers" who are more productive in their reading (e.g., critics, teachers, intellectuals, etc.) and thus become "writers" of the text themselves.[18] Fans of cult brands could be considered productive readers given how they contribute to the creation of the brand.

Consumers can sometimes hijack a brand and alter its meaning, as when skinheads and blue-collar workers transformed Dr. Martens boots from footwear made for "elderly women with foot problems" into a working-class, antiestablishment symbol.[19] Yet some brands actively encourage consumers to play with and transform their products. For example, Stephen Colbert provided viewers of his Comedy Central series *The Colbert Report* with greenscreen footage of him fighting an unseen enemy and challenged them to "produce the most creative versions of that footage."[20] Similarly, YouTubers Arin Hanson and Dan Avidan, collectively known as the Game Grumps, often encourage their fans to engage in participatory activities such as creating fanfiction or fan art, which Hanson and Avidan then turn into content on their channel. Game Grumps fans (collectively known as "the lovelies") thus contribute to the creation of the Game

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[16] Ibid., 76.
[17] Ibid., 82.
[18] Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text," in *Untying the Text: A Post-structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (New York: Routledge, 1981), 32-47.
[19] Alex Wipperfürth, *Brand Hijack: Marketing Without Marketing* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 17.
[20] Vieregge, 75.

Grumps brand, which in turn becomes a component of an individual's identity, taste, and lifestyle. Therefore, the Game Grumps could be considered a cult brand according to Vieregge's definition.

Cult brands often encourage consumers to engage in acts of "rebellion, nonconformity, creativity, or being antiestablishment."[21] "Refn" could therefore be considered a cult brand due to how Refn uses this mediated persona to encourage rebellion and creativity. In an essay written for the *Guardian*, Refn claims that he founded the website byNWR to develop "a different concept of culture than the traditional, romantic one" sold by Hollywood. Crucially, however, Refn differs from the cult brands mentioned above in that his auteur tendencies frequently override the sort of co-creation that other brands encourage among consumers. While Refn builds his brand by appropriating fragments of discourse generated by himself and others, he remains the primary author of that brand. He fails to foster the same type of participation as a creator such as Stephen Colbert; rather, Refn produces and presents his works as well as those of others to his fanbase for the purposes of consumption as opposed to transformation. Indeed, through projects like *The Act of Seeing* and byNWR, both Refn and "Refn" align with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the "cultural intermediary," someone who shapes people's tastes for specific goods and services.[22] Refn is not a corporation peddling rebellion, but rather an individual creator who positions rebellion as a key component of his own identity.

Refn and Polymediation

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[21] Ibid., 77
[22] See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* ((New York: Routledge, 1984).

Refn's various works all contribute to the construction of "Refn," which unifies different texts produced by multiple creators across disparate media. This in turn allows Refn to navigate a twenty-first century media ecology that has become increasingly polymediated. Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller define polymediation as "an emerging environment of communicative opportunities that functions as an 'integrated structure' within which each individual medium is defined in relational terms in the context of all other media."[23] Refn works within such a polymediated environment, developing a brand that spans various texts, media, platforms, and even other creators. As such, examining "Refn" can offer insight into the political economic structures of the contemporary media landscape. Furthermore, due to the contemporary emphasis on branding,[24] it is important to consider how different media interact under the banner of content. Looking at "Refn" in this way not only provides insight into how various media work within an integrated structure in which they are all defined in relation to one another, but also how creators are defined in relation to the texts they create and those they discuss (either as influences or simply as things they enjoy).

In some ways, polymediation recalls Henry Jenkins's concept of convergence culture,[25] which considers the changing relationships and experiences with so-called new media. Within a convergent media ecology, content flows across various interconnected media, industries, and audiences, resulting in a power struggle between producers and consumers over the distribution and control of that content. However, as Art Herbig, Andrew F. Herrmann, and Adam W. Tyma

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[23] Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller, "Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2012): 170.

[24] Bob Batchelor and Melanie Formentin contend that the concept of branding has achieved paramount importance in the realm of twenty-first century marketing, so much so that "the corporate world has virtually eschewed the term 'public relations' in favor of 'branding' or 'marketing communications.'" For more, see Bob Batchelor and Melanie Formentin, "Re-branding the NHL: Building the League Through the 'My NHL' Integrated Marketing Campaign," *Public Relations Review* 34, no. 2 (2008): 157.

[25] See Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

observe, in the years since Jenkins popularized the term "media convergence" in 2006, "the media have definitely converged."[26] Scholars therefore must move beyond the idea that "media can spread across vast discursive expanses" and instead consider how interconnected media operate and influence one another.[27]

Tyma contends that such interconnectivity contains "the potential to transmit information in multiple directions through multiple platforms and co-create meanings."[28] For Tyma, "the power of media comes not from its immediate effect, but rather the influence it has on audience members over time."[29] Much of that influence arises from the content transmitted by media, whether in the form of movies, TV shows, books, video games, or other texts. Therefore, as Herbig notes, examining content allows for understanding how information is "formed, distributed, reformed, and distributed again."[30] Herbig further contends that critics need to consider texts as fragments of discourse created by people "through the crafting of existing materials."[31] For Herbig, looking at texts in this way allows critics to examine how these fragments are incorporated into a text and link it to other texts, thus positioning it as "a piece of an ongoing discourse."[32] Refn demonstrates these ideas in that his branded persona could be considered a discursively generated text that transmits information in multiple directions across multiple platforms.

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[26] Art Herbig, Andrew F. Herrmann, and Adam W. Tyma, "The Beginnings: #WeNeedaWord," in *Beyond New Media: Discourse and Critique in a Polymediated Age*, eds. Art Herbig, Andrew F. Herrmann, and Adam W. Tyma (Lexington, 2015), xvi.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Adam W. Tyma, "I am You and You are We and We are All…Me?: Understanding Media and/as Context (The Road to Polymediation)," in *Beyond New Media: Discourse and Critique in a Polymediated Age*, eds. Art Herbig, Andrew F. Herrmann, and Adam W. Tyma (Lanham: Lexington, 2015), 3.

[29] Ibid., 7.

[30] Art Herbig, "Rhetoric and Polymediation: Using Fragments to Understand the Relationship Between 'Text' and Discourse," in Beyond New Media: Discourse and Critique in a Polymediated Age, eds. Art Herbig, Andrew F. Herrmann, and Adam W. Tyma (Lanham: Lexington, 2015), 32.

[31] Ibid., 34.

[32] Ibid.

"Refn" is generated largely through fragments of discourse that position Refn as a maverick filmmaker. In many ways, Refn embraces and advances these discourse fragments and incorporates them as part of his brand, which is heavily associated with both exploitation films[33] and trash cinema.[34] Much of Refn's brand involves subverting taste hierarchies and challenging canon formation. In the process of creating his brand, Refn develops what David Bordwell terms a "biographical legend,"[35] or a "cluster of traits and views" that form the basis for "a discursively mediated persona linked to the filmmaker's own systematic statements."[36] As mentioned, however, "Refn" is generated through Refn's statements as well as those of critics, scholars, and fans. This brand, which remains consistent across various projects and platforms, in turn provides critics and/or scholars with an opportunity to unite a variety of media and/or texts under a single vision or ideology. This idea is increasingly vital during the early years of the twenty-first century as most media are now funneled into a single pipeline known simply as content,

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[33] Exploitation impresario Charles Band, founder of Empire Pictures and Full Moon Features, explains that exploitation cinema "takes whatever you're thinking about right now, the thing that's in the wind and recontextualizes it as a piece of entertainment." He notes that such films are usually "Quick, silly, down-and-dirty" pictures intended to give viewers "a thrill, a scare, and hopefully a few good laughs." According to Band, such films are designed to exploit "an opportunity, a cultural or historical moment." Additionally, he contends that exploitation films are often the antithesis of corporate cinema, writing, "Long before the corporate behemoths can get something approved, and written, and rewritten, and negotiated, and shot and edited and slotted into their schedules, we true independents have already gone ahead and made something, released it, and moved on to whatever the next thing is." For more, see Charles Band and Adam Felber, *Confessions of a Puppet Master: A Hollywood Memoir of Ghouls, Guts, and Gonzo Filmmaking* (New York: William Morrow, 2021), 4.

[34] Guy Barefoot argues that the term "trash cinema" operates as a label rather than a judgment, one that serves to emphasize the relationship between "high-brow" and "low-brow" art while allowing viewers to explore the world of "badfilm" (a term Barefoot borrows from I. Q. Hunter) without dismissing such films due to their shortcomings, technical or otherwise. Barefoot notes that critics often associate or conflate trash film with cult cinema as both involve distinct reception and consumption protocols on the part of spectators. Ultimately, he argues that the appreciation of trash film revolves around an acceptance of auteurism and the notion that film, regardless of its quality, is an important art. He also aligns trash cinema with punk as both genres speak to the complexity of taste formation. Jeffrey Sconce, meanwhile, believes that trash cinema offers more of a challenge to conventional tastes than do high-brow avant-garde films, while Marc Jancovich contends that trash film audiences often develop their own sets of elite values. For more on the historical trajectory of trash cinema and its accompanying scholarship, see Guy Barefoot, *Trash Cinema: The Lure of the Low* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2017).

[35] David Bordwell, *The Films of Carl Theodor Dryer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

[36] Mette Hjort, *Small Nation, Global Cinema: The New Danish Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 261.

blurring the lines between different types of media and distorting notions of authorship. Given that "Refn" spans so many different types of media, platforms, and discourses, analyzing "Refn" provides a useful foundation for understanding how media figures navigate the contemporary and increasingly interconnected digital media ecology.

One result of polymediation is that media texts have become ever more intertextual, which here refers to how a text's meaning can be shaped by another text. Intertextual references are sometimes made deliberately and require prior knowledge and understanding of the referent. While the term was originally used to discuss links between literature, poetry, and drama, intertextuality is now understood as intrinsic to any text. The concept of intertextuality is highly relevant to Refn and his works, which often demonstrate intertextual links with other texts and creators.

Refn and Intertextuality

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin observes that authors of what he calls "polyphonic novels"[37] present readers with protagonists defined mainly by their own discourse about themselves and their world.[38] According to Bakhtin, readers come to know the characters through their discourses, which include dialogues about their identities, their relationships, and the world(s) they inhabit. Bakhtin refers to such conversations as "dialogic relationships," in which two voices collide dialogically within a word or an utterance.[39] For

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[37] Graham Allen explains that polyphonic novels present readers with "a world in which all characters, and even the narrator him or herself, are possessed of their own discursive consciousnesses," consisting of such elements as each character's "world-view, typical mode of speech, ideological and social positioning, all of which are expressed through the character's words." See Graham Allen, *Intertextuality, 3rd Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 22-23.

[38] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 53.

[39] Ibid., 184.

Bakhtin, dialogic relationships demonstrate how closely each character's discourse depends on the discourse of others. Such relationships often take the form of argument, criticism, and refuting or anticipating other speakers' ideas.[40] Thus, the author

> constructs the hero [character] not out of words foreign to the hero, not out of neutral definitions; he constructs not a character, nor a type, nor a temperament, in fact he constructs no objectified image of the hero at all, but rather the hero's *discourse* about himself and his world.[41]

The protagonists of such novels are therefore "not an objectified image but an autonomous discourse, *pure voice*," and "everything that we see and know apart from his discourse is nonessential and is swallowed up by discourse as its raw material, or else remains outside it as something that stimulates and provokes."[42]

Per Bakhtin, dialogic relationships are an essential component of language itself because the "life of the word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another context, from one social collective to another, from one generation to another generation."[43] As such, words are "permeated with the interpretations of others."[44] In Bakhtin's conceptualization, words come loaded with meaning because they contain traces of other words and other uses. For instance, if an author includes the word "London" in a novel, it contains the author's intended meaning (e.g., "home," "a bustling city") but also the reader's meaning (e.g., "colonialism" or "monarchy") as well as other meanings associated with that word in various historical and cultural contexts. Julia Kristeva echoes Bakhtin when she argues that texts are primarily composed of the same structures and systems that comprise culture itself – otherwise

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[40] Allen, 23.
[41] Bakhtin, 53, emphasis in original.
[42] Ibid., emphasis in original.
[43] Bakhtin, 201.
[44] Ibid.

known as the cultural or social text – and thus cannot be separated from one another.[45] Texts, therefore, consist of "all the different discourses, ways of speaking and saying, institutionally sanctioned structures and systems which make up what we call culture."[46] Graham Allen succinctly sums up these ideas, writing, "All utterances depend on or call to other utterances; no utterance itself is singular; all utterances are shot through with other, competing and conflicting voices."[47]

Much like polyphonic novels present story worlds in which "all discourses are interpretations of the world, responses to and calls to other discourses,"[48] twenty-first century media respond to and call to one another. As Madianou and Miller observe, all media are presently defined in relation to all other media.[49] This idea recalls Kristeva's contention that every text is "a mosaic of citations, every text is the absorption and transformation of another text."[50] Similarly, within the context of convergence or polymediation, every individual medium is a response to and call to all other media, as they are all a mosaic of citations built out of the absorption and transformation of other media. In addition, all media offer up interpretations of the world and thus function as a form of discourse. As the barriers between different media begin to break down, a mediated persona or brand allows creators to navigate between media and remain recognizable all while presenting consumers with a specific interpretation of the world.

A brand, such as that developed by Refn, contains elements of Bakhtin's and Kristeva's ideas regarding language and texts. Much like language consists of many voices, a brand also

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[45] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardin, and Leon S. Rudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 36.
[46] Allen, *Intertextuality*, 35.
[47] Ibid., 26.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller, "Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2012): 170.
[50] Julia Kristeva, "Bakhtine, le mot, le dialogue et le roman," *Critique* 23 (1967): 440-41.

contains traces of multiple discourses including those generated by critics, scholars, fans, and the creator themselves. In other words, a persona or brand consists of fragments of discourse advanced by the creator and others. As Herbig notes in his discussion of polymediation, such fragments "are a product of how various and often-competing discourse producers connect those scraps and pieces of evidence to fit varied perspectives or commitments."[51] By considering a brand as a collection of discourse fragments, it becomes possible to understand how that brand functions as a readable text that allows a creator or author to move between various media while remaining recognizable to others. Additionally, creators must be considered the author of their own brand given how they develop these mediated identities through discourse that includes interviews, director commentaries, essays, and the works they produce.

As mentioned, a brand such as Refn's allows a creator to produce work across different media while remaining identifiable. For instance, while "Nemesis," an episode of the long-running British mystery series *Marple* directed by Refn, appears to share little in common with *Bronson* (2008), Refn's biopic about Britain's most notorious criminal, both texts contain traces of "Refn" in the form of provocative uses of color (a character's vibrant red dress in the former, moody red lighting in the latter) and the inclusion of elements of exploitation cinema (lesbian nuns in "Nemesis" and explicit male nudity in *Bronson*). These two signifiers are integral pieces of Refn's brand, as they appear in nearly all his works across various media. A brand thus functions as a *langue*, which Gérard Genette conceptualizes as a way for readers to organize literary texts "into a coherent system."[52] A brand performs a similar function in that it helps

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[51] Art Herbig, "Rhetoric and Polymediation: Using Fragments to Understand the Relationship Between 'Text' and Discourse," in *Beyond New Media: Discourse and Critique in a Polymediated Age*, eds. Art Herbig, Andrew F. Herrmann, and Adam W. Tyma (Lanham: Lexington, 2015), 34.

[52] Gérard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 19.

consumers organize a creator's works (and adjacent works, e.g., influences and obsessions) into a coherent system. "Refn" is positioned as a creator who delights in acts of disruption and discontinuity, which Heinrich F. Plett identifies as the "symptoms of intertextual modernity."[53] Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers, and Lisa Perrott echo Plett's idea, arguing that "narrative discontinuity, audiovisual discontinuity and 'loose continuity' also provide important strategies for transmedial artists with avant-garde leanings."[54]

Yet Refn's persona also reveals him as a bricoleur, which Genette defines as someone who "creates a structure out of a previous structure by rearranging elements which are already arranged within the objects of his or her study."[55] According to Genette, the bricoleur-critic breaks down literary works into familiar "themes, motifs, key-words, obsessive metaphors, quotations, index cards, and references."[56] While Genette focused his discussion on literary critics, his idea applies to creators such as Refn, whose own work consists of bits and pieces of the social text (e.g., other films, critical/scholarly discourses, Refn's own life). In films such as *Pusher*, *Bronson*, *Drive*, *Valhalla Rising* (2009), and *The Neon Demon* (2016), Refn quotes from a wide (though mostly American) range of sources, filtering these influences through his own personal lens. For instance, *Pusher* suggests that lead character Frank idolizes physically and emotionally tough loners such as Bruce Lee and "Mad" Max Rockatansky (Mel Gibson) via the posters that adorn the walls of his small flat.[57] In this regard, Refn's works are all extremely

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[53] Heinrich F. Plett, "Intertextualities," in *Intertextuality*, ed. Heinrich F. Plett (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), 25.

[54] Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers, and Lisa Perrott, "Introduction," in *Transmedia Directors: Artistry, Industry and New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, eds. Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers, and Lisa Perrott (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 16.

[55] Allen, 93.

[56] Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, 5.

[57] Christopher J. Olson, "Gangstas, Thugs, Vikings, and Drivers: Cinematic Masculine Archetypes and the Demythologization of Violence in the Films of Nicolas Winding Refn," (master's thesis, DePaul University, Chicago, 2014), 64, Digital Commons@DePaul.

hypertextual, which Genette defines as a text that alludes to, draws from, or relates to a previous work. According to Genette, hypertextuality involves "any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary."[58]

Refn's works are packed with hypertextual markers intended to evoke other films, thereby establishing a specific mood, aesthetic, identity, ideology, atmosphere, etc. For example, *Drive* references such films as *The Driver* (Walter Hill, 1978) and *Thief* (Michael Mann, 1982), both of which feature stylish cinematography and revolve around physically tough, emotionally stoic leading men closely associated with cars and thievery. Such intertextual references suggest that Refn consciously utilizes interfigurality, a term that describes the interrelation between literary characters. Wolfgang G. Müller notes that interfigurality refers to any moment involving "a fictional character's imitation of, or identification with, a character from another literary work."[59] In Refn's case, such interfigurality manifests via the connections he draws between his characters (e.g., Frank in *Pusher*, Michael Peterson in *Bronson*) and characters appearing in other media (e.g., Bruce Lee, Charles Bronson). This interfigurality then becomes a component of Refn's mediated persona or brand.

At the same time, Refn's films also feature (and occasionally celebrate) the sort of extreme violence regularly found in trashy exploitation films; in *Pusher III* (2005), for instance, Serbian gangster Milo (Zlatko Buric) murders a rival and systematically butchers his corpse, while *Drive* sees the lead character (known only as the Driver or Kid and played by Ryan Gosling) stomp a hitman's head into a bloody pulp. As such, Refn engages in what Plett terms

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[58] Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 104.
[59] Wolfgang G. Müller, "Interfigurality: A Study on the Interdependence of Literary Figures," in *Intertextuality*, ed. Heinrich F. Plett (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), 102.

inverted intertextuality, using his various works to elevate trash to the level of high art and vice

versa. According to Plett,

> Inverted intertextuality is a more ludic type [of intertextuality]. We find it most
> conspicuously in parody, which transposes 'low' topics, personages, motifs, and actions
> into a 'high' style, and in travesty, which, contrarily, transposes 'high' topics, personages,
> motifs, and actions into a 'low' style. Such procedures engender a reappraisal of values
> and hence participate both in affirmative and in negative intertextuality.

Refn routinely engages in such playful ludic intertextuality in his work and even positions it as a

core component of his brand, as evidenced by his willingness to identify his influences. Refn's

brand thus performs a carnivalesque function as it positions trash cinema as more important than

popular films that gain widespread adoration among a broad audience.

Yet Refn's brand also demonstrates a discursive dichotomy, which sees him positions

himself and his works (both those he produces and those he champions) against what Pierre

Bourdieu terms heteronomous culture, or one that is interpenetrated by the commercial field.

However, many of the films that Refn advocates for, such as those available via byNWR, were

also produced within a heteronomous culture as they aimed to exploit current trends and were

made almost solely to generate revenue. This discursive dichotomy appears to lie at the heart of

Refn's polymediated persona.

Refn and Transdiscursivity

Despite the discursive dichotomy noted in the previous section, Refn's brand helps

ensure that his style, aesthetic, ideology, identity, etc. remain consistent and recognizable across

the various media that he creates or appears in. As such, Refn's persona functions as a readable

text, with Refn as the primary author who constructs his persona out of fragments of discourse

about himself and his works. Foucault, in his essay "What is an Author?" observes that, in

addition to creating texts, authors routinely generate discourse. He writes, "It is easy to see that in the sphere of discourse one can be the author of much more than a book – one can be the author of a theory, tradition, or discipline in which other books and authors will in their turn find a place."[60] Foucault terms such authors as "transdiscursive," arguing that "Homer, Aristotle, and the Church Fathers" all operated within a transdiscursive mode.[61] Foucault also contends that the nineteenth century saw the emergence of what he terms "founders of discursivity" or authors who produce "the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts."[62]

Refn's brand spans various media and texts created by others, uniting them all under the auspices of "Refn," a signifier that connotes a specific style, aesthetic, ideology, or identity. As Foucault notes, an author's name "does not have just one signification."[63] Instead, it "performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function."[64] In other words, an author's name calls to mind certain ideas associated with the author. Foucault writes, "When one says 'Aristotle,' one employs a word that is the equivalent of one, or a series' of definite descriptions, such as 'the author of the Analytics,' 'the founder of ontology,' and so forth."[65] Similarly, when one says "Refn," one employs a word that suggests certain ideas about aestheticized violence, rugged masculinity, minimal dialogue, dreamy visuals, unsettling red lighting, bright neon colors, tableau-style staging, the 1980s, and more. Refn has established a brand that now serves as a signifier for his idiosyncratic cinematic fetishes. More importantly, perhaps, this brand remains mostly consistent across various media and numerous texts. Within the type of branding employed by Refn, the author is no longer dead but rather a brand used to

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[60] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 113.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 114.
[63] Ibid., 105.
[64] Ibid., 107.
[65] Ibid., 105-106.

sell goods as well as himself. Thus, as discussed further in Chapter 4, brands become more important than people because they are easier to exploit, at least within the context of late-stage capitalism.

Of course, while he tends to make grandiose proclamations like "Cinema is *dead*" and only he can resurrect it,[66] Refn is not necessarily good at producing discourse himself,[67] due to being somewhat shy and reclusive. The documentary film *My Life Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn* (Liv Corfixen, 2014) reveals Refn as someone who vacillates between "confidently inspired and nervously despondent," often struggling to "keep his composure in the face of crippling anxiety."[68] Furthermore, if his films are any indication, Refn prefers to communicate via images drenched in his signature 1980s-inflected aesthetic rather than dialogue. Nevertheless, Refn could likewise be considered a "founder of discursivity" as conceptualized by Foucault, but one who uses fragments of discourse to develop a brand rather than a theory, tradition, or discipline. The brand reflects Refn's aesthetic and thematic preoccupations, thereby symbolizing "Refn," an idea that serves as the nucleus of an attitude or lifestyle. In turn, Refn's brand, which revolves around challenging core culture and celebrating subversive art, comes to encompass, appropriate, remix, and inform texts and discourses created by others (see Chapter 4). These texts and their creators then become part of "Refn," a mediated persona that is itself a discursively generated concept connoting a specific identity.

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[66] Bradshaw, "Refn: Cinema is Dead," emphasis in original.

[67] According to Bradshaw, Refn's bluster exists within "a great auteur tradition" of declaring cinema dead or changing. By way of example, Bradshaw cites Francois Truffaut's assertion that "the cinema of tomorrow [will be] like a confessional, diary or act of love," Jean Luc Godard's proclamation that cinema is dead even as he curated an exhibit titled Histoire(s) Du Cinéma, and literary historian George Steiner's tendency to declaim everything from tragedy to the German language dead while "showing a passionate interest in their lively existence right now." See Ibid.

[68] Katie Rife, "My Life Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn is a familiar account of an unusual film," last modified February 26, 2015, https://www.avclub.com/my-life-directed-by-nicolas-winding-refn-is-a-familiar-1798182880.

The type of branding that Refn employs on byNWR often blurs the boundaries of authorship. According to Barthes, "The author places meaning in the work so traditional accounts argue, and the reader-critic consumes that meaning." Yet a branded website such as byNWR can potentially alter that meaning, as it can overshadow the original authors in favor of the author who developed the brand. In the polymediated environment of the early twenty-first century, the notion of authorship no longer applies solely to an author's own works; instead, it encompasses the texts they champion, which become a part of their brand. A transdiscursive auteur such as Refn serves as a tastemaker rather than simply the author of their own texts; Refn's brand encompasses not only his own works but also the works he champions and exploits. In many ways, contemporary authors have become subsumed by their brands. This idea echoes Foucault's assertion that "the author's name, unlike other proper names, does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it; instead, the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing or at least characterizing, its mode of being."[69] Within a polymediated ecology, the term "text" now applies to all the content (both that produced by the author and that which they celebrate) surrounding a given author, serving as vital components of their brand.

Much like his films, which frequently contain numerous intertextual references, Refn's brand is intertextual in the sense that critics, scholars, collaborators, and fans help to co-create it through their own discourses along with interpretations of and reactions to his work. In other words, critics, scholars, collaborators, and fans operate as Barthesian readers who help to write and/or create a creator's persona or brand, thus making a branded persona both intertextual and transdiscursive. Critical and scholarly discourses routinely position Refn as an iconoclast who

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[69] Ibid., 107.

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delights in subverting audience expectations. For instance, film scholar Arne Lund writes that

Refn "is an unconventional Hollywood director"[70] whose films often "eschew any particular

fixed genre at all but rather reveal formal experiments and hybridic art films," thus

demonstrating an "oppositional and independent" stance.[71] Film critic Scott Tobias, meanwhile,

notes that Refn appears to enjoy dividing audiences with films like *Pusher III*, which

"audaciously challenges our preconceptions."[72] Moreover, Refn tends to embrace such

descriptions, using them to develop his mediated persona or brand. Indeed, as Isabella Maher

notes, "Refn revels in the controversy he evokes among audiences and critics, and with each

subsequent release is a film more contentious and divisive than the last."[73]

Critics, scholars, collaborators, festival goers, fans, anti-fans,[74] and others all contribute

to the creation of "Refn" via their discourse regarding his films, TV episodes, streaming projects,

archival efforts, onscreen appearances, editorials, interviews, and more. At the same time,

however, Refn himself serves as a fragment within the discourse that contributes to the

development of "Refn," working with and against what other people have said about him.

Various discourses conceptualize Refn as an exciting and incendiary auteur possessed of a very

specific vision,[75] and Refn has contributed to that discourse in numerous ways, often through

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[70] Arne Lund, "Going Hollywood: Nordic Directors in American Cinema," in *Nordic Genre Film: Small Nation Film Cultures in the Global Marketplace*, eds. Tommy Gustafsson and Pietari Kääpä (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 236.

[71] Ibid., 237.

[72] Scott Tobias, "Nicolas Winding Refn's Pusher Trilogy," last modified October 8, 2009, https://www.avclub.com/nicolas-winding-refn-s-pusher-trilogy-1798217909.

[73] Isabella Maher, "Beauty 'Beyond Feminism'? An Intersectional Analysis of Venerated Beauty in Nicolas Winding Refn's *The Neon Demon* (2016)," *Literature & Aesthetics* 28, no. 2 (2018): 67.

[74] According to Suzanne Scott, anti-fans derive enjoyment from hating a celebrity, icon, text, or other piece of media, and they express their hatred via writing, discussion, or the creation of derivative works designed to parody the object of their loathing. See Suzanne Scott, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry* (NYU Press, 2019).

[75] It must be noted that Refn rejects both the auteur label and the title of director, instead preferring to refer to himself as an "instructor." According to Refn, designations such as director or author imply a lack of control, which is something he strives for on all his films. Justin Vicari observes that Refn's notion of control suggests something more "dynamic, active, a way of effecting continuous change. Control, perhaps best understood as a

interviews, editorials, or other outlets. At the same time, he has attached his name to a variety of texts produced by others – such as the films streaming on byNWR, or the movie posters discussed in *The Act of Seeing* – and has appeared in films and video games produced by other creators. Significantly, "Refn" has remained consistent across all these various works regardless of whether they were produced by himself or others. As such, his public persona as both an auteur and a provocateur can provide vital insights into the political economic structures of the contemporary media environment. While different audiences will see "Refn" differently because they only see or consume certain fragments of this discourse, it is important for scholars and/or cultural critics to step back and try to view holistically the entire discourse, as doing so provides important insights into Refn's mediated persona and the discussions that contribute to its creation, regardless of their origins.

A brand such as "Refn" could be considered the culmination of Barthes's assertion that modern authors merely arrange and compile preexisting ideas into a "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash," rendering a text "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture."[76] This is essentially what Refn does in his own works, from his films to byNWR: he compiles his own films from a well of references, and he compiles the work of other directors that influenced him into a lifestyle brand via byNWR. With byNWR, Refn and his collaborators link the films screened on the site to the themes, motifs, keywords, etc. from which they were constructed, thereby allowing viewers to uncover deeper meaning in the original texts. Refn, meanwhile, must be viewed as a cultural intermediary who understands the necessity of branding within the context of the political

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constant balance between growth and containment, is where the instructor's skill comes into play, and where one earns the authority only promised by the ephemeral title" (13). See Justin Vicari, *Nicolas Winding Refn and the Violence of Art: A Critical Study of the Films*, McFarland, 2014.

[76] Roland Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 146.

economic structures of the polymediated post-streaming era. Indeed, as Liz Moor observes, branding facilitates interventions "premised on the idea of an entire environment of coordinated brand elements, and on a model of influence that emphasizes spatial immersion and experience, and engagement with concrete objects and sites, rather than simply the reception of, and response to, images and representations." By creating a brand that remains consistent across various media while also uniting those media and showing how they call and respond to one another, Refn has demonstrated an ability to navigate the increasingly polymediated ecology of the twenty-first century, and he accomplishes this through his branded, mediated persona, "Refn," which evokes highly specific ideas regarding style, aesthetic, ideology, and identity.

Chapter Preview: From Creator to Curator to Author as Content

The theories, concepts and ideas discussed in this introductory chapter will be elaborated upon and applied to Refn across four analysis chapters, all of which work together to trace Refn's development from creator to curator to author as content. Chapter 1 considers Refn's early period lasting from 1996 to 2007, when he established himself as a traditional auteur as first established by the critics writing for the *Cahiers du Cinéma* film journal and later elaborated upon by scholars such as Peter Wollen. The chapter explores how during this time Refn took the first steps toward developing his mediated persona "Refn," a brand that consists mainly of discourse fragments generated by critics, scholars, fans, and Refn himself. The construction of this persona involves a transactional process in which Refn makes discursive statements about himself which are then appropriated by others who make their own discursive statements that then help to create an idea of Refn. Refn then appropriates those statements into his own mediated persona and uses them to develop his brand, which serves as the basis for all his works.

Chapter 2, meanwhile, examines Refn's later period lasting from 2007 to 2019, the period

when he made the transition from traditional auteur to transmedia auteur whose works span

various media and platforms while still retaining aspects of Refn's signature stylistic tendencies.

The projects produced during this time, which include movies, a prestige coffee table book, and a

10-episode streaming series, demonstrate Refn's willingness to exploit twenty-first century

polymediation. The chapter also considers how political and economic factors – specifically an

intensified focus on blockbusters and franchise films along with the rise of streaming platforms –

contributed to the development of "Refn" while also shaping the trajectory of his career.

Chapter 3 explores how Refn established himself as a curator through projects such as his

coffee table book *The Act of Seeing* and his branded streaming service byNWR.com. The chapter

looks at how these curatorial efforts contribute to the construction of "Refn" by establishing his

reputation as a cultural intermediary who shapes the tastes of others. With these projects, Refn

seeks to restore, produce, and exhibit old exploitation films of the 1960s and 1970s, all of which

become associated with him and his brand. Interestingly, these archival projects use advanced

digital technologies to collect, preserve, and celebrate the analog cinema of the past, and as such

they help to establish the discursive dichotomy that informs Refn's brand, which, as discussed in

the chapter, revolves around contradictory statements and ideas.

Finally, Chapter 4 analyzes Refn's appearance in the video game *Death Stranding* to

consider how a creator's brand can be appropriated by other creators, who then play with that

mediated persona in their own works. The chapter highlights the similarities between Refn and

Kojima, both of whom discursively position themselves as independent outsiders challenging

corporate culture. The analysis focuses on Kojima's use of Refn's likeness and mediated persona

in *Death Stranding* to uncover how personal branding can transform a creator into a form of

content. The chapter also discusses how transdiscursivity and polymediation help to facilitate this process of digital exploitation and reflects on how this shift could lead to new forms of exploitation within a late-capitalist matrix.

While their work spanned multiple media – making them what Anastasia Salter and Mel Stanfill call transmedia auteurs[77] – creators such as Orson Welles and Lucille Ball differ from Refn in that they obviously did not have access to digital platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Netflix, etc.[78] Rather, they worked during the period before the rise of participatory media that granted more power to the people. Refn, meanwhile, emerged around the same time that the internet became widely available to the public, and he therefore epitomizes what it means to be a creator who works within that environment. More importantly, perhaps, Refn also embraced these new technologies and platforms, thereby setting himself apart from someone like Quentin Tarantino, who emerged around the same time but remains wary of digital technologies and changes in the film industry. Refn, on the other hand, utilizes all the discursive tools provided by polymediation to build, solidify, and perpetuate his brand across different media and texts, including those produced by others, thus establishing him as a transdiscursive auteur.

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[77] See Anastasia Salter and Mel Stanfill, A Portrait of the Auteur as Fanboy: The Construction of Authorship in Transmedia Franchises (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), xv.

[78] It must be noted that Tarantino and Varda also had access to these tools later in their respective careers but did not take advantage of these platforms and technologies in the same way that Refn does.

Chapter 1

Early Refn: 1996-2007

Born in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1970 to a filmmaking family,[1] Nicolas Winding Refn

embarked on his own directing career after watching *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe

Hooper, 1974),[2] a film that aestheticizes gruesome imagery in a low-budget milieu. Rejecting

what he considers his parents' high-minded artistic sensibilities,[3] Refn drew much of his

inspiration from what some critics consider less reputable sources, specifically trash cinema and

exploitation films produced during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Refn's first feature, *Pusher*,

premiered in Denmark on August 30, 1996, and quickly earned a reputation as a worldwide cult

phenomenon.[4] As Björn Nordfjörd argues, the film helped usher in "the era of Nordic crime and

gangster cinema,"[5] which encompasses such pictures as *Insomnia* (Erik Skjoldbjærg, 1997)[6] and

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[1] His father, Anders Refn, worked as a film editor, assistant director, and technical director on 72 films and TV series since 1969, frequently collaborating with fellow Dane Lars Von Trier on films such as *Breaking the Waves* (1996), *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), *Dogville* (2003), *Antichrist* (2009), *Melancholia* (2011), and *Nymphomaniac* (2013). Meanwhile, Refn's mother, Vibeke Winding, served as cinematographer on 12 films between 1971 and 2010 and directed the documentary *Keep on Walking: Joshua Nelson, the Jewish Gospel Singer* (2004).

[2] In an interview with Xan Brooks of the *Guardian*, Refn (somewhat grandiloquently) declares, "My life changed when I saw *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*." See Xan Brooks, "'My father and I disagree on the purpose of cinema': Anders and Nicolas Winding Refn on film-making," last modified February 11, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/feb/11/my-father-and-i-disagree-on-the-purpose-of-cinema-anders-and-nicolas-winding-refn-on-film-making.

[3] Refn explains that he and his father "come from very different backgrounds" and therefore "have a fundamental difference in [their] approach to cinema." This is likely because, as Brooks observes, "Anders is a child of postwar European arthouse cinema, whereas his son was raised on a diet of American grindhouse and horror movies." Ibid.

[4] See Mette Hjort, *Small Nation, Global Cinema: The New Danish Cinema*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 263.

[5] Björn Nordfjörd, "Criminal Undertakings: Nicolas Winding Refn, European Film Aesthetics, and Hollywood Genre Cinema," in *Nordic Film Cultures and Cinemas of Elsewhere*, eds. Anna Westerstahl Stenport and Arne Lund (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 370.

[6] In 2002, Warner Bros. acquired the rights to the Norwegian thriller and produced an English-language remake directed by Christopher Nolan and starring Al Pacino and Robin Williams.

The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo (Niels Arden Oplev, 2009).[7] Since then, Refn has directed ten

feature films, two episodes of the ITV series *Marple* ("Nemesis" and "Towards Zero," both

originally aired in 2007), and ten episodes of the Amazon Prime series *Too Old to Die Young*

(which Refn co-created with author and comic book writer Ed Brubaker), along with adverts for

luxury brands such as Gucci and Hennessy.[8] Each of these works provides a platform for Refn's

specific approach to film form and authorship.

In addition to his directorial work, Refn served as producer or executive producer on a

handful of films and television series, including *De udvalgte* (2001), *Black's Game* (Óskar Thór

Axelsson, 2012), *Dying of the Light* (Paul Schrader, 2014), and a British remake of *Pusher* (Luis

Prieto, 2012). Refn has also performed onscreen in films directed by Luis Prieto and Henrik

Ruben Genz,[9] and he allowed his likeness to be used in the video game *Death Stranding* (Hideo

Kojima, 2019). Intertextuality and cross-cultural genre mixing have defined Refn's films from

the start; early efforts like *Pusher*, *Bleeder* (1999), and *Fear X* (2003) contain numerous

allusions to movies produced during the 1970s and 1980s. For instance, *Pusher* includes

intertextual nods to *Enter the Dragon* (Robert Clouse, 1973) and *Mad Max* (George Miller,

1979), while *Bleeder* incorporates footage from *Flesh for Frankenstein* (Paul Morrissey and

Antonio Margheriti, 1973) and *Maniac* (William Lustig, 1980). *Fear X*, meanwhile, features a

dreamlike montage sequence that includes images of a hotel elevator door opening to reveal a

room filled with shimmering reddish water, recalling the elevator sequence from *The Shining*

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[7] The original Swedish film, co-produced by Yellow Bird, was adapted from the novel by the late Swedish writer, journalist, and activist Karl Stig-Erland "Stieg" Larsson. In 2011, Columbia Pictures and MGM teamed up to produce an English-language remake directed by David Fincher and starring Daniel Craig and Rooney Mara.

[8] Most recently, Refn directed the six-episode miniseries *Copenhagen Cowboy* (2022-2023) for the streaming service Netflix. However, that project falls outside of the scope of the current analysis and thus will not be examined here.

[9] Refn appears in the British remake of *Pusher* as a character named Dutch Bob. In the film *Chinaman* (Henrik Ruben Genz, 2005), Refn portrays the character Lægen.

(Stanley Kubrick, 1980).[10] Significantly, while Refn's works are often in dialogue with the past, they are also informed by contemporary storytelling and production methods. In their own way they demonstrate what Vivian P. Y. Lee describes as "the complex entwinement of film cultures in global cinema today."[11] Indeed, as Justin Vicari notes, Refn "innately grasps the idea of transcending the limitations of borders," meaning he should therefore be considered a global filmmaker as opposed to a Danish filmmaker.[12]

In this chapter, I consider Refn as a creator who is beginning to establish himself creatively while also learning how to act as a brand capable of spanning multiple interconnected media, that is, transdiscursively. At this point in his career, Refn conforms to the idea of a traditional auteur whose films contain a core of meanings and thematic motifs. This phase also saw him begin to develop his signature visual style, though this development stalled due to the critical and commercial failure of *Fear X*, which subverted audience expectations due to its languid pacing and intentional lack of closure. The chapter explores the films and TV episodes produced during Refn's early period from 1996 to 2007: *Pusher*, *Bleeder*, *Fear X*, *Pusher II* (2004), *Pusher III* (2005), and the *Marple* episodes "Towards Zero" and "Nemesis" to consider how they contribute to discourses that position Refn as a provocateur who challenges established taste hierarchies by elevating trash films to the level of art. The chapter also considers the conditions under which these texts were produced to uncover how Refn's works challenge and/or subvert prevailing political economic structures. Drawing on academic and popular sources, my

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[10] The Kubrick connection is reinforced by the fact that cinematographer Larry J. Smith, who worked with Refn on *Fear X*, *Bronson*, and *Only God Forgives*, also served as a lighting cameraman on Kubrick's final film, *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999).

[11] Vivian P. Y. Lee, "Staging the 'Wild Wild East': Decoding the Western in East Asian Films," in *The Post-2000 Film Western: Contexts, Transnationality, Hybridity*, eds. Marek Paryz and John R. Leo (New York: Palgraave, 2015), 153.

[12] Justin Vicari, *Nicolas Winding Refn and the Violence of Art: A Critical Study of the Film* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014), 12.

analysis is not a close reading of Refn's films but rather of the critical paratexts that surround them and help develop Refn's branded persona, "Refn." Ultimately, the chapter aims to illuminate how Refn is an auteur who uses fragments of discourse to create a consistent and recognizable brand.

Early Refn: A Brief Overview

Refn burst onto the international film scene in 1996 with his debut film *Pusher*. Shot on an estimated budget of six million Danish crowns (roughly the equivalent of $1,020,000 USD at that time), the film quickly emerged as a cult sensation both in Denmark and abroad. *Pusher* was a reaction to what Refn considered overly talky independent films, or in his words, "Yapping Sundance American independent films."[13] According to Refn, filmmakers at that time "were just making movies where everyone was just walking around talking," so he set out to make "a straight-on genre movie" as a way of standing out from the crowd.[14] Refn made a kinetic crime film because he knew it would sell, an early indicator that Refn was inspired by the spirit of exploitation cinema, which aims to succeed financially by exploiting current trends, popular genres, or lurid content.

Critics immediately took note of the brash young director, who initially appeared to have been "cloned from Quentin Tarantino's DNA" but almost immediately demonstrated that "his genre intentions [were] sterner than first impressions suggest."[15] Three years later, Refn, an admirer of fellow Dane Carl Theodor Dryer,[16] released his sophomore effort *Bleeder*, which

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[13] Tasha Robinson, "The Most Important Films in Nicolas Winding Refn's Path from *Pusher* to the Present," last modified June 15, 2015, https://thedissolve.com/features/5-10-15-20/1065-the-most-important-films-in-nicolas-winding-refns-/.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Jonathan Romney, "Men Behaving Badly," *New Statesman* 13, no. 598 (2000): 46.
[16] Ibid.

prompted more comparisons to Tarantino largely because of the film's stylized violence but also because one of the characters works in a video store and admires trashy exploitation films. However, *Bleeder* ultimately reveals Refn as someone more interested in "pushing hip cliché to its breaking point" as opposed to simply recreating or paying homage to his influences.[17] In 2003, Refn traveled to Hollywood to make his third feature, *Fear X*, but that film's failure at the box office bankrupted his production company, Jang Go Star,[18] and sent the upstart director scurrying back to Denmark. In the ensuing years, Refn bounced back from his losses by directing two additional *Pusher* films, *Pusher II* aka *With Blood on My Hands* and *Pusher III* aka *I'm the Angel of Death*, despite a professed distaste for sequels.[19] During this time, Refn also ventured into TV work as a director-for-hire helming two episodes of the British TV series *Marple* (2004-2013), based on stories by writer Agatha Christie and starring Geraldine McEwan as the title character.

Pusher debuted in the wake of *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and critics quickly lumped Refn in with the wave of imitators seeking to capitalize on Tarantino's newfound status and success by producing their own twisty, talky crime thrillers. As Jonathan Romney writes,

> *Pusher* exemplified everything you imagined a hyper confident young post-Tarantino filmmaker might achieve with limited resources and a handheld camera: a narratively bustling, quasi-*vérité* vignette of urban lowlife, soundtracked to a relentless throb of techno and Scandinavian thrash metal.[20]

Mette Hjort argues that Refn and *Pusher* were swept up in what she calls the "Tarantino effect," largely because the combination of violence and humor proved integral to the film's success.[21]

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Derived from Refn's nickname, Jang.

[19] See Brad Westcott, "Nicolas Winding Refn," last modified August 21, 2006, http://reverseshot.org/interviews/entry/1433/nicolas-winding-refn.

[20] Jonathan Romney, "Natural Selection," *Sight & Sound* 16, no. 3 (2006): 34.

[21] Mette Hjort, *Small Nation, Global Cinema: The New Danish Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 263.

Pusher undeniably shares some similarities with *Pulp Fiction* knockoffs such as *Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead* (Gary Fleder, 1995), *2 Days in the Valley* (John Herzfeld, 1996), *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (Guy Ritchie, 1998), and *Boondock Saints* (Troy Duffy, 1999). Like these films, *Pusher* is a stylish crime thriller that follows verbose, pop culture-obsessed wannabe gangsters as they navigate a seedy criminal underworld.

Yet, as film critic Noel Murray notes, while *Pusher* "came out in the middle of the wave of post-Quentin Tarantino underworld chic" it nevertheless shares "more in common with the naturalistic cops-and-robbers movies of the early '70s, dosed with just a little of Lars von Trier's artificial austerity."[22] Indeed, unlike Tarantino's numerous copycats who frequently produced aesthetically slick but thematically empty films, Refn refuses to portray his characters or the violence they unleash as cool or aspirational.[23] Instead, he sets out to critique and comment on the effortlessly cool and macho masculine heroes that frequently populate Westerns, action movies, martial arts films, and crime pictures.[24] In this way, Refn resembles Tarantino himself, who, according to film critic Matt Zoller Seitz, visually and textually mythologizes his characters only to later destabilize their hip, larger-than-life personae by revealing the tensions and potentially disastrous outcomes that arise from such mythologizing.[25] Refn similarly populates his films with (usually male) characters who either portray themselves as exaggerated tough guys (a la Frank in *Pusher* or Michael Peterson in *Bronson*) or are discursively established as legendary figures by other characters (as in the case of One Eye in *Valhalla Rising* or the Driver

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[22] Noel Murray, "Pusher Trilogy," last modified August 23, 2006, https://www.avclub.com/pusher-trilogy-1798201974.

[23] Romney, "Men Behaving Badly," 46.

[24] Christopher J. Olson, "Gangstas, Thugs, Vikings, and Drivers: Cinematic Masculine Archetypes and the Demythologization of Violence in the Films of Nicolas Winding Refn," (master's thesis, DePaul University, Chicago, 2014), 13, Digital Commons@DePaul.

[25] Matt Zoller Seitz, "'Pulp Fiction' and the mythology of cool," last modified May 21, 2014, http://www.rogerebert.com/mzs/pulp-fiction-and-the-mythology-of-cool.

in *Drive*).[26] In his monograph *Nicolas Winding Refn and the Violence of Art*, Vicari notes that Refn makes "violence central to his films" but that "there is much more to his movies than their quotient of expressive, propulsive, heady, imaginative violence."[27] Truly, Refn's films often serve to critique the sort of cinematic violence routinely found in Hollywood films because he refuses to shy away from the negative and often life-altering outcomes of such brutality.[28] This idea is prevalent throughout the films produced during the early part of his career.

During this phase, Refn aligned with the idea of a traditional auteur as initially conceptualized by the founders of influential French film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Though originally developed more as an informal way of reading films as opposed to "something that could be proved,"[29] the auteur theory remains, as Peter Wollen observes, an indispensable tool for critiquing films.[30] The auteur theory assigns authorship to a film or body of films by revealing authors where none had been seen before. Broadly speaking, the auteur theory holds that the director (or screenwriter, or producer, or studio) oversees all elements of a film and therefore assumes the role of "author." Of course, because film is a collaborative medium and directors rarely exert total control over their work, the auteur theory involves uncovering an author through an operation of decipherment, one that "emphasizes the body of a director's work rather than isolated masterpieces."[31] For Peter Wollen, the auteur theory revolves around a structural approach articulated by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, who concentrated on revealing repeated motifs that give an author's films a specific structure and distinguishes one body of

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[26] See Olson, 26.
[27] Vicari, 7.
[28] See Olson, 84.
[29] Richard Brody, "Andrew Sarris and the 'A' Word," *The New Yorker*, June 20, 2012, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/andrew-sarris-and-the-a-word.
[30] Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, 5th ed. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 64.
[31] Andrew Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," in *Film Theory & Criticism*, 8th ed., eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 403.

work from another.[32] Refn's work routinely demonstrates the ideas outlined above, even during this early period. Though Refn had yet to fully develop his distinctive visual style – which Vicari contends is "not the locked-down long takes of contemplative cinema, but an adrenaline-driven search for action"[33] – his early films and TV episodes nevertheless demonstrate both a distinguishable personality and a sense of interior meaning, two key criteria of value for identifying a creator as an auteur.

It must be noted, however, that Refn rejects the auteur label and instead considers himself an "instructor" who encourages a degree of artistic freedom among his collaborators.[34] In some ways, Refn recalls director Walter Hill, who, like Refn, spent much of his cinematic career exploring themes of violence and masculinity and whose film *The Driver* (1978) served as an inspiration for Refn's film *Drive*.[35] According to author Wayne Byrne, Hill contradicts the "auteurist anointment" because he "is transparently collaborative, as quick to hail the input and ideas of those he surrounds himself with as he is to take responsibility for his vision being the driving force of the end result."[36] Refn has expressed a similar sentiment in interviews, stating that filmmakers "only make good stuff if your collaborators are a part of your process and a part of your ideas, and there's no point in fighting them or them fighting you."[37] As Vicari suggests, an instructor can be considered "an exemplar, a mediator between ideals and realities."[38] The act of instruction suggests "a vertical movement aiming upward" whereas direction implies "a lateral

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[32] Wollen, 62-65.
[33] Vicari, 36.
[34] Ibid., 12.
[35] According to *The Driver* producer Lawrence Gordon, however, *Drive* is more a rip-off of Hill's film than an homage, as it is "the exact same movie." For more, see Wayne Byrne, *Walter Hill: The Cinema of a Hollywood Maverick* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2022), 24.
[36] Ibid., 6.
[37] Vicari, 13.
[38] Ibid., 12.

movement (albeit structured hierarchically, with top-to-bottom power differentials) aimed at the covering of ground."[39]

Refn routinely demonstrates this idea with his films, which are highly collaborative and often evolve due to the input of the cast and crew. For instance, to better evoke softspoken characters like the Man with No Name or Shane,[40] Refn worked closely with star Ryan Gosling to trim much of the dialogue from Hossein Amini's screenplay for *Drive*, reducing the unnamed lead character's lines to just 116 (a total of 891 words).[41] Yet, while Refn rejects the auteur label, his works, starting with *Bleeder* and extending through *Too Old to Die Young*, all demonstrate similar aesthetic, thematic, and aural preoccupations, including an innovative use of color, a preoccupation with masculinity and violence, and an emphasis on silence over dialogue.[42] At the same time, however, while he could be considered an instructor in terms of the content he creates, Refn is more of an auteur regarding his brand, which is created using fragments of discourse generated by Refn and others but more closely controlled and performed by Refn himself. In other words, Refn demonstrates agency in terms of how he labels himself as a maverick or outsider, thus taking control of the discourse(s) surrounding him and his films.

The next section considers Refn's place within the larger political and economic structures of cinema at the time of his debut. First, it presents brief overview of the history of the Danish film industry to establish a framework for the political economic conditions under which Refn worked when making *Pusher*. The section also considers the political and economic

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Scott Tobias, "Nicolas Winding Refn," last modified September 15, 2011, https://www.avclub.com/nicolas-winding-refn-1798227435.

[41] Chase Hutchinson, "How 'Drive' Challenged Our Perception of Ryan Gosling and Marked a Career Turning Point for the Actor," last modified September 26, 2021, https://collider.com/ryan-gosling-drive-performance-why-its-good/.

[42] As Refn himself notes, "I love the language of silence" largely because the "man who's always more silent is always the one who's unpredictable." See Tobias, "Nicolas Winding Refn."

environment of Hollywood at the time Refn first emerged on the international film scene, and

discusses how these conditions likely impacted the production and reception of his first English-

language film, *Fear X*.

The Political Economy of Cinema During Refn's Early Phase

The year 1897 saw the release of Denmark's first film, director Peter Elfelt's one-minute-

long documentary short *Svanerne i Sortedamssøen* (The Swans of Lake Sortedams).[43] Seven

years later, in 1904, Constantin Philipsen opened Denmark's first successful movie theater,

Kosmorama, in Copenhagen.[44] Then, in 1906, Ole Olsen, owner and operator of Copenhagen's

popular Biograf-Theater,[45] founded the film production company Nordisk Films Kompagni,[46]

signaling the formal establishment of the Danish film industry. However, it was not until 1972

that Denmark's government founded the Danish Film Institute to provide state subsidies for

select (e.g., "artistic") Danish movie projects.[47] The following decade, the Danish government

announced the Film Law of 1982, intended to help invigorate the nation's flagging cinema

industry by granting more funds to support Danish films with at least 25% of the aid earmarked

for children's films and youth films.[48] Five years later, *Babette's Feast* (Gabriel Axel, 1987)

became the first Danish film to win an Academy Award, earning the Oscar for Best International

Film. This new focus on Danish cinema prompted a revision of the Film Law in 1989, shifting

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[43] Peter Schepelern, "Danish Film History: 1896-1910," accessed April 9, 2023,
https://www.dfi.dk/en/english/danish-film-history/danish-film-history-1896-1910.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Mette Hjort and Ib Bondebjerg, *The Danish Directors: Dialogues on a Contemporary National Cinema*,
trans. Mette Hjort (Portland: Intellect Books, 2003), 8-9.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Peter Schepelern, "Danish Film History: 1980-1989," accessed April 9, 2023,
https://www.dfi.dk/en/english/danish-film-history/danish-film-history-1980-1989.

film support from an artistic backing to a cultural backing.[49] That year, lawmakers introduced the 50/50 ordinance, with the nation's government agreeing to provide fifty percent of the financing for Danish film projects that were likely to appeal to "popular tastes and inclinations" so long as the rest was backed by private capital.[50]

The 50/50 ordinance resulted in a wave of populist comedies, coming-of-age films, and youth-oriented pictures released during the early 1990s, including *The Birthday Trip* (Lone Scherfig, 1990), *Dance of the Polar Bears* (Birger Larsen, 1990), and *The Crumbs* (Sven Methling, 1991). Several films produced during this period enjoyed great success in Denmark but failed to attract international audiences. Then, on March 20, 1995, Danish filmmakers Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg appeared at Le Cinéma Vers Son Deuxième Siècle in Paris, France, to present their co-written manifesto that led to the creation of the Dogme 95 movement. With this manifesto, Von Trier and Vinterberg protested what they saw as the superficial, technological, and economically supercharged cinematic style of Hollywood films. Instead, the duo called for a simpler mode of production, one that required the use of authentic locations, hand-held cinematography, natural lighting, and the simultaneous recording of sound and image, while also forbidding the use of props and visual editing. The announcement once again helped shine an international spotlight on Danish cinema,[51] though the first wave of Dogme films, which included Vinterberg's *The Celebration* (1998) and Von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998), did not arrive until three years later and just one year prior to Refn's 1999 debut.

Around that time, Denmark experienced the emergence of numerous young genre-aware filmmakers who comprised what is now known as the "new new wave" of Danish cinema.[52]

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[49] Ibid.
[50] Hjort and Bondebjerg, 19.
[51] Ibid., 10.
[52] Ibid., 11.

These included Ole Bornedal (director of *Nightwatch*, 1994), Lotte Svendsen (director of *Royal Blues*, 1997), Jonas Elmer (director of *Let's Get Lost*, 1997), and Refn. According to Peter Schepelern of Copenhagen University, the films of this so-called "new new wave" were marked by grim violence, social satire, improvisational acting, and a sense of humanism,[53] all of which appear in Refn's early films. Many of the films produced during this period benefitted from the 50/50 ordinance, including *Pusher*, for which Refn received an $800,000 grant from the Danish government.[54] In 1997, the 50/50 ordinance gave way to the 60/40 ordinance,[55] with the government pledging to support up to sixty percent of a film's budget, though in reality that support was closer to around forty percent.[56]

During this same period, Nordic crime stories – sometimes lumped under the designation "Nordic noir" – gained popularity around the world. As Kerstin Bergman notes, "the 1990s and early 2000s are often regarded as a new Golden Age of Swedish crime fiction."[57] In 1997, Hennig Mankell's first novel, *Faceless Killers* (Swedish: *Mördare utan ansikte*), originally published in 1991, was translated into English. The book's success, which stemmed partly from Mankel's Leftist political perspective and subsequent critique of western capitalism, helped other Scandinavian crime thrillers find success beyond the borders of their home countries. These include books by Nordic authors such as Håkan Nesser, Stieg Larsson, and Camilla Läckberg.

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[53] Peter Schepelern, "Danish Film History: 1990-1999," accessed March 31, 2023, https://www.dfi.dk/en/english/danish-film-history/danish-film-history-1990-1999.

[54] In an interview with film critic Tasha Robinson for the now-defunct film-focused website *The Dissolve*, Refn explains that he likely received the grant money because he applied at "a time when Danish film was not very popular, certainly not internationally. And there was not a lot of interest in what was going on in Danish cinema." As such, he contends that his "application just got approved, and then suddenly, [he] had this money." However, Refn counts himself lucky, because, at the time, he had "no track record" as a filmmaker and therefore doubts he would have received the money under different circumstances. For more see Robinson, "From *Pusher* to the Present."

[55] Hjort and Bondebjerg, 19.

[56] Schepelern, "Danish Film History: 1990-1999."

[57] Kerstin Bergman, *Swedish Crime Fiction: The Making of Nordic Noir* (Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis International, 2014). 25.

According to Bergman, Scandinavian crime fiction gained global popularity due to a focus on social and political criticism; international curiosity about Scandinavian welfare systems; an emphasis on setting that fed into a perception of the Nordic landscape as exotic; and a foregrounding of strong women characters that appeal to female readers.[58]

   Pusher arrived around the same time that these Nordic crime stories were gaining worldwide recognition, and it helped drive interest in Scandinavian crime and gangster films. Often credited as the first Danish-language gangster movie,[59] *Pusher* was "a runaway success in Europe"[60] that gained global cult status in the decade following its initial release.[61] While the film differs from many Scandinavian crime novels in that it is neither a police procedural nor a political/spy thriller, it nevertheless engages in the same sort of genre mixing that helped propel the success of books like *Faceless Killers*, Nesser's *The Mind's Eye* (Swedish: *Det grovmaskiga nätet*), or Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Swedish: *Män som hatar kvinnor*, which translates to *Men Who Hate Women*).[62] By way of example, Larsson's novel mixes numerous genres including intellectual whodunit mystery, suspenseful serial killer thriller, clue-puzzle mystery, historical mystery, American hard-boiled detective story, children's detective story,

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[58] Kerstin Bergman, "The success of Nordic Noir literature," Lund University, June 30, 2015, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFlMspMCqN8.

[59] Alistair Ryder, "The Beginner's Guide: Nicolas Winding Refn, Director," last modified June 14, 2016, https://www.filminquiry.com/beginners-guide-nicolas-winding-refn-director/.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Scott Tobias, "Nicolas Winding Refn's Pusher trilogy," last modified October 8, 2009, https://www.avclub.com/nicolas-winding-refn-s-pusher-trilogy-1798217909.

[62] It must be noted that *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* author Stieg Larsson is Swedish, while Refn hails from Denmark. However, as Bergman notes, though "all the national crime fiction traditions display their own specificities and preferences" there are nevertheless "strong grounds for talking about Nordic crime fiction as a common, regional phenomenon." According to Bergman, the "focus on (leftist) social and political critique and/or consciousness, the preference for realism, the importance of setting, the melancholic male detectives, and the strong women detectives" all support an "inclusive grouping." Thus, considering how genre mixing contributed to the success of Nordic noir might help illuminate why *Pusher* gained global recognition. For more on genre mixing in Scandinavian crime fiction see Bergman, *Swedish Crime Fiction*, 173.

action thriller, police procedural, financial thriller, horror, journalistic detective novel, and true crime.[63]

Refn engages in a similar form of playful genre mixing throughout his own works starting with *Pusher*, which mixes such genres as crime, comedy, action, thriller, and even horror.[64] Such genre mixing may explain why the film resonated with a global audience, though it should be noted that while Refn likewise works in popular genres he does not always engage in the same sort of sociopolitical critique as the Nordic crime fiction authors (films like *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon* can nevertheless be read as commentaries on masculinity and fashion respectively). His films also do not enjoy the same sort of massive popularity as Nordic crime novels, instead cultivating a primarily cult or arthouse (i.e., niche) audience. Nevertheless, numerous other Nordic crime films followed in *Pusher*'s wake, including *Bloody Angels* (Karin Julsrud, 1998), *Inkasso* (Lasse Spang Olsen, 2004), and *Ambulance* (Laurits Munch-Petersen, 2005).[65]

Pusher premiered just as blockbusters and franchises were achieving dominance over most international film markets, but especially in Hollywood. By this point, Hollywood was already several decades deep into what Charles R. Acland calls the "blockbuster strategy,"[66] or the "cultural and economic logic that drove the conventionalization of the 'big' in film

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[63] Ibid., 131-32.

[64] As evidenced by the film's final sequence, which in some ways prefigures so-called "torture porn" films like *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005) and *Hostel: Part II* (Eli Roth, 2007).

[65] In 2022, Universal Pictures released an English-language remake of *Ambulance* directed by Michael Bay and featuring Jake Gyllenhaal, Yahya Abdul-Mateen II, and Eiza González in the lead roles.

[66] Thomas Schatz uses the term "blockbuster syndrome" to describe Hollywood producers' interest in big films to the exclusion of other types of movies in the years following the Paramount Decree of 1948. Jon Lewis, meanwhile, refers to this phenomenon as the "blockbuster mindset," emphasizing how the financial attractiveness of large-scale productions drove Hollywood for decades. See Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 10, and Jon Lewis "Following Money in America's Sunniest Company Town: Some Notes on the Political Economy of the Hollywood Blockbuster," in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (New York: Routledge, 2003), 63-66.

entertainment" that "by and large remains intact and dominant today."[67] Indeed, the blockbuster strategy only intensified during the first decade of the New Millennium, as Hollywood studios increasingly focused films that boasted "outsize production budgets, unusually elaborate promotional campaigns, and significant box office results."[68]

According to Acland, contemporary blockbusters tend to feature "visually dynamic scenes, saturated with color and sound," "sprawling, swirling, and soaring images, the product of actual or simulated camera work," and "action that ignores the laws of physics."[69] Refn's films, especially those produced during his later period, incorporate elements of the blockbuster, most notably visually dynamic sequences, saturated color, vibrant soundscapes, and sprawling imagery. For instance, *Pusher* features a brief but dynamically edited foot chase through downtown Copenhagen involving lead character Frank (Kim Bodnia) and the police, while *Bronson* includes several visceral fight sequences enhanced by energetic camera work and editing. *Drive*, meanwhile, boasts an exhilarating car chase following a tense pawn shop robbery, with both sequences benefiting from the contrast between the languid pace of the theft and the frenetic speed of the pursuit. At the same time, however, Refn routinely creates texts that stylistically and narratively refute those produced within the confines of the blockbuster strategy. He often employs some of the same tactics, tropes, and/or generic conventions found in such films only to subvert them via extremely languid pacing, graphic violence and/or sexuality, unconventional use of color and sound, etc. Refn appears to align aspects of his films with prevailing cinematic trends only to establish himself and his work as different, which could

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[67] Charles R. Acland, *American Blockbuster: Movies, Technology, and Wonder* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 9.
[68] Ibid., 6.
[69] Ibid., 3

explain why they are often not as commercially and/or critically successful (though they often appear to have more lasting cult appeal).

Acland contends that "'Blockbuster' is a term, but more centrally it is a 'nodal point,' a meeting place for ideas and understandings about popular entertainment and industry" that "works to fix an array of idea about business, capital, and popular culture."[70] As such, this strategy provides Refn (and others like him) with a mode of filmmaking and/or cultural production he can oppose. Through his branded persona, Refn positions himself against what Acland terms "conglomerate Hollywood," the "wide, cross-media, interindustry plan" that positions blockbusters as "'tentpoles,' meaning they are the centerpiece for the coming season, under which less capitalized works will be sheltered."[71] More importantly, perhaps, the blockbuster strategy also provides critics, scholars, fans, and Refn himself a way to likewise position Refn, via their discourse, as an outsider who subverts audience expectations and resists making more traditional Hollywood fare. For example, Scott Meslow notes that Refn could have easily parlayed the success of *Drive* into "a comfortable, lucrative string of blockbusters," but instead he made *Only God Forgives*, which Meslow describes as "a spectacular and apparently willful act of self-immolation."[72] Refn, meanwhile, cheekily compares making blockbusters to sex work, stating "Hollywood is like going into a hotel room and seeing the most gorgeous escort girl" who tempts filmmakers but could potentially infect them with a disease.[73]

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[70] Ibid., 32.
[71] Ibid., 6.
[72] Scott Meslow, "Remember When Drive's Nicolas Winding Refn Was Poised to Be Hollywood's Biggest Director?" published May 20, 2016, https://www.gq.com/story/drive-nicolas-winding-refn.
[73] Kevin Jagernauth, "After Comparing Making Blockbuters to Prostitution, Is Nicolas Winding Refn Really Going to Make A Bond Movie?" published May 28, 2013, https://www.indiewire.com/news/general-news/after-comparing-making-blockbuters-to-prostitution-is-nicolas-winding-refn-really-going-to-make-a-bond-movie-97549/.

This opposition to conventionality serves as the basis of Refn's brand, which would not fully coalesce until his later period though elements of it were evident even during this early phase of his career. Refn frequently dismisses conglomerate Hollywood in interviews, claiming that contemporary cinema "has become like Chinese food: it gives you cheap, instant pleasure, like an orgasm, but it's not very healthy or interesting."[74] These ideas frequently manifest in Refn's films in the form of unconventional techniques that subvert standard Hollywood tropes and conventions. Jason Wood observes that *Pusher* established Refn's "acute visual style and refusal to shy away from the graphic depiction of violence."[75] As Romney notes, that visual style involves techniques like "bustling handheld camerawork and claustrophobia-inducing wide angles."[76] When taken together, the *Pusher* films represent "one of the most distinctive exercises in recent crime cinema" due in part to Refn's specific stylistic tendencies and peculiar filmic obsessions.[77] He cites Refn's "taste for willfully trashy, splashy gestures, such as the car-heist sequences in *Pusher II*" – which he describes as a "bracingly speedy cut-price Michael Mann" – as elements that set Refn apart from other directors.[78] Jonathan Barnes, meanwhile, notes that in *Fear X* Refn avoids formula through the use of a relaxed pace and a hypnotic score, rendering everything onscreen "more as dreams or visions than any literal representation of the truth."[79]

These elements that appear in Refn's early works but define his later works all contribute to the construction of his mediated persona, "Refn," which is steeped in 1980s excess and serves to unify not only his own works but those produced by others under a coherent banner. In this way, Refn aligns with franchise films and their various spinoffs and tie-ins, which Anastasia

[74] Ibid.
[75] Jason Wood, *Last Words: Considering Contemporary Cinema* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2014), 108.
[76] Jonathan Romney, "Hard Men," *Film Comment*, July/August 2010, 26.
[77] Romney, "Natural Selection," 34.
[78] Ibid., 36.
[79] Jonathan Barnes, "Fear X," *Sight & Sound* 14, no. 4 (2004): 48.

Salter and Mel Stanfill consider the epitome of convergence culture because they emphasize branding that "reinforces the idea that fragmented, multiauthored, corporate productions are somehow unified and coherent."[80] Refn's brand accomplishes such unification, but focuses on establishing taste formation or a lifestyle as opposed to building a cinematic universe, such as those developed by Disney/Marvel or Warner Bros./DC. Of course, it should be noted that Refn has occasionally toed the line of such films, flirting with high-profile projects such as *Wonder Woman* (eventually directed by Patty Jenkins and released in 2017) and a remake of 70s sci-fi thriller *Logan's Run* (Michael Anderson, 1976).[81] Yet both critics and Refn himself would ultimately categorize him as a maverick who prefers to make stylish, challenging, and (some might say agonizingly) slow films that resonate more with cult audiences than with a broad global population. "Refn" intentionally demonstrates anti-franchise and anti-blockbuster tendencies, as Refn uses his discourses to counter what he considers a safe, sanitized cinema emblematized by the standard Hollywood blockbuster model. Instead, Refn uses his brand to celebrate what he considers an "uncontrolled" cinema that emphasizes "mental pain" to help "stimulate and reset the brain."[82]

The following sections explore the films made during Refn's early period and further analyze the discourses surrounding them to uncover how the films and the response to them help to establish the foundation for his branded persona, "Refn," which emerges more fully in his later period. First, I discuss his breakthrough film *Pusher*, and his semi-autobiographical follow-

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[80] Anastasia Salter and Mel Stanfill, *A Portrait of the Auteur as Fanboy: The Construction of Authorship in Transmedia Franchises* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), xv.

[81] Matt Goldberg, "Nicolas Winding Refn Says He Gets WONDER WOMAN if He Does Well with LOGAN'S RUN," last modified August 16, 2011, https://collider.com/nicolas-winding-refn-wonder-woman-logans-run/.

[82] Nicolas Winding Refn, "Our Times Need Sex, Horror, and Melodrama," last modified July 4, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jul/04/nicolas-winding-refn-apocalyptic-times-cult-movies-can-save-us-bynwr.

up, *Bleeder*, to analyze how they establish Refn's identity as an auteur.[83] Following that, I

consider how *Fear X*, *Pusher II*, and *Pusher III* all contributed to the creation of "Refn" and how

these films fit into the political economic structures of the industry at the time of their

production. Finally, I examine "Towards Zero" and "Nemesis," the episodes of *Marple* directed

by Refn, to explore how he began to make the shift to being a transmedia auteur as described by

Salter, Stanfill, and others.

Pusher and *Bleeder*

Refn's reputation as a disruptive filmmaker was established from the start, as critics often

portrayed *Pusher* as a film that subverted audience expectations and revealed Refn as a director

who would be difficult to pigeonhole. As Romney observes, *Pusher* "may have seemed an

archetypal guys-with-guns movie […] but it had a rigorous narrative drive, a dispassionate

distance from its characters, and a flair for the uncomfortable comedy of time-wasting

inarticulacy."[84] Indeed, Refn's films regularly confront audiences with minimal dialogue, long

takes reminiscent of but distinct from 70s traditionalism, and startling sequences of altogether

horrific violence, things rarely included in bombastic, massified blockbusters such as *Avengers:*

Endgame (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2019) or *Star Wars: Episode IX - The Rise of*

Skywalker (J. J. Abrams, 2019). In this way, Refn recalls David Fincher, who, according to Graig

Uhlin, sympathized with the directors of the so-called New Hollywood movement and likewise

sought to "throw some grit into high concept's polish."[85] Like Fincher, Refn quickly earned a

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[83] Readers may consult the Appendix for synopses of Refn's films, television episodes, and streaming series.

[84] See Romney, "Men Behaving Badly," 46.

[85] Graig Uhlin, "David Fincher's Righteous Workflow: Design and the Transmedial Director," in *Transmedia Directors: Artistry, Industry and New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, eds. Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers, and Lisa Perrott (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 141.

reputation as a rebellious and confrontational director who took creative risks, gleefully shunning the model of success established by both blockbusters and franchise films.

Starting with *Pusher* and continuing throughout his career (but especially during his later period), Refn remixes and recontextualizes his various cinematic influences.[86] With *Pusher*, Refn establishes both his tendency toward intertextuality and what Vicari considers his ability to rethink standard conventions of action cinema such as "stagy dialogue" and "generic bodies flashing across the screen like avatars in a video game."[87] Film scholar Alison Taylor writes that Refn's films all contain "a wealth of influence, allusion, and mysticism that can only enrich our appreciation."[88] Along with the films and filmmakers already mentioned, *Pusher* contains intertextual references to "some Fassbinder and Scorsese films" in that they "follow a brutish, unredeemable character while having his limitations and lack of options hammered home again and again."[89] Refn also draws inspiration from the works of Australian director George Miller, specifically *Mad Max*; Vicari argues that Refn routinely includes variations on the sequence in which lead character "Mad" Max Rockatansky (Mel Gibson) visits his wife in the hospital following her assault at the hands of the unhinged Toecutter (Hugh Keays-Byrne) and his gang of brutal bikers. In this sequence, "Miller pulls back from the grotesque hospital bed where Max's brutalized wife is now an amputee in an oxygen tent, until the right side of the screen is

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[86] Other influences include *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933), which introduced to Refn "a great world of the fantastique" that inspired what he considers his own brand of fantasy filmmaking, and *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973), which taught him about the relationship between music and image. Refn also cites *Clerks* (Kevin Smith, 1994) as the film that helped him realize he could make his own independent film, explaining that it heavily influenced the acting and dialogue in *Pusher* (I would argue that it also inspired aspects of *Bleeder*, specifically the video store sequences and the discussions about movie minutiae). Finally, Refn asserts that *Liquid Sky* (Slava Tsukerman, 1982) revealed to him the importance of capturing the vibe of an era as opposed to the specific details, while *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (Russ Meyer, 1970) shaped his approach to cinematography, specifically composition and color. For more, see Robinson, "From *Pusher* to the Present."

[87] Vicari, *53*.

[88] Alison Taylor, "Scorpion Rising," in *Drive*, ed. Petra Deacon (Teddington: Second Sight Films, 2022), 4.

[89] Vicari, 55.

filled with a close-up of Max, anguished, staring out toward the camera."[90] Indeed, reworkings of

this sequence can be found in *Pusher* (following the vicious beating by Frank, the camera pulls

back to reveal a bloody and battered Tonny), *Bleeder* (the camera pulls back to reveal Louise

after Leo beats her), and *Fear X* (the camera pulls back to reveal the lead character lying in a

hospital bed after he is shot by his wife's murderer).

According to Vicari, such allusions indicate Refn's interest in building a distinctive

visual language."[91] They also serve as evidence of Refn's fandom surrounding sleazy, low-

budget exploitation films. In this way Refn recalls his contemporary Kevin Smith,[92] whose own

debut film *Clerks* (1994) partly inspired Refn to make *Pusher*.[93] According to Salter and Stanfill,

Smith's so-called View Askewniverse cycle of films[94] demonstrate how "Smith is both fanboy

and auteur on multiple levels: he's the author of the text, which is steeped in geek culture, but

also his body exists both behind the camera and in front of it as a fanboy character."[95] This idea

also applies to *Bleeder*; though Refn does not appear in front of the camera himself in that film,

he nevertheless includes a semi-autobiographical surrogate in the form of shy video store clerk

Lenny (Mads Mikkelsen), who shares Refn's obsession with exploitation cinema. As noted by

Jonah Jeng, Lenny is the "most movie-obsessed member of his friend group" and "films are his

lens onto the world."[96] While Refn insists that he is "not a walking film encyclopedia," he

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[90] Ibid., 31.

[91] Ibid., 32.

[92] Though Smith's fandom tends toward blockbusters like *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) and *Star Wars* (aka *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope*, George Lucas, 1977) as opposed to low-budget exploitation flicks like *The Joys of Jezebel* (Peter Perry, Jr., 1970) or *Maniac Cop* (William Lustig, 1988), as in Refn's case.

[93] See Robinson, "From *Pusher* to the Present."

[94] The cycle includes *Clerks*, *Mallrats* (1995), *Chasing Amy* (1997), *Dogma* (1999), *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (2001), *Clerks II* (2006), *Jay & Silent Bob's Super Groovy Cartoon Movie!* (2013), *Jay and Silent Bob Reboot* (2019), *Clerks III* (2022).

[95] Salter and Stanfill, 69.

[96] Jonah Jeng, "How Bleeder was a landmark for Nicolas Winding Refn's distinctive style," last modified January 5, 2023, https://lwlies.com/articles/bleeder-nwr/.

nevertheless views the world through the lens of his cinematic obsessions. For instance, in his

essay for the *Guardian*, Refn writes, "Bad-taste cult movies can save us from the dystopian

nightmare of Trump's America."[97] Through this somewhat grandiose statement, Refn reveals

how he situates everything from art to politics in relation to his favorite films and genres.

Lenny, who spends much of his time onscreen expounding about bad-taste cult movies

like *Vigilante* (William Lustig, 1982), is clearly a stand-in for Refn, an idea reinforced by

Lenny's longing for Lea, an attractive bartender played by Refn's real-life wife Liv Corfixen.

Here, Refn engages in an early version of the "creator as content" concept, which would

manifest more clearly in the later phase of his career, when Kojima used Refn's likeness and

persona to create the character Heartman in *Death Stranding* (see Chapter 4). While not entirely

a new practice or idea (precursors abound in the form of Smith's portrayal of Silent Bob, Alfred

Hitchcock's playful cameos, and Steven Spielberg's fatherless sons), polymediation has allowed

the concept to evolve over the course of Refn's thirty-plus-year career. The prevalence of

advanced communication technologies and the amplified interconnectivity between media

ensures that creators and their brands become more visible. While *Bleeder* appears to

demonstrate that Refn abides by the adage of "write what you know," Lenny's love of trash

cinema and infatuation with Lea serves as an initial attempt to establish "Refn" as both a

character and a recognizable brand, one that would fully blossom in the latter half of his career.

As mentioned, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* inspired Refn to embark on a career as a

filmmaker,[98] largely because it helped him realize that cinema "is not just mass entertainment"

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[97] Refn, "Sex, Horror, and Melodrama."

[98] It should be noted that, upon its initial release in 1974, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* received mixed reviews, with some critics lambasting the film for what they considered its extreme violence. For instance, *Los Angeles Times* critic Linda Gross deemed the picture "a degrading, senseless misuse of film and time," calling it "despicable" as well as "ugly and obscene." Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* likewise panned the film, writing that he "can't imagine why anyone would want to make a movie like this" and dismissing it as a movie "without any apparent purpose, unless the creation of disgust and fright is a purpose." Some audience members also

but rather "an expression."[99] Refn asserts that the film "goes against all logic of filmmaking as you're otherwise taught it" and therefore holds "no meaning other than just emotional impact."[100] This idea persists throughout Refn's own films, which tend to emphasize mood over narrative cohesion, especially in his later period. Indeed, films such as *The Neon Demon* (2016) evince what Phipps calls an "enveloping aesthetic,"[101] which is often so enveloping that it occasionally threatens to overwhelm the narrative. Of course, it must be noted that while *Pusher* and *Bleeder* both prioritize atmosphere over plot, neither film features the sort of "psychedelic mysticism"[102] that Refn first dabbles with in *Fear X* and later pushes to the fore in films like *Valhalla Rising* (2009) and *Only God Forgives* (2013).[103]

Action movie cliches such as those previously mentioned can be found in nearly all Refn's films, but he generally avoids "'the big picture' in order to examine the desperate choices made by people who operate in the underworld."[104] According to Romney, *Pusher* accentuates "the bleak nature of a criminal existence that offers rewards which seem barely worth the effort"[105] in place of the dynamic action found in other films that similarly utilize frenetic camerawork and propulsive music. Tobias likewise notes that *Pusher* focuses more on "dread-

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found the film repellent; James Stolworthy of the *Independent* notes that some cinemas were "forced to stop showing the horror shortly after its release due to complaints from audience members about its content." Stolworthy also observes that *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* "was famously banned in several countries after being released in October 1974." It was only later that the film earned a reputation as a classic of the horror genre. For more, see: Linda Gross, "Movie Review: 'Texas Massacre' Grovels in Gore," *The Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Oct. 30, 1974; Roger Ebert, "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre," *The Chicago Sun-Times* (Chicago, IL), Jan. 1, 1974; and James Stolworthy, "Original Texas Chainsaw Massacre Would Have Been a PG if Director Tobe Hooper Had His Way," last modified February 18, 2022, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/texas-chainsaw-massacre-netflix-b2018518.html.

[99] Robinson, "From *Pusher* to the Present."

[100] Ibid.

[101] Keith Phipps, "Nicolas Winding Refn's New Streaming Service Tries to Shape a Better Future out of a Sleazy Past," last modified August 9, 2018, https://www.theverge.com/2018/8/9/17661216/nicolas-winding-refn-streaming-service-bynwr-launch-better-future-grindhouse-cinema.

[102] Vicari, *94*.

[103] For more discussion of these and other films produced during Refn's later period, see Chapter 2.

[104] Tobias, "Pusher Trilogy."

[105] Romney, "Natural Selection," 35.

soaked ambiance" than it does on "shocking violence and abuse" or "crime-movie sensationalism."[106] Scholar C. Claire Thomson, meanwhile, describes both films as "gritty, stylized, self-aware portraits of violence."[107] While accurate, these critical appraisals fail to mention that both *Pusher* and *Bleeder* are straightforward crime films that hearken back to the sleazy, low-budget exploitation films that Refn loves, which often feature simple plots bolstered by scandalous elements such as sex and violence. As such, these two films help to codify Refn's brand as a maverick fanboy who prefers trash cinema to "safe" films considered "good" or "legitimate" according to prevailing taste hierarchies.

Across his films, Refn tends to dispense with elements such as expository dialogue, opting instead to let the visuals convey the mood while characters reveal themselves through their actions. As Refn explains in an interview with entertainment website the *AV Club*, "everything [he and his collaborators] do is about the emotion of the characters. We believe the better the emotion, the better the movie."[108] Thus, when a character like Frank runs or fights or kills someone, the action "is an extension of their already established, everyday reality, their sometime clumsiness – in a word, their humanity."[109] Vicari notes that *Pusher* contains "some of the same cool stylization as New Wave or No Wave cinema."[110] Such stylization helps Refn push his themes to the fore, as when he demythologizes traditional conceptions of violent masculinity by refusing to shy away from the negative outcomes that often befall vicious men.[111] *Pusher* is no exception, as it explores themes of fragile masculinity but also offers a scathing

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[106] Tobias, "Pusher Trilogy."

[107] C. Claire Thomson, "'I Am No Longer an Artist': Heritage Film, Dogme 95 and the New Danish Cinema," in *A History of Danish Cinema*, eds. C. Claire Thomson, lsak Thorsen, and Pei-Sze Chow (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 171.

[108] Scott Tobias, "Nicolas Winding Refn," last modified September 15, 2011, https://www.avclub.com/nicolas-winding-refn-1798227435.

[109] Vicari, 53.

[110] Ibid.

[111] See Olson, 84.

critique of consumerism; Vicari contends that in *Pusher*, much of the action occurs within consumer spaces[112] and "drugs stand for commodity-culture, for commodification itself, since there is, in a sense, no more perfect commodity; only food and water rival it, or, on the day that it can be withheld and sold, oxygen."[113] For Vicari, this metaphor serves as a critique of capitalism itself, because it reveals how "all capitalist agents are dealers whose power stems from being able to operate outside of legal strictures with wild abandon and lack of remorse."[114] Here, the theme of late-stage capitalist exploitation becomes evident.

Pusher thus reflects Refn's own critique of the modern film industry as a business controlled by "a small number of conglomerates whose sole purpose is the bottom line."[115] The film industry in general and Hollywood in particular are prime examples of capitalist industries that emphasis profit over people, often operating above or outside of the law provided they can get away with it. Examples of Hollywood's illicit activities include Paramount Pictures using an elaborate strategy to avoid paying U.S. taxes on its entertainment properties.[116] Another involves how the film industry largely chose to ignore producer Harvey Weinstein's alleged pattern of sexual abuse over the course of several years.[117] Refn's tendency to dismiss Hollywood as a "trivial and banal" industry that peddles "glitz, glamour and an illusion of perfection and enjoyment that's very far from the truth"[118] suggests that he finds much of the so-called "mainstream" entertainment industry distasteful. As such, *Pusher* could be considered Refn's

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[112] Vicari writes, "Hardly anything in Pusher takes place outside of consumer spaces. Frank tracks down and attacks Tonny in the neighborhood bar where they always go to drink; regular consumption, in this case, makes it easier for your enemies to find you." See Vicari, 58.
[113] Ibid., 55.
[114] Ibid., 56.
[115] Refn, "Sex, Horror, and Melodrama."
[116] Hope Rosenblatt, "TMNT & Other Paramount Movies Allegedly Part of Massive Tax Fraud," last modified June 2, 2021, https://screenrant.com/tmnt-paramount-viacomcbs-movie-tax-fraud-details/.
[117] Megan Garber, "In the Valley of the Open Secret," last modified October 11, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/10/harvey-weinstein-latest-allegations/542508/.
[118] Refn, "Sex, Horror, and Melodrama."

critique of his own chosen profession rather than merely a straightforward but stylish crime

drama, especially when read as a metaphor for capitalism and/or the entertainment industry. This

idea points to the discursive dichotomy that defines "Refn," working within corporate cinema

while also trying to subvert its political economic structures, using genre tropes to subvert

audience expectations.

With *Bleeder*, meanwhile, Refn develops the stylistic flourishes and aesthetic fetishes

that would come to define his later works, so much so that Jeng wisely considers the film "a

transitional work in retrospect."[119] He describes *Bleeder* as a "meeting point between [Refn's]

two stylistic poles," with the "gritty handheld camerawork" and "dread-inducing, plans-gone-

awry narrative" of *Pusher* at one end and the "tableau-vivant-style staging involving static

bodies arranged like mannequins in a fashion photoshoot" of *Too Old to Die Young* (2019) at the

other.[120] He also contends that *Bleeder* is "'about' this very convergence, exploring the violence

and beauty that ensue when reality and fantasy, life and art collide."[121] Certainly, with this film

Refn further solidifies his tendency to foreground theme over narrative, here exploring how

protagonist Leo (Bodnia) succumbs to the fantasy of male violence, only to discover that in

reality he simply does not measure up to the hegemonic ideal of masculine toughness.[122] Refn

conveys this theme through his use of red lighting and production design, a stylistic device that

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[119] Jeng. "How Bleeder was a landmark for NWR."
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Leo reflects R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt's concept of "complicit masculinity." According to Connell and Messerschmidt, hegemonic masculinity refers to "the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue." Essentially, hegemonic masculinity establishes the "most honored way of being a man" in a society and requires "all other men to position themselves in relation to it" while also ideologically legitimating "the global subordination of women to men." Connell and Messerschmidt note that most men fail to embody the qualities of the hegemonic masculine ideal but can nevertheless receive "the benefits of patriarchy" by performing "a strong version of masculine dominance." This performance lies at the core of complicit masculinity. See R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 832.

first manifests in *Bleeder* but recurs throughout all of Refn's subsequent films, TV episodes, and streaming series. Jeng observes that the walls of Leo's apartment are covered in red wallpaper, "suggesting the latent violence within his home."[123] Furthermore, "scene transitions repeatedly involve the image slowly fading to red as a deep, ominous rumbling is heard on the soundtrack."[124] Refn uses this stylistic motif to establish the theme that fatal consequences await those who engage in a violent masculinity they could never hope to embody.

At the same time, *Bleeder* emphasizes Refn's fetishistic tendencies. In Refn's own words, he is a "fetish filmmaker" in that he only shoots what he likes to see.[125] Critics have also remarked upon Refn's fetishism. For instance, Andrew Anthony of the *Guardian* considers Refn a director "who uses film to act out his personal fantasies and fetishes."[126] Angie Han of the *Hollywood Reporter* writes that Refn's films demonstrate a "fetish for violence that verges on (and occasionally tips over into) sexual,"[127] while scholar Meryl Shriver-Rice contends that Refn's films demonstrate an "obsession with glossy visual aesthetics."[128] Vicari, meanwhile, argues that within the context of Refn's films, fetishism functions as expiatory or joyous act of mourning for the outdated things that the director loves.[129]

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[123] Jeng, "How Bleeder was a landmark for NWR."

[124] Ibid.

[125] See Sean Fennesey, "The GQ&A: Drive Director Nicolas Winding Refn," last modified September 12, 2011, https://www.gq.com/story/drive-nicolas-winding-refn-ryan-gosling and Jesse Thorn, "60: The Sound of Young America: Nicolas Winding Refn, Director of Drive," September 12, 2011, in *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*, produced by Maximum Fun, podcast, MP3 audio, 32:06, https://maximumfun.org/episodes/bullseye-with-jesse-thorn/nicolas-winding-refn-director-drive-interview-sound-young-america/.

[126] Andrew Anthony, "Nicolas Winding Refn: I Am a Pornographer," last modified July 13, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/jul/13/nicolas-winding-refn-god-forgives.

[127] Angie Han, "'Copenhagen Cowboy' Review: Nicolas Winding Refn's Netflix Series Plays Like His Greatest Hits Compilation," last modified January 5, 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-reviews/copenhagen-cowboy-nicolas-winding-refn-netflix-1235290926/#!.

[128] Meryl Shriver-Rice, "Stories of Scandinavian Guilt and Privilege: Transnational Danish Directors," in *A History of Danish Cinema*, eds. C. Claire Thomson, Isak Thorsen, and Pei-Sze Chow (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 180.

[129] Vicari, 39.

An example of this cheerful fetishism occurs in *Bleeder* when the camera lingers on the

video cassettes that line the aisles of Lenny's workplace. Romney notes that *Bleeder* frequently

seems to fetishisticly mourn other aspects of the past as well. For example, the film begins with

an apparent reference to the opening of *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977), as "a pair of

sneakers stride along to 1970s pop, before we see their owner, a gormless-looking baseball-

capped guy, and the caption 'Lenny.'"[130] Jeng likewise observes that the film frequently

foregrounds diegetic sound such as "the tinny audio of a '70s kung-fu film, playing in the

background of the video store."[131] Yet, as mentioned, Refn's fetishism of video stores and old

exploitation films is not necessarily rooted in nostalgia for the past, but rather a more

complicated relationship to both history and cinema. As Romney asserts, Leo and Lenny discuss

movies in a way that recalls characters in a Tarantino or Smith film, but "there is something tired

and sad about the dialogue," an idea underscored by the fact that Kitjo counsels Lenny to forget

about movies and start appreciating nature instead.[132] As such, *Bleeder* appears to anticipate the

discursive dichotomy that defines "Refn."

  Pusher and *Bleeder* each debuted at a time when studios around the world were growing

increasingly risk-averse, and movies were becoming bigger and more bombastic. Jeff Smith

observes that the late 1990s saw several changes throughout the international media landscape

but specifically in Hollywood, as studios moved to embrace emerging concepts such as digital

cinema, e-commerce, and convergence.[133] Phipps likewise observes that by the end of the 1990s,

blockbusters, often "designed to inspire sequels, merchandise, and theme park rides," had

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[130] Romney, "Men Behaving Badly," 46.
[131] Jeng. "How Bleeder was a landmark for NWR."
[132] Romney, "Men Behaving Badly," 46.
[133] Jeff Smith, "Our Lives in Pink: Sofia Coppola as Transmedia Audiovisual Stylist," in *Transmedia Directors: Artistry, Industry and New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, eds. Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers, and Lisa Perrott (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 76.

transitioned "from being one aspect of the industry to its driving force."[134] Indeed, this period saw many studios (particularly those based in Hollywood) turn toward the blockbuster strategy as described by Acland, largely because such films tend to promise increased financial returns and greater risk diversification thanks to profits generated by sequels, spinoffs, ancillary products, etc. According to Phipps, this emphasis on big films capable of spawning a multimedia franchise and unleashing a torrent of tie-in products made it more difficult for filmmakers to produce smaller, more complex, and thus riskier films. He contends that "the knotty little movies" that once played to great success at "drive-ins, grindhouses, and on multiplexes' smaller screens" (the types of films favored by "Refn") were suddenly pushed aside due to both the rise of massive blockbusters and the advent of home video.[135] As Phipps writes, "With so much money going to stars, studios, rarely the most adventurous entities to begin with, would need to reduce risks elsewhere."[136] This reduction often involved the shift away from smaller low- and mid-budget films that took risks and toward a focus on safer, more homogenized blockbusters.

Meanwhile, Denmark's film industry also seemed to succumb to the blockbuster strategy and franchise model. This shift results partly from Denmark's "cinematic internationalization,"[137] or what the Chicago Cultural Studies Group terms "corporate multiculturalism"[138]; throughout the 1980s and 1990s, economic motives compelled Danish filmmakers to try to "compete with big-budget films produced elsewhere, especially by Hollywood."[139] Therefore, this era saw an increased focus on the production of action movies and sequels to popular films. For example, the popular romantic comedy *Love at First Hiccough*

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[134] Keith Phipps, *Age of Cage: Four Decades of Hollywood Through One Singular Career* (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2022), 171.
[135] Phipps, *Age of Cage*, 102-103.
[136] Ibid., 144.
[137] Hjort and Bondebjerg, 18.
[138] Ben Lee et. al., "Cultural Multiculturalism," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 3 (1992): 550-52.
[139] Hjort and Bondebjerg, 18.

(Tomas Villum Jensen, 1999) spawned four sequels,[140] while the broadly comedic family film *My Sister's Kids* (Tomas Villum Jensen, 2001) was followed by five sequels.[141] Meanwhile, screenwriter Anders Thomas Jensen emerged as a key figure in the development of action films or "guy flicks" in Denmark, penning screenplays for a spate of wildly popular action-packed comedies featuring lovable losers in the lead roles. These include *In China They Eat Dogs* (Lasse Spang Olsen, 1999), *Flickering Lights* (Anders Thomas Jensen, 2000), *Stealing Rembrandt* (Jannik Johansen, 2003), *Adam's Apples* (Anders Thomas Jensen, 2005), *Clash of Egos* (Tomas Villum Jensen, 2006), and *At World's End* (Tomas Villum Jensen, 2009).

As mentioned, *Pusher* and *Bleeder*, along with the discourse surrounding them, helped to establish Refn's reputation as a disorderly filmmaker whose work regularly defies audience expectations. This period also saw Refn embark on a brief and altogether unsuccessful sojourn to Hollywood only to return to Denmark and surrender to the emerging industrial emphasis on sequels. The next section discusses how the critical and commercial failure of his first American film, *Fear X*, sent Refn back to his home country, where, in a bid to save his production company from bankruptcy, he directed *Pusher II* and *Pusher III*.

Fear X, *Pusher II*, and *Pusher III*

As discussed, Refn produced his first two feature-length films within the confines of the Danish film industry, but when it came time to make his third film, he set out for Hollywood to make *Fear X*. Donato Totaro notes that *Fear X* debuted in the midst of a wave of complex films

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[140] *Anja & Viktor* (Charlotte Sachs Bostrup, 2001), *Anja After Viktor* (Charlotte Sachs Bostrup, 2003), *Anja & Victor: Flaming Love* (Niels Nørløv Hansen, 2007), and *Anja & Viktor: In Sickness and in Health* (Søren Frellesen, 2mul008).

[141] *My Sister's Kids in the Snow* (Tomas Villum Jensen, 2002), *My Sister's Kids in Egypt* (Kasper Barfoed, 2004), *My Sister's Kids in Jutland* (Martin Miehe-Renard, 2010), *My Sister's Kids Home Alone* (Martin Miehe-Renard, 2012), and *My African Adventure* (Martin Miehe-Renard, 2013).

marked by a sense of uncertainty, disorientation, paranoia, and a breakdown between reality and unreality or between the subjective and the objective.[142] Film critic Michael Barrett refers to such films as "millennial unreality" films,[143] though others, such as Alexander Geimer of the University of Hamburg, refer to them as "mindfuck" films.[144]

Regardless of the term used to describe such films, they all tend to avoid resolving "problems neatly, even when it seemed they did."[145] In addition, such films are usually "more full of questions than answers, sometimes told in a narrative style that is itself disorienting, full of dislocations and flashbacks or teases about what we're really seeing."[146] Geimer likewise argues that "mindfuck" films comprise "a genre that systematically breaks with viewers' expectations"[147] via unreliable narratives that contradict "what is actually occurring" through "the suppression of what really happens, […] the temporal nonlinearity of what is shown (such as flashbacks, anticipations), and, most of all, […] the narration being presented from the hero's distorted perspective."[148] For Geimer, these films present viewers with a "dysfunctional experience" due to a "narrative structure that reproduces the protagonist's confused state of mind" and leaves many things untold or unresolved.[149]

Prominent examples of "millennial unreality" or "mindfuck" films include *Open Your Eyes* (aka *Abre los ojos*, Alejandro Amenábar, 1997), *Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997), *Eyes*

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[142] Donato Totaro, "Fear X: An Obsessive Inquiry into Knowledge, Art and Uncertainty," *Offscreen* 17, no. 3 (2013), https://offscreen.com/view/fear_x.

[143] Michael Barrett, "While We Were Dreaming: Millennial Unreality at the Movies." *Video Watchdog*, no. 152 (2009): 18-33.

[144] Alexander Geimer, "Preferred Readings and Dissociative Appropriations: Group Discussions Following and Challenging the Tradition of Cultural Studies," in *Making Sense of Cinema: Empirical Studies into Film and Film Spectatorship*, eds. CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 77-96.

[145] Barrett, 19.

[146] Ibid.

[147] Geimer, 79.

[148] Ibid., 80.

[149] Ibid.

Wide Shut (Stanley Kubrick, 1999), *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), *American Psycho* (Mary

Harron, 2000), *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001), *Spider* (David Cronenberg, 2003), *The

Machinist* (Brad Anderson, 2004), and *Inland Empire* (Lynch 2006). For this project, I have

opted to use the term "mindfuck" film, though I diverge with Geimer in that I consider it more a

mode of filmmaking than a genre.[150] As Totaro notes, *Fear X*, which boasts a screenplay written

by novelist Hubert Selby, Jr., could be considered a "mindfuck" film as it conforms to many of

the above criteria.[151]

Despite its failure, *Fear X* laid the foundation for Refn's later career and what would

become his signature brand of stylistic excess. In an interview with Xan Brooks of the *Guardian*,

Refn explains that "*Fear X* might have been the making of him."[152] He states,

> You have to make one big mistake to understand the meaning of true creative success.
> Complete failure, in my case, was the only way to release myself from the prison of a
> more conventional career. It gave me clarity about who I was and what I wanted to do.[153]

In his review of the film for *Sight and Sound*, Barnes notes that the film's "murder mystery

premise – a bereaved husband searches for his wife's killer – might have formed the basis for a

tediously conventional thriller."[154] Barnes contends that Refn's direction helps turn the narrative

into "an artful study of loss and obsession, subtle, allusive, and elegiac."[155] For Barnes, the film's

pace "expertly mimics the glassy-eyed alienation of its grieving protagonist Harry Cain," and,

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[150] Though, as Geimer notes, both filmmakers and film spectators "rely on genres as heuristics that provide guidelines for classifying movies," and these guidelines often arise from "genre schemata" that emerge over the course of engaging with media (78). Such schemata serve to "frame the spectator's expectations" regarding everything from narrative content to dramatic composition to narrative conventions (78). Given that, as Geimer contends, "mindfuck" films tend to demonstrate a willingness to "play games with the viewers by revealing wrong cues and hiding the rights ones," a tendency that in some ways functions as a form of "genre schemata," they could thus be considered a genre unto themselves (80). See Geimer, 78-80.
[151] Totaro, "Fear X."
[152] Brooks, "'My father and I disagree on the purpose of cinema.'"
[153] Ibid.
[154] Barnes, 48.
[155] Ibid.

rather than provide viewers with easy answers, *Fear X* culminates "in a perplexing lightshow, an abstract display of infernal scarlets and blacks."[156] Totaro similarly writes that *Fear X* culminates in "a final disturbing montage of rapidly edited, flicker-like blotches of blood red liquid, oozing drop formations, and horizontal streaks, accompanied by scratch on film sounds" that is "probably the most abstract sequence that [he's] seen in an otherwise mainstream fiction film."[157]

Vicari, meanwhile, contends that *Fear X* is "the first Refn film that flirts heavily with a kind of psychedelic mysticism within a provocative framework of atmospheric and narrative moves culled from a variety of more mundane genres."[158] Indeed, these psychedelic sequences, which here manifest as "abstract red visions,"[159] appear throughout Refn's later work, including *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising*, *Only God Forgives*, *The Neon Demon*, and *Too Old to Die Young*. At the same time, with its allusions to films like *The Shining* and *Prelude: Dog Star Man* (Stan Brakhage, 1964), *Fear X* reveals how the media landscape itself has evolved since the late 1990s and into the post-streaming ecology as it exists today, a time when, according to Michael Rennett, intertextuality has emerged as a defining feature of many films and TV series.[160] Thus, *Fear X* could be considered a flashpoint for Refn's career, at least in terms of how his visual/aural style and approach to narrative evolved between the releases of *Pusher* and *Too Old to Die Young*.

Like many films produced since 1996, but especially those made by Refn, *Fear X* is highly intertextual, containing allusions to such films as *Cries & Whispers* (Ingmar Bergman,

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[156] Ibid.
[157] Totaro, "Fear X."
[158] Vicari, 94.
[159] Totaro, "Fear X."
[160] Michael Rennett, "Quentin Tarantino and the Director as DJ," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45, no. 2 (2012): 391-409.

1972), *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), and *The Shining*. According to Totaro, the red visions of the anguished woman that occur periodically throughout the film contain references to both "the women characters in Bergman's *Cries & Whispers*" and the "the subliminal 'demon mask' face in *The Exorcist*." In addition, the film's climax, in which Northrup shoots Harry before pushing him into an elevator, contains an obvious reference to *The Shining*, as the wounded Harry imagines the doors opening to reveal a room filled with red water, recalling the torrent of blood that exploded forth from an elevator in Kubrick's film.

     Fear X also appears to reference the Italian exploitation picture *So Sweet… So Perverse* (Umberto Lenzi, 1969); that film, a loose remake of *Diabolique* (Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1955), likewise features red-tinted flashbacks and a score by composer Riz Ortolani, whose song "Oh My Love" (written for the 1971 film *Goodbye Uncle Tom*, directed by Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi) appears in Refn's 2010 film, *Drive*. Furthermore, according to Refn's commentary track on the DVD, the film's bleak, unresolved ending is an explicit reference to director Stan Brakhage's *Prelude: Dog Star Man*, an experimental short film that uses disconnected imagery to evoke movement. Such intertextual references align *Fear X* with other films produced during the first 20 years of the twenty-first century.

     At the same time, however, *Fear X* subverted audience expectations due largely to Refn's refusal to conform to modes of popular entertainment, as well as his refusal to provide audiences with easy (or really, any) answers to the film's central mystery. As Vicari notes, with this film Refn "plays with slowness, time nearly standing still, long pauses between lines, the tension of the unsaid or the not-yet-said."[161] Yet audiences mostly rejected *Fear X* because, as Vicari accurately observes, it "posed a distinct challenge to narrative expectations; people are not 'used

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[161] Vicari, 105.

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to a film without an ending.'"[162] At the time of the film's release, one Rotten Tomatoes user

awarded the film three stars and wrote, "This movie had potential to be really good only if it

weren't so damn confusing! i [*sic*] have no idea really what the point is."[163] Another half-star

review states, "This movie was completely boring from beginning to end. The story was dull, the

acting duller."[164] Yet another user felt the film earned only one star, deeming it "a feeble attempt

at being a thriller."[165]

Looking at *Fear X*'s production, distribution, and reception offers valuable insight into

how the political economy of media changed in the years since Refn made *Pusher*, as it

potentially provides a glimpse of how things may look going forward as digital technologies

such as streaming video continue to shape the entertainment media ecosystem. For instance,

considering *Fear X* within the context of Refn's overall career suggests that at that time global

audiences wanted more fast-paced films that feature straightforward narratives and contain

endings that offer a sense of closure. Now, however, with the emergence of streaming and series

that are sometimes treated as multi-episode movies thanks to their serialization and longform

storytelling,[166] twenty-first-century audiences have become more accustomed to deliberately

paced narratives that delay or even deny closure. Examples of this phenomenon include *Breaking

Bad* (2008-2013) and *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017),[167] as well as Refn's own series *Too Old to

Die Young* (discussed in Chapter 2).

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[162] Ibid., 93.
[163] "Fear X reviews," accessed August 30, 2023,
https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/fear_x/reviews?type=user.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid.
[166] See Marcos Melendez, "'The Boys' Eric Kripke Says "F— You" to Creators Comparing Their Shows to 10-Hour Movies," last modified July 16, 2022, https://collider.com/the-boys-eric-kripke-streaming-shows-10-hour-movie-comments/.
[167] In an article for *IndieWire*, critics David Ehrlich, Eric Kohn, Ben Travers, and Hanh Nguyen write "Back in the early '90s, people weren't sure what kind of TV show "Twin Peaks" was supposed to be — these days, people aren't even sure what *kind of thing* "Twin Peaks" is supposed to be." They note that creator David Lynch has

As mentioned, *Fear X*'s failure to appeal to either critics or audiences bankrupted Refn's production company, Jang Go Star, leaving him $1 million in debt. He therefore returned to Denmark to try and recoup his losses by directing two sequels to what was, at that time, his biggest hit, *Pusher.* Of the sequels, *Pusher II* feels the most like *Pusher*, largely because it follows Tonny, one of the aspiring gangsters from the first film, as he fumbles his way through a lawless underworld populated by dope fiends, estranged fathers, and sadistic crime lords. Like the trilogy's first installment, *Pusher II* illustrates what Romney describes as "a merciless underworld Darwinism: however hard you are, there's always someone harder waiting to take you for all you've got."[168] Yet the film also contains the occasional experimental touch, such as the previously mentioned choice to light the characters from below during their introductions so that they appear cadaverous. With *Pusher II*, Refn also makes use of red hues to signify danger or anguish, as in *Bleeder* and *Fear X*. Here, harsh red lighting highlights Tonny's frequent humiliations, as when a sex worker mocks his impotence or when his father rejects him and expresses affection for Tonny's friend, Ø. Like *Pusher* before it, *Pusher II* "luxuriates in the details of criminal life"[169] but prefers to explore the "disconnect between Mikkelsen's lurid imagination and his disappointing reality."[170]

Pusher III, meanwhile, pushes the limits of violence normally seen in Hollywood crime films, presenting some truly gruesome images with an artful flair, a juxtaposition that would characterize Refn's films from that point forward. Murray declares the film "gut-churningly

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said that *Twin Peaks: The Return* is "a film that's 'broken into parts'" while observing that "listening to that guy discuss his own work in the abstract is unhelpful at best, and amusingly futile the rest of the time." The group then tries to determine whether *Twin Peaks: The Return* is a movie or a TV show, conceding that "16 hours in, we're still not sure." For more see, David Ehrlich et. al., "Film and TV Critics Debate 'Twin Peaks: The Return': How David Lynch Has Forged New Territory with a Groundbreaking Achievement," last modified September 2, 2017, https://www.indiewire.com/2017/09/twin-peaks-return-film-or-television-1201872338/.

[168] Romney, "Natural Selection," 35.
[169] Tobias, "Refn's Pusher Trilogy."
[170] Murray, "Pusher Trilogy."

nasty"[171] while Tobias observes that it contains "scenes of shocking violence and abuse"[172]

without ever descending into standard "crime-movie sensationalism."[173] Like the other two films

in the trilogy, *Pusher III* emphasizes the negative outcomes of criminality, asserting "that even

the men at the top of the food chain are fated to fall and fall hard."[174] *Pusher III*, like the

previous two installments, frequently uses humor to underscore the mundanity and ineptitude

that afflicts even a powerful Serbian drug kingpin like Milo (Croatian-Danish actor Zlatko

Burić), who served as the heavy in the trilogy's first film and now leads the third film. The film

reveals that Milo's house, which he paid for with his ill-gotten gains, is "nice but not that

nice."[175] It also shows that even a feared crime lord like Milo must fight for respect, as he

struggles to stay in the good graces of his Albanian suppliers while simultaneously maintaining

his hold over rebellious underlings like Little Muhammed (Ilyas Agac). Tobias argues that by

focusing on the details of Milo's attempt to navigate "a narrowing set of options," the film stands

in stark contrast to something like *Scarface* (1983), which he refers to as "Brian De Palma's

typically perverse subversion of the immigrant-makes-good story."[176] Ultimately, the difference

between a high concept film like *Scarface* and a medium concept film like *Pusher III* lies in the

latter's "comic depiction of the drabness behind the ostensibly glamorous surface," which

Romney argues situates it "close to Mike Leigh territory."[177]

    Pusher II and *Pusher III* premiered in 2004 and 2005, respectively. As noted, this was around

the time when the blockbuster strategy came to dominate much of the global film industry. Acland

observes that throughout the early 2000s, "large private-equity firms saw motion pictures as a

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[171] Ibid.
[172] Tobias, "Refn's Pusher Trilogy."
[173] Ibid.
[174] Ibid.
[175] Romney, "Natural Selection," 35.
[176] Tobias,"Refn's Pusher Trilogy."
[177] Romney, "Natural Selection," 35.

particularly advantageous investment target, one that offered quick and high returns,"[178] largely

because the global financial crisis of 2008 made financing films more difficult. Thus, private

equity firms turned their attention to the motion picture industry because they considered films

"a fairly safe investment bet."[179] These conditions led Hollywood and other national film

industries to become more risk averse and focus established franchises, which were safer bets,

rather than unknown properties.

Franchises also allowed for more revenue streams; as Acland observes, contemporary

blockbuster franchises are "cross-media commodities, beginning with theatrical exhibition but

then becoming hotel and airplane media content, followed by release via Blu-ray and DVD,

streaming, cable, and television."[180] Such films are meant to sell a variety of ancillary or

integrated products such as "soundtracks, novels, cars, watches, [and] booze."[181] They are

perfectly suited for the current moment, as the "media environment has entered a moment of

industrial change, and old infrastructures are creaking under the weight of new technologies."[182]

In the early part of the twenty-first century, blockbusters and franchise films have proven

especially desirable to studio executives as they are global works "designed to develop paths to

exploitable entertainment markets worldwide."[183]

Phipps makes a similar observation, asserting that Hollywood studios have increasingly

placed an emphasis on marketing, thinking "in terms of the four quadrants: men under twenty-

five, women under twenty-five, older men, and older women."[184] Tad Friend of the *New Yorker*

likewise notes that, at the time *Pusher II* and *Pusher III* were released, Hollywood studios were

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[178] Acland, 59.
[179] Ibid.
[180] Ibid., 54.
[181] Ibid., 55.
[182] Ibid., 51.
[183] Ibid., 69.
[184] Phipps, *Age of Cage*, 174.

focused primarily on making films that were expected to "succeed with at least two quadrants, and a film's budget [was] usually related to the number of quadrants it [was] anticipated to reach."[185] Janet Wasko, meanwhile, remarks that "the general process of marketization has moved rapidly around the world during the last few decades."[186] She asserts that, on a global scale, "public media institutions have been privatized," which in turn has opened "additional markets for growing transnational media and entertainment conglomerates." These conditions, when combined with the commercialization of the internet and the rapid expansion of consumer culture, helped fuel the global spread of the blockbuster strategy. These were the conditions under which Refn made the *Pusher* trilogy. While the first film arrived during a time when blockbusters emerged as the dominant mode of cinema, its sequels appeared just as the blockbuster strategy seemingly cemented its position as the preferred industrial approach to filmmaking for studio executives around the world but especially those in Hollywood.

Pusher II and *Pusher III* each operate within what Tommy Gustafsson and Pietari Kääpä consider a distinctly Scandinavian tradition of combining "genre patterns with experimental characteristics," resulting in "films that lie somewhere between commercial–experimental hybrid and deconstructions of mainstream cinema."[187] Andrew Nestingen refers to such films as "medium concept" films,[188] arguing that they combine "genre patterns from the 'high concept' films produced in Hollywood, for example, with relevant and specific social and political themes

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[185] Tad Friend, "The Cobra: Inside a Movie Marketer's Playbook," last modified January 11, 2009, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/01/19/the-cobra.

[186] Janet Wasko, "The Study of the Political Economy of the Media in the Twenty-first Century," *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 10, no. 3 (2014): 261.

[187] Tommy Gustafsson and Pietari Kääpä, "Introduction: Nordic Genre Film and Institutional History," in *Nordic Genre Film: Small Nation Film Cultures in the Global Marketplace*, eds. Tommy Gustafsson and Pietari Kääpä (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 12.

[188] Andrew Nestingen, *Crime and Fantasy in Scandinavia: Fiction, Film, and Social Change* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008),

endemic to the Nordic countries."[189] For Nestingen, medium concept films mix "the dramaturgical structures and continuity style of genre film and the excess characteristic of the art film."[190] Such qualities, according to Nestingen, distinguish films like *Pusher II* and *Pusher III* from the "high concept" films routinely produced by Hollywood, which are molded by "economic and institutional forces" and therefore tend to "suppress excess." [191]

Pusher II and *Pusher III* conform to Nestingen's ideas regarding medium concept films because they feature the same sort of gritty aesthetic that defined *Pusher*. At the same time, however, they also contain elements of the excessive self-indulgence and so-called "psychedelic mysticism" that marks Refn's later works, as when Tonny visits two sex workers in a red-lit room in *Pusher II* or when Milo silently smokes a cigarette while gazing into his empty swimming pool at the end of *Pusher III*. Though initially "appalled" when faced with the prospect of expanding his breakout film into a franchise, Refn nevertheless determined "that if the material could be revisited in such a way that it might prove successful both commercially and artistically then it was worth a shot."[192] While *Pusher II* and *Pusher III* could be considered safer bets due to being sequels to an established hit, they nevertheless diverge from the standard blockbuster franchise model (e.g., presenting more of the same) while also helping to establish Refn's brand of aesthetic and thematic fetishism.

Both these qualities manifest in "Nemesis," the second of two episodes of the British series *Marple* directed or co-directed by Refn. Here, Refn worked as a director-for-hire, molding his own personal style to fit the established aesthetic of a long-running TV series. At the same

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[189] Gustafsson and Kääpä, 12.
[190] Nestingen, 73.
[191] Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 8.
[192] Westcott, "Refn."

time, however, Refn continued to play around with the qualities that would typify the works

produced during his later period. The next section briefly examines these two episodes and

considers how they helped Refn transition from traditional auteur to transmedia auteur as defined

by Salter and Stanfill. The section also discusses how these two installments of a TV show

contributed to the construction of Refn's mediated persona, "Refn," largely through a highly

stylized use of color as well as intertextual references to 1970s exploitation films.

Marple: "Towards Zero" and "Nemesis"

Little scholarship currently exists on Refn's *Marple* episodes outside of Vicari's

monograph. At just seven pages long, the chapter devoted to "Nemesis" is the shortest in the

book. Moreover, Vicari ignores "Towards Zero" and only examines "Nemesis," and he spends

half the chapter discussing the women characters in *Pusher II*, *Pusher, III*, and *Fear X*. Yet

Vicari makes an important observation, noting that "Nemesis" explores some of the themes that

would recur throughout Refn's filmography:

> The psychosexual crisis occasioned by the intrusion of mothers and maternal figures into
> male-female relationships has popped up before in Refn's work, mainly *Bleeder*; but
> unlike in that film, Miss Marple is not so schematically taboo and unsettling. Or rather,
> she occupies a realm that is on par with that of Eros in terms of titillation.[193]

While Vicari's idea could apply to "Towards Zero," which presents its narrative in a

conventional manner (likely because Refn only co-directed the episode alongside David

Grindley), "Nemesis" dabbles in the sort of "taboo and unsettling" content that defines much of

Refn's work, especially that of his later period, as well as the films that inspired him. Throughout

the episode, which Kim Newman of *Sight & Sound* describes as "a straightforward ITV

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[193] Vicari, 125.

adaptation of an Agatha Christie novel,"[194] Refn's predilection for sleazy exploitation cinema

and grindhouse movies is on full display, as the episode recalls so-called "nunsploitation" films

such as *The Sinful Nuns of Saint Valentine* (Sergio Grieco, 1974), *The Killer Nun* (Giulio Berruti,

1979), and *Malabimba* (aka *The Malicious Whore*, Andrea Bianchi, 1979). Here, Refn taps into

the nunsploitation subgenre that flourished throughout the 1970s.

Nunsploitation, an exploitation subgenre that shares similarities with women in prison (or

WIP) films, typically involves narratives in which Christian nuns deal with religious oppression

or sexual suppression due to living in celibacy during the Middle Ages. Andrea Bini notes that

the nunsploitation subgenre was heavily influenced by Italian gothic films, which frequently

positioned sexually active women as dangerous or deadly.[195] Italian film historian Roberto Curti

similarly observes that nunsploitation films share many commonalities with gothic films,

particularly in how they often emphasize eroticism over narrative.[196] With its story of murderous,

lesbian nuns and a wealth of gothic imagery (such as Sister Clotilde praying before a large stone

altar as lightning flashes dramatically outside), "Nemesis" aligns with the nunsploitation

subgenre in a variety of ways, thereby reinforcing Refn's exploitation bona fides.

Both episodes also contain traces of Refn's aesthetic fixation, though these stylistic

choices are subdued somewhat by the show's pre-established look, which is grounded in the so-

called "cozy mystery" genre.[197] Nonetheless, Refn manages to put his stylistic stamp on both

episodes, mainly through his signature use of red to signal danger or anguish. For instance, in

"Towards Zero," the femme fatale character Kay Strange has fiery red hair and wears a bright

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[194] Kim Newman, "Gods and Monsters," *Sight & Sound* 23, no. 8 (2013): 32.
[195] See Andrea Bini, "Horror Cinema: The Emancipation of Women and Urban Anxiety," in *Popular Italian Cinema: Culture and Politics in a Postwar Society*, ed. Flavia Brizio-Skov (2011: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 53-82.
[196] Roberto Curti, *Italian Gothic Horror Films, 1970-1979* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2017), 4.
[197] Cozy mysteries or simply "cozies" are typically set in small, picturesque towns or villages populated by quiet, reserved characters along with the occasional eccentric and tend to avoid gory details or explicit situations.

red dress for much of the episode. She is also a red herring intended to make the viewer think that she was behind the murders. In "Nemesis," meanwhile, the character Margaret Lumley (played by Laura Michelle Kelly, who also portrays Verity Hunt) wears a dark red coat and sports bright red lipstick, details that become significant when considering Margaret's husband, Sydney (Johnny Briggs), was the landlord who accosted Verity and sent her fleeing to the convent in Medhurst. Through this stylistic choice used in both "Towards Zero" and "Nemesis," Refn demonstrates the fetishistic tendencies that would later become his trademark in films like *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon*.

Beyond simply reinforcing his intertextual filmmaking style or his obsessive fetishism, the *Marple* episodes also offer insight into how Refn transitioned from a traditional auteur to what Salter and Stanfill term a transmedia auteur. With their book *A Portrait of the Auteur as Fanboy*, Salter and Stanfill extend the definition of transmedia to consider how a creator's brand functions as a form of authorship. Initially, the term transmedia was coined to refer to a narrative or project that spans and combines multiple media forms. Henry Jenkins pointed to *The Matrix* franchise as one example, as its narrative spanned films, comic books, and video games, all while remaining cohesive. Salter and Stanfill expand this definition, arguing that what they term "fanboy auteurs" – a designation that encompasses often problematic creators such as Steven Moffatt, J. K. Rowling, Kevin Smith, Zack Snyder, and others – develop brands that span and combine multiple media, thus establishing them as transmedia auteurs.[198] Salter and Stanfill build on the work of Jonathan Gray, who argues that media authors themselves are brands capable of becoming "paratexts in their own right."[199] In such cases, an author comes to eclipse

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[198] See Salter and Stanfill.

[199] Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 136.

"the contributions of others involved in the media product and [draws] fans into the metanarrative of their body of work."[200] Ultimately, as Salter and Stanfill observe, media branding helps to unify "fragmented, multiauthored, corporate productions."[201]

Salter and Stanfill's ideas apply to both "Towards Zero" and "Nemesis," though more so in the case of the latter. While these episodes are based on stories originally written by Agatha Christie and are installments in an episodic TV show with an established visual aesthetic and narrative style, Refn nevertheless demonstrates his own unique interpretation of the material through the inclusion of his own aesthetic and stylistic obsessions. He demonstrates authorship in a way that recalls Suzanne Scott's ideas surrounding transmedia authorship:

> Transmedia stories disintegrate the author figure, as artists in different media collaboratively create the transmedia text, but, in order to assure audiences that someone is overseeing the transmedia text's expansion and creating meaningful connections between texts, the author must ultimately be restored and their significance reaffirmed.

Refn accomplishes this sort of restoration in his *Marple* episodes by incorporating his fetish for red and introducing elements of exploitation cinema into an otherwise straightforward cozy mystery milieu. Both elements would later become cornerstones of Refn's brand and his mediated persona, both of which were, at this point, still in flux and not yet fully established. At the same time, they each point to Refn's emerging brand, which in many ways demonstrates Foucault's notion that authorship is a technology that helps consumers assign texts to a specific entity according to the laws and institutions of its context.[202] Refn's authorship would more fully blossom in his later period, at which point it would come to eclipse the authors behind the works that Refn would celebrate.

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[200] Salter and Stanfill, xv.

[201] Ibid.

[202] See Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 101-120.

Conclusion

During this early period Refn developed a reputation as a maverick director who preferred provocative exploitation films over what he considers "safer" Hollywood fare. Throughout this phase of his career, Refn worked within prevailing political economic structures only to establish himself as a maverick intent on pushing boundaries. Drawing on discourse generated by critics, fans, and scholars, Refn discursively positioned himself as an outsider even while working to develop his skills as a creator and his reputation as an auteur. He accomplishes this through his affinity for intertextuality, aesthetics, fetishism, and a fondness for trashy exploitation cinema, all of which are evident in early efforts like the *Pusher* trilogy, *Bleeder*, and *Fear X*. These tendencies would only intensify in the latter half of Refn's career and would serve as the core traits of his branded persona "Refn," which fully emerged during his later period. More significantly, perhaps, the second phase of Refn's career saw him shift away from being a traditional auteur and instead establish himself as a transmedia auteur, or a creator whose work spans a variety of media and platforms, specifically film, TV, and streaming video. As explored in Chapter 2, the increased interconnectivity of media offered by polymediation contributes to the development of "Refn," a brand that discursively encompasses and unites various media, platforms, texts, and creators.

Chapter 2

Late Refn: 2008-2019

The second phase of Nicolas Winding Refn's career commenced with the release of

Bronson, a loose retelling of the exploits of Michael Peterson aka Charles Bronson, dubbed

Britain's most violent inmate by UK tabloids.[1] The film debuted at the BFI London Film Festival

on October 17, 2008, and helped cement Refn's stylistic tendencies, such as his provocative use

of red and 80s-inflected synth music, as well as his thematic preoccupations, specifically those

involving violence and masculinity. These quirks first manifested in his early period, making

brief appearances in *Pusher* (1996), *Bleeder* (1999), and, most notably, *Fear X* (2003), but as

mentioned in Chapter 1 their development stalled due to the critical and commercial failure of

Fear X. That film nevertheless laid the groundwork for the fetishistic obsessions that would

characterize Refn's later period from 2008 to 2019.

Refn asserts that the failure of *Fear X* released him from "the prison of a more

conventional career."[2] According to Refn, "You have to make one big mistake to understand the

meaning of true creative success," and the failure of *Fear X* "gave me clarity about who I was

and what I wanted to do."[3] What he wanted to do was indulge in his affinity for languorous

pacing, minimal dialogue, tableau framing, haunting red visuals, moody synth scores, 1980s-

style visual excess, and shocking eruptions of graphic violence. These elements blossomed in the

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[1] See Thomas Page, "Dark, Twisted Visions from the Mind of 'Britain's Most Violent Prisoner,'" last modified June 15, 2016, https://www.cnn.com/style/article/charles-bronson-salvador-prison-art/index.html.
[2] Xan Brooks, "'My father and I disagree on the purpose of cinema': Anders and Nicolas Winding Refn on film-making," last modified February 11 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/feb/11/my-father-and-i-disagree-on-the-purpose-of-cinema-anders-and-nicolas-winding-refn-on-film-making.
[3] Ibid.

projects produced and released during this stage of Refn's career, and they all comprise a

distinctive style that may be termed "Refnesque."

Refn's later works also advance his thematic fascination with the negative effects of

violent masculinity, while featuring numerous intertextual references to exploitation films

produced during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. These ingredients all contribute to the construction

of Refn's branded persona, "Refn," which positions Refn as a maverick filmmaker intent on

challenging conventional taste hierarchies by celebrating trash cinema and elevating it to the

level of art.

It was during this latter phase that Refn also fully blossomed as a transmedia auteur.

Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers, and Lisa Perrott argue that the term "transmedia" usually refers to

"a franchise aimed at monetizing a concept,"[4] but it can also be applied to creators whose work

spans various media and platforms. Transmedial creators and practices have become increasingly

common during the early part of the twenty-first century, a time when production houses operate

"as hubs for all kinds of media making."[5] Refn emblematizes this idea, as his works and his

brand encompass film, television, streaming video, advertising, social media, print, and video

games. Refn's tendency toward transmedia auteurism began with his *Marple* episodes (see

Chapter 1) but intensified during the latter half his career as he embraced what Vernallis et. al.

describe as "the fresh fluidities afforded by contemporary networked and participatory culture."[6]

Throughout his later period, Refn fully exploits the interconnectivity of media brought about by

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[4] Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers, and Lisa Perrott, "Introduction," in *Transmedia Directors: Artistry, Industry and New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, eds. Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers, and Lisa Perrott (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 1.
    [5] Ibid.
    [6] Ibid., 9.

polymediation, developing projects "across platforms while retaining a distinctive grain"[7] and creating content and discourses capable of spinning "out into multiple forms."[8]

Significantly, these different projects all demonstrate Refn's peculiar idiosyncrasies, regardless of the medium or platform used in their production and distribution. Some of this uniformity can be attributed to polymediation, which in part concerns how different media interrelate and overlap. Such increased interconnectivity provides Refn with access to a variety of media and platforms through which he can produce, advertise, and distribute his works. Yet it is the branded persona "Refn" that truly unites these disparate works and ensures that they remain visually, thematically, and ideologically consistent across different channels. This discursively generated persona guarantees that a film like *Bronson*, a coffee table book like *The Act of Seeing* (2015), and a streaming series like *Too Old to Die Young* (2019) all contain recognizable elements of the creator who produced them. These projects are all explored in this chapter.

As mentioned, Refn's later works span film, TV, print, streaming video, and even his own branded streaming service, byNWR (discussed in Chapter 3), which showcases low-budget regionally produced exploitation films made by the likes of Dale Berry, Lee Frost, and Larry Jackson. These projects all contain aspects of Refn's signature visual, aural, and narratological tendencies. Analyzing these projects and their production offers insight into how Refn exploits twenty-first century polymediation to shift from a traditional auteur to a transmedia auteur as conceptualized by Vernallis et. al. The next section considers how the focus on blockbusters and franchise films intensified during this time, paying particular attention to how this development contributed to the construction of "Refn." After that, the chapter explores how the rise of

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[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., 7.

streaming video technologies impacted both the entertainment media landscape and Refn's career trajectory.

Refn and "Refn" in the Era of Blockbusters and Franchises

As discussed in Chapter 1, during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, major film studios embraced what Charles R. Acland calls the "blockbuster strategy," a cultural and economic logic that emphasizes enormous spectacle in filmed entertainment.[9] Blockbusters epitomize the idea of spectacle, as they routinely involve "elaborate orchestrations of commodities and investments."[10] More importantly, perhaps, blockbusters also sometimes function as "an engine for the development of a brand, a franchise, or a product line."[11] Such films cater to massified audiences, meaning producers relay on "identifiable stories and talent" to encourage "even closer ties across media as both source material for movie narratives and future revenue."[12] The commercially and critically successful superhero films *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) and *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008) each exemplify the blockbuster strategy as described by Acland; released the same year as Refn's unconventional biopic *Bronson*, both films involved elaborate orchestrations of commodities and investments. They also kicked off long-running transmedia franchises that continue to occupy screens both big and small more than 10 years later.

As film critic Keith Phipps observes, cinema is presently "dominated by franchises."[13] Indeed, while blockbusters, sequels, remakes, and reboots have long been a fixture of cinema,

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[9] Charles R. Acland, *American Blockbuster: Movies, Technology, and Wonder* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 9.

[10] Ibid., 6

[11] Ibid., 33.

[12] Ibid., 39.

[13] Keith Phipps, "If '80s Were '40s: A Thought Experiment About Franchises and Time," last modified June 14, 2022, https://thereveal.substack.com/p/if-80s-were-40s-a-thought-experiment.

they previously comprised only one component of the entertainment media landscape rather than operating as "the predominant mode."[14] During the early years of the twenty-first century, however, blockbusters and franchise films have come to almost completely overshadow other types of films and filmmaking practices.[15] According to Jeong-Suk Joo, by 2019 "the ten highest grossing films all belonged to franchises."[16] Furthermore, the success of such films inspired major studios like Disney and Warner Bros. Discovery to more fully embrace the blockbuster strategy and the franchise model.[17] As Joo notes, while "the major studios do not monopolize film production in Hollywood" they nevertheless "set the trend, making it increasingly difficult to find other projects coming out of Hollywood."[18] One of those trends is that blockbusters and franchise films receive greater support than smaller budgeted films, aka "in-betweeners."[19] In the past, in-betweeners were frequently released direct-to-video, but now they tend to head straight to streaming platforms, as when the in-betweeners *Deep Water* (Adrian Lynn, 2022) and *Prey* (Dan Trachtenberg, 2022) both bypassed theaters and debuted exclusively on Hulu.

Contemporary blockbusters and franchise films belong to what Pierre Bourdieu terms heteronomous culture,[20] which encompasses "the field of large-scale production beholden to the laws of the market."[21] Within a heteronomous culture, individuals are subject to laws or domination, and their actions are not autonomous but rather influenced by outside forces, such as the government or the market. Blockbuster franchise films are subject to market forces, and their

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Keith Phipps, *Age of Cage: Four Decades of Hollywood Through One Singular Career* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2022), 201.

[16] Jeong-Suk Joo, "Netflix and Changes in the Hollywood Film Industry," *Journal of Industrial Convergence* 18, no. 5 (2020): 40.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Acland, 185.

[20] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Revisited," (1983), in *The Field of Cultural Production*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 40.

[21] Ibid., 20.

attendant industrial practices in some ways recall the assembly line mentality of Old Hollywood as described by Thomas Schatz. According to Schatz, Old Hollywood films "were the product not simply of individual human expression, but of a melding of institutional forces."[22] He contends that within context of the Old Hollywood's studio system, which existed from the 1920s to the 1950s, filmmakers often aligned their vision with a studio's "talent pool, its narrative traditions and market strategy," meaning "any individual's style was no more than an inflection on an established studio style."[23] As Schatz observes, studio executives such as Harry Warner focused on churning out "consistent, reasonably priced products for a homogeneous mass of consumers."[24] In their pursuit of a rigidly efficient production process, studio heads frequently discouraged innovation, meaning that films became increasingly conventional.[25]

Schatz's description of the Old Hollywood studio system easily applies to contemporary franchise filmmaking, which involves similar production methods and an analogous emphasis on conventionality, all with the goal of generating maximum profits. Marvel Studios typifies this idea, as directors such as Chloé Zhao and Sam Raimi must curtail their distinctive stylistic and thematic tendencies to better align with Marvel's homogenous "house style" when directing big-budget franchise entries like *Eternals* (2021) and *Dr. Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022) respectively. Refn, through his branded persona "Refn," resists such films and filmmaking practices, which characterize conglomerate Hollywood. For Refn, blockbuster

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[22] Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 6.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., 136.
[25] Ibid., 254.

franchise films are little safe and unimaginative corporate products designed solely to please

mass audiences and not challenge them in any way.[26]

Both Old Hollywood and contemporary franchise filmmaking align with Max

Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's conceptualization of the culture industry. Horkheimer

and Adorno argue that by the middle of the twentieth century the arts had adopted the same

standardized production strategies used by industry and commerce to manufacture and sell vast

quantities of consumer goods.[27] As such, cultural items were now being produced via an

assembly line process that recalled the organizational procedures employed by industrial

manufacturers, all with the aim of maximizing profits. According to Horkheimer and Adorno,

"The truth that [studios] are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash

they intentionally produce."[28] As defined by Horkheimer and Adorno, the culture industry

typifies Bourdieu's notion of heteronomous culture, especially during the first three decades of

the twenty-first century, a time when studios churn out a seemingly endless stream of branded

content intended almost entirely to extend the scope of massive and lucrative transmedia and

cross-platform franchises.[29]

Refn's discourse frequently echoes that of Horkheimer and Adorno.[30] In interviews, Refn

has contemptuously referred to Hollywood films as "board-meeting movies,"[31] meaning they

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[26] See Nicolas Winding Refn, "Our Times Need Sex, Horror and Melodrama," last modified July 4, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jul/04/nicolas-winding-refn-apocalyptic-times-cult-movies-can-save-us-bynwr.

[27] See Max Horkheimer and Theordor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94-136.

[28] Ibid., 95.

[29] Both the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the DC Extended Universe represent examples of this phenomenon.

[30] See, for instance, Refn, "Sex, Horror, and Melodrama."

[31] Tasha Robinson, "The Most Important Films in Nicolas Winding Refn's Path from *Pusher* to the Present," last modified June 15, 2015, https://thedissolve.com/features/5-10-15-20/1065-the-most-important-films-in-nicolas-winding-refns-/.

were made by committee and designed to be inoffensive and appeal to the widest audience possible. While Refn has said that "art is for the masses" he also contends that art is not "meant to satisfy the masses in any way, and it never has."[32] He also insists that creativity should be polarizing, as he considers divisiveness the only way to generate substantial dialogue.[33] Here, Refn pits his vision of a more challenging, polarizing cinema against the sort of large-scale production that defines heteronomous culture and which currently rules Hollywood and other national cinemas.

According to Refn we currently "live in a society where good taste has become law, and I believe that's the enemy of creativity."[34] He asserts that multinational media conglomerates now evince "an obsession about controlling" entertainment media,[35] resulting in a singular, far less interesting cinema.[36] He contrasts the present moment with the 1970s, a period when filmmakers were perceived to have more control over their work and "there was much more freedom in the flow of entertainment."[37] This was also the decade that gave rise to many of the films from which Refn draws inspiration, including *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), and *The Driver* (Walter Hill, 1978). For Refn, these films reinforce the idea that filmmaking is an art form capable of inspiring others. More importantly, though, he argues that art should provoke a reaction, which is why he gravitates toward a more extreme form of cinema represented by ultra-low-budget regionally produced exploitation

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[32] Dan Solomon, "'Only God Forgives' Director Nicolas Winding Refn on the Creative Freedom That Comes with Making Divisive Art," last modified July 19, 2013, https://www.fastcompany.com/1683424/only-god-forgives-director-nicolas-winding-refn-on-the-creative-freedom-that-comes-with-maki.

[33] See Joshua St. Clair, "Nicolas Winding Refn Welcomes All Your Hate," last modified June 13, 2019, https://www.menshealth.com/entertainment/a27966824/nicolas-winding-refn-too-old-to-die-young-interview/.

[34] Scott Tobias, "With the Ultra-violent Only God Forgives, Director Nicolas Winding Refn Felt the Need to Exorcise Some Desires," last modified July 18, 2013, https://thedissolve.com/features/interview/29-with-the-ultra-violent-only-god-forgives-director-/.

[35] Robinson, "From *Pusher* to the Present."

[36] Tobias, "Exorcise Some Desires."

[37] Robinson, "From *Pusher* to the Present."

movies. He states that "extremity touches your outer limits, whether it's sex or violence or love or hatred. In between is political correctness, and who wants to be that? That's like asking someone if they want to be normal."[38] With this statement, Refn discursively pits conventionality against extremity, coming down firmly on the side of the latter. This idea represents a core aspect of his branded persona, "Refn."

For Refn, then, creativity can only truly flourish outside the confines of the monolithic institutional and industrial practices that comprise heteronomous culture. He explains that he never aspired to make a Hollywood film, largely because doing so meant he would be required to cede control to someone else (e.g., studio executives).[39] This idea may explain why Refn routinely advocates for low-budget regionally produced exploitation films while dismissing large-scale, heteronomous cinema as the enemy of art via his branded persona "Refn." Such films are often produced independently far from Hollywood and thus not subject to institutional forces that dictate films must adhere to a specific template and cater to a broad global audience, thereby generating maximum revenue. Refn's preference for autonomous production also offers insight into why he has embraced new technologies, platforms, and practices that potentially grant him more control over his work, meaning he need not compromise his deeply personal vision as much as he would within the confines of the Hollywood system. Transmedia authorship thus arises as another component of Refn's rebellious persona.

It is through this branded persona that Refn discursively positions himself and his works (both those he produces and those he celebrates) in contrast to the sort of conventionality that defines heteronomous culture, which opposes "the more artfully inclined, and commercially

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[38] Ibid.

[39] Brandon Harris, "Nicolas Winding Refn, Drive," last modified September 14, 2011, https://filmmakermagazine.com/29833-nicolas-winding-refn-drive/.

sublimated, field of restricted *autonomous* production."[40] As Acland explains, the realm of

autonomous production "is where the auteur film, with its evocation of personal style and

supposed disregard for market potential, conventionally resides."[41] Refn rejects the blockbusters

and franchise films that comprise much of heteronomous cinema as thematically empty pablum

incapable of artistically nourishing audiences.[42] At the same time, his own films tend to occupy

the realm of autonomous production, as they demonstrate an abundance of personal style and

little market potential (this is especially true of the films produced during his later period). Like

Adorno, Refn pits popular art intended for mass consumption (e.g., blockbusters and franchise

films) against the "excesses of autonomous art"[43] (e.g., his own films and regionally produced

exploitation films).

It is important to note, however, that many of the films Refn celebrates, such as those

streaming on byNWR, were also produced within a heteronomous culture as they were made

solely to exploit current trends and thereby generate the maximum amount of revenue for their

producers and distributors. This discursive dichotomy seems to lie at the heart of "Refn." Indeed,

Refn frequently espouses a punk ethos, as when he bemoans conglomerate cinema's emphasis on

profits over inspiration, stating, "We need to remember that cinema is not just about, 'How much

money did you make on Friday to Monday?' but also, 'What is your actual interest?'"[44] He even

compares himself to seminal punk band the Sex Pistols due to how his films receive adulation

and condemnation in equal amounts.[45] Yet, as Ruth Adams astutely notes, the Sex Pistols were a

largely prefabricated group whose image –which drew heavily on a Dickensian image of

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[40] Acland, 20, emphasis in original.
[41] Ibid.
[42] See Refn, "Sex, Horror, and Melodrama."
[43] See Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1974).
[44] Tobias, "Exorcise Some Desires."
[45] Solomon, "Refn on Divisive Art."

working-class poverty – was manufactured primarily by fashion designer and rock impresario Malcolm McLaren.[46] McLaren often referred to the band as his "little Artful Dodgers," presenting them "less as menaces to society" and more as amusing musical theatre kids "characterized by clownish outfits, silly walks, smutty jokes, and cocking a snook at the Establishment."[47]

A similar tension exists between Refn and "Refn." Like the Sex Pistols, Refn frequently demonstrates "a kind of provocative flippancy in some of his replies, a punkish temptation to shock."[48] Despite adopting a defiantly combative persona (reinforced by a tendency to strike a fighter's stance in promotional photographs) and using his discourse to rage against the establishment, Refn often appears more clownish than menacing. Andrew Anthony of the *Guardian* offers a bluntly shrewd assessment of this contrast, writing that while Refn's films regularly foreground "cinematic brutality," the man himself comes across as "a bit of a wuss, in the nicest possible way."[49] Peter Bradshaw, meanwhile, notes that Refn frequently engages in "deadpan provocation and gnomic iconoclasm" but his bluster "is part of a great auteur tradition" that encompasses filmmakers such as Francois Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard.[50] This tradition involves making grandiose pronouncements about cinema while holding contrasting ideas, as when Godard declared cinema "to be dead while producing a great curation: Histoire(s) Du Cinéma."[51]

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[46] Ruth Adams, "The Englishness of English Punk: Sex Pistols, Subcultures, and Nostalgia," *Popular Music and Society* 31, no. 4 (2008): 470.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Andrew Anthony, "Nicolas Winding Refn: I Am a Pornographer," last modified July 13, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/jul/13/nicolas-winding-refn-god-forgives.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Peter Bradshaw, "Nicolas Winding Refn: 'Cinema is Dead. And now it is Resurrected," last modified July 9, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jul/09/nicolas-winding-refn-cinema-is-dead-bynwrcom.
[51] Ibid.

Refn frequently makes similar dichotomous declarations via his branded persona "Refn," as when he condemns corporate cinema while also expressing a desire to make a massified blockbuster, stating it would be fun to someday "make a Michael Bay movie."[52] Likewise, he claims to prefer making films outside of institutional contexts because it affords him a greater sense of control but he nevertheless "would love to try and do a film where the studio says, 'Here's the check: make whatever you want!'"[53] This dichotomy initially seems to point to an inconsistency in Refn's brand, but in fact it likely helps him adapt to changes in the entertainment industry, allowing him to move across a variety of technological platforms and political economic situations with ease. In many ways, the conflict between establishing outsider credentials and desiring mainstream success defines "Refn," which may also explain why he followed the major studios' lead and embraced new streaming video technologies and platforms during his later phase; these new channels would allow Refn to retain greater control over his work while also potentially introducing him to a new audience.

Refn and "Refn" in the Streaming Era

Refn's later period also overlapped with the rise of digital video technologies and streaming platforms. Even as the Hollywood studios accelerated the production of blockbusters and franchise films, their corporate overlords kept one eye focused on the world of streaming video. Inspired by the successful launch of Netflix's streaming service in 2007, massive multinational media conglomerates soon launched their own proprietary streaming platforms. Doing so provided them with dedicated portals through which they could release and advertise their film and TV libraries while also reducing the need to license their content to third-party

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[52] St. Clair, "Refn Welcomes Your Hate."
[53] Nick Roddick, "Stealer's Wheels," *Sight & Sound* 21, no. 10 (2011): 48.

entities that doubled as competitors. These proprietary streaming services also gave media

companies the ability to place their content behind branded paywalls intended to generate

ongoing revenue via rentals or subscriptions. Such platforms proliferated throughout the 2010s,

with many competing for viewers and/or subscription fees. The rise of streaming video

platforms, augmented by the global COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in the so-called streaming

wars that began in earnest near the end of the 2010s and fundamentally changed how media is

produced, distributed, and consumed.[54] According to the European Audiovisual Observatory, by

2019 there existed "546 free streaming services, 448 transactional services, 367 subscription

services (including adult sites), and 28 video sharing platforms."[55] These include Netflix, HBO

Max,[56] Prime Video, Disney Plus, Paramount Plus, MGM Plus, and Refn's own free streaming

platform byNWR.

Interestingly, unlike advocates for the primacy of the theatrical experience such as Martin

Scorsese and Steven Spielberg, late-period Refn appears unconcerned about the potential

breakdown of the boundaries between different types of media. Journalist Peter Bradshaw notes

that when asked if he thinks the boundaries between cinema and long-form television will

continue to blur, Refn merely shrugged and replied,

> Television is dead. And television will not be reborn. It will not come back. What has
> surfaced instead is the digital platform of entertainment. Cinema will come back with
> different meaning. But television…is dead."[57]

While this comment could simply be another example of Refn's infamous tendency toward

trolling, it nevertheless suggests that "Refn" at least is willing to embrace the "digital platform of

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[54] "Streaming wars: The Fight for Viewers," *CBS News*, September 25, 2022,
https://www.cbsnews.com/news/streaming-wars-the-fight-for-viewers/.

[55] Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: NYU Press, 2019),
8-9.

[56] In summer 2023, the platform was rebranded Max following the Warner Bros.-Discovery merger.

[57] Bradshaw, "Refn: 'Cinema is Dead.'"

entertainment" and thus use all available platforms and technologies to produce and promote his

works. For instance, Refn launched his own free-to-access streaming service to provide access to

digital versions of his collection of exploitation films (see Chapter 3), and then soon after he co-

created and directed the 10-episode series *Too Old to Die Young* for Amazon's Prime Video

streaming platform (discussed later in this chapter). These projects demonstrate Refn's

willingness to work outside the traditional confines of "cinema" while also establishing his

reputation as a transmedia auteur whose work spans different media and technologies.

As Acland notes, "our media environment has entered a moment of industrial change,

and old infrastructures are creaking under the weight of new technologies."[58] New

communication technologies such as social media, on-demand video, and streaming bring with

them new entrepreneurial initiatives intent on establishing each of these technologies as the

primary way to access a given service.[59] At the same time these new business models render

existing regulatory regimes obsolete and inspire ambitious users to come up with new ways to

bypass laws.[60] Popular wisdom suggests that digital media platforms have "eroded the one-way

hold on culture that saw a small segment of the world as producers and the larger segment as

consumers."[61] The idea that platforms have tilted the balance between producers and consumers

aligns with Refn's lament about culture being controlled by a small number of massive

entertainment conglomerates focused on the bottom line. One might be tempted to argue that

platforms such as byNWR have brought about Refn's vision of a chaotic future in which

everyone "is free to speak their own mind, without being overseen by big business."[62] Yet most

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[58] Acland, 51.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Toby Miller, "Cultural Work and Creative Industries," in *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader*, eds. Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Matthews (Newbury Park: SAGE, 2014): 213.
[62] Refn, "Sex, Horror, and Melodrama."

of these digital platforms are owned and operated by the very multinational media corporations that exert a one-way hold over culture, and they serve as just another arm through which these companies can strengthen their grip on consumers.

Despite the introduction of advanced production and distribution technologies, little has changed within the political economic structures of the culture industry because communicative capitalism ultimately "bends back in on itself and supplies the lifeblood of profit capitalism in general needs to survive."[63] Ramon Lobato concurs with this idea, noting that many of these so-called new media technologies are merely updated versions of old media technologies. He writes that "a lot of internet media is basically television" and that "television institutions are still structurally central to digital media markets" around the globe.[64] This idea becomes especially significant when considering that broadcast television itself was a hybrid medium that frequently functioned as "an empty container into which existing art forms and business models could be poured."[65]

Streaming video often performs a similar function, absorbing "existing textual forms and associated business models and putting them together in new combinations."[66] In other words, streaming video platforms simply remediate television and film. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin define remediation as "the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms."[67] Put simply, new media transform old media by preserving some of their features while discarding others. Such is the case with streaming video, which transposes many of TV's underlying political and economic structures (e.g., product placement, seasonal production

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[63] Acland, 51.
[64] Lobato, 27.
[65] Ibid., 10.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 273.

schedules) into a digital milieu while also doing away with formal structures such as the need for appointment viewing or having to watch programming via a dedicated television set (viewers can now watch content via any internet-connected device).

Little may have changed regarding the underlying capitalistic structures of entertainment media, but streaming video has still altered users' viewing habits and their relationship to media, allowing individuals to decide when and where they want to watch something while also disrupting the cultural and national borders that traditionally limit access to media texts. Up until the 1980s, when direct-broadcast satellite systems became widely available to consumers, "television signals were mostly contained within national boundaries."[68] Streaming video and internet distribution exploded those boundaries by "introducing new mobilities and immobilities into the system," thereby adding "new complexity to the existing geography of distribution."[69]

Additionally, as Amanda Lotz argues, streaming video introduced new ways to filter, aggregate, and access content due to the development of recommendation algorithms.[70] The internet, which now serves as "a distribution channel and archive for a diverse range of content, scattered unevenly across hundreds of platforms and portals,"[71] fundamentally transformed how audiences access and consume their favorite media content. Now, consumers in the U.S. can watch a Korean drama series on Netflix, while a South Korean viewer can access byNWR and stream a low-budget exploitation film produced in Florida, options that may not have been available prior to the introduction of streaming video technologies. Therefore, while streaming video platforms may not have brought about Refn's beautiful, uncontrolled future,[72] they

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[68] Lobato, 5.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 71.
[71] Lobato, 6.
[72] See Refn, "Sex, Horror, and Melodrama."

nevertheless destabilized aspects of the institutional structures and industrial practices of

traditional media, all while granting consumers a bit more power over how, when, and where

they engage with entertainment media.

Many of these changes can be traced back to Netflix, "presently the major global

subscription video-on-demand service."[73] Founded as a mail order service for DVDs, Netflix

launched its streaming feature, originally called Watch Now, on January 15, 2007. This new

platform allowed subscribers to watch digital versions of films and TV shows via their internet-

connected devices. Though the initial selection of digital titles numbered around just 1000

films,[74] the streaming video component proved so popular with customers that Netflix quickly

outpaced chief rival Total Access (later Blockbuster Online), a streaming service launched by

Blockbuster Video.[75]

At first, Netflix relied entirely on content produced by others.[76] After losing streaming

rights to over 2500 films and TV shows produced by the Starz network,[77] however, the company

shifted its focus to acquiring or producing its own original TV shows and films, starting with the

Norwegian-American comic crime series *Lilyhammer* (2012-2014).[78] By 2018 Netflix had

released nearly 90 original movies via their streaming video service.[79] Because Netflix is a tech

company rather than a film studio, its investors expect "long-term growth" rather than "short-

term returns," meaning that, unlike large media conglomerates that thrive on short-term profits,

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[73] Lobato, 11.
[74] Gina Keating, *Netflixed: The Epic Battle for America's Eyeballs* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2012),
183.
[75] Ibid., 230-34
[76] Joo, 37.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Grant Marek, "Why You've Never Heard of the First Netflix Original, 'Lilyhammer.' And Why it's Still
My Favorite" last modified October 21, 2020, https://www.sfgate.com/sf-culture/article/First-Netflix-Original-
Lilyhammer-Steven-Van-Zandt-15665708.php.
[79] Joo, 38.

Netflix can "take risks and produce a diverse range of films."[80] As a result, by 2019, "consumer spending on digital home entertainment including streaming services overtook global box office revenue for the first time."[81]

Netflix's move into developing its own original content signaled a major shift in how media are produced and distributed while also paving the way for Hollywood studios and other companies to launch their own proprietary streaming services. Filmmaking industries around the world rely on a commitment institutional logic comprised of decision-making heuristics focused on theatrical release and box-office intakes.[82] Streamers such as Netflix, meanwhile, utilize a convenience institutional logic that employs advanced data analytics to increase user subscriptions via micro-segmented offerings.[83] By acquiring or producing their own content and releasing it directly to their dedicated streaming platforms, Netflix and other media companies have "defied not only the privileged status of theaters as the place to first screen films, but, indeed, the need for the traditional theatrical release itself, which could possibly wipe out theaters altogether."[84] Hadida et. al. contend that a combination of rising ticket prices and declining movie theater attendance may render theatrical exhibition "at best a niche business,"[85] meaning that "the standard studio distribution model that relies on theatrical release would become unsustainable."[86] Statements such as this highlight the disruptive power of streaming services such as Netflix or even byNWR, which offers access to its selections free of charge to anyone with an internet connection.

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[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Allegre L. Hadida et. al., "Hollywood Studio Filmmaking in the Age of Netflix: A Tale of Two Institutional Logics," *Journal of Cultural Economics* 45 (2021): 217-20.

[83] Ibid., 220-24.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Hadida et. al., 231.

[86] Ibid., 232.

Yet, as Lobato notes, "while internet distribution has created new forms of mobility for content and audiences, it has also served to reduce mobility in other cases (e.g., via geoblocking), leading to increased territorialization."[87] Such technologies also limit the availability of media; according to Acland, "for every film available – in release, in theaters, on television, on a streaming service, and so on – there are so many others that are inaccessible for a variety of reasons ranging from economics to fragility."[88] Some of these issues of availability and accessibility stem from streamers seeking to produce their own original content. According to at least one estimate, "The number of movies available on Netflix dropped forty percent between 2010 and 2018 because of their pivot to creating original content."[89] Most of the movies purged from the site were those licensed from other studios, especially those produced before 1960. Indeed, it often seems as though streaming platforms are "now focused on producing their own content rather than offering as much of a catalog of older films."[90]

As film critic Matt Zoller Seitz writes, Netflix "has become notoriously unwilling to dedicate more than a fraction of its offerings to movies made before 2000."[91] In September 2017, Netflix offered just "43 movies made before 1970, and fewer than 25 from the pre-1950 era" via its streaming platform.[92] Of course, other streaming services such as Prime Video or Max offer a wide selection of classic cinema,[93] but as Elisabeth Donnelly of *Vanity Fair* observes, "classic

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[87] Lobato, 11.
[88] Acland, 46-47
[89] Emily Kubincanek, "The Evolution of Watching Movies at Home," last modified June 26, 2020, https://filmschoolrejects.com/watching-movies-at-home-history/.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Matt Zoller Seitz, "Disney is Quietly Placing Classic Fox Movies into Its Vault, and That's Worrying," last modified October 24, 2019, https://www.vulture.com/2019/10/disney-is-quietly-placing-classic-fox-movies-into-its-vault.html.
[92] Zach Schonfeld, "Netflix, Streaming Video and the Slow Death of the Classic Film," last modified September 15, 2014, https://www.newsweek.com/2017/09/22/netflix-streaming-movies-classics-664512.html.
[93] As do boutique streamers such as the Criterion Channel and the Arrow Player, both of which are dedicated to showcasing films produced from the 1920s to today.

movies, or indie options, or foreign films" often "seem to be getting lost in the algorithm."[94]

Streaming algorithms "strategically bring back the most general genre categories, new releases,

and their own productions,"[95] thus demonstrating the need for curation performed by human

beings to highlight films that fall outside these parameters. Highly curated streaming platforms

like the Criterion Channel or byNWR seek to address this problem head on, offering access to a

diverse selection of older and/or obscure films, many produced prior to 1980 and beyond the

borders of Hollywood (see Chapter 3 for more discussion on byNWR).

More insidious, perhaps, streaming video platforms are subject to the whims of media

executives, who could decide at a moment's notice to "erase a project out of existence in order to

file it as a loss on their taxes."[96] Shortly after purchasing 20th Century Fox's film library in

2019, the Disney corporation placed several Fox titles into the "Disney Vault,"[97] a longstanding

practice of "artificially creating excitement for a repertory title by keeping film prints out of

theaters for years or decades, and periodically manufacturing a limited number of physical media

copies."[98] This means that many theaters, including "first-run chains like Cineplex will now lose

access to Fox repertory titles."[99] Likewise, other streamers may find it more difficult to license

Fox films, which will most likely wind up on Disney Plus.[100] This example shows that while

contemporary media platforms may "solicit an individualized, fragmented, and empowered

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[94] Elisabeth Donnelly, "The Film Snob's Dilemma," last modified August 2, 2019, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/08/netflix-hulu-amazon-streaming-film-snob.

[95] Acland, 42.

[96] B. J. Colango, "The Bleak Future of Streaming Suggests a World Without Cult Classics," last modified July 11, 2023, https://www.slashfilm.com/647389/horror-movie-flops-that-became-cult-classics/.

[97] Titles placed in the vault include *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), and *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965).

[98] Seitz "Disney Placing Fox Movies into Its Vault."

[99] Ibid.

[100] Though after Disney's streaming division reportedly lost $1.5 billion dollars in 2022, the company started "exploring the possibility of licensing film and TV properties to rival media outlets, shifting from Disney's current streaming strategy" of keeping the company's films and TV shows exclusive to the Disney Plus platform. For more, see Wilson Chapman, "Disney Exploring Licensing Films and Shows – Report," last modified February 6, 2023, https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/disney-bob-iger-licensing-films-1234806888/.

media consumer" who "has greater control over when, where, and how she watches movies and television shows,"[101] they nevertheless limit consumer choice and flexibility.

Additionally, streaming services are not well suited to the types of films that Refn makes and celebrates, films that subvert audience expectations and refuse to fit easily into the generic categories relied upon by streaming algorithms. This may explain why Refn felt the need to launch his own streaming platform that offers users access to a highly curated selection of films and supplemental materials that reflect Refn's own rebellious outsider persona (as explored in Chapter 3).[102] Monied interests many control the channels of distribution, but Refn is more willing to accept and embrace such digital technologies because they allow him to more easily reach his niche audience (see Chapter 4 for additional discussion of this idea).

The next sections consider the works produced during Refn's later period from 2008 to 2019: *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising* (2009), *Drive* (2011), *Only God Forgives* (2013), *The Neon Demon* (2016), and *Too Old to Die Young* (2019), as well as the promotional short films *Gucci Première* (2012) and *Hennessy X.O: Odyssey* (2016). Refn produced these works while continuing to discursively develop his branded persona, "Refn," which consists primarily of discourse fragments that portray Refn as a rebellious filmmaker intent on subverting traditional notions of "good" and "bad" art.

Late Refn: Transmedia Auteurism and the Construction of "Refn"

While Refn cites *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* as the film that inspired him to direct, he also claims that *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933) has shaped

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[101] Lobato, 24.
[102] Once again, it must be noted that in January 2023, Refn took the original byNWR offline, replacing it with a landing page that features the soundtrack for Refn's Netflix series, *Copenhagen Cowboy*.

his own films in various ways. In interviews, he explains that *King Kong* "introduced a great

world of the fantastique to me. My first exposure was very much fantasy filmmaking, and I guess

that's what I do."[103] This idea is especially prominent in his later projects, which all feature

unsettlingly surreal moments (as when Jenna Malone's character Ruby unleashes a torrent of

blood while menstruating beneath a full moon during the climax of *The Neon Demon*) and

elements of "psychedelic mysticism"[104] (in *Valhalla Rising*, lead character One-Eye repeatedly

experiences blood-red prophetic visions). Refn frequently invokes myths and fairytales when

discussing his later films, which often feel untethered from reality and feature simplistic

characters who embody fundamental notions of good or evil, purity or corruption, and virtue or

vice. Refn argues that his films draw on universal concepts, an idea reinforced by how his later

films tend to center on characters that recall archetypal figures such as the samurai or the

cowboy.[105]

Yet these films also feature gritty, often all-too-real depictions of violence that echo the

bursts of aestheticized brutality seen in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. This inclination toward

violence likely stems from Refn's assertion that "art is essentially an act of violence,"[106] one that

can serve as "a way to exorcise your fetishes and desires, both the good ones and the bad

ones."[107] Examples of violent acts in Refn's films include the protagonist of *Valhalla Rising*

slicing open a man's belly and pulling out his entrails, the Driver crushing an enemy's head in

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[103] Robinson, "From *Pusher* to the Present."

[104] Justin Vicari, *Nicolas Winding Refn and the Violence of Art: A Critical Study of the Film* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014), 94.

[105] For instance, the lead character of *Drive* recalls the "Man with No Name" figure (played by Clint Eastwood) that headlines director Sergio Leone's so-called "Dollars Trilogy," which includes *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), and *The Good, the Bad, and The Ugly* (1966). For more, see Christpher J. Olson, "Gangstas, Thugs, Vikings, and Drivers: Cinematic Masculine Archetypes and the Demythologization of Violence in the Films of Nicolas Winding Refn," (master's thesis, DePaul University, Chicago, 2014), 13, Digital Commons@DePaul.

[106] Roddick, 47.

[107] Tobias, "Exorcise Some Desires."

Drive, and calmly vicious vigilante Chang torturing a man to death in *Only God Forgives*. Refn's attempt to balance fantasy and reality onscreen represents yet another of the discursive dichotomies that define "Refn," which in many ways reflects the perception of cult film as a revolutionary, masculine pursuit.

Cult fandom often involves a laddish behavior intended to establish "opposition to the 'commercial mainstream' […] to present them as standing in clear distinction to a conformist mass of viewers."[108] Joanne Hollows shrewdly argues that "mainstream cinema is imagined as feminized mass culture and cult as heroic and masculinized subculture."[109] Here, "mainstream" refers to blockbusters such as *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990) or *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), two hugely successful films that have large followings among women. Cult film fans frequently "Other" such feminized mainstream fare,[110] largely by celebrating films that highlight so-called "masculine" interests such as extreme violence (often perpetrated against women) and graphic sexuality (which usually takes the form of female nudity). Jacinda Read contends that this stance was then legitimized by scholars such as I. Q. Hunter or Steve Chibnall, whose writings on cult cinema tended "to reproduce, rather than question, subcultural ideologies, and thus the masculinity of cult."[111] At the same time, such behavior also likely hides "a potentially nerdish failed masculinity,"[112] which is then reclaimed through a fanboy elitism that works "structurally to exclude women."[113]

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[108] Mark Jancovich, "Cult Fictions: Cult Movies, Subcultural Capital and the Production of Cultural Distinctions," *Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2010): 309.

[109] Joanne Hollows, "The Masculinity of Cult," in *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, ed. Mark Jancovich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 37.

[110] Mark Jancovich, "Introduction," in *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, ed. Mark Jancovich (Manchester University Press, 2003), 1

[111] Jacinda Read, "The Cult of Masculinity: From Fan-boys to Academic Bad-boys", in *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, ed. Mark Jancovich (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 54.

[112] Read, 68

[113] Hollows, 36.

These ideas all apply to "Refn," the mediated persona through which Refn celebrates sleazy, often sexist exploitation films that appeal primarily to a male audience, including *The Velvet Trap* (Ken Kennedy, 1966), *Fuego* (Armando Bo, 1969), and *Auntie's Secret Society* (Sanford White, 1973). Streaming technologies, especially when utilized by a heavily branded service like byNWR, make it easier for "Refn" to hail a (largely male) cult audience that would find value in tasteless exploitation films that emphasize misogynist attitudes, female nudity, and violence against women.

Critical discourses generated during Refn's later period regularly position him as a polarizing figure who deliberately makes divisive art. Indeed, his branded persona revolves around a perception of rebellion against conventional tastes and ideologies. As Elena Gorfinkel observes, however, cinephilia and cultism overlap in many ways. She argues that cinephiles are "defined by a tradition of ciné-clubs, demitasse cups, art houses, little film magazines, and modernist tastes" and cultists by "midnight screenings, excessive bodies, ruptured decorum, talking at the screen and subterranean circulation."[114] Yet, the two groups are nevertheless united through a "logic of reclamation and resuscitation."[115] The difference lies in the objects that cinephiles and cultists seek to reclaim and resuscitate; according to Gorfinkel, cinephiles tend to focus on "the beauty and mastery of overlooked Hollywood films and directors" such as Nicholas Ray, Samuel Fuller, Howard Hawks, and Alfred Hitchcock.[116] Cultists, meanwhile, engage with film more cynically, "using yet refusing the parameters of artistic value and the idea of the hallowed masterpiece" to celebrate "the ugly, the distasteful, and the shocking as a mode of feeling, mounting this anticanon as a mark of subversion."[117] For Gorfinkel, the demarcation

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[114] Elena Gorfinkel, "Cult Film or Cinephilia by Any Other Name," *Cineaste* 34, no. 1 (2008): 33
[115] Ibid., 34.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid.

between cinephilia and cultism "becomes much more porous and at times illegible, since it is no longer oriented around the project of film as art and definitions of connoisseurship that rely on exclusivity and rarity" but rather "the horizon line that separates those films that are available through digital, wireless means, and those that are not."[118] These ideas all align with the ideology that drives "Refn," which celebrates the ugly, the distasteful and the shocking as a way to challenge and potentially subvert conventional taste hierarchies.

At the same time, however, Gorfinkel's ideas potentially destabilize the outsider status of "Refn" while inadvertently contributing to the discursive dichotomy that defines this branded persona, largely because her argument suggests that distinctions between mainstream and cult are entirely arbitrary. Such distinctions may exist only in the minds of adherents seeking to shore up exclusionary subcultural ideologies, thus allowing them to act as cultural gatekeepers. Cultists such as Refn often engage in what Gorfinkel describes as a "pursuit of cinema's elusive, ineffable meanings – in theory resembling the labors of their cinephile contemporaries and predecessors, in practice seizing on radically opposed objects for similar effect."[119] Refn's discourses routinely demonstrate this idea, as he advocates for a more dangerous cinema that challenges prevailing tastes and values. He thus emblematizes the cult aficionado who considers the "ready-made, cruddy antiformalist form of the trash film" as a "sense-defying interpretive or artistic strategy."[120] Yet if cinephilia and cultism are two sides of the same coin, as Gorfinkel contends, then "Refn" sits upon a shaky foundation as this persona "reproduces existing power structures rather than challenges them."[121]

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[118] Ibid., 38.
[119] Ibid., 37
[120] Ibid.
[121] Hollows, 37.

Nevertheless, as critic Brian Tallerico writes, "Refn loves to play with expectations,"[122] and this playfulness represents another core component of "Refn." In interviews, Refn routinely portrays himself as a mischievous scamp who makes shocking statements (as when he called fellow Danish director Lars Von Trier a Nazi[123]) and engages in carnivalesque behavior, such as elevating low-budget trash films to the level of art. Even if the distinctions between mainstream and cult are arbitrary and/or imagined, Refn still incorporates the perception of such cultural divisions into his branded persona. "Refn" also regularly exhibits the laddish behavior often associated with cultism by making and celebrating films that foreground sordid elements such as sex, violence, drug use, and more, all evident in the works produced throughout his later period.

Masculine Outsiders: *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising*, and *Drive*

Following his foray into episodic TV with the *Marple* episodes "Towards Zero" (2007) and "Nemesis" (2007), Refn next directed the incendiary biopic *Bronson*. A Danish/British co-production with an estimated budget of $230,000 USD, the film helped propel both Refn and lead actor Tom Hardy to international acclaim. Upon its release at the 2008 BFI London Film Festival, *Bronson* garnered largely positive reviews, with many critics comparing it to *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971),[124] an altogether apt assessment given that *Bronson* likewise presents an uncompromising portrait of a brutish but charismatic young man. Reviewers

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[122] Brian Tallerico, "Nicolas Winding Refn Delivers Distinct Vision of Too Old to Die Young," last modified June 13, 2019, https://www.rogerebert.com/streaming/nicolas-winding-refn-delivers-distinct-vision-of-too-old-to-die-young.

[123] See Anthony, "Refn: I Am a Pornographer."

[124] For instance, Garry Maddox of the *Sydney Morning Herald* dubbed Bronson "a cross between *A Clockwork Orange* and an extended music video," while the *New York Times*' A. O. Scott declared that the film is "like Stanley Kubrick's Clockwork Orange reimagined as a one-man stage show and stripped of any political implications." See Garry Maddox, "Bronson," last modified August 7, 2009, https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/bronson-20090807-gdto4s.html and A. O. Scott, "Portrait of the Criminal as a Performance Artist," last modified October 9, 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/09/movies/09bronson.html.

routinely praised Refn's inventiveness,[125] though some critics were less enamored with the

director's brash stylistic quirks. For example, J. Hoberman wrote that the film's story was

"trampled into dust by the showy Sturm und Drang of Refn's filmmaking,"[126] while Dave

Calhoun dismissed it as "a shoddy and morally nasty film that leaves a terrible taste in the

mouth."[127] Despite such dissenting opinions, however, *Bronson* grossed over $2.2 million

worldwide and developed a cult audience, thereby fulfilling *Variety* critic John Anderson's

perceptive observation that while *Bronson* "may have a tough time finding its niche" it

nevertheless "has 'cult hit' written all over it."[128]

Though *Bronson* recounts the exploits of a dangerously violent criminal it could be (and

indeed has been) read as a story of a radically independent individual fighting back against

oppressive and exploitative systems (e.g., government, the prison industrial complex,

capitalism). The film features all of Refn's stylistic and thematic preoccupations, including stark

red lighting (most notably in the beginning, as a nude Tom Hardy exercises in a small prison

cell), an atmospheric synth score (composed by Johnny Jewel of Chromatics, an 80s-inspired

band featured on the *Drive* soundtrack), and exploitative elements (e.g., graphic violence, full-

frontal male nudity, queer-coded characters) that hearken back to such Refn-approved sleaze-

fests as *Hot-Blooded Woman* (Dale Berry, 1965) and *Male Service* (Arch Hudson, 1966).

Bronson also subverts the expectations of viewers looking for a standard biopic in that it focuses

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[125] In his review for the website *AV Club*, Noel Murray proclaimed that Refn's "dynamic" direction ensures that viewers "buy in to the inherent entertainment value of bloody fisticuffs." Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone*, meanwhile, observed that Refn "pushes hard at the boundaries of banal film biography." See Noel Murray, "Bronson," last modified October 8, 2009, https://www.avclub.com/bronson-1798207155 and Peter Travers, "Bronson," last modified October 8, 2009, https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-reviews/bronson-125212/.

[126] J. Hoberman, "Merry Pranksters," *The Village Voice* (New York, NY), Oct. 6, 2009: 40.

[127] Dave Calhoun, "Bronson," last modified March 10, 2009, https://www.timeout.com/movies/bronson.

[128] John Anderson, "Bronson," last modified January 20, 2009, https://variety.com/2009/film/markets-festivals/bronson-1200473184/#!.

on and asks viewers to sympathize with a charming but thoroughly unpleasant character, brought to vivid life through Tom Hardy's spirited performance.

The film can also be viewed as Refn's "self-portrait as an artist" given that the title character's "demeaning incarcerations" serve as a metaphor for "the idea of cinematic art held hostage to the need for raising capital, for making a profit, for placating powers that be."[129] Like Bronson the character, Refn "understands that his will is pointless and meaningless, but he refuses to stop exerting it," largely because doing so is more preferable "than an ironic capitulation to the very system that would remove his will altogether and thus remove him entirely from the world."[130] Refn frequently rails against conglomerate Hollywood even as he produces corporate art (as when he co-created and directed *Too Old to Die Young* for Amazon). He also discursively challenges conventional ideologies that may only exist in his mind, doing so in ways that potentially replicate the power structures that define those very ideologies. Yet, much like Bronson, Refn prefers to proclaim outsider status rather than be viewed as comfortably working within the system. This is yet another example of the discursive dichotomies that drive "Refn."

Refn followed *Bronson* with *Valhalla Rising*, a meditatively psychedelic Viking epic that would come to truly define the director's later period. The film reunited Refn with actor Mads Mikkelsen, who previously appeared in *Pusher* and *Pusher II*. It also confounded audiences and critics alike. Shot on an estimated budget of roughly $6,600,000, *Valhalla Rising* grossed just $282,737 worldwide during its initial theatrical run, giving it a reputation as a commercial failure that alienated audiences. Critics, meanwhile, were sharply divided over the film's merits. J. R. Jones of the *Chicago Reader* savaged *Valhalla Rising*, calling it both a "bleak, grimy fiasco" and

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[129] Vicari, 142.
[130] Ibid.

"an endless slog of mud, blood, and graphic disembowelment."[131] Mike Hale of the *New York Times* similarly panned the film, observing that Refn "shows no knack for the kind of visionary, hallucinatory image making that would render *Valhalla Rising* memorable."[132]

Other reviewers, however, lauded the film, singling out Refn's direction and Mikkelsen's silent performance as highlights. IndieWire's Eric Kohn, for instance, deemed *Valhalla Rising* "poetic" and "elegantly minimalist," writing that "Refn's filmmaking prowess routinely dominates the experience" and ensures that the film "conveys a far more muted ambience than anything else in his rapidly expanding oeuvre."[133] Lauren Wissot of *Slant* also applauded Refn's directorial style, which she claimed demonstrated a "distilled intensity" and summoned "primal energies" thanks to a focus on "painstakingly composed images, rendered in different levels of saturation, that place an emphasis on primary colors."[134]

Like *Bronson* before it, *Valhalla Rising* subverts audience expectations through elements such as leisurely pacing, an ambiguous ending, and the complete removal of the lead character's voice. Silence would become a hallmark of Refn's later period, with his characters becoming much less talkative throughout the films produced during this phase of his career, but *Valhalla Rising* stands out as it entirely removes the voice of lead character One-Eye, played with stoic indifference by Mikkelsen. In many ways, *Valhalla Rising* intensifies the foundation of unease that *Bronson* established, as it takes the relaxed pacing, unsympathetic characters, and oppressive

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[131] J. R. Jones, "Valhalla Rising," last modified September 2, 2010, https://chicagoreader.com/film/valhalla-rising/.

[132] Mike Hale, "A Nordic Epic," last modified July 15, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/16/movies/16valhalla.html?partner=Rotten%20Tomatoes&ei=5083.

[133] Eric Kohn, "REVIEW | Ancient Ultra-Violence: Nicolas Winding Refn's 'Valhalla Rising,'" last modified July 12, 2010, https://www.indiewire.com/criticism/culture/review-ancient-ultra-violence-nicolas-winding-refns-valhalla-rising-54920/.

[134] Lauren Wissott, "Review: Valhalla Rising," last modified July 11, 2010, https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/valhalla-rising/.

soundscapes to an entirely new level. *Bronson*, on the other hand, defines excess but remains likable thanks to an abundance of charm and charisma.

Both One-Eye and *Valhalla Rising* feel contained and unknowable, keeping viewers at arm's length throughout the film's 93-minute runtime. Yet, like *Bronson*,the filmsfeels like another mission statement for both Refn and "Refn," as it follows an uncivilized man who breaks free from captivity and sets out on a journey to a new land filled with both possibility and uncertainty. This idea reflects Refn's own career trajectory, as he frequently endeavors to work outside the parameters of major studio filmmaking, even though that means dealing with the uncertainty of independent cinema, which nevertheless offers numerous possibilities in terms of storytelling, production, and distribution.

Mixed reactions also greeted Refn's next film, *Drive*, which would emerge as his biggest commercial hit. A minimalist homage to stylish crime thrillers of the past like *Point Blank* (John Boorman, 1967), *Bullitt* (Peter Yates, 1968), *The Driver*, and *Thief* (Michael Mann, 1981), *Drive* stars Ryan Gosling as a nameless, preternaturally gifted getaway driver who falls in love with his beautiful next-door neighbor Irene (Carey Mulligan) before running afoul of cruel Jewish crime lord Bernie Rose (Albert Brooks, playing against type) and his thuggish Partner Nino (Ron Perlman). With an estimated budget of $15 million dollars, *Drive* was Refn's largest and most expensive production to date. Debuting on May 20, 2011, in competition at the Cannes Film Festival, the film reportedly received a 15-minute-long standing ovation and earned Refn the best director prize,[135] making him the first Danish filmmaker to ever receive the coveted award.[136]

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[135] Pete Hammond, "CANNES: Sean Goes Glam Rock, Uma Leaves Town, Sarkozy Film Sold To U.S.," last modified May 20, 2011, https://deadline.com/2011/05/cannes-sean-goes-glam-uma-goes-awol-sarkozy-film-sold-to-u-s-134200/.

[136] James Hughes, "Nicolas Winding Refn on His Favorite Song Choices in Movie History," last modified July 19, 2013, https://slate.com/culture/2013/07/only-god-forgives-director-nicolas-winding-refn-discusses-his-favorite-music-in-cinema-history.html.

Drive proved a modest hit with general audiences, grossing over $78 million worldwide after opening in Denmark on September 15, 2011. It also resonated with critics such as the *Washington Post*'s Ann Hornaday, who wrote that Gosling and Refn "neatly manage the hat trick of paying homage to those wheelmen of yore while reinvigorating the genre with style, smarts, and flashes of wit."[137] Most critics, however, were more muted in their praise, as was *Sight & Sound* reviewer Wally Hammond, who considered *Drive* a "more or less conventional Los Angeles-set hot-rod/getaway-driver movie with neo-noir decoration" that was "satisfying enough on its own terms."[138] *Time Out*'s Tom Huddleston judged the film "shallow" but also "slickly compelling, beautifully crafted, and so damn shiny."[139] Other reviewers, however, found little to love in *Drive*; Nicolas Rapold of *Film Comment* wrote that the film "plays more like an exercise in turn-of-the-Eighties nostalgia, a movie-length strong-silent swagger inspired by the art on a VHS box."[140] Leonard Maltin, meanwhile, deemed *Drive* "all attitude, punctuated by unpleasant bursts of violence."[141] Regardless, the film quickly developed a reputation as a stylish neo-noir thriller and it remains an influential cult hit over a decade after its initial release.

Drive represents an interesting entry in Refn's filmography in that it is both his biggest production and his biggest commercial hit, but still technically an independent film. As Vicari notes, *Drive* is "essentially an independent film with an A-list Hollywood cast, since studio backing (even with Gosling on board) chickened out and Refn had to seek funding in France."[142] The film signaled Refn's return to Hollywood following the disastrous release of *Fear X* in 2003,

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[137] Ann Hornaday, "Drive," last modified September 16, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/gog/movies/drive,1111797/critic-review.html.

[138] Wally Hammond, "Film Review: Drive," last modified September 27, 2011, http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/6500.

[139] Tom Huddleston, "Drive," last modified September 20, 2011, https://www.timeout.com/movies/drive.

[140] Nicolas Rapold, "Short Takes: Drive," *Film Comment* 47, no. 5 (2011): 72.

[141] Leonard Maltin, "Drive – Movie Review," last modified September 16, 2011, https://leonardmaltin.com/drive-movie-review/.

[142] Vicari, 179.

but Refn considered it a return to his roots, explaining "in the end I had to go back and make a film that was financed independently, which is basically back to where I started."[143] In any event, the development afforded Refn and Gosling "total control over the overall making of the film."[144] Despite being completely different in terms of tone and content, *Drive* recalls *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (Russ Meyer, 1970), a film that Refn has cited as an influence. Like that film, *Drive* is a studio (or, more accurately, studio-adjacent) picture that subverts traditional studio-style storytelling and production techniques, made by a fiercely independent and highly fetishistic filmmaker known for his stylistic and thematic quirks.

Drive contains all the stylistic and thematic elements established in Refn's previous two films: long stretches of silence, graphic violence, a pulsing score, saturated colors, archetypal characters, and a preoccupation with masculinity and male violence. It also subverts audience expectations, as many viewers expected a kinetic crime caper along the lines of *The Fast and the Furious* (Rob Cohen, 2001) but instead got a quiet, thoughtful film about a conflicted character struggling to balance rage and compassion.[145] At the same time, *Drive* advances the narrative of "Refn" as it features an intensely individualistic lead character who chafes against the confines of working within the system (in this case, organized crime). *Bronson*, *Valhalla Rising*, and *Drive* all contribute to the discourses that position Refn as a rebel intent on challenging longstanding cinematic and narrative practices.

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[143] Harris, "Refn, *Drive*."

[144] Vicari, 180.

[145] A woman in Michigan even sued the film's distributor, claiming that the trailer promised a thrilling "chase, or race action film" while the actual film delivered "very little driving." She also claimed that *Drive* "substantially contained extreme, gratuitous, dehumanizing racism directed at members of the Jewish faith, and thereby promoted criminal violence against members of the Jewish faith." For more see Ben Child, "Woman Sues to Stop Drive Getting Away with a 'Misleading' Trailer," last modified October 10, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/oct/10/woman-sues-drive-trailer.

Selling "Refn": *Gucci Première* **and** *Hennessy X.O: Odyssey*

In 2012, Refn turned his attention to directing and appearing (alongside performer Blake

Lively) in a short promotional film advertising Gucci Première perfume. Refn dabbled in the

world of advertising during his early period; following the release of *Pusher*, Refn directed a

series of ads for Tuborg beer that aired in Denmark and featured his frequent collaborator Zlatko

Burić, who appeared in *Pusher*, *Bleeder*, and *Pusher III*. In each humorous advert, Burić portrays

an immigrant store owner who sells beer to thirsty (and often obnoxious) Danes. According to

Mette Hjort, these ads are a "clear example of the mobilization of metaculture,"[146] or the

universal concepts present in all cultures. Hjort contends that Refn utilizes metaculture in this ad

campaign "as a loose and subtle means of *indirect reference*, a way of returning to the film that

made Burić a household name in Denmark but without actually mentioning the text of that

film."[147] Yet while the Tuborg ads capitalize on Burić's newfound star persona they also feel

somewhat anonymous, as though they could have been directed by anyone. They give little

indication that it is Refn behind the camera. In other words, the adverts do not feel Refn-esque.

Such is not the case with the *Gucci Premiere* advert, which features many of the stylistic

traits that define Refn's later period including sultry synth music, saturated colors, long (for a

two-minute commercial, anyway) takes, flashes of tableau-style staging, and fetishistic shots of

Los Angeles. These flourishes reappear in Refn's 2016 promotional short film *Hennessy X.O:*

Odyssey, which also includes bursts of red lighting and chapter breaks that recall those used in

Valhalla Rising. The Hennessy advert also features a garage that resembles the one featured in

Drive, as well as characters painted gold from head to toe, evoking a sequence from *The Neon*

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[146] Mette Hjort, *Small Nation, Global Cinema: The New Danish Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 268.
        [147] Ibid., emphasis in original.

Demon that sees lead character Jesse (Elle Fanning) painted gold by a photographer clearly inspired by fashion photographer and alleged sexual predator Terry Richardson.

Whereas the Tuborg ads utilize metaculture to call back to Burić's role in *Pusher* while appearing to ignore Refn, the Gucci and Hennessy ads mobilize metaculture in a way that evokes ideas of "Refn." Yet the two adverts also reveal how Refn navigates an identity as both auteur and director-for-hire (hearkening back to the original conception of auteur, which focused on the work of directors laboring within the studio system, such as George Cukor or Frank Capra). They also demonstrate another of the discursive dichotomies that define "Refn"; though Refn denounces capitalism, he nevertheless demonstrates a willingness to produce advertisements for luxury brands, thus contributing to the very economic system he condemns. Regardless of how much these conform to his stylistic and thematic fetishes, they still reveal that Refn and "Refn" contain inconsistencies in their professed political and economic ideologies.

Troubling Masculinity: *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon*

In 2013, Refn directed *Only God Forgives*, his highly anticipated follow-up to *Drive*. The film reunites Refn with Gosling, who this time around portrays Julian, an impotent expatriate drug-smuggler who operates a Muay Thai boxing club in Bangkok, Thailand alongside his unhinged brother Billy (Tom Burke). When Billy is killed by retired-cop-turned-vigilante Chang (Vithaya Pansringarm) in retaliation for murdering an underage prostitute, Julian's domineering crime boss mother Crystal (Kristin Scott Thomas) shows up seeking revenge. Shot on-location in Thailand with an estimated budget of $4.8 million, *Only God Forgives* deals with such complicated and potentially exploitative topics as prostitution, vigilantism, and incest. The film debuted on May 22, 2013, in competition at the Cannes Film Festival, where it received a mixed

reception, continuing the trend started with *Bronson*. Like *Drive* before it, *Only God Forgives* received a standing ovation even as it inspired "laughter, boos, and jeers" from a significant portion of the Cannes crowd.[148]

Upon entering wide release following its premiere in Denmark on May 30, 2013, *Only God Forgives*, which pushes Refn's stylistic tendencies to their breaking point, elicited mixed reactions from critics. Many reviewers lambasted the film; for instance, *Grantland*'s Wesley Morris described it as a "one-dimensional video game of death,"[149] while Mick LaSalle of the *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote that the film "borders on unwatchable."[150] Other critics heaped praise on *Only God Forgives*, with Jesse Cataldo of *Slant* writing that it is "blessed with a pure visual beauty that clashes hard against the astounding ugliness on display in nearly every other aspect."[151] Richard Roeper of the *Chicago Sun-Times* proclaimed *Only God Forgives* "one of the most shocking and one of the best movies of the year."[152]

Yet, as per usual with Refn's later films, most critics fell somewhere in between these two poles. Scott Tobias of the *Dissolve* called *Only God Forgives* both "a sensual wonder" and "eye candy with a sour taste,"[153] and *Flavorwire*'s Jason Bailey deemed it "a mess, an overly stylized and brutally violent mood piece with something to alienate everyone" that is

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[148] Scott Meslow, "4 Things You Should Know Before You See *Only God Forgives*," published January 8, 2015, https://theweek.com/articles/461940/4-things-should-know-before-only-god-forgives.

[149] Wesley Morris, "Small(er) Movie Roundup: Because Even the Studio Knows RIPD Is a Toxic Stink Bomb," last modified July 18, 2013, http://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/smaller-movie-roundup-because-even-the-studio-knows-ripd-is-a-toxic-stink-bomb/.

[150] Mick LaSalle, "'Only God Forgives' Review: Unwatchable," last modified July 18, 2013, https://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Only-God-Forgives-review-unwatchable-4672793.php.

[151] Jesse Cataldo, "Review: *Only God Forgives*," last modified July 15, 2013, https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/only-god-forgives/.

[152] Richard Roeper, "Every Bloody Moment Demands Attention in *Only God Forgives*," last modified July 18, 2013, https://chicago.suntimes.com/entertainment/movies/21378516-421/every-bloody-moment-demands-attention-in-only-god-forgives.html.

[153] Scott Tobias, "Only God Forgives," last modified July 18, 2013, https://thedissolve.com/reviews/66-only-god-forgives/.

nevertheless "also absolutely worth seeing."[154] General audiences, meanwhile, failed to fully embrace the film, which grossed just $10,639,616 worldwide.

Only God Forgives might be Refn's most subversive and provocative work. It actively upends the expectations of viewers who were expecting another *Drive* but got something far weirder and more meditative. Gosling subverts his own star persona by playing an ineffectual and impotent character who is still something of a romantic figure, though definitely a far cry from his role in *The Notebook* (Nick Cassavetes, 2004), which cemented his star image in the minds of many fans. Of course, *Only God Forgives* announced its subversive intentions in its ad campaign; as Dan Solomon notes, the film dared to take "one of the most handsome actors in the world and [put] his bruised, beaten, puffy face on its poster."[155]

Once again, all the stylistic and thematic elements established in Refn's three previous films are present in *Only God Forgives*, but here the style frequently overwhelms the substance, leaving viewers unmoored from any sort of traditional narrative. In this film, the long takes become excruciatingly long, the saturated colors draw the eye away from the action, and the violence becomes even more gruesome than before. Starting with *Only God Forgives* and continuing through *Too Old to Die Young*, style becomes substance. Of course, part of that substance involves advancing the ideology of "Refn," as Gosling's character Julian tries to get out from under the thumb of his domineering mother, only to experience a fall when he cedes control of his life to her whims. Here Refn clearly reiterates his own philosophy, which states that it is better to strike out on your own and fail rather than give up control to others.

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[154] Jason Bailey, "In Defense of 'Only God Forgives,' the Summer's Weirdest Movie," last modified July 19, 2013, https://www.flavorwire.com/404808/in-defense-of-only-god-forgives-the-summers-weirdest-movie.
[155] Solomon, "Refn on Divisive Art."

Refn's next film would prove even more divisive than *Only God Forgives*. Premiering in competition at the Cannes Film Festival on May 20, 2016, *The Neon Demon* reportedly received a 17-minute-long standing ovation, the fourth longest in the festival's history.[156] It also offended a large portion of the Cannes crowd, prompting jeers and walkouts before the end credits rolled.[157] Set in the world of high fashion, *The Neon Demon* stars Elle Fanning as Jesse, an aspiring underage model who learns that her peers will resort to any means, including cannibalism, to maintain their youth and beauty. Yet again, a Refn film polarized critics, with fewer landing in the middle this time around. Many reviewers condemned *The Neon Demon* for its sordid story, confused metaphor, and self-indulgent style. For example, Kristy Puchko of *Pajiba* wrote "a movie *this* studded with beautiful people, surreal visuals, necrophilia, and bloodlust has no right to be this deadly dull."[158] Kate Taylor of the *Globe and Mail* likewise found the film lacking, calling it "laughably grotesque yet so visually cool it remains fatally unfunny."[159]

Other critics, however, praised *The Neon Demon* for its hypnotic visuals, pulsing soundtrack, and Grand Guignol narrative that evoked Italian exploitation films made by the likes of Dario Argento, Lucio Fulci, and Ruggero Deodato.[160] Entertainment writer Wenlei Ma proclaimed *The Neon Demon* "a work of art,"[161] while K. Austin Collins of the *Ringer* declared it

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[156] Lisa Laman, "This Movie Got Both a 17-Minute Standing Ovation and Walkouts at Cannes," last modified May 25, 2023, https://collider.com/the-neon-demon-cannes-standing-ovation-walkouts/.

[157] Ibid.

[158] Kristy Puchko, "Review: How Dare 'Neon Demon' Be This Filled with Sex And Violence, Yet So DAMN Dull," last modified June 24, 2016, https://www.pajiba.com/film_reviews/review-how-dare-neon-demon-be-this-filled-with-sex-and-violence-yet-so-damn-dull.php (emphasis in original).

[159] Kate Taylor, "*The Neon Demon* is Laughably Grotesque Yet So Visually Cool It's Fatally Unfunny," last modified June 24, 2016, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/film-reviews/the-neon-demon-is-laughably-grotesque-yet-so-visually-cool-its-fatally-unfunny/article30587773/.

[160] See, for instance, Mark Kermode, "The Neon Demon Review – Beauty as Beast," last modified July 10, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jul/10/the-neon-demon-review-nicholas-winding-refn.

[161] Wenlei Ma, "The Neon Demon Could Be the Year's Most Divisive Film," last modified October 22, 2016, https://www.news.com.au/entertainment/movies/new-movies/the-neon-demon-could-be-the-years-most-divisive-film/news-story/8cd31d70691ca6a160044230496a80af?sv=5c5494d5db0e42cf74e414a537692b45.

"Refn's best movie, or at least the one that best matches his style to his subject."[162] Despite such accolades, the film flopped with general audiences, earning just over $3 million at the global box office, less than half its $7 million estimated budget.

For *The Neon Demon*, Refn asked his performers to watch *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, as he wanted them to study director Russ Meyer's "infamous rock-star psychodrama."[163] Tasha Robinson of the *Verge* finds Refn's edict unsurprising, writing that "*Neon Demon* is lurid, lush, and overripe in the same sort of way [as *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*], with a vulgar vapidity that's baffling and hypnotic at the same time."[164] Once more, Refn's stylistic and thematic preoccupations are present in *The Neon Demon*, but have been shifted to a feminine tale rather than a masculine one. The film still features explosions of extreme violence, but this time around it is women perpetrating violence against women. At the same time, however, the threat of masculine violence looms over the film, thanks to characters like Hank (a skeevy landlord played by Keanu Reeves) and Roberto Sarno (a lascivious fashion designer played by Alessandro Nivola, whose character shares a last name with sexploitation pioneer Joseph W. Sarno).

Refn has described *The Neon Demon* as a feminist horror film and claims that it is informed by his Scandinavian upbringing, stating:

> We're taught to treat women with utmost equality and respect. Nothing enrages me more than seeing women not being treated as complete equals on a human level. There's probably a bit of subconscious thrown in there from my end. I don't run from that."

[162] K. Austin Collins, "Nicolas Winding Refn Fails Upwards," last modified June 30, 2016, https://www.theringer.com/2016/6/30/16041880/nicholas-winding-refn-fails-upward-176d31aa3e02.

[163] Tasha Robinson, "The Neon Demon Review: Everyone's an Object in Nicolas Winding Refn's LA Horror Show," last modified June 24, 2016, https://www.theverge.com/2016/6/24/12024080/the-neon-demon-review-winding-refn-elle-fanning-horror-movie.

[164] Ibid.

In many ways, *The Neon Demon* serves as Refn's commentary on the male gaze, as it tells a story of women transforming themselves to align with what men want. The women in the film all internalize the male gaze and commit acts of violence against themselves and others, all in the name of conforming to masculine desires. Yet *The Neon Demon* also advances the idea of "Refn," as its narrative revolves around a young woman determined to make it in a ruthless industry without compromising her principles but meets a fatal end once she succumbs to the temptations of the system.

As these examples show, Refn's films all contribute to the idea that he is a rebellious filmmaker who subverts longstanding traditions and challenges audience expectations with little care for how others receive him and his works. This is the essence of "Refn." This tendency to divide critics and general audiences becomes interesting when considering how Refn appropriates such critical discourse into his branded persona, which is often openly combative to both critics and audiences. Refn, who remains unfazed by the negative reactions to his work, appears to draw on his cinephile knowledge to understand critical and commercial expectations only to subvert them, thereby advancing the idea that he is an outsider who makes divisive art. These tendencies would carry over into his streaming series *Too Old to Die Young*, which proved every bit as divisive as the films produced during the latter half of his career.

Streaming Refn: *Too Old to Die Young*

The commercial failure of *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon* did little to impact Refn's reputation as an eccentric director who made challenging films, but it did affect his box office earning potential and thus his standing with the major film studios. This may explain why, in 2017, Refn turned his eye to the world of streaming. That year he launched his own branded

streaming service, byNWR (discussed in Chapter 3), devoted to showcasing the low-budget

regionally produced exploitation films that Refn had collected over the years. Two years later he

teamed with novelist and comic book writer Ed Brubaker to create the 10-episode series *Too Old*

to Die Young for Amazon's Prime Video streaming platform.

The show, which follows cop-turned-hired-killer Martin Jones (Miles Teller) as he

navigates Los Angeles's criminal underworld while grappling with an existential crisis, contains

all the qualities that define Refn's later period. These include the gritty L.A. setting, a stark use

of red lighting, tableau-style staging, throbbing techno music, depictions of graphic sex and

violence, and lethargic pacing. Episodes four and five of the series, repackaged as a single

feature titled "North of Hollywood, West of Hell," played at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival. Like

Drive and *The Neon Demon* before it, *Too Old to Die Young* was shot in L.A. With all three

works, Refn references older films shot and set in L.A. (e.g., *The Driver*), but they also reveal

how Refn is beholden to industrial contexts that make filming in that location more cost-

efficient.

As was becoming tradition with Refn, *Too Old to Die Young* sharply divided critics. *The*

Hollywood Reporter's David Rooney wrote that the two episodes screened at Cannes suggested a

"ponderously portentous sleazefest shaken out of its torpor by the occasional bloodbath."[165]

David Fear of *Rolling Stone* roasted the series, deeming it a "limping, baggy megillah, which

fails to justify its marathon-length running time as anything more than a self-satisfying,

hardboiled-by-numbers folly."[166] Other reviewers found much to like in *Too Old to Die Young*,

such as BBC film critic Nicholas Barber, who declared it "addictive, in an unpleasant sort of

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[165] David Rooney, "'Too Old to Die Young': TV Review | Cannes 2019," last modified May 17, 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-reviews/too-old-to-die-young-cannes-2019-1211933/.
[166] David Fear, "'Too Old to Die Young' Review: Only God Forgives This Sh-tshow," last modified June 18, 2019, https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-reviews/too-old-to-die-young-tv-review-848860/.

way."[167] Karen Han of *Polygon* similarly found the show "mesmerizing" and anointed it Refn's "most striking project yet."[168] Yet, like Refn's two previous cinematic efforts, *Too Old to Die Young* failed to find a wide audience and Amazon opted against ordering a second season, leaving the series' central narrative frustratingly unresolved.

Too Old to Die Young doubles down on the stylistic and thematic elements that define late period Refn, stretching them out across 10 episodes with a total runtime of 751 minutes. The show upends audience expectations because, unlike other streaming series, it resists binge-watching, partly because the Refn-esque elements are intensified. This time around the unsympathetic characters have been dialed up to 11, the violence is far more graphic and disturbing, and the aesthetic elements (e.g., color, music) often threaten to overwhelm the narrative and the dialogue entirely.

Yet *Too Old to Die Young* also demonstrates moments of stark beauty, as when Refn lingers on a tableau shot populated by cartel gangsters who look they stepped right out of a comic book, including one dressed like a mariachi musician (this could be an allusion to the themed gangs featured in director Walter Hills's 1979 comic book pastiche *The Warriors*). Other beautiful compositions include the establishing shots of the L.A. skyline at night, the city brightly lit against the darkness, and Jenna Malone's character, Diana, dancing barefoot with wild abandon in her modest L.A. home with its view of a lush garden behind her. Like most of the films Refn makes and celebrates, *Too Old to Die Young* takes an ugly story and makes it look beautiful via filmic techniques such as cinematography and mise-en-scène. Here, *Too Old to Die*

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[167] Nicholas Barber, "Too Old to Die Young: 'Evil at Its Most Sordid,'" last modified June 12, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20190611-too-old-to-die-young-evil-at-its-most-sordid.

[168] Karen Han, "The Director of Drive Rolled Killer Cops, Neon Lights, and Hideo Kojima into a Mesmerizing TV Series," last modified May 21, 2019, https://www.polygon.com/2019/5/21/18630748/too-old-to-die-young-review-cannes-2019.

Young reflects one of the core principles of "Refn": celebrating the ugly as a form of beautiful subversion.

Even as critics remained split over Refn's output during his later period, his budgets nevertheless continued to rise along with his profile. Thanks to the increased visibility made possible first by Netflix's DVD-by-mail service and later by streaming platforms such as Amazon Prime, Refn gained increased esteem (as well as infamy) among both critics and general audiences. The success of *Drive* also helped propel Refn's rising star, and he used his newfound notoriety to subvert audience expectations with ever more inflammatory works such as *Only God Forgives*, *The Neon Demon*, and *Too Old to Die Young*.

Significantly, most of Refn's films and TV projects from this period were either produced or released by major studios, which were themselves undergoing a transformation as entertainment conglomerates increasingly focused on producing blockbusters and franchise films even as they turned their eye toward launching their own proprietary streaming platforms such as Disney Plus and Paramount Plus. At the same time, media became ever more interconnected and classified under the designation of "content." This development helped further erode the already porous barriers between film, TV, streaming video, and digital games. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Refn embraced the possibilities offered by this new polymediated landscape, producing texts that remain recognizably Refn-esque despite spanning a variety of media. While Refn has yet to reach a massified audience, he has nevertheless found his niche, cultivating a devoted cult fandom willing to support his various endeavors, thus allowing him to land more film, advertising, and streaming deals.

Conclusion

Throughout his career but especially in his later period, Refn demonstrates Salter and

Stanfill's assertion that "media authors are brands."[169] During his later phase, Refn established

himself as a transmedia auteur as defined by Vernallis et. al. The works produced during this

period span film, TV, and streaming video, but nevertheless retain Refn's distinctive grain thanks

to the establishment of his branded persona, "Refn." Refn uses his branded persona to more

easily navigate the polymediated entertainment landscape that emerged during the first two

decades of the twenty-first century. During this period Refn established himself as a "founder of

discursivity," a term that refers to creators who "are not just the authors of their own works" but

rather "an endless possibility of discourse."[170] According to Michel Foucault, the nineteenth

century witnessed the development of a "more uncommon kind of author" who, rather than

simply producing their own works, is instead "the author of a theory, tradition, or discipline in

which other books and authors will in their turn find a place."[171] Refn, especially in his later

period, could be considered a "founder of discursivity," at least within the context of global

genre cinema.

It was near the end of this second phase that Refn revealed himself as a transdiscursive

auteur who discursively constructs a branded persona capable of uniting and potentially eclipsing

works produced by others who become overshadowed by Refn himself thanks to his brand. This

brand allows Refn to align himself with texts produced by other creators, discursively integrating

them under the banner of his own authorship. In the words of Salter and Stanfill, Refn's brand

allows him to eclipse "the contributions of others involved in the media product and [draw] fans

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[169] Salter and Stanfill, xv.

[170] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 114.

[171] Ibid., 113.

into the metanarrative of [his] body of work."[172] With the launch of byNWR, "Refn" would come to eclipse directors such as Joseph G. Prieto, Ron Ormond, Ray Dennis Steckler, whose works all become subsumed into Refn's brand thanks to their inclusion on his streaming service. Thus, as elaborated in Chapter 3, a branded persona such as "Refn" potentially blurs the boundaries of authorship while allowing a creator like Refn to transform from a traditional auteur who creates only texts into a transdiscursive auteur who creates both texts and discourses capable of encompassing other creators and their works. In other words, "Refn" converges the identities of Refn and multiple other creators.

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[172] Ibid.

Chapter 3

By N. W. R.: Archives, Authorship, and Refn as Curator

In 2012, during the latter phase of his career, Nicolas Winding Refn set out to collect

prints of previously lost or forgotten exploitation films, starting with the work of queer

filmmaker Andy Milligan. Refn purchased several of Milligan's films, including prints of *Gutter

Trash* (1969), *Nightbirds* (1970), and *Fleshpot on 42nd Street* (1973), from author and fellow

collector Jimmy McDonough for $25,000.[1] Refn considered Milligan a kindred spirit,[2] another

unconventional talent making films under difficult conditions outside of institutional contexts but

doing things his own way. Milligan started off making extremely personal films such as *Vapors*

(1965) and *Depraved!* (1967), but he soon transitioned into making outrageous horror movies

like *Torture Dungeon* (1970) and *The Rats are Coming! The Werewolves are Here!* (1973)

because of their commercial potential. Yet, as with Refn's various projects, Milligan's films all

display a recognizable style regardless of genre; from sex-drenched melodramas to horrifically

gory period pieces, Milligan's films are all tawdry, poorly acted, and overly talky affairs marked

by dark humor, warped sexuality, and unsettling atmosphere. Upon acquiring the Milligan prints,

Refn worked with both the British Film Institute and the folks at Something Weird Video[3] to

restore and exhibit the films.[4]

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[1] Nicolas Winding Refn, "My Obsession with Andy Milligan's Cult Horror Movies," last modified June 14, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2012/jun/14/obsession-andy-milligan-cult-movies.

[2] Ibid.

[3] An American film distribution company based in Seattle, Washington, specializing in exploitation cinema.

[4] Refn, "My Obsession with Andy Milligan."

Three years later, in 2015, Refn teamed with FAB Press to publish *The Act of Seeing*,[5] a

coffee table book that gathers images of Refn's collection of vintage exploitation film posters

(aka one-sheets[6]), most of which were likewise purchased from McDonough.[7] According to

Refn, he purchased the posters because, the more he looked at them, the less he considered them

"musty artifacts" or "redundant pieces of paper featuring some unusual artwork, questionable

claims, and outrageous promises." Instead, he saw them as "a time machine into a world of

filmmaking that has to date mainly been documented from a romantic angle through rose-tinted

glasses."[8] *The Act of Seeing* contains images of more than three hundred rare American film

posters advertising such movies as *The Twisted Sex* (Sande N. Johnson, 1966), *Spiked Heels and

Black Nylons* (Whit Boyd, 1967), *Obscene House* (Henry Blake, 1969), *Alice in Acidland* (Donn

Greer, 1969), *Torture Me, Kiss Me* (David R. Friedberg, 1970), and *Zero in and Scream* (Lee

Frost, 1971).

Refn tasked film critic Alan Jones with writing the text for each entry,[9] all with the

purpose of informing readers about these little-known films. This assignment proved more

difficult than initially anticipated, given that roughly 60 percent of the films included in *The Act

of Seeing* are "ultra-rare, because they're so obscure."[10] This obscurity, along with the fact that

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[5] The book's title is likely a reference to the short film *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (Stan Brakhage, 1971), in which forensic pathologists conduct autopsies of corpses in a morgue.

[6] The term "one-sheet" refers to the standard U.S. sized 27"x41" movie poster, usually printed on paper stock.

[7] According to Refn, McDonough (co-creator of the exploitation fanzine *Sleazoid Express* and biographer of both Milligan and his fellow trash cinema icon Russ Meyer) accumulated the collection of one-sheets by stealing them from various grindhouse cinemas located along New York's infamous 42nd Street. See Nicolas Winding Refn and Alan Jones, *The Act of Seeing* (Godalming: FAB Press, 2015).

[8] Ibid.

[9] Jones is the founder of Film 4 Frightfest, the United Kingdom's premier horror film festival, and author of books such as *The Rough Guide to Horror Movies* (2005) and *Dario Argento: The Man, the Myths, the Magic* (2012).

[10] Drew Fortune, "Director Nicolas Winding Refn on His Obsession with Exploitation Films," last modified September 16, 2015, https://www.avclub.com/director-nicolas-winding-refn-on-his-obsession-with-exp-1798284411.

many of the people involved in the productions either worked under pseudonyms or were complete unknowns, meant that it took Jones "more than a year to basically gather information about the films."[11]

Over time, Refn's collection of film prints ballooned to over 200 titles, including *Night Tide* (Curtis Harrington, 1961), *Olga's House of Shame* (Joseph P. Mawra, 1964), *Chained Girls* (Joseph P. Mawra, 1965), *The Nest of the Cuckoo Birds* (Bert Williams, 1965), *Cottonpickin' Chickenpickers* (Larry E. Jackson. 1967), and *The Burning Hell* (Ron Ormond, 1974). Most of these films were produced at the margins or outside the confines of the Hollywood system, instead emerging out of regional filmmaking industries based in states such as Florida, Ohio, and Mississippi. Refn wanted not only to restore and preserve these films but to also make them readily available to the public. Thus, in 2017, he teamed with the programmers behind the website *Mubi.com* and the archivists at the Harvard Film Archive to launch byNWR.com, a free streaming service devoted to screening digital versions of Refn's collection of vintage exploitation movies. The site also doubles as an online archive of the films and the (sub)cultures surrounding them. Rather than a straightforward for-profit streaming service like Netflix or Hulu, Refn describes byNWR as an "unadulterated cultural expressway for the arts" intended to "inspire the youth" via highly curated selections of "subversive" films alongside themed extras that offer insight into the cultures and (often outsider) communities that produced, informed, and/or grew up around these movies.[12]

With both *The Act of Seeing* and byNWR.com, Refn uses paratexts (e.g., old exploitation films produced by others) to create a text (byNWR) that reflects and extends his brand. At the

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[11] Ibid.

[12] Peter Bradshaw, "Nicolas Winding Refn: 'Cinema is Dead. And now it is Resurrected,'" last modified July 9, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jul/09/nicolas-winding-refn-cinema-is-dead-bynwrcom.

same time, like Refn himself, both projects demonstrate a discursive dichotomy in that they use advanced digital technologies to collect, preserve, and celebrate the analog cinema of the past. This chapter explores how these curatorial efforts contribute to the construction of "Refn" by looking at how Refn's efforts to restore, preserve, and exhibit obscure exploitation films produced during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s help him make the transition from a creator to a curator who shapes the tastes of others.

DIY Heritage: Refn as Collector and Fan Curator

Refn claims to suffer from what he terms "collector mania," meaning he has devoted a significant portion of his life to collecting everything from VHS tapes to vinyl records to Japanese toys.[13] Yet film remains his foremost passion, and he has amassed numerous titles on a variety of formats including "16mm, 8mm, and some laser discs," many of which he still owns.[14] Much of his collecting revolved around acquiring movies made by filmmakers he finds interesting,[15] such as Andy Milligan and Curtis Harrington. However, Refn laments the shift to digital media, explaining that someone once gave him a hard drive with 93,000 songs on it, meaning he could "live an entire lifetime never having to hear the same song twice."[16] Upon receiving this gift, Refn realized that it is nigh impossible to "collect something at that level,"[17] largely because analog media such as VHS tapes and vinyl albums take up far more physical storage space than digital media.

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[13] Aaron Hills, "Nicolas Winding Refn Made a Book Out of His Collection of Gorgeously Schlocky Movie Posters," last modified October 18, 2015, https://www.vice.com/en/article/9bgjx5/talking-sexploitation-cinema-and-sleazy-vintage-posters-with-nicolas-winding-refn-1017.

[14] Fortune, "Refn on Exploitation Films."

[15] Hills, "Refn Made a Book."

[16] Ibid.

[17] Fortune, "Refn on Exploitation Films."

More importantly, perhaps, Refn contends that the relatively easy accessibility of digital media has removed the excitement of the hunt, explaining that with the advent of the internet "most films were just uploaded" and thus "there was never joy" in obtaining them, whereas "VHS was much more of a hunter's ground." In Refn's words, the digital revolution "made everything so extremely accessible" that collectors are now "pushed toward the obscurities."[18] For Refn, these obscurities take the form of seedy exploitation films such as *Savage Bride* aka *Caïn, aventures des mers exotiques* (Leon Poirier, 1930) and *The Witch* (Roland af Hällstrom, 1952), movies that are mostly forgotten by the public at large.

Refn has said that he often grows bored with hoarding things, stating "I've collected numerous things in my life, but then I usually tire after a couple of years and don't know what to do with it."[19] Yet he knew exactly what to do with his extensive collections of exploitation film prints and posters: launch a branded streaming service and publish a high-end coffee-table book, respectively. With byNWR and *The Act of Seeing*, Refn makes the leap from collector to curator. More specifically, Refn should be considered a fan curator, which Derek Kompare defines as "more established fans (usually, though not always, older) with deeper knowledge of, and access to, the fandom and its texts."[20] Thanks to his wealth and broad knowledge of exploitation cinema (though Refn insists he is "not a walking encyclopedia of film"[21]), Refn aligns with this definition in that he can afford to immerse himself in the culture of exploitation cinema by spending large sums on movie posters and film prints. He also demonstrates the idea that fan curators "*organize their expertise in service of bringing new people into the fandom*, or at least

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Hills, "Refn Made a Book."

[20] Derek Kompare, "Fan Curators and the Gateways into Fandom," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, eds. Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (New York: Routledge, 2018), 107.

[21] Hills, "Refn Made a Book."

their particular corner of it."[22] As Kompare observes, much like "a curated museum exhibit affects ways in which visitors understand the objects displayed, curated fan experiences shape how fans understand and engage with a text and fandom that is new to them."[23] Refn engages in such activity, producing projects devoted to informing others about obscure exploitation films and thus fueling their interest in such films.[24]

Crucially, while *The Act of Seeing* is intended to generate profits for Refn and FAB Press, neither it nor byNWR operate as marketing paratexts designed to "convert fan interest into fan economic consumption."[25] If this were the case, byNWR would require users to pay a monthly or yearly subscription fee to access the films and their accompanying supplementary materials. Rather these projects are meant to introduce others to these films and, in the process, create a sort of alternative canon that exists alongside and in opposition to established cinematic canons and histories. Here Refn engages in what Kompare considers the most basic form of fan curation, suggested canon, which involves "simply *suggesting, loaning, copying, or gifting* additional material to interested fans."[26] Both byNWR and *The Act of Seeing* are examples of what Kompare terms encyclopedic media, or "curated descriptions of a fandom's objects."[27] By collecting, curating, explaining, and presenting films such as *Ride a Wild Stud* (Oliver Drake, 1969) and *Les démons* (Jesús Franco), Refn helps foster a fandom for these films.

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[22] Kompare, 107, emphasis in original.

[23] Ibid., 108.

[24] While beyond the scope of the current project, Refn has also branched into "vinyl and music curation with Milan Records." In 2014, the label launched the Nicolas Winding Refn Presents series, which includes "a remastered version of the hard-to-find *Bronson* soundtrack," Disasterpiece's score for *It Follows*, and the soundtrack of Park Chan-Wook's Oldboy, among others. For more see Tasha Robinson, "The Most Important Films in Nicolas Winding Refn's Path from *Pusher* to the Present," last modified June 15, 2015, https://thedissolve.com/features/5-10-15-20/1065-the-most-important-films-in-nicolas-winding-refns-/.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., emphasis in original.

[27] Ibid., 109.

Both byNWR and *The Act of Seeing* exist at the intersection of museum (an institution devoted to acquiring, conserving, studying, exhibiting, and interpreting objects considered historically, scientifically, and/or artistically significant) and fan wiki (a collaborative website maintained by fans who use it to document the object of their fandom). Furthermore, Refn's curatorial efforts relate to the political economy of digital technologies such as the internet, which allows anyone with access to act as a curator, thereby removing power from the hands of traditional gatekeepers.

Though Refn lacks the same "formal training or background in archiving or museology" as professionals working within established heritage institutions,[28] he nevertheless works to "fill an institutional void of preservation and remembrance."[29] In this case, Refn sets out to preserve and remember low-budget regional exploitation films and subcultures. byNWR and *The Act of Seeing* thus recall "do-it-yourself heritage institutions," or informal amateur operations overseen by heritage enthusiasts who work to identify "gaps (amplified by limited funding and resources) in the collecting practices of mainstream institutions."[30] Sarah Baker observes that DIY heritage institutions share "similar goals to national institutions with regard to preservation, collection, accessibility and the national interest."

Yet these amateur organizations differ in that they "aim to collect, document, preserve and display heritage which might otherwise be beyond the remit of the mainstream heritage sector."[31] Buck Clifford Rosenberg argues that DIY heritage institutions arose due to "the

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[28] Amanda Brandellero et. al., "Valuing Popular Music Heritage: Exploring Amateur and Fan-Based Preservation Practices in Museums and Archives in the Netherlands," in *Preserving Popular Music Heritage: Do-it-Yourself, Do-it-Together*, ed. Sarah Baker (New York: Routledge, 2015), 35.

[29] Amanda Brandellero and Suzanne Jansen, "Popular Music as Cultural Heritage: Scoping Out the Field of Practice," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 20, no. 3 (2014): 237.

[30] Zelmarie Cantillon and Sarah Baker, "Career Volunteering as Good Work in Do-it-Yourself Heritage Institutions: A Serious Leisure Perspective," *Journal of Sociology* 56, no. 3 (2020): 356.

[31] Ibid.

privatized do-it-yourself society engendered by neoliberalism and globalization in late modernity."[32] Regardless of the root causes, Refn performs a similar function with byNWR and *The Act of Seeing*, both of which collect, preserve, and exhibit subcultural heritage objects sometimes deemed unworthy of such treatment by mainstream institutions.

Given Refn's fandom surrounding low-budget exploitation films such as *My Body Hungers* (Joseph W. Sarno, 1967) and *The X-Rated Supermarket* (Paul Roberts, 1972), both byNWR and *The Act of Seeing* align with the concept of fan-run museums, which grow out of subcultural networks and represent central spaces for community building.[33] Moreover, as Philipp Dominik Keidl notes, fan-run museums tend to preserve and exhibit "objects that are often sidelined by state- and industry-run film and media heritage institutions and exhibition projects."[34] In Refn's case, these objects take the form of ultra-low-budget regionally produced exploitation films, which are sometimes deemed disposable, especially when compared to other films more widely recognized as "classic" or "important" by mainstream heritage organizations.

Yet byNWR and *Act of Seeing* also demonstrate what Dorus Hoebink et al. have termed the "the museumification of fan culture,"[35] which tends to downplay

> fans' individual values, meanings, and interpretations in favor of legitimizing popular culture through a more objective and universal contextualization beyond fandom to justify a museum on popular culture.[36]

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[32] Buck Clifford Rosenberg, "The Our House DIY Club: Amateurs, Leisure Knowledge and Lifestyle Media," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 2 (2011): 174.

[33] Benjamin Woo, *Getting a Life: The Social Worlds of Geek Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018), 132.

[34] Philipp Dominik Keidl, "The Labor of Curating: Fandom, Museums, and the Value of Fan Heritage," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 54, no. 2 (2021): 408.

[35] Dorus Hoebink et. al., "Exhibiting Fandom: A Museological Perspective," *Materiality and Object-Oriented Fandom*, special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* 16 (2014), accessed August 9, 2023, https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0529.

[36] Keidl, 410

Both byNWR and *The Act of Seeing* align with this idea as they each present trash films as high

art via classy presentation and thoughtful supplemental materials, both of which help to

contextualize and therefore legitimize what some might dismiss as low-art objects.

According to Refn, when "these films were produced and directed, they were considered

by the general public to be pure exploitation."[37] Now, however, "the perception of these films

has changed" and what was once "considered trash and worthless has become historical and

treasured."[38] As Refn explains, genre has "become a new way of artistic expression that [is]

accepted by the mainstream, where before it was always an underground thing."[39] He likens this

development to the perception of retro clothes and pop cinema, explaining that several home

video labels devoted to cult media (e.g., Vinegar Syndrome, Arrow Video, Severin Films)

currently flourish because "interest [returned] to collect again, trying to seek the past like we do

with music or design."[40] This seemingly newfound appreciation for genre has also resulted in the

rise of preservation organizations such as the American Genre Film Archive (AGFA), a non-

profit dedicated to "preserve the legacy of genre movies through collection, conservation, and

distribution."[41] For Refn, this change resembles "the Warhol soup-can trick. You take something

that was throwaway trash 50 years ago, but you re-present it, and it suddenly becomes high

culture."[42]

Of course, this idea could represent another example of Refn's inclination toward

trolling, which sees him cite films like *Mondo Weirdo* aka *Follow That Skirt* (Richard W.

Bomont, 1965) and *Diary of a Swinger* (John Amero and Lem Amero) as examples of high art

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[37] Refn and Jones, *The Act of Seeing*.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Hills, "Refn Made a Book."
[40] Ibid.
[41] "About AGFA," accessed September 8, 2023, https://www.americangenrefilm.com/about-agfa/.
[42] Ibid.

while admitting that this perception relies solely on presenting them as such. Regardless, both byNWR and *Act of Seeing* combine elements of both the fan-museum and traditional heritage institution, as they seek to preserve and celebrate subcultural films frequently sidelined by conventional institutions while simultaneously setting out to legitimize these films as objects worthy of preservation. More importantly, perhaps, the two projects evince a "strong curatorial imprint . . . with clearly stated aims and objectives,"[43] achieved largely through an association with Refn's brand.

The next section considers how these two projects discursively draw upon and contribute to the construction of Refn's branded persona, "Refn," primarily via positioning the films chosen for inclusion as subversive works that challenge audience expectations. The section also considers how these two projects utilize nostalgia to challenge modern-day monoculture even as they exist within a contemporary mediascape marked by the rise of streaming video technologies.

The Act of Seeing **and byNWR**

Both *The Act of Seeing* and byNWR celebrate low-budget exploitation films produced between the 1960s and the 1980s, highlighting such titles as *Hot Thrills, Warm Chills* (Dale Berry, 1967), *The Girls on F Street* (Saul Resnick, 1966), and *Emerald Cities* (Rick Schmidt, 1983). While *The Act of Seeing* emerged from the world of traditional publishing, it nevertheless uses modern computer-assisted scanning technologies to capture and present high-quality images of the one-sheets. Likewise, byNWR utilizes contemporary digitization techniques and streaming video technologies to grant users access to seemingly disreputable films produced long before

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[43] Brandellero et al., 35.

the advent of such tools. Like these projects, Refn himself often seems to be engaged in a

dialogue with the past, though one that is likewise fraught with contradictions. He claims to have

launched byNWR to not only share his trove of vintage exploitation films with others, but also to

introduce users to a new image of the past that in turn allows them to imagine an anarchic future

in which people can speak their minds free from corporate oversight.[44] Refn's discourse about a

future built on the tenets of "free speech and free access"[45] thus echoes billionaire industrialist

and self-described "free speech absolutist"[46] Elon Musk's rhetoric regarding his intentions for

the microblogging platform Twitter (recently rebranded X), which Musk purchased in late 2022

for a reported $44 billion.[47] This link between Refn and Musk becomes significant when

considering that both men hold reputations among fans and detractors alike as trolls and

disruptors.

Yet, even as Refn uses his platform to commemorate the crude exploitation cinema of the

past while simultaneously denouncing the corporate art of the present moment,[48] he also

expresses skepticism about looking backward. He observes that "people of my generation – I'm

47 – want tangible tokens of mortality to cling to."[49] In many ways, byNWR is an outgrowth of

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[44] See Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

[46] See Michel Martin, "Elon Musk calls himself a free speech absolutist. What could Twitter look like under his leadership?" last modified October 8, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/10/08/1127689351/elon-musk-calls-himself-a-free-speech-absolutist-what-could-twitter-look-like-un.

[47] Kate Conger and Lauren Hirsch, "Elon Musk Completes $44 Billion Deal to Own Twitter," last modified October 27, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/27/technology/elon-musk-twitter-deal-complete.html.

[48] According to Jerome Christensen, "Corporate art always counts as a tool of corporate strategy – that is, as one of a set of actions taken to attain competitive advantage which are coordinated and implemented by executives, which can successfully claim the authority to interpret the intent of the corporation and project a policy that will advance its particular interests, whether financial, social, cultural, or political." For Christensen, this idea applies equally to "General Motors's commissioning of massive murals painted by Diego Rivera in the courtyard of the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1932 or [Warner Bros.]' hiring of Howard Hawks to direct *Scarface* the same year." For more see Jerome Christensen, "America's Corporate Art: The Studio Authorship of Hollywood Motion Pictures," in *Film Theory & Criticism*, 8th ed., eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 464.

[49] Nicolas Winding Refn, "Our Times Need Sex, Horror, and Melodrama," last modified July 4, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jul/04/nicolas-winding-refn-apocalyptic-times-cult-movies-can-save-us-bynwr.

this compulsion to hold on to the past, as the site highlights little-known exploitation films and provides information on the regional cultures and the marginalized (though mostly white, male, cisgendered, and heterosexual) individuals and communities that produced them. byNWR fuels nostalgia for both a bygone era and various outmoded institutions. As film critic Keith Phipps notes, the site

> makes a case for several lost or dying institutions at once: the low-budget exploitation film, of course, but also the obsessively focused zine, the Web 1.0-era online magazine, and the video-store clerk willing to recommend something truly unusual to jaded viewers who think they've seen it all.[50]

At the same time, even as byNWR seeks to recapture elements of the analog past, Refn also dismisses nostalgia as "artistic suicide," imploring others to "accept the fact that everything disintegrates in your hands."[51] This rhetoric represents yet another example of the discursive dichotomy that fuels Refn's mediated persona, "Refn," which honors the past while utilizing contemporary technologies and tactics to produce or celebrate works that simultaneously resemble and refute the cinema of conglomerate Hollywood.

Refn's rhetoric about celebrating the past while looking to the future recalls cultural theorist Svetlana Boym's concept of reflective nostalgia. According to Boym, there exist two types of nostalgia: the restorative and the reflective.[52] Restorative nostalgia "does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition" and thus lies "at the core of recent national and religious revivals."[53] Such revivals include the rise of Trumpism ("Make America Great Again!") or the religious Right's repeal of Roe v. Wade. Restorative nostalgia revolves around

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[50] Keith Phipps, "Nicolas Winding Refn's New Streaming Service Tries to Shape a Better Future out of a Sleazy Past," last modified August 9, 2018, https://www.theverge.com/2018/8/9/17661216/nicolas-winding-refn-streaming-service-bynwr-launch-better-future-grindhouse-cinema.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), XVIII.
[53] Ibid.

the desire to relive moments from the past by rebuilding them with modern elements. As Boym writes, this type of nostalgia "stresses *nostos* [i.e., a homecoming or return] and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home."[54] Examples of restorative nostalgia within popular culture include such films as *Beauty and the Beast* (Bill Condon, 2017) or *The Lion King* (Jon Favreau, 2019), which utilize contemporary filmmaking techniques and sociocultural sensibilities to reconstruct beloved children's films of the (recent) past. This idea could also apply to both *The Act of Seeing* and byNWR, which both use advanced digital technologies to capture moments from the past.

Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, balances a longing for the past with an effort to understand how previous events influence both the present and the future. Boym argues that reflective nostalgia "thrives in algia, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironic, desperately."[55] Reflective nostalgia also "calls [the truth] into doubt," preferring instead to explore "ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones."[56] It presents "an ethical and creative challenge" as opposed to "midnight melancholias."[57] Refn draws upon reflective nostalgia when making boastful pronouncements about introducing others to a new idea of the past aimed at fostering a chaotic future.[58] Through reflective nostalgia, byNWR and, to a lesser extent, *The Act of Seeing* each nurture a wistful longing for the past, but one that shines a light on subcultural narratives that cast doubt on the prevailing truth(s) surrounding that past. As such, both *The Act of Seeing* and byNWR could potentially inspire

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[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] See Refn, "Sex, Horror, and Melodrama."

users to, as Phipps suggests, "reshape the future, once they delve into film's half-forgotten, disreputable past."[59]

Refn's impetus to create *The Act of Seeing* grew out of a realization that the posters he had collected were historical artifacts of a romanticized era, one in which "the key players are dead or too old to remember."[60] In his introduction to the book, Refn describes *The Act of Seeing* as "a personal aesthetic expression, an album of poster images artfully put together to represent a fantasy world I can never now experience."[61] He explains that his mother forbade him from visiting New York's infamous 42nd Street, site of several dodgy grindhouses and porn theaters, because she considered it a "a dangerous and scary place."[62] Yet this prohibition only served to make the location "even more exciting and alluring" for the young Refn.[63] Upon acquiring his collection of posters, Refn declares that he could "envision what it must have been like to be a compulsive cinemagoer during this thrilling time, then enter that world vicariously in [his] over-active imagination through [his] prized items."[64] Therefore, he decided "to make the most expensive poster book ever produced by anyone," claiming to have spent $100,000 to produce a book of "posters from films no one has ever heard of."[65]

The process of creating *The Act of Seeing* involved scanning the 500 posters that Refn owned and then selecting 250 titles to include in the book.[66] Refn then decided he wanted to include more images, which entailed searching online for additional posters.[67] From there, Refn worked to curate the images, searching for "the order of what would work together, kind of like

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[59] Phipps, "Refn's new streaming service."
[60] Fortune, "Refn on Exploitation Films."
[61] Refn and Jones, *The Act of Seeing*.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Fortune, "Refn on Exploitation Films."
[66] Hills, "Refn Made a Book."
[67] Ibid.

making a movie and film editing."[68] For Refn, each image "represented an emotion," and this feeling helped him to develop "a subconscious or subliminal narrative" regarding the placement of the posters.[69] Refn notes that he wanted to open *The Act of Seeing* with the poster for *The Girl Behind the Curtain* (1953), which documents the legendary stripper Lili St. Cyr performing the titular routine. The book would thus open with a "woman undressing in a private moment to be photographed,"[70] establishing the template for what readers could expect from the rest of the volume. This image is followed by the poster for the existential sci-fi flick *Conquest of Space* (Byron Haskin, 1955), which follows an international group of astronauts as they wrestle with questions of morality and faith during the first manned mission to Mars. Refn explains that he wanted this juxtaposition of images to leave readers feel with "no idea what's going to happen on the next page because I'm already going against what I present, the same way I do my films."[71] In this way, *The Act of Seeing* aligns with Refn's rebellious persona, which revolves primarily around challenging or subverting audience expectations.

At the same time, this theme of subverting expectations extends to the posters featured in *The Act of Seeing*. As Refn explains, "these posters promise things they would never live up to."[72] Truly, posters for films such as *The Old Man's Bride* (George Gunter, 1967) and *The Muthers* (Donald A. Davis, 1968) tended to suggest "the impossible, seeing something you would never otherwise have seen" via an emphasis on "sex and violence in one way or

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[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.

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another."[73] They often accomplished this via "brilliant marketing schemes hearkening back to the ballyhoo techniques used in vaudeville and the sideshows of the early twentieth century."[74]

Beth Kattelman notes that the hyperbolic advertising of the nineteenth century "was easily adapted to film promotion when that medium began to replace live performance as the most popular form of entertainment in the early twentieth century."[75] She explains that advertisers quickly learned that by emphasizing "the most outrageous or repulsive aspects of a film," they could craft "ad campaigns that compelled audiences to flock to the theatres."[76] Kattelman points to *The Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972), *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), and Refn's beloved *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) as examples of films that not only used exploitation marketing strategies effectively but also delivered on their promises of presenting something new "in terms of subject matter, special effects and/or graphic violence."[77]

Of course, many of the films advertised in this way fail to deliver on their promises of explicit material the likes of which viewers have never seen.[78] Instead they offered audiences what David Church refers to as "generically formulaic films."[79] According to Church, exploitation advertising routinely highlighted "the most exploitable elements of films that might otherwise disappoint if viewed as a whole, while creating almost surreally incongruous mixes of sex, violence, and sensationalism."[80] Refn echoes this idea when he explains that there "was a

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[73] Mekado Murphy, "Nicolas Winding Refn on 'The Act of Seeing,'" last modified September 25, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/25/movies/25nicolas-winding-refn.html.
[74] Beth Kattelman, "'We Dare You to See This!': Ballyhoo and the 1970s Horror Film," *Horror Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011): 61.
[75] Ibid., 62.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid., 64.
[78] Hills, "Refn Made a Book."
[79] David Church, *Grindhouse Nostalgia: Memory, Home Video, and Exploitation Film Fandom* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 100.
[80] Ibid.

carny sensibility to the promises [the one-sheets] made." This idea also informs "Refn," which is all about promising something only to subvert audience expectations (e.g., *Drive* failing to deliver on its promise of abundant car chase action). Ultimately, the one-sheets included in *The Act of Seeing* advertised films that were, according to Refn, "made with a distinct aesthetic approach, no matter how awkwardly realized, and on a fetishized basis, which the subsequent campaigns completely reflected."[81] As such, films like *Malamondo* (Paolo Cavara, 1964) and *Sweet Trash* (John Hayes, 1970) align with Refn's own works, which are also highly aestheticized and fetishistic affairs.

According to the publisher's description, *The Act of Seeing* represents the first offering from the "new NWR imprint from FAB Press, a collaboration with cinema's most exciting contemporary talent, Nicolas Winding Refn." Under Refn's guidance, the imprint will endeavor to "produce books that focus on iconic rebels in the entertainment industry, presenting to the world high-end art books of the finest possible quality." With this description, both *The Act of Seeing* and the NWR imprint contribute to the construction of Refn's branded persona, which positions him as a similarly rebellious filmmaker who praises yesterday's trash while bemoaning the rise of conglomerate Hollywood, all with the intent of inspiring others to imagine both a new conception of culture and a radically unhinged future. *The Act of Seeing* debuted in Austin at Fantastic Fest, an event that "supplements its anarchic screenings with boxing, nerd-rap competitions, machine guns, and a 32-member satanic drum band." The book's launch thereby replicated the sort of ballyhoo that accompanied many of the films it celebrates within its pages, as well as others featured on the byNWR streaming site, which also showcases sleazy

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[81] Refn and Jones, *The Act of Seeing*.

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exploitation films produced outside of Hollywood. The site also launched to a niche audience likely comprised of Refn's most ardent fans.

On the surface, byNWR recalls other streaming sites such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney Plus, or Max. As discussed in Chapter 2, streaming sites operate as for-profit enterprises that seek to generate revenue via monthly or yearly subscriptions in exchange for offering users access to digital media objects such as digitized and/or cloud-based versions of films, television shows, or video games. Such services aim to attract new subscribers and retain existing subscribers by "offering engaging content – especially, original programs that cannot be found elsewhere."[82] Netflix helped pioneer this industry when it launched its streaming video service in January 2007.

Though not the first global TV service or digital platform (CNN, MTV, Al Jazeera, and YouTube all preceded it), Netflix is presently the world's leading subscription-based digital-video-on-demand service, accessible in over 130 countries.[83] Ramon Lobato notes that Netflix and other streaming video services have disrupted and/or transformed traditional modes of media production and distribution. He writes:

> internet distribution of television content changes the fundamental logics through which television travels, introducing new mobilities into the system, adding another layer to the existing palimpsest of broadcast, cable, and satellite distribution. Internet television does not replace legacy television in a straightforward way; instead, it adds new complexity to the existing geography of distribution.[84]

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[82] Jeong-Suk Joo, "Netflix and Changes in the Hollywood Film Industry," *Journal of Industrial Convergence* 18, no. 5 (2020): 37.

[83] Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 11.

[84] Ibid., 5.

While Lobato focused his analysis on television content, his argument easily applies to other

media such as films and video games, both of which are offered by the multitude of for-profit

streaming sites that presently exist.

The rise of streaming sites like Netflix or byNWR coincided with what Anne Helmond

terms the "the platformization of the web," or the "rise of the platform as the dominant

infrastructural and economic model of the social web and the consequences of the expansion of

social media platforms into other spaces online."[85] According to Helmond, websites "have

historically enabled their programmability through the exchange of data, content, and

functionality with third parties" by separating "content and presentation," modularizing content

and features," and interfacing with databases."[86] Platforms, meanwhile, "enact their

programmability to decentralize data production and recentralize data collection," allowing them

to "extend into the web and to employ these extensions to format external web data."[87]

Programmers can therefore format data "to fit their economic interest through the

commodification of user activities and web and app content."[88] While Helmond was specifically

looking at the computational structures of social media sites such as Facebook – which grant

power to users to decide what is important enough to be placed online – she nevertheless notes

that platformization provides "a technological framework for others to build on, geared toward

connecting to and thriving on other websites, apps and their data."[89] This idea could apply to

streaming sites such as Netflix or byNWR.

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[85] Anne Helmond, "The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready," *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2 (2015): 5.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid., 8.
[89] Ibid.

Amanda Lotz, however, prefers to use the term "portals" when discussing streaming sites, as it helps to "distinguish the crucial intermediary services that collect, curate, and distribute television programming via internet distribution."[90] Lobato clarifies this distinction, writing, "In new media and internet studies, platforms are commonly defined as large-scale online systems premised on user interaction and user-generated content."[91] The term portals, on the other hand, refers to closed systems that operate mainly on proprietary software and use professionally produced content to attract users. In his exhaustive study of Netflix and the globalized nature of digital distribution, Lobato writes, "Netflix is closed, library-like, professional; a portal rather than a platform; a walled garden rather than an open marketplace."[92] Michael Wolff picks up this thread, arguing that Netflix more closely resembles TV due to prioritizing established narrative structures, aesthetics, and experiences over the interactive affordances offered by internet media.[93]

Whether platforms or portals, streaming sites have contributed to the evolution and intensification of the culture industry. For Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, all components of mass culture, from print to radio to film, psychologically dominate the masses and maintain existing capitalist power structures by suppressing communication of alternative ideas.[94] According to Horkheimer and Adorno, this culture industry produces only disposable, interchangeable rubbish intended to generate profit rather than worthwhile art aimed at nourishing the soul.[95] For Horkheimer and Adorno, those in positions of power use the products

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[90] Amanda Lotz, *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-Distributed Television* (Ann Arbor: Maize Books, 2017), 8.

[91] Lobato, 36.

[92] Ibid., 37.

[93] Michael Wolff, *Television is the New Television* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 93-94.

[94] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94-96.

[95] Ibid.

of the culture industry to manipulate consumers by showing them the futility of resistance and the value of conformity within a capitalist society.[96] As such, they consider capitalism a destructive force that must be dismantled. Refn echoes these ideas when he declares that he launched byNWR to counter a monolithic culture industry controlled by a handful of multinational media conglomerates.

As Sam Caslin notes, however, the rapid advancement of digital communication technologies capable of diffusing mass entertainment across platforms and immersing consumers in media have only increased the capitalist culture industry's reach during the early years of the twenty-first century.[97] Caslin observes that such technologies immerse consumers within a fantasy world very different from their own,[98] thereby ensuring they "venerate the symbolic aspects of products rather than asking important questions about their use value and how they are produced."[99] The technologies that intensified the culture industry's influence include those that power streaming platforms such as byNWR, from search algorithms to streaming video.

Streaming digital video services such as Netflix have increased the reach of both the culture industry and neoliberal capitalism by providing subscribers with a wide selection of content that can be accessed via the push of a button, so long as users pay a monthly or yearly fee for the privilege. Charles Andrew Prusik writes that "the widespread introduction of computers and digital media in the sphere of production in the 1970s and 1980s has reified consciousness in a manner that reflects the integrated character of neoliberal capitalism."[100] Prusik observes that "individuals today are socialized to relate to each other through increasingly

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[96] Ibid., 120-24.
[97] Sam Caslin, "Compliance Fiction: Adorno and Horkheimer's 'Culture Industry' Thesis in a Multimedia Age," *Fast Capitalism* 2, no. 2 (2007): 85.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., 92.
[100] Charles Andrew Prusik, *Adorno and Neoliberalism: The Critique of Exchange Society* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 145.

integrated and abstract connections" such as "monopolistic platforms that 'mine' users' private data" and "sell manufactured news cycles," all while the "application of data analytics targets users with increasingly tailored advertisements."[101] In other words, within the twenty-first century neoliberal economy, consumers have become the primary product, their personal information traded via digital platforms designed to transform engagement into profit.

Prusik's argument recalls Adorno's discussion regarding life within the sphere of consumption that defines late-stage Capitalism. According to Adorno, an industrial society built on a consumer economy renders private life nonexistent while simultaneously subjugating public life entirely to the processes of production.[102] Within this context, "Private life asserts itself unduly, hectically, vampire-like, trying convulsively, because it really no longer exists, to prove it is alive. Public life is reduced to an unspoken oath of allegiance to the platform."[103] Here, Adorno refers to the dehumanizing effects of industrialization, but his ideas easily apply to life in the increasingly digitized, mediated, and surveilled twenty-first century. Today, citizens willingly surrender their privacy to digital applications and platforms that gather user data for the purposes of targeted advertising, which has the effect of intensifying the micro-segmentation of culture and sowing division (or at least a perception of division) between individuals and groups.

With byNWR, Refn endeavors to discursively capitalize on such division via a rhetoric that pits "mass" (i.e., popular) culture against "outsider" (i.e., trash) culture. As film critic Keith Phipps writes, "there isn't much good taste to be found" in the sleazy exploitation films available via byNWR but they nevertheless demonstrate "an extraordinary amount of creativity."[104] The

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[101] Ibid.
[102] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1974), 33.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Keith Phipps, "Refn's New Streaming Service."

films streaming on byNWR – which include such regionally produced quickies as *Eegah* (Arch Hall Sr., 1962) and *Wild Guitar* (Ray Dennis Steckler, 1962) – all fall under the umbrella of "grindhouse fare."[105] Such films were frequently produced by filmmakers who demonstrated "a sensibility that, by design or otherwise, wouldn't find a home in the era's respectable theaters."[106] Moreover, these films tended to include "images and moments of creative daring and breathtaking oddness that would never be seen elsewhere," such as in Hollywood films aimed at the broadest possible audience.[107] Overall, as Phipps suggests, the films available on byNWR differ from those produced by the major studios in that the former are daring, dangerous, and exciting while the latter are safe, sanitized, and boring.

Church, however, contends that "[grindhouse theaters] and Hollywood were never mutually exclusive, despite the discourses that often promoted them as such."[108] Yet he also notes that the filmmakers and exhibitors who dealt in grindhouse films often expressed "skepticism toward 'mainstream' Hollywood" and intentionally endeavored to establish their works as different from those produced by the major studios.[109] For instance, grindhouse operators frequently

> aimed at differentiation from studio-owned theaters (even as they capitalized on subsequent-run Hollywood films), whether by reviving violent, male-oriented films, by treating their creeping decrepitude as a positive mark of cultural distinction, or by playing exploitative films largely unavailable elsewhere.[110]

Meanwhile, as Church explains, the term "grindhouse film" eventually came to suggest "aesthetic, moral, and economic poverty,"[111] while Hollywood product connoted more reputable

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[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid.
[108] David Church, "From Exhibition to Genre: The Case of Grindhouse Films," *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 4 (2011): 25.
[109] Ibid., 13.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid., 20.

entertainment. Eric Schaefer explains that this notion arose largely because Hollywood positioned its public image against the disreputability of exploitation films while exploitation filmmakers embraced their status as cinematic outsiders.[112]

With his various works, Refn seeks to capitalize on this perceived division between the multiplex and the grindhouse. In interviews and essays, Refn dismisses contemporary mass culture as safe, homogenized, and boring while simultaneously exalting trash cinema as dynamic, creative, and exciting. Here, Refn claims that squalid cult films such as *Santo vs. the Evil Brain* (Joselito Rodríguez, 1961) and *Orgy of the Dead* (Stephen C. Apostolof, 1965) are more important than globally popular and financially successful films like *Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens* (J. J. Abrams, 2015) or *Avengers: Endgame* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2019). In many ways, Refn's ideology echoes Adorno's declaration that it "is as old a component of bourgeois ideology that each individual, in his particular interest considers himself better than all others."[113] Refn's interest gravitates toward obscure, low-budget, independently produced, regional genre films "made by people who had no ideas of what a film was supposed to be, and feel more as if they were made for the people at the bar on the corner or the cafeteria down the street than for Americans at large."[114] For Refn, such films are preferable to the blockbuster franchise films that currently dominate multiplex screens around the world.

Just as Netflix disrupted the home video and filmmaking industries, byNWR appears to disrupt the capitalist model of streaming services such as Netflix. Through his rhetoric, Refn positions byNWR as an alternative to the neoliberal capitalist ideologies of for-profit streaming services. Streaming technologies and the proprietary digital platforms that utilize them help to tilt

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[112] Eric Schaefer, *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!" A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 2-6, 39, 96-105, 156.
[113] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 27.
[114] Refn, "Sex, Horror, and Melodrama."

power further into the hands of the large multinational media conglomerates that own the most popular intellectual properties. Streaming digital video platforms grant media conglomerates increased power over consumers because they allow the companies to exert more control over the flow of information. Thanks to the introduction of such technologies, entertainment companies can now more closely regulate what consumers see (as when Disney censored Darryl Hannah's naked backside in the Disney Plus version of director Ron Howard's 1983 film *Splash*[115]) or even rewrite their own histories (e.g., WWE Network producing documentaries that present sanitized, corporate-controlled versions of the company's past[116]). Thus, the rise of proprietary streaming digital video platforms has seen a significant shift in the balance of power between consumers and multinational media conglomerates.

While byNWR recalls Netflix and other streaming video services in terms of operating as a closed system that provides access to professionally produced digital content rather user-generated content, it differs in one crucial aspect: byNWR does not require users to pay a subscription fee to access its offerings.[117] Instead, the site allows users to access its library of digital versions of vintage exploitation films free of charge.[118] As such, byNWR's mission of providing grater access to films relegated to the dustbin of history proves increasingly vital

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[115] Kristen Acuna, "Disney Plus Edited 'Splash' to Hide a Character's Bare Butt and People Think it Looks Ridiculous," last modified April 13, 2020, https://www.insider.com/disney-plus-splash-edit-removes-butts-2020-4.

[116] Christopher A. Medjesky, "WWE's Corporate Documentary: Convergence, Collective Memory, and the Case Against Warrior," in *Convergent Wrestling: Participatory Culture, Transmedia Storytelling, and Intertextuality in the Squared Circle*, eds. CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson (New York: Routledge, 2019), 71-84.

[117] The site requires users to sign up for a free account to access the essays and other supplemental materials.

[118] Of course, it must be noted that byNWR exists entirely on the internet and thus requires users to have an internet connection to access the films and other materials offered by the site. Therefore, while byNWR disrupts the capitalist structures of streaming services in some ways, it also operates entirely within a capitalist system, especially in terms of how people access the site's content.

during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, especially considering current popular

discourse regarding film preservation (or the lack thereof) in the digital age.

Elizabeth Donnelly, for instance, argues that while the Internet has increased access to

numerous films produced since the dawn of cinema, many streaming platforms and their search

algorithms nevertheless tend to focus on newer popular films rather than classic movies or

smaller efforts produced at the margins of mainstream Hollywood.[119] In addition, the current

focus by streaming services on producing original in-house content leaves little room for archival

efforts. According to Donnelly:

> The stars of the current streaming ecosystem – Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu – can
> also stymie film enthusiasts. Netflix, for example, seems to be too busy these days
> expanding its own in-house offerings […] to provide much in the way of archival
> material; it's expected to spend $15 billion on original content in 2019 alone, even as it
> says farewell to some of its most-watched licensed content.[120]

She additionally observes that "Bad, computer-led curation also means that tiny films by first-

timers and others can easily disappear into the ether." Here, Donnelly echoes Kompare's

assertion that fan curation "has been ceded to algorithms which immediately suggest related

material available on their service."[121] Kompare also argues that "even robust streaming

platforms can't fully predict where a person's interests may lead them," and therefore "active

human curation and connection" are necessary to point users toward more specialized material,

whether online or off.[122] With both *The Act of Seeing* and byNWR, a site that is at once

extremely niche and highly curated by people rather than an algorithm, Refn seeks to address

some of the issues raised by both Donnelly and Kompare.

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[119] Elisabeth Donnelly, "The Film Snob's Dilemma," last modified August 2, 2019,
https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/08/netflix-hulu-amazon-streaming-film-snob.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Kompare, 109.
[122] Ibid.

Donnelly's argument aligns with the fears of film critics such as Matt Zoller Seitz, who complained on X (formerly Twitter) that "One of the greatest tricks that streaming technology ever pulled was convincing the public that 'everything' would be available, and that physical media wouldn't be necessary anymore."[123] Other users share Seitz's concerns, including one who writes that "The unspoken part of 'once you put something on the internet, it's there forever' is that is only really certain if someone thinks they can make money off it. Everything else could get switched off at any time. Preservation is of zero interest to these people."[124] Such fears seem grounded in the wake of Warner Bros. Discovery chief David Zaslav ordering the removal of 36 titles (including 200 episodes of the beloved long-running children's show *Sesame Street*) from the Max streaming service. Many film fans worry that the appearance of ever more proprietary streaming video platforms (e.g., Disney Plus, Paramount Plus, Max, etc.) means users may lose access to older films and TV shows as studios place greater emphasis on the latest big-budget blockbusters or original series. Moreover, as Kompare notes, "the catalogs of licensed and even unlicensed digital distributors are far from complete; plenty of unmigrated material exists only in physical formats or in the halfway house of offline digital files."[125] Until recently, such gaps tended to revolve around films that studios believed would fail to generate much profit, such as the lesser-known exploitation films collected and celebrated in both byNWR and *The Act of Seeing*.

As Refn observes, most of the films collected in both *The Act of Seeing* and on byNWR are "barely even half-remembered, some totally forgotten, others completely obscure or talked

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[123] Matt Zoller Seitz (@mattzollerseitz), Twitter, May 8, 2019, https://twitter.com/mattzollerseitz/status/1126087710387650560.

[124] @NoChorus, Twitter, March 18, 2019, https://twitter.com/NoChorus/status/1107675771303354368.

[125] Kompare, 109.

about in hushed tones from the yearning point of view of never being seen."[126] The next section

considers how, through acts of archiving and curations, Refn and byNWR work to discursively

create an alternative cinematic canon that challenges established film histories. This activity

reflects and extends Refn's brand, which as mentioned celebrates obscure exploitation films

while denigrating more popular cinematic fare.

byNWR, Archives, and Alternative Histories

byNWR stands as an important digital media object due to its creators' efforts to preserve

little-known exploitation films produced outside of Hollywood's borders and highlight the

(sub)cultures that produced them. As mentioned, the site allows anyone with an internet

connection to access both the films and the supplemental materials free of charge, situating

byNWR within the corporate-controlled capitalist media system while also allowing the service

and its founder to offer a discursive challenge to that very system. As Refn notes, he spent

several years buying and restoring "scores of old movies as a hobby," and he set up byNWR as a

place where he could "share them for free."[127] The people behind byNWR preserve and exhibit

obscure films in a way that recalls the efforts of boutique home video labels such as the Criterion

Collection, Arrow Video, and Vinegar Syndrome, providing numerous supplemental features

intended to help contextualize each film and thus rendering them less disposable. These features

include essays, videos, photos, and other artifacts that are either directly or tangentially related to

each film, all of which the site organizes in themed volumes.

While Refn and the team behind byNWR endeavor to restore and preserve vintage

exploitation films often deemed unworthy of such treatment, the site is not an archive in the

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[126] Refn and Jones, *The Act of Seeing*.
[127] Refn, "Sex, Horror, and Melodrama."

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traditional sense, but rather something that exists at the intersection between a streaming service

and a digital archive that exists entirely on the internet. Cheryl Mason Bolick defines digital

archives as collections of numerical data and digitized texts (i.e., images, videos, audio files,

etc.) made available via the internet.[128] She argues that the creation of digital archives altered the

act of conducting historical research because such sites allowed historians and non-traditional

researchers increased access to historical documents and resources.[129] According to Bolick,

anyone with an internet connection can access most digital archives free of charge.[130]

Bob Nicholson, meanwhile, argues that while copyright concerns and other issues have

prevented equal distribution of digital archives, most notably regarding media produced after the

nineteenth century, historians have nevertheless "responded to the emergence of online archives

with cautious enthusiasm."[131] Using newspapers and periodicals as his primary case studies,

Nicholson considers the effect of digitization on research, noting that the contents of a digital

archive undergo "a complex process of transformation" that fundamentally alters how

researchers interact with that material.[132] Both Bolick and Nicholson's ideas apply to byNWR,

which digitizes physical films and makes them easily accessible to both general audiences and

media researchers. While the Harvard Film Archive houses and restores the physical films (using

either the original negatives or, more likely, an existing print), most byNWR users will likely

never interact with these objects, instead accessing the content via the website.

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[128] Cheryl Mason Bolick, "Digital Archives: Democratizing the Doing of History," *International Journal of Social Education* 21, no. 1 (2006): 122-25.

[129] Ibid., 128.

[130] This idea raises questions about who can afford to access these resources, but these queries remain beyond the scope of the current analysis.

[131] Bob Nicholson, "The Digital Turn: Exploring the Methodological Possibilities of Digital Newspaper Archives," *Media History* 19, no. 1 (2012): 61.

[132] Ibid., 64.

At the same time, both byNWR and *The Act of Seeing* also seek to challenge established cinematic canons and prevailing ideas regarding the qualities that render a film worthy of preservation. The site also aims to keep alive outmoded sociocultural traditions by shining a light on marginalized or forgotten subcultures. Refn and his team intend to generate an alternative history of cinema by focusing on outsider perspectives and amplifying marginalized voices that exist at the edges of the mainstream canonical histories often taught in Introduction to Film courses. In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Jacques Derrida contends that archives operate as extensions of memory, and that the act of maintaining one memory often serves to concurrently bury another.[133] Derrida claims that this action also aids in modulating both the archive and the public memory of the past.[134] Moreover, in their attempts to preserve the past, all archives are at once conservative and revolutionary.

Daniel Kieckhefer elaborates on Derrida's idea, writing that the archive is "liberal in its general purpose as a repository, whose function is to serve (either society or some part thereof) and to extend the cultural patrimony."[135] At the same time, the archive's "conservative character derives from its need to maintain order, and the inherent necessity of caution and protection against outside forces, decay, and entropy."[136] All this becomes significant when considering that "leading institutions in fields like history, law, medicine, science, genealogy, and business" manage most archives and therefore define what constitutes "proper" archival materials.[137] Thus, such institutions can either reinforce existing sociocultural power structures and imbalances or challenge them depending on what materials they choose to include in the archive.

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[133] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 76.

[134] Ibid., 56-57.

[135] Daniel Kieckhefer, "archive," last updated January 17, 2018, https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/archive/.

[136] Ibid.

[137] Ibid.

byNWR performs a similar function as it seeks to preserve the past but does so in a way that challenges the sensibilities and tastes of mass culture. The site collects, restores, and preserves films informed primarily by subcultural perspectives, as well as stories and other archival materials that offer vital insight into subcultural ideologies. Phipps contends that byNWR offers users a glimpse into "film's half-forgotten, disreputable past," which he insists is comprised of "dangerous, restless places where good taste finds no footing, and creativity draws blood."[138] byNWR thus becomes a revolutionary archive in that it amplifies marginalized voices and challenges the established order exemplified by conventional ideas of cinematic history while also appearing to challenge ideas regarding what deserves to be included in the canon. In Refn's words, byNWR is intended to "inspire people to see the world a different way" and help them develop a new concept of culture.[139]

The films presented via byNWR serve as windows into (sub)cultures that tend to remain underexplored in most films produced by Hollywood and aimed at mass audiences. For instance, at launch the site featured a selection of three regionally produced films that included *The Nest of the Cuckoo Birds*, an extremely low-budget movie written, produced, directed by, and starring Bert Williams. Made in Florida, far outside the Hollywood system, the film was long thought lost until Liz Coffey of the Harvard Film Archive stumbled upon a beat-up print in a collection salvaged from The Little Art Cinema in Rockport, Massachusetts.[140] Meanwhile, the titillating sexploitation crime thriller *Hot Thrills and Warm Chills*, the second film included in the inaugural collection, was shot in and around New Orleans, Louisiana, and features a narrative that unfolds in a stream-of-consciousness manner. Rounding out the initial selection is *Shanty*

[138] Phipps, "Refn's new streaming service."
[139] See Refn, "Sex, Horror, and Melodrama."
[140] Liz Coffey, "Lost film found! The Nest of the Cuckoo Birds," last modified May 21, 2018, http://blogs.harvard.edu/hfacollections2/2018/05/21/lost-film-found-the-nest-of-the-cuckoo-birds/.

Tramp (Joseph G. Prieto, 1967), a sweaty, exploitative tale of race relations also produced in Florida.

Unlike Netflix or other for-profit streaming video services, which all rely on recommendation algorithms to drive engagement, byNWR is heavily curated by a rotating team of guest editors handpicked by Refn, including biographer Jimmy McDonagh, author Bob Mehr, and the editors of the British film magazine *Little White Lies*. Through their efforts, they develop a counter-cinematic canon comprised of films considered subversive, countercultural, or sordid according to mainstream sensibilities. At the time of writing, byNWR features 33 films arranged into thematic "volumes" intended to help users discover the films while also placing them into historical and industrial contexts. Other films available for streaming on byNWR include the gripping incest drama *Spring Night Summer Night* (Joseph L. Anderson, 1967), and the lurid *She-Man: A Story of Fixation* (Bob Clark, 1967). Nearly all the films chosen for inclusion on byNWR were produced outside or at the margins of Hollywood, and they all offer snapshots of various regional (sub)cultures and ideologies. byNWR thereby highlights cinema's capacity as an archival or indexical art. At the same time, due to financial or narrative shortcomings, the films all highlight the inequalities between mass art and fringe art, even as they shine a light on different points of view or ways of life frequently underrepresented by Hollywood films.

Of course, it must be noted that most of the films currently available on the site were made by white, cisgendered, heterosexual men and therefore one could argue about the actual difference of the perspectives on display. Yet, like the cult movies discussed by Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik, the films on byNWR all clash with "prevailing cultural mores, displaying a preference for strange topics and allegorical themes that rub against cultural sensitivities and

resist dominant politics."[141] As such, byNWR's selections demonstrate Jeffrey Sconce's concept

of paracinema as they refuse to "easily admit the textual pleasures of more 'commonplace'

audiences" while also reinforcing the idea that cinema "once held the promise of a revolutionary

popular art form."[142]

In addition to the films, byNWR offers users access to a wealth of supplemental materials

that recall the special features in physical media released by boutique label Criterion and are

intended to offer more insight into the film and its production. These include text essays,

interviews with the filmmakers, and articles that deal in similar subject matter, all serving to

shine a light on the people and (sub)cultures that produced each film. They are also intended to

maintain a record of outsider artists, fringe cultures, groups, ideologies, etc. These supplemental

materials are not always about the films or filmmakers directly, but rather focus on the

(sub)cultures or ideologies that existed at the time of each film's production.

For example, alongside *The Nest of the Cuckoo Birds* byNWR includes essays about the

film's production, digital reproductions of some of Williams' artwork, and a digitized collection

of found photographs taken around the time of the film's release. The first essay, "Bert Williams:

Stark Raving Drama," describes the film's production and profiles its creator, a fitness instructor

turned filmmaker and character actor. Following that is the "Art of Bert Williams," a collection

of Williams' drawings and paintings made during the 1930s and 1940s. The next essay,

"Discovering the Lost Cuckoo Bird Nest," offers a comprehensive look at the discovery and

subsequent restoration of the film. After this are several tangentially-related multimodal essays,

including: "Naked I Take Your Money: The Relater" (which chronicles a sex worker's on-the-

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[141] Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik, "Editorial Introduction: What is a Cult Film?" in *The Cult Film Reader*, eds. Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (Open University Press, 2008), 11.
[142] Jeffrey Sconce, "'Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style," in *The Cult Film Reader*, eds. Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (Open University Press, 2008), 108.

job experiences); "Just Enough Stuff: The Saga of Margaret Doll Rod (a profile of the trailblazing feminist punk musician and founder of the Demolition Doll Rods); "Family Man: Frankie Miller" (an essay about the largely forgotten country singer); "Loose on the Deuce: The Prince of Porn" (a short biography of notorious pornographer Phil Prince); "Murder is my Beat: Florida" (an article on the life of singer and murderess Salwa Merrige-Abrams); and "Barbie and Me" (an examination of obsessive collectors of Barbie dolls). Rounding out the supplemental materials are "Charlie Beesley's Discarded America," a collection of found photographs, and "The Restorationists," a short piece about the difficulty of restoring old films. By preserving the subcultural attitudes and ideologies that both informed the film's creation and were in turn informed by its content, these materials all serve to contextualize *Nest of the Cuckoo Birds*.

These supplemental materials help to contextualize films but also mark byNWR as a counter-site devoted to the creation of an alternate cinematic canon. In this way, the site emblematizes Refn's core ideology, which is to discursively oppose "mainstream" cinema and corporate art. As such, the site conforms in some ways to Michel Foucault's concept of the heterotopia, a space that exists within society and reflects its structures and ideologies even as it critiques them.

byNWR as Digital Heterotopia

With byNWR, Refn has created a sort of digital heterotopia, a concept originally developed by Foucault in his March 1967 lecture "Of Other Spaces." Here, Foucault elaborates on the social relations and cultural conditions of spaces, particularly those that exist alongside other spaces "in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they

happen to designate, mirror, or reflect."[143] According to Foucault, within every society and every culture there exist "real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites."[144] He labels these counter-sites heterotopias: existing spaces that simultaneously represent, contest, and invert a society's prevailing paradigms.

As conceptualized by Foucault, heterotopias are cultural, institutional, and discursive spaces that mirror society even as they unsettle or disrupt its mores, values, and ideologies. In this regard, heterotopic spaces recall Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque in that they subvert and/or liberate the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere. Foucault contends that heterotopias are "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible."[145] In addition, heterotopias "are most often linked to slices in time" and can subsequently destabilize Western conceptualizations of time and its relationship to prevailing historical narratives.[146] Foucault identifies cinemas, gardens, museums, libraries, archives, and cemeteries as examples of heterotopias, as they are all incompatible, contradictory, and/or transformative spaces that exist both inside and outside of time.

byNWR could be considered a digital heterotopia because it functions as a counter-site that reflects and unsettles prevailing notions of culture, taste, and cinema history. Indeed, Refn's entire persona seems to be built on the idea of counter-sites, as he and others have, via their discourse, fabricated for him an identity as a provocateur who challenges prevailing paradigms regarding so-called "mainstream" culture. In many ways, byNWR represents the culmination of this idea, as it serves as a repository of subcultural art, presenting grungy exploitation films as

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[143] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 24.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid., 25.
[146] Ibid., 26.

examples of "good, challenging art."[147] By exalting regionally produced oddities such as *House on Bare Mountain* (Lee Frost and Wes Bishop, 1962) and *If Footmen Tire You, What Will Horses Do?* (Ron Ormand, 1971), the site pushes back against the dominant values and ideologies of both good taste and mass culture. In other words, Refn uses byNWR as a site to elevate "trash" to the level of "important" art, thus rendering it a counter-site that challenges dominant notions of popular culture.

Pierre Bourdieu observes that while social class tends to influence an individual's tastes, those in power determine what constitutes "good" or "legitimate" culture.[148] According to Bourdieu, cultural intermediaries, or "the taste makers defining what counts as good taste and cool culture in today's marketplace,"[149] help to facilitate this process by using gentle manipulation to shape people's tastes for specific goods and services. Jennifer Smith Maguire notes that cultural intermediaries "cannot enforce desires or purchases; rather, they create the conditions for consumers to identify their tastes in goods."[150] These days, media conglomerates tend to utilize recommendation algorithms and proprietary streaming services to shape viewers' tastes for their products. This situation has resulted in the rise of what Refn considers an entertainment industry devoted to banality.[151] With byNWR, Refn eschews recommendation algorithms, but the site is based entirely around his specific tastes and interests, meaning that users must already possess similar preferences or learn to appreciate the things that Refn likes. In this way, the site functions as an extension of Refn's transdiscursive auteurism, as he sets out to

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[147] Refn, "Sex, Horror, and Melodrama."

[148] See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* ((New York: Routledge, 1984).

[149] Julian Matthews and Jennifer Smith Maguire, "Introduction: Thinking with Cultural Intermediaries," in *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader*, eds. Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Matthews (Newbury Park: SAGE, 2014), 1.

[150] Jennifer Smith Maguire, "Bourdieu on Cultural Intermediaries," in *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader*, eds. Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Matthews (Newbury Park: SAGE, 2014), 20.

[151] See Refn, "Sex, Horror, and Melodrama."

discursively shape people's tastes in addition to creating texts. Refn and byNWR's curators all serve as cultural intermediaries, as they help shape users' tastes.

byNWR also functions as a digital archive that preserves texts, contexts, paratexts, and metatexts. The site collects and exhibits digitized versions of vintage exploitation films, but it also archives the context surrounding these films by discursively presenting them as regional oddities frequently considered unworthy of preservation. byNWR also archives the paratexts surrounding those texts, which here take the form of supplemental materials intended to help contextualize the films, the eras in which they were produced, and the cultural, political, economic, and ideological conditions that informed their productions. Finally, the site archives the metatexts that exist in relation to the primary texts. These include information about cult or regional audiences, information about the (sub)cultures that surround each film, and information about the fandoms that grow up around the films and their attendant (sub)cultures. More importantly, the site offers all this content free of charge to anyone with an internet connection, meaning that Refn and his team of curators want to make these films available to a wide audience. Thus, regardless of its impact on authorship, byNWR serves as a significant digital object because it fills an institutional void of preservation and remembrance while also helping to legitimize seemingly disposable subcultural texts.

Conclusion

As mentioned, byNWR's mission aligns with those of organizations such as Vinegar Syndrome and AGFA, which likewise set out to preserve and make available lost or forgotten cult films of the past. In doing so, these groups help to craft a history of cinema that differs from the one usually offered up by Hollywood. Both *The Act of Seeing* and byNWR perform a similar

function and reveal Refn as a discourse creator as opposed to a traditional creator, director, filmmaker, auteur, etc. Instead, Refn is a transdiscursive auteur who establishes a persona or brand that serves to unite disparate texts, including those he did not produce himself. Yet the question remains: What does Refn's brand do for these pre-streaming objects that might have otherwise been discarded? One answer is that Refn grants these films new life and increased visibility in the streaming era. For example, *Nest of the Cuckoo Birds* was once considered a lost film, but it has now found an audience thanks to byNWR and Refn's promotional efforts. At the same time, the site also helps to reveal popular (sub)cultures that exist outside or at the margins of mass culture and offers insight into regional tastes and ideologies.

With byNWR Refn and his collaborators have set out to disrupt traditional understandings of film history by preserving and exhibiting regional exploitation films with the same sort of care usually reserved for "important" films such as those made by the likes of Ingmar Bergman or Akira Kurosawa. The rhetoric Refn uses to describe and promote the site taps into the discourses generated by film critics, film scholars, and film fans who portray Refn as a provocative director who makes and celebrates films that challenge conventional tastes. *The Act of Seeing* and byNWR can both be considered heterotopic counter-sites that help shape users' tastes through their presentation of texts, contexts, paratexts, and metatexts that all reflect and disturb prevailing conceptualizations of culture, taste, and the past. Thus, these projects establishe Refn as a transdiscursive auteur whose persona or brand unites disparate texts, including many he did not produce himself, thus unsettling notions of cinema history and authorship.

Because Refn's persona or brand has been firmly established, it can now be played with by others, as does Hideo Kojima in the video game *Death Stranding*. Refn allowed his likeness

to be used in the game for the character known as Heartman, but Refn himself does not appear in the game. Someone else performed the motion capture for the character while another actor provided Heartman's voice. Nonetheless, Heartman draws on Refn's mediated persona, as the character is an archivist who collects physical media and stores it in an isolated laboratory bathed in pink and blue neon light, the colors that define the byNWR brand. The next chapter considers how other creators can appropriate and manipulate Refn's branded persona within their own works.

Chapter 4

Refn/Kojima: Refn as Content in *Death Stranding*

As discussed in previous chapters, Refn made the leap from creator to curator during the

latter part of his career, due largely to a discursively generated brand that celebrates and

encompasses works made by exploitation filmmakers such as Bert Williams, Curtis Harrington,

and Andy Milligan, among others. This brand gave rise to the book *The Act of Seeing* and the

streaming site byNWR, both of which serve as archival repositories of sorts for low-budget

regional exploitation films like *The Sex Shuffle* (Ron Scott, 1968) and *The Scissors Girl* (Jai

Hais, 1968). Refn's discourse(s) frequently hold such films up as examples of dangerous,

challenging art worthy of preservation. He also places them in opposition to what he deems safe

entertainment, which consists mainly of the blockbuster franchise films produced by

multinational media conglomerates.

Exploitation cinema, along with the creators and (sub)cultures that produced exploitation

films, thereby become aspects of Refn's branded persona and function as extensions of his own

authorship. In the latter half of his career Refn established himself as both a creator and a curator

capable of generating "an endless possibility of discourse" that encompasses his own works and

those produced by others.[1] More significantly, perhaps, Refn's brand became so recognizable

during the later phase of his career that other creators can appropriate and play around with it in

their own works. In the copy he wrote for the back of Second Sight Films' UK release of *Drive*

(2011), Refn describes himself as "a blank canvas with a touch of pink neon." Other creators can

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[1] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 114.

then use that blank canvas to paint their own pictures, always while incorporating that dash of

pink neon that signifies "Refn."

For instance, Daniel Chong, creator of the Cartoon Network series *We Bare Bears* (2014-

2019), appropriates and plays with Refn's persona in the episode "Icy Nights" (S2.E17, October

20, 2016), which features numerous intertextual allusions to Refn's films *Drive* and *Only God

Forgives* (2013).[2] The episode follows lead character Ice Bear (sporadically voiced by comedian

Dmitri Martin) as he sets out to retrieve his technologically advanced Roomba from a group of

computer nerds who want to use it in their clandestine robot fights. The episode opens with Ice

Bear riding his modified Roomba through the neon-lit streets of San Francisco while an 80s-

inflected synth tune plays on the soundtrack. Here the character's activities recall those of the

unnamed (and equally aloof) protagonist of *Drive*, who likewise cruises the nighttime streets of

Los Angeles, neon lights dancing across his windshield as the 80s throwback song "Nightcall"

by French electro house artist Kavinsky blares on the film's soundtrack. Later in "Icy Nights,"

Ice Bear infiltrates an arcade café that doubles as an underground robot fight club reminiscent of

the Muay Thai boxing club operated by central character Julian and his brother in *Only God

Forgives*. In addition, like Julian and the Driver, both taciturn figures portrayed by Ryan

Gosling, Ice Bear is a character of few words who prefers to let his actions speak for him.

Similarly, professional wrestlers "The Bad Boy" Joey Janela and Orange Cassidy (real

name James Cipperly) each tap into Refn's persona in different ways. During his early years on

the independent circuit, Janela routinely entered the ring wearing a replica of the iconic scorpion

jacket worn by Gosling's character in *Drive* and accompanied by the electro-pop song

"Protovision" by Kavinsky, an artist featured on that film's original soundtrack. Cassidy,

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[2] The episode also features intertextual nods to the film *John Wick* (Chad Stahelski and David Leitch, 2014).

meanwhile, developed an in-ring persona that in some ways recalls the Driver in that he is reserved and laidback but also capable of explosive violence.[3] In addition to physically resembling Gosling, Cassidy regularly performs his signature move the "Slow Motion Kick" (aka the "Kicks of Doom"), a series of comically light taps to his opponent's shins, before transitioning into a more fast-paced, hard-hitting style of offense. This aggressive attack usually culminates with Cassidy's finishing move the "Superman Punch," a Muay Thai technique that involves leaping in the air, bringing the rear leg forward to feign a kick, and then snapping the leg back while throwing a right cross. As such, Orange Cassidy would no doubt fit right in at Julian's boxing club in *Only God Forgives*.

Yet perhaps no other creator has appropriated and played with Refn's persona quite like Japanese video game designer Hideo Kojima. On November 8, 2019, the same year that Refn's original series *Too Old to Die Young* (co-created with novelist and comic book writer Ed Brubaker) debuted on Amazon's Prime Video streaming service, Kojima unleashed his latest creation, *Death Stranding*, an expansive open-world game released exclusively for the PlayStation 4 gaming system. Published by Sony Interactive Entertainment, *Death Stranding* was the first title produced by the eponymous Kojima Productions game studio, which had split from Konami in July 2015 and re-emerged as an independent studio in December of that year. The game features an appearance by Refn, who allowed Kojima to use his likeness for the character of Heartman, a death-obsessed researcher who periodically assists the game's protagonist Sam Porter Bridges (played by Norman Reedus). While Refn was scanned to make the 3D model for the Heartman character, British actor Darren Jacobs provided Heartman's voice while reclusive Japanese thespian Zega performed the motion capture. Nevertheless, Kojima has

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[3] Though it should be Cassidy's persona is primarily inspired by the apathetic camp counselor Andy (Paul Rudd) from the film *Wet Hot American Summer* (David Wain, 2001).

stated that he explicitly based Heartman on Refn,[4] and the character's identity draws heavily on

Refn's discursively generated persona as he is likewise a collector and an amateur archivist

seeking to preserve the past in hopes of creating a better future.

This chapter uses Refn's appearance in *Death Stranding* as a case study to consider how

a creator's brand and/or mediated persona, such as the one cultivated by Refn, can be extended

into original works produced by other authors. First, the chapter examines the relationship

between Refn and Kojima to illuminate the similarities between these two creators, paying

particular attention to how they both discursively position themselves as independent outsiders

challenging mainstream corporate culture. Following that, the chapter analyzes how Kojima

draws on Refn's mediated persona when creating the character Heartman in *Death Stranding* to

explore how a creator can become content via their personal brand, focusing specifically on how

both transdiscursivity and polymediation help to facilitate this process of digital exploitation.

Refn and Kojima: A Very Beautiful Relationship

According to Kojima, "Memes are propagated when people connect with each other."[5]

Here, he refers to the idea that stories help people to "connect across time and place."[6] Kojima

forged such a connection with Refn, another fiercely independent outsider and professional

storyteller who endeavors to exert full control over his own work. The two met during the

casting phase for *Death Stranding*; as Kojima explains, he admired Refn's films and asked him

to participate in the game.[7] Refn agreed, and as a result the two creators learned they had a great

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[4] Patrick Shanley, "Hideo Kojima Explains Nicolas Winding Refn's 'Death Stranding' Character," last modified July 20, 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/hideo-kojima-explains-nicolas-winding-refns-death-stranding-role-1225858/#!.

[5] Hideo Kojima, *The Creative Gene: How Books, Movies, and Music Inspired the Creator of* Death Stranding *and* Metal Gear Solid, trans. Nathan A. Collins (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2019), 236.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., 238.

deal in common, quickly bonding over their numerous similarities. Refn explains that they

developed a "very beautiful relationship," comparing the bond they share to a couple who travel

the world together.[8] In his book *The Creative Gene*, Kojima writes that "Refn was even nice

enough to say that meeting me was like 'reuniting with a childhood friend.'"[9] Kojima also

explains that Refn agreed to appear in *Death Stranding* as a personal favor.

Like Refn, Kojima discursively presents himself as resolutely independent and asserts

that his eponymously named game studio has "no affiliations with anyone." He notes that he

"created this company in 2015 after leaving Konami," paying for it entirely himself.[10] According

to Kojima, his studio receives zero funding from any outside sources, ensuring that Kojima

Productions remains completely independent. He also claims to have refused numerous buyout

bids from media companies that view Kojima Productions as a big-name acquisition, so much so

that several have offered "ridiculously high prices" to purchase the studio. However, Kojima

claims that he is not interested in such proposals, declaring "As long as I'm alive, I don't think I

will ever accept those offers."[11] He states, "it's not that I want money. I want to make what I

want to make. That's why I created this studio."[12] Here, Kojima recalls Refn, who likewise

emphasizes the importance of independence as it allows him to maintain full control over the

movies that he makes.[13] Like Kojima, Refn dislikes putting himself into situations that would

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[8] Shanley, "Refn's 'Death Stranding' Character."
[9] Kojima, 238.
[10] Owen S. Good, "Kojima Turns Down 'Ridiculous' Buyout Offers Every Day to Stay Indie," last modified November 4, 2022, https://www.polygon.com/23441288/hideo-kojima-studio-buyout-acquired-sony-microsoft-indie.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] See Nick Roddick, "Stealer's Wheels." *Sight & Sound* 21, no. 10 (2011): 48.

require him to give up creative control, which may explain his claim about never harboring "any

aspiration to go to Hollywood and make a film."[14]

Yet Refn did eventually go to Hollywood to make films, first with *Fear X* and then later

with *Drive*; the former flopped while the latter ultimately required independent financing after

"all the studios in Los Angeles passed on the movie."[15] According to Refn, one of the reasons he

returned to Hollywood to make *Drive* was to test himself, as he wondered, "Where can I put

myself in the most difficult situation to make a movie? Where would they try to control me the

most?"[16] While *Drive* ended up being produced largely outside of the studio system, Refn still

ran into issues of control, explaining that "a person very high up in the system" told him that the

film "will never work with an audience. The critics are going to hate it. Recut it, redesign it,

rescore it."[17] Refn refused this advice, preferring to release a film that reflected his own

sensibilities as a filmmaker. At the same time, however, he also expresses a desire for a studio to

grant him carte blanche to make whatever film he wants with a large budget. He has even flirted

with the idea of directing huge blockbusters such as a remake of *Logan's Run* (Michael

Anderson, 1976), a film that Refn claims to have been obsessed with since childhood. These

competing impulses to remain independent but still work within the confines of the Hollywood

system perfectly encapsulate the discursive dichotomy that defines "Refn."

Kojima evinces a similar dichotomy, founding a completely independent development

studio that nevertheless shares close working relationships with massive multinational

corporations like Sony and Microsoft. While video games are "sometimes developed and

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[14] Brandon Harris, "Nicolas Winding Refn, Drive," last modified September 14, 2011, https://filmmakermagazine.com/29833-nicolas-winding-refn-drive/.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Roddick, 47.
[17] Ibid., 48.

produced with less direct involvement of corporate executives,"[18] they are more frequently

subject to corporate oversight, given that they are products intended to generate maximum profits

for media conglomerates. Kojima no doubt receives notes on his games from Sony and Microsoft

executives, but, like Refn, he has more power to accept or ignore them as he sees fit. At the same

time, as Toby Miller observes, "End-user licensing agreements ensure that players of corporate

games online sign over their cultural moves and perspectives to the very companies whom they

are paying in order to participate."[19] Given that Kojima's games are often include online

components and are produced for consoles made by Sony and Microsoft, his works must also

conform to these licensing agreements. This includes an independently produced title like *Death

Stranding*, which incorporates some asynchronous online functions. This situation means that

Kojima's autonomy only extends so far.

At the same time, however, the very act of working within the video game industry –

which generated nearly $57 billion in revenue in 2020,[20] outperforming movies and music

combined – means operating within a hypercapitalist matrix centered on endless expansion and

an unchecked accumulation of wealth, regardless of whether a studio is truly independent.

According to Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, the video game industry has helped to

facilitate the rise of a hypercapitalist empire that dominates the early-twenty-first century cultural

landscape. They argue that video games, which emerged out of the U.S. military industrial

complex, serve to perpetuate neoliberal capitalist ideologies. Per the authors, the game industry

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[18] Timothy Havens, "Towards a Structuration Theory of Media Intermediaries," in *Making Media Work: Cultures of Management in the Entertainment Industries*, eds. Derek Johnson, Derek Kompare, and Avi Santo (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 41.

[19] Toby Miller, "Cultural Work and Creative Industries," in *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader*, eds. Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Matthews (Newbury Park: SAGE, 2014), 27.

[20] Marc Saltzman, "E3 2021: Video Games are Bigger Business Than Ever, Topping Movies and Music Combined," last modified June 10, 2021, https://www.usatoday.com/videos/tech/2021/06/10/e-3-2021-video-games-big-business-topping-film-and-music-combined/7637695002/.

not only reflects these ideals but has reshaped and advanced them by pioneering "methods of accumulation based on intellectual property rights, cognitive exploitation, cultural hybridization, transcontinentally subcontracted dirty work, and world-marketed commodities."[21] This, they argue, makes video games the "exemplary media of empire" as they serve to "crystallize in a paradigmatic way its constitution and its conflicts."[22] Thus, like Refn, whose films are subject to the whims of global box office trends, Kojima is only as independent as the market will allow.

No matter the limits of their independence, Kojima and Refn have each expressed a desire to change the future through their various works. According to Refn, the "future must be different."[23] He envisions an unruly future built on art that pushes people out of their comfort zones, which he argues revolve primarily around "complacency, and, for most of us in the West, an easeful life."[24] Kojima has expressed similar sentiments, declaring that he wants "to create new things and give new stimulation to the world," and he seeks to accomplish this by making art "that is difficult to chew and digest."[25] Refn claims that he and Kojima "both take great pleasure in destroying good taste."[26] In addition to disrupting audience expectations, both Kojima and Refn claim that the future will see media become ever more convergent. Kojima contends that,

> 120 years ago, films were created and at first you had to go to a theater to watch them. Then came the TV. Then came streaming. Gaming will be streaming, too. I think games and movies, in the near future, will come closer. We're going into an era of new possibilities.[27]

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[21] Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xxix.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Nicolas Winding Refn, "Our Times Need Sex, Horror, and Melodrama," last modified July 4, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jul/04/nicolas-winding-refn-apocalyptic-times-cult-movies-can-save-us-bynwr.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Shanley, "Refn's 'Death Stranding' Character."
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.

Here, Kojima echoes Refn's declaration that "the cinema screen and the phone are co-existent. One is not better than the other. They are co-existent."[28] For both Refn and Kojima, then, media are not separated by boundaries demarcating something as a "film" or a "video game." Instead, each creator views media as content capable of challenging audiences and bringing about a radical future marked by endless possibility, thus reinforcing the idea that both Refn and Kojima align with the concept of transmedia auteurs as defined by Anastasia Salter and Mel Stanfill.

Another trait that unites Refn and Kojima is their reverence for the past, even as they look toward the future. Though Refn considers nostalgia a form of artistic suicide, he nevertheless "keeps a little piece of everything from [his] past."[29] Refn discursively calls for an uncontrolled future all while celebrating the past in the form of exploitation films produced throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. In the same way, Kojima contends that "past experiences are necessary to create new connections," explaining, "That's why I read books, watch movies, and listen to music. I go to art and history museums. I meet people."[30] For Kojima, "That repeated process is the only way to learn from history and create the future."[31] As with Refn, Kojima appears to believe that it is important for people to know the past to build a better future.

This ideology animates both Refn and the byNWR streaming site, which serves as a sort of digital history museum designed to introduce users to subcultural histories through art and stories. Given byNWR's emphasis on exploitation cinema, which frequently subverts the norms of both filmmaking and storytelling, the site and its mission align with Kojima's ideas regarding

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[28] Peter Bradshaw, "Nicolas Winding Refn: 'Cinema is Dead. And now it is Resurrected," last modified July 9, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jul/09/nicolas-winding-refn-cinema-is-dead-bynwrcom.
[29] Drew Fortune, "Director Nicolas Winding Refn on His Obsession with Exploitation Films," last modified September 16, 2015, www.avclub.com/director-nicolas-winding-refn-on-his-obsession-with-exp-1798284411.
[30] Kojima, 238-39.
[31] Ibid.

the power of memes to change the future. According to the site's ABOUT page, "byNWR breathes new life into the culturally intriguing, influential and extreme" films of the past, all to inspire users to "look to the future – with hope, prosperity, and the idea that *culture is for everyone*" (emphasis in original). This rhetoric recalls Kojima's assertion that,

> To build a world for the new youth, the existing world is destroyed and the old age is ended. Norms are broken, cities and nations destroyed. Parents, ancestors, and the current inhabitants are killed. To carry memes forward is to bring in the new generation through the massacre of the previous."[32]

Here, Kojima appears to advocate for the idea that only the twin forces of disruption and chaos can bring about a better future, the same ethos espoused by Refn when discussing projects such as byNWR and *The Act of Seeing*.

Given all these similarities, it is no wonder that Refn and Kojima became fast friends and creative colleagues whose various works involve similar ideological preoccupations regarding the need to look to the past when creating the future. The connection shared by the two creators also likely helps to explain their willingness to appear in one another's projects. For instance, Kojima makes a brief cameo appearance in Refn's streaming series *Too Old to Die Young*, portraying the "Yakuza Executioner" in the show's fourth episode, "Volume 4: The Tower."[33] Refn, meanwhile, allowed Kojima to use his likeness for the character of Heartman in *Death Stranding*. While not a playable character, Heartman nevertheless performs a pivotal role in the game, providing information about the game's story world to the player. Significantly, while Heartman is performed by other actors, the character nevertheless incorporates elements of Refn's branded persona, most notably his obsession with looking to the past to create a brighter future. The next section presents an analysis of the Heartman character to consider how Kojima

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[32] Kojima, 69.
[33] Kojima also makes a cameo appearance in Refn's Netflix series *Copenhagen Cowboy* (2022-2023), portraying the character "Hideo" in episode 6, "The Heavens will Fall."

appropriates and plays with Refn's brand in *Death Stranding*. Following that is a section looking at what it means for a creator to become content within a neoliberal, late-stage capitalist society that emphasizes profits over people.

Refn and *Death Stranding*: Playing with the Creator as Content

Featuring a script co-written by Kojima along with Kenji Yano and Shuyo Murata, *Death Stranding* plunges players into an expansive, ravaged futuristic wasteland (largely inspired by the rocky terrain of Iceland) and tasks them with reconnecting the fractured United States. The narrative unfolds in a post-apocalyptic U.S. torn asunder by a cataclysmic event known as the Death Stranding, which ripped open a doorway to the Beach, a sort of limbo comprised of realms thought to be unique to each person on Earth. The game chronicles the efforts of expert courier Sam Porter Bridges as he works to reunite the shattered nation. Along the way, Sam strives to avoid the deadly Timefall rains, which rapidly age and deteriorate anything they touch, as well as hordes of "beached things" (BTs), hostile otherworldly entities capable of leveling entire cities. Players take control of Sam as he delivers supplies to remote outposts and rebuilds the broken roads that once connected these distant settlements. He is helped in his quest by members of the BRIDGES corporation, a monolithic logistics company that was formed to rejoin the broken U.S. in the years following the Death Stranding. Sam's allies include Deadman,[34] a medical examiner created from a combination of cadavers and stem cells, and Heartman, a grief-stricken researcher devoted to studying the Beach and helping to construct the Chiral Network that allows the remaining American cities to communicate with one another.

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[34] Film director Guillermo del Toro served as the 3d scan model for Deadman, though, as with Heartman, others bring the character to life. In this case, Justin Leeper performed the motion capture for Deadman while Venezuelan actor Jessi Corti provided the character's voice.

According to the game, Heartman was undergoing heart surgery at a local hospital when his wife and daughter both perished in a pair of simultaneous voidouts, explosive annihilation events that occur whenever a BT, which is comprised of anti-matter, interacts with the matter of the normal world. The resulting explosion destroyed Heartman's home, leaving behind a heart-shaped crater. The shockwave from the blast also knocked out the hospital's power, causing Heartman to suffer a near-death experience. He awoke to find himself on the Beach surrounded by the souls of the recently deceased, including his wife and daughter. Before he could join them in the hereafter, however, the ICU's emergency generator activated, allowing cardiac surgeons to re-start Heartman's heart and forcibly return him to the world of the living.

Devastated by the loss of his family, Heartman devoted his life to obsessively studying the Beach, going so far as to have his heart hooked up to an automated external defibrillator (AED) that stops his heart for three minutes every 21 minutes, all so he can repeatedly return to the afterlife and search for his loved ones. Unfortunately, the repeated cardiac arrests have deformed his heart, leaving him weak and unable to survive without the help of various machinery housed in his laboratory. Thus, Heartman spends his life in a strange 21-minute loop, traveling to the beach 60 times each day before returning to life in his lonely lab. Yet Heartman considers his unique condition a sort of blessing in disguise, as it allows him to effectively (if slowly) study the Beach while searching for his wife and daughter. In many ways, the Heartman character is the heart of *Death Stranding*, as he works to preserve the past and build a better future all while providing information and support to the player.

Heartman also demonstrates how a creator can become content to be played with,though here it is Kojima playing with "Refn" as opposed to players. As noted, Kojima based the Heartman character on Refn, and *Death Stranding* provides ample evidence to support this

claim, especially as Heartman's identity draws heavily on Refn's own mediated persona.

Significantly, when players finally find and enter Heartman's lab, located in the heart-shaped

crater left behind by the voidouts that killed his family, the game provides a comprehensive look

at the new location via a cutscene. As the camera slowly pans across Heartman's modernist

apartment, it passes behind a piece of equipment emblazoned with the byNWR logo, an in-joke

that nevertheless establishes an intertextual link between Heartman and Refn. The cutscene also

reveals a picture of Heartman's wife and daughter, who both bear striking resemblances to

Refn's own wife, Liv Corfixen, and eldest daughter, Lola.[35] Likewise, the colors in Heartman's

lab evoke those commonly found in Refn's films; the room is bathed in pink and blue neon hues

that recall the lighting in films such as *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon*. Finally,

Heartman's lab is lined with shelves overflowing with physical media, including what appear to

be books, VHS tapes, DVD and Blu-ray discs, and video game cartridges and discs. These

artifacts mark Heartman as a collector, thus aligning him with Refn, who claims to suffer from

"collector mania" and spends much of his life acquiring toys, posters, film prints, and more.[36]

In some ways, Kojima uses Heartman to comment on the tensions between the physical

and the digital, and this is another way that the character echoes Refn himself. Throughout the

game, Heartman spends much of his time traveling to the Beach, a sort of spirit world that exists

alongside the "real" world and is unique to each person who ends up there. In this way, the

Beach could serve as a metaphor for digital spaces. As Sherry Turkle notes, digital technologies

have become part of our social and psychological lives,[37] at once separate from but inexplicably

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[35] Though it could be Refn's younger daughter Lizzielou standing in for Heartman's child. Unfortunately, the photograph is not rendered clearly enough to be sure.

[36] See Aaron Hills, "Nicolas Winding Refn Made a Book Out of His Collection of Gorgeously Schlocky Movie Posters," last modified October 18, 2015, https://www.vice.com/en/article/9bgjx5/talking-sexploitation-cinema-and-sleazy-vintage-posters-with-nicolas-winding-refn-1017.

[37] See Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005).

intertwined with our offline lives. Though owned by massive media conglomerates and thus subject to the whims of their CEOs, digital platforms nevertheless allow users to negotiate their identities online by carving out their own digital spaces that reflect their personalities.

Richard Frankel compares such spaces to dreams, arguing that when we venture online, we become physical creatures dreaming in a digital world.[38] Furthermore, he contends that the walls separating the physical and the digital have begun to collapse. In *Death Stranding*, the Beach performs a similar function; portrayed as a liminal space between the worlds of the living and the dead, the Beach is common to all humanity but unique to every individual, a manifestation of humankind's consciousness but one that reflects each person's conception of death. As such, the Beach exists alongside our own world but remains intertwined with our lives, reflecting the quirks and qualities that comprise our individual personalities. Moreover, the walls between the real world and the Beach have begun to collapse, allowing paranormal phenomena to bleed into everyday existence. As a concept, then, the Beach illustrates the tension that exists between life and death, but it could also be read as a metaphor for the boundaries between the physical (waking life) and the digital (dream life).

Heartman travels to the Beach to engage in a seemingly futile search for his wife and daughter, but also to study this strange realm. Along the way, he records the various afterlives he encounters upon returning to his lab, effectively archiving them for future generations of Beach researchers. As such, Heartman once again recalls Refn, who performs a similar function with projects like byNWR and *The Act of Seeing*. Instead of afterlives, however, Refn explores the worlds of low-budget regional cinema, recording what he sees in the form of purchasing and

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[38] See Richard Frankel, "Dreaming Life in the Digital Age," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity, and Technology*, eds. David Goodman and Matthew Clemente (New York: Routledge, 2023), 34-46.

restoring film prints, which are then digitized and housed in the digital archive that is byNWR. In addition to the films – which are highly idiosyncratic expressions, not all that different from the individualized lands that make up the Beach – Refn also collects the subcultures that gave rise to or grew up around these films, ensuring the survival of the stories that comprise each movie's legacy. Refn and Heartman are both engaged in a sort of cycle of life, death, and revival; Heartman repeatedly lives, dies, and is reborn as he strives to find his family and study the Beach, all to possibly reunite the broken U.S. and bring about a future free from the Timefall rains and the BTs. Refn, meanwhile, navigates a seemingly dead past that he then sets out to resurrect by restoring films often deemed disposable, all to disrupt the present moment in hopes of creating a better, more creatively fulfilling future free from corporate control.

In the game, Heartman categorizes himself as a "Homo loquens," meaning a linguist who understands the world around him through the language of science and logic. Here, the character appears to share another link with Refn, who often seems to understand the world around him through the language of cinema ("Homo cinema," perhaps). Though he often downplays his knowledge of cinematic history,[39] he nevertheless frequently appears to be, much like the lead character of Steve Erickson's novel *Zeroville*, "cinéautistic." The term refers to someone obsessed with film but who is "absolutely unschooled, his knowledge and opinions absolutely unmediated."[40] Refn's largely self-taught knowledge (he dropped out of film school at an early age) revolves primarily around the low-budget movies made by exploitation filmmakers such as Curtis Harrington, Andy Milligan, and Russ Meyer, among others.

Similarly, as Jonathan Romney notes, Refn's knowledge encompasses a "visual and comic style that confidently channels the language of Sixties and Seventies British satire:

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[39] See Hills, "Refn Made a Book."
[40] Steve Erickson, *Zeroville* (New York: Europa Editions, 2007), 75-76.

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Lindsay Anderson, Peter Medak, N.F. Simpson, *A Clockwork Orange*."[41] Yet Refn's knowledge

also extends to films made by revered directors such as Akira Kurosawa, Sergio Leone, and

Jean-Pierre Melville, directors who helped teach Refn about the value of silence. As Refn

explains,

> I love the language of silence. Like the character in *Vanishing Point* (Richard C. Sarafian,
> 1971) who is essentially also very existentialist in his silence. The great heroes are
> always more silent, from that to the Man with No Name to The Samurai and Shane.
> There's a mythology. The man who's always more silent is always the one who's
> unpredictable.

Movies like *Yojimbo* (Kurosawa, 1961), *A Fistful of Dollars* (Leone, 1964), and *Le Samouraï*

(Melville, 1967) all feature heroes who rarely speak, thus emphasizing the primacy of images

and action created through techniques such as cinematography and editing. These characters

would also inspire many of Refn's own heroes, including One-Eye in *Valhalla Rising* (2009), the

Driver in *Drive* (2011), and Julian in *Only God Forgives* (2013), all of whom speak the language

of silence and thus of cinema. In this way, Refn engages in his own form of mythmaking,

creating "*stories* that cement the actual history within mass consciousness."[42] At the same time,

he demonstrates that he is a linguist who instinctively understands the language of cinema.

Heartman, his lab, and his mission to catalog the lands that comprise the Beach tie into

the notion that Refn's various works, when looked at together, represent a sort of heterotopia

devoted to the celebration of exploitation cinema. Refn's films, his archival and preservation

efforts, and his branded persona all operate as a counter-site to core culture, as they serve to

challenge prevailing taste hierarchies that define what constitutes good and bad art or legitimate

and illegitimate culture. *Death Stranding* draws on this idea especially via the Heartman

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[41] Jonathan Romney, "Hard Men," *Film Comment*, July/August 2010, 28.
[42] Justin Vicari, *Nicolas Winding Refn and the Violence of Art: A Critical Study of the Films* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014), 8, emphasis in original.

character; the lands that make up the Beach could be read as heterotopic spaces as they are counter-sites that exist in conjunction with the "real" world of the game. Recall that heterotopias "differ from the 'fundamentally unreal' condition of utopias in that they are actually existing 'counter-sites' in which society's real sites are 'simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.'"[43] As Paula Amad notes, archives represent a heterotopic counter-site, as they "link 'to slices in time' as exemplified by those key archival sites of nineteenth-century modernity – museums and libraries."[44]

In *Death Stranding*, the Beach lands function as a sort of archive or library of a person's experience on Earth, serving as a record of person's life up to the point of their death. At the same time, however, they allow people to reflect on those experiences and potentially change them. For instance, primary antagonist Clifford Unger (played in the game by frequent Refn collaborator Mads Mikkelsen) is a deceased combat veteran who repeatedly relives his wartime experiences in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kosovo while searching the Beach lands for the soul of his unborn son, BB. Yet, whereas in the "real" world Clifford was gunned down by BRIDGES personnel while trying to defend the unborn BB (who resided inside a portable pod filled with amniotic fluid), in the Beach land Clifford could change his fate, reuniting with his son in a metaphysical reenactment of the day they both died. Here, Clifford is granted an opportunity to embrace BB before being shot dead as he was in the past. The Beach lands link to "slices in time," thereby serving as a sort of general archive due to how they accumulate everything to do with a person's life. Yet they also allow people to metaphorically change the circumstances of their death, meaning that they allow for the contestation and inversion of

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[43] Paula Amad, *Counter-Archive: Film, the Everyday, and Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 35.
   [44] Ibid.

reality. Therefore, within the world of the game, the Beach lands are counter-sites that represent, contest, and invert the social sites of the real world. As such, they must be considered as heterotopic spaces.

Kojima's own discourse supports this reading. In *The Creative Gene*, a collection of essays in which Kojima reflects on the artworks that inspired his games, he discusses Kobo Abe's 1962 novel *The Woman in the Dunes*. In the novel, an insect collector takes shelter in the home of a beautiful woman, only to wake the next morning and find himself trapped in an inescapable pit in the middle of a harsh desert. According to Gary D. Allinson, the novel "offers a brilliant but terrifying commentary on the claustrophobic quality of human existence and is a devastating critique of the narrow-minded obsessiveness of some Japanese social behavior."[45] Kojima appears to corroborate this view, writing, "Kobe Abe may have been using the pit as a metaphor for the norms that govern our lives as a society."[46] As such, in *The Woman in the Dunes*, the pit could be considered a heterotropia, as it functions as a counter-site that represents and contests the norms that govern society's real sites.

Given that Kojima cites this novel as an inspiration on his own works, both the Beach lands and the outposts in *Death Stranding* could be considered heterotopias, existing within or alongside the world and commenting on its structures. The game thus becomes a quest to connect or archive scattered heterotopias, which here take the form of scattered outposts or Beach lands populated by a single person or a handful of people, and occasionally represent and invert sites in the "real" world. Heartman's lab, meanwhile, functions as the game's central heterotopia, as the character endeavors to collect fragments of the past to change the existing present and create a

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[45] See Gary D. Allinson, *The Columbia Guide to Modern Japanese History*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 190.
[46] Kojima, 35.

more hopeful future, one no longer ravaged by the paranormal entities unleashed by the Death Stranding event.

The intertextual references described above all serve as fragments of discourse that help to evoke an idea of "Refn" within the text of *Death Stranding*. According to Art Herbig, "critics can examine a text both for how fragments are incorporated into it and how those fragments link it to other texts."[47] As a result, texts becoming pieces of an ongoing discourse. An examination of Heartman in *Death Stranding* reveals how the game functions as a piece of the ongoing discourse that is "Refn." Heartman is a sort of archivist who prizes his family above all else as he mines the past to navigate a ravaged present and make a better future for himself and others. In many ways, the character recalls Refn himself, who has expressed the importance of his own family, declaring that "when I was younger, I was probably more arrogant for vanity's sake, though now I get that when you have a family, there are other things in life."[48] He also excavates the past while keeping one eye on the present and the other toward the future, claiming that streaming video is the future but launching a streaming service that only deals in low-budget exploitation films made between the 1960s and the 1980s. *Death Stranding* thus becomes another fragment in the discourse that Refn uses to create his branded persona, "Refn."

In some ways, the game also reveals both Kojima and Refn as fanboy auteurs as defined Anastasia Salter and Mel Stanfill. According to Salter and Stanfill, fanboy auteurs are those creators steeped in geek media, nerds who "collect (trivia and merchandise) and then create."[49]

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[47] Herbig, Art. "Rhetoric and Polymediation: Using Fragments to Understand the Relationship Between 'Text' and Discourse," in Beyond New Media: Discourse and Critique in a Polymediated Age, eds. Art Herbig, Andrew F. Herrmann, and Adam W. Tyma (Lanham: Lexington, 2015), 34.

[48] Tasha Robinson, "The Most Important Films in Nicolas Winding Refn's Path from *Pusher* to the Present," last modified June 15, 2015, https://thedissolve.com/features/5-10-15-20/1065-the-most-important-films-in-nicolas-winding-refns-/.

[49] Anastasia Salter and Mel Stanfil, *A Portrait of the Auteur as Fanboy: The Construction of Authorship in Transmedia Franchises* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), xi.

They perceptively argue that, "The fan auteur may be the inevitable outcome of the convergence of normalizing fandom with the geek turn in industry; certainly, as an emergent (and maybe ascendant) concept, it very much speaks to its moment."[50] As mentioned in Chapter 1, Salter and Stanfill point to director Kevin Smith as a prime example of a fanboy auteur, as he is at once a pop culture fanatic and an auteur who both works behind the camera and appears onscreen.[51] They also note that Smith recognizes the importance of branding, writing, "We're all forced to self-promote and self-start these days, and Smith is a patron saint in that realm" due largely to his self-created podcast empire and reality TV show *Comic Book Men* (2012-2018).[52] Refn conforms in many ways to Salter and Stanfill's definition of the fanboy auteur, thanks partly to the creation of semi-autobiographical characters such as Lenny in *Bleeder* but more directly to his appearance as a character in *Death Stranding*. Like Refn, a fanboy of old exploitation films, Heartman is a fanboy of old media, but also of heterotopic spaces such as the Beach lands, which reflect the digital heterotopia of byNWR (see Chapter 3). As such, the character capitalizes on and advances the fragments of discourse used to create "Refn," thus helping to transform Refn into a character as well as an author.

At the same, both Refn and Kojima align with Smith in that they both understand the importance of selling themselves through branding. In Refn's case, he created the byNWR brand to sell his own films as well as launch a streaming service that helped to advance his ideas about culture and exploitation cinema. Kojima, meanwhile, penned essays detailing his inspirations and his outlook on art for outlets such as *Da Vinci* magazine and *papyrus* magazine,[53] and he split from Konami to launch his own branded studio, Kojima Productions. These brands allow both

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[50] Ibid., xiii.
[51] Ibid., 69.
[52] Ibid., 85.
[53] Many of these were later collected in *The Creative Gene*.

creators to remain recognizable across a variety of media and platforms, both behind the scenes and in front of the camera (or the 3D scanner, as it were). By engaging in transdiscursive activities, Refn and Kojima each work to generate or advance discourses that establish their brand as auteurs. At the same time, they also develop personae capable of being played with in each other's projects, as demonstrated by Refn allowing his likeness to be used in *Death Stranding* and Kojima's brief onscreen appearance in *Too Old to Die Young*. Thus, Refn and Kojima must both be considered as transdiscursive auteurs who create both texts and discourses within which others may play.

From Creator to Content: Navigating Late-Stage Capitalism with NWR

As Refn's appearance in *Death Stranding* demonstrates, creators have emerged as another form of content, another product to be bought and sold within the neoliberal, hypercapitalist market of the early twenty-first century. Self-branding helps individuals sell themselves, meaning that they (or, more accurately, their mediated personae) may in turn be sold by others. As this dissertation demonstrates, a personal brand such as the one cultivated by Refn becomes recognizable and thus marketable due to its consistency across a variety of platforms and technologies.

This idea becomes significant when considering that Refn and his various works emerged within a free-market capitalist system driven largely by neoliberal ideology, which emphasizes unchecked economic growth. Thus, examining how Refn moves from creator to content reveals how branding can help to transform a person's identity into another commodity capable of generating profit for others. In other words, the shift from creator to content represents another form of economic exploitation or commodification within a late-stage capitalist economy that

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thrives "on authoritative, controlling, and exploitative relationships, most notably between that of capitalists and workers."[54] As Thomas Pynchon acerbically (and accurately) puts it in his novel *Bleeding Edge*, "late capitalism is a pyramid racket on a global scale…getting the suckers to believe it's all gonna go on forever."[55]

Refn's career has played out entirely against this backdrop of late-stage capitalism, a period marked by the intensified commodification and industrialization of nearly every aspect of human life,[56] giving rise to a concomitant emphasis on branding. In a post written for the website *Medium*, a representative from Gingersauce Branding, which specializes in the development of brand books, observes that "we live in the age of over-consumption" and twenty-first century consumers therefore "need brands more than ever."[57] The author writes, "Brands are a way for people to communicate their personality and privileges,"[58] echoing Quentin Vieregge's assertion that brands help people to convey information about their identities.[59] Indeed, branding increasingly allows individuals to highlight their experience, expertise, core values, and/or key differentiators, thus developing an acknowledged public perception of themselves that helps to establish their credibility in a specific field. Within late-stage capitalism, the need to sell oneself has emerged as a supreme concern.

At the same time, Refn readily embraces media convergence, praising the fact that twenty-first century media have coalesced into what he calls the "digital platform of

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[54] Derek R. Ford, *Keywords in Radical Philosophy and Education: Common Concepts for Contemporary Movements* (Boston: Brill, 2019), 20.

[55] Thomas Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge: A Novel* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 163.

[56] See Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: Humanities Press, 1975), 387.

[57] Gingersauce, "The Importance of Branding in twenty-first Century," last modified February 11, 2021, https://medium.com/gingersauce-branding/the-importance-of-branding-in-21th-century-a5d9217d8e8c.

[58] Ibid.

[59] See Quentin Vieregge, "Whose Brand is it Anyway? How Brands Become Cults by Becoming Inclusive," in *Cult Pop Culture: How the Fringe Became Mainstream Vol. 3: Everyday Cult*, ed. Bob Batchelor (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015), 71.

entertainment."[60] As Henry Jenkins notes, media convergence involves "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries," and, significantly, "the search for new structures of media financing that fall at the interstices between old and new media."[61] These ideas encompass Refn and his brand, which serves to celebrate low-budget regional cinema. The films produced by these regional industries are sometimes made by amateur filmmakers and could thus be considered a form of folk culture, as they comprise "a context where creativity occurs on a grassroots level, where skills are passed through informal education [...] and where all creators can draw from shared traditions and image banks."[62] Indeed, A film like *The Nest of the Cuckoo Birds* is the product of independent financing, grassroots creativity, and informal education. With platforms such as byNWR, which takes full advantage of media convergence, Refn not only raises awareness of such films but helps to contextualize them by providing information about their subcultural production and legacy.

Here, the discursive dichotomy that defines Refn's branded persona becomes evident; throughout his career, Refn has embraced digital technologies, all while commemorating cinema's analog past. In interviews, Refn hails the internet as the best thing to ever happen to art, because of how it disrupts a corporatized film industry "financed by certain films whose sole purpose is to maximize profit as fast as possible."[63] Additionally, he contends that one of "the key things of the digital revolution is that *sharing* is a new definition of culture."[64] Refn's rhetoric recalls John Hartley's assertion that the internet has irrevocably altered many of our

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[60] Bradshaw, "Refn: 'Cinema is Dead."
[61] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 282.
[62] Jenkins, 285.
[63] Though, as Refn notes, there is "nothing wrong with that." See Bradshaw, "Refn: Cinema is Dead."
[64] Ibid., emphasis in original.

sociocultural systems, largely by disrupting the institutional monopolization of knowledge by large systems such as universities, libraries, museums, and other organizations devoted to learning. For Hartley, "the central cultural experience of modernity has been change, both the 'creative destruction' of existing structures and the growth, often exponential, of new knowledge."[65] This idea aligns with Refn's contention that the "best way to move forward is to bury the past" while simultaneously keeping its memory alive.[66]

At the same time, however, Refn's and Hartley's ideas about digital technologies both appear rather utopian (in the popular sense of the word), especially when considering recent events like the death of net neutrality and the increased consolidation of information by massive multinational conglomerates. Indeed, it often seems as though advanced digital technologies and platforms have pushed humanity further into what Neil Postman terms a Technopoly, or a society in which all forms of cultural life are subject to the sovereignty of technique and technology.[67] Postman argues that Technopolists believe the world requires access to information, even though this drive to access information contributes to the end of human creativity. According to Postman, digital technologies such as the internet so greatly increase the available supply of information that social control mechanisms become strained, thus leading to a general breakdown of psychic tranquility and social purpose.

Postman wisely observes that unregulated information can overwhelm social defense systems such as courts, schools, families, political parties, religions, and the state. In other words, a deluge of information can erode people's trust in institutions (this idea seems to foreshadow the era of "fake news"). As such, a Technopoly utilizes three primary technical

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[65] John Hartley, *Digital Futures for Cultural and Media Studies* (Malden: Wiley, 2012), 117.
[66] Bradshaw, "Refn: Cinema is Dead."
[67] See Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Penguin, 1992).

methods to control the flow of information: bureaucracy (i.e., a coordinated series of techniques for reducing amount of information that needs processing), expertise (all aspects of human relations are regulated to the control of experts), and technical machinery (e.g., technologies that offer an illusion of standardization). Through these methods, a Technopoly can subvert traditional social institutions and exert greater control over information. Here, Postman aligns with Refn, who considers the internet a boon for art but also finds it worrying in terms of news given that the technology "is ruled by three words: individualism, unapologetic, polarization."[68] For Refn, the internet can inspire people to create, but it can also facilitate the political rise of a wannabe autocrat like Donald J. Trump.[69]

Refn and Hartley also seemingly fail to account for the impact of digital platforms, which have profoundly altered existing political and economic systems. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Uber, and Google have disrupted traditional institutions and allowed late-stage capitalists like Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk to exert greater control over information by offering an illusion of standardization in the form of algorithms. Nick Srnicek contends that throughout the early part of the twenty-first century, late-stage capitalism has shifted toward the extraction and use of data harvested by digital platforms, which rely on algorithms to gather user data that are then sold to advertisers. Srnicek refers to this new paradigm as platform capitalism, writing, "New technologies, new organizational forms, new modes of exploitation, new types of jobs, and new markets all emerge to create a new way of accumulating capital."[70] According to Srnicek, these digital platforms are "designed in a way that makes them attractive to its varied users," largely because they "present themselves as empty spaces for others to interact on" even

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[68] Bradshaw, "Refn: Cinema is Dead."
[69] Ibid.
[70] Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2016), 22.

as they advance capitalist ideologies.[71] These platforms use algorithms to extract user data and thereby make the platforms more useful and desirable, thus generating more capital for the entities that own them. They also allow people to express themselves and engage in more acts of folk creation, but all within a matrix of hidden costs such as the exploitation that Srnicek mentions, with media companies mining user data for the purposes of turning people into products.

Refn discursively disrupts this neoliberal paradigm of exploitation in a variety of ways – primarily by critiquing capitalist ideologies – but he nevertheless operates within a for-profit system that seeks to exploit individuals via personal brands constructed and perpetuated via digital platforms. At the same time, his own films are intended to generate profit, both for himself and for the media conglomerates that distribute them, and he uses the digital technologies developed and owned by those same corporate entities to celebrate the old exploitation films streaming on byNWR. He also relies on the labor of his fans to spread the word about these films. Fans are encouraged to spread hashtags such as a #byNWR as well as share links to the films via social media, thus drumming up further interest in these works.

Both Refn and byNWR thus appear to merge top-down corporate (in this case, Refn and the site's team of editors and restorationists) and bottom-up audience (again, fans) models of curation and participation to help spread media and assign it value. In doing so, Refn exploits fan labor for marketing purposes, provoking viral marketing by creating buzz for the films while at the same time reconceptualizing the power dynamics between himself (a producer) and fans (consumers).[72] Likewise, while Refn portrays byNWR as a free service, the site exists entirely on

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[71] Ibid., 26.
[72] CarrieLynn D. Reinhard refers to this concept as "gameplay marketing," arguing that producers actively encourage consumers to play with and in the virtual spaces intended to promote television series or films. For more see CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, "Gameplay Marketing Strategies as Audience Co-optation: The Story of *The Dark*

the internet meaning that users must pay monthly fees to corporately owned internet service providers for the privilege of accessing the site. Therefore, by using these digital platforms and encouraging his fans to use them as well, Refn becomes complicit in the exploitation facilitated by platform capitalism, highlighting yet another example of the discursive dichotomy that characterizes "Refn."

The interlinked concepts of Technopoly and platform capitalism become alarmingly relevant within the current neoliberal ideological system, as individuals willingly cede control of their privacy to platforms (e.g., Google, Facebook, X, Instagram) and applications (e.g., LastPass, Waze, FaceTime, TikTok) owned by corporate entities. Presently, the media conglomerates that own many of these digital technologies control nearly all the information that people produce and consume. As Robert McChesney observes, since the 1980s corporations have exerted more control over media and information since the 1980s. He contends that neoliberal economic policies, along with the emergence of a truly globalized economy and the rapid digital communication revolution, helped to facilitate the rise of corporate-owned media. This development in turn contributed to the acceleration of oligarchy and corruption as these media conglomerates anointed themselves as the "unquestioned regulator of all aspects of social life wherever profits may be made."[73] Recalling Postman, McChesney argues that this corporate commercial takeover of U.S. communication technologies undermined democracy by eroding belief in institutions such as journalism and altering the nature of truth itself (again, think "fake news" or "alternative facts"), given that political and economic powerbrokers could ensure

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Knight, the *Cloverfield* Monster, and Their Brethren," *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 51-77, accessed August 19, 2023, https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/803.

[73] Robert W. McChesney, *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas* (New York: NYU Press, 2008), 233-34.

broadcasting advanced their own interests. Ultimately, McChesney identifies media reform as a vital component in overthrowing oligarchy.[74]

While Refn may disagree with McChesney over the need for media regulation given that he routinely calls for an uncontrolled future marked by "beautiful chaos,"[75] he nevertheless advances similar ideas regarding the need to disrupt corporate media. For Refn, corporate art is neither healthy nor interesting, and this is why he advocates for what he considers an unconventional cinema that thumbs its nose at traditional "Hollywood three-acts."[76] Throughout his career, Refn has discursively challenged the dominant neoliberal capitalist model of entertainment, as when he uses his heavily branded and highly curated streaming service to provide free access to a variety of texts and other materials produced outside of traditional institutions. At the same time, he performs the duties of an amateur curator devoted to keeping a record of subcultural art, ideologies, and histories that exist at the margins of core culture. With his branded persona, Refn seeks to educate others about independently produced regional cinema, thereby disrupting the commercial interests of massive media conglomerates while advancing a more democratic approach to entertainment and society itself.

Refn also challenges neoliberal political models via subversion of the socially constructed boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate culture. As Pierre Bourdieu notes, members of the ruling class exercise social control via different types of capital (social, economic, cultural), as doing so ensures the social and cultural reproduction of their values at every level of society, thus allowing them to remain in power. Part of how they accomplish this is by establishing boundaries between what they consider legitimate and illegitimate culture.

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[74] Ibid., 499.
[75] Refn, "Sex, Horror, and Melodrama."
[76] Fortune, "Refn on Exploitation Films."

These barriers often involve the construction of sex- and class-based barriers propped up by taste hierarchies that deem cultural objects either good or bad. For Bourdieu the expansion of a consumer economy across the twentieth century resulted in the affiliated rise of a consumer culture that places "ever greater emphasis on the production of needs and the artificial creation of scarcity,"[77] The production of needs in turn requires "the need for needs merchants and taste makers,"[78] giving rise to a new bourgeoisie primed to exploit "the new mode of profit appropriation."[79] Bourdieu refers to such needs merchants and taste makers as cultural intermediaries, a term that encompasses "the vendors of symbolic goods and services" such as "the directors and executives of firms in tourism and journalism, publishing and the cinema, fashion and advertising, decoration and property development."[80]

Refn's branded persona marks him as a cultural intermediary, given that he uses it to perform "the tasks of gentle manipulation,"[81] shaping people's "tastes for particular goods and practices" while "defining and defending (new class) group positions within society."[82] In Refn's case, he endeavors to shape people's tastes toward trash films while defining and defending a new class group position focused on celebrating illegitimate culture in the form of bad taste art. Here, Refn's actions align with those performed by influencers, or individuals who venture outside of standard capitalist roles to take control of their own labor. Influencers rely heavily on Web 2.0 technologies to spread their own personal brands across a variety of platforms. Refn's own brand spans platforms like X, byNWR, and various screens both big and small.

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[77] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (New York: Routledge, 1984), 369.
[78] Jennifer Smith Maguire, "Bourdieu on Cultural Intermediaries," in *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader*, eds. Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Matthews (Newbury Park: SAGE, 2014), 18.
[79] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 311.
[80] Ibid., 310-11.
[81] Ibid., 365.
[82] Maguire, 16.

With projects like byNWR and *The Act of Seeing*, Refn lends his name and his branded

identity to cultish films like *The Old Man's Bride* (George Gunter, 1967) and *Keep My Grave*

Open (S. G. Brownrigg, 1976), thereby generating interest in them among fans of his own work.

In this regard, the byNWR streaming service resembles the branded home video labels of the

1990s, such as Quentin Tarantino's Rolling Thunder Pictures, which distributed films like

Switchblade Sisters (Jack Hill, 1975) and *Mighty Peking Man* (Meng-Hua Ho, 1977). As such,

Refn aligns with Jenkins et. al.'s contention that "known authors can become a tag for new

media content that can interest audiences in projects outside the mainstream."[83] Yet Refn's

actions as a cultural intermediary also illustrate the discursive dichotomy that defines his branded

persona, as so many of the films that that Refn champions were produced by white, cis-gendered,

heterosexual men almost entirely in service of generating profits.

Despite the numerous contradictions that exist within Refn's brand, he nevertheless

discursively establishes a stated goal of subverting capitalist ideologies and hegemonic taste

hierarchies. In many ways, polymediation helps Refn accomplish these goals, as Web 2.0

technologies facilitate a participatory culture that contributes to the spreadability of both media

and ideas, such as Refn's branded persona. Not only do social media platforms help Refn to

distribute more easily his ideas about subcultural art, but streaming video allows him to share the

exploitation films he loves with others. Here, Refn utilizes the increasingly digital media

landscape of the early twenty-first century to reach out to a networked community of like-

minded individuals who share similar tastes in movies, music, etc.

Within a participatory culture goods and services acquire value via a process that

involves "negotiation between different systems of evaluation, determining not only [an] object's

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[83] Henry Jenkins et. al., *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 243.

value but also how that value can be measured."[84] Refn engages in such negotiation as he assigns value to objects often dismissed as disposable or disreputable according to prevailing taste hierarchies. For Refn, the value of old exploitation films lies in their ability to disrupt conglomerate art designed to increase profits and turn viewers into consumers whose sole purpose is to purchase products related to this content. Refn further disrupts such consumerist impulses via the byNWR streaming site, which offers access to such films for free (though one needs an Internet connection to access them). Of course, this gratis access could diminish the value of these cultural objects as they are not affixed with a price tag, but Refn clearly sees them as valuable art objects that challenge prevailing cultural notions of good or bad taste, an idea that serves as the core of his branded persona, "Refn."

Conclusion

As discussed throughout this dissertation, Refn's brand celebrates low-budget regionally produced exploitation films, rather than mass-produced corporate art. Refn thereby disrupts the hegemonic, socially constructed boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate culture as established by the corporate ruling class. Media convergence and social media assist him in his efforts, as these developments allow Refn to establish a brand and act as an influencer whose identity is built around venerating folk work over conglomerate media. Yet, as critics such as Postman and McChesney point out, media convergence comes with a host of problems, not the least of which is the disruption of the traditional systems that regulate information, which could in turn lead to the downfall of democracy itself. Meanwhile, as Srnicek notes, the platform

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[84] Ibid., 87.

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capitalism inherent to convergence often exploits folk work by harvesting data, thereby turning people into commodities.

Refn aligns with notions of disruption and self-branding, using the tools of late-stage capitalism to subvert neoliberal ideologies and develop a persona that honors the analog media of the past. At the same time, however, he seemingly ignores the exploitative aspects of these digital tools. Indeed, Refn frequently exploits himself and his fans while also exploiting the folk works of the past that serve as the core of his branded persona, "Refn," all while allowing the exploitation of his brand by others. He asks fans to spread these old films across different platforms, attempting to raise awareness of them as a way of inspiring others to be more creative. Here, his predilection for old exploitation films becomes significant; Refn routinely claims that digital platforms like byNWR, which can serve as archives for a subcultural past, potentially contribute to the development of a brighter future built upon creative expression because disrupt twenty-first century conglomerate media. Yet the technologies that drive these platforms exploit individuals by harvesting their data. Thus, by transdiscursively building his brand online and allowing his polymediated identity to become commodified and used by others, Refn participates in the exploitation that often accompanies new technological advancements, especially those that occur within a neoliberal economic environment.

Conclusion

The Implications of NWR as Transdiscursive Auteur

As this dissertation has shown, Nicolas Winding Refn is a prime example of a transdiscursive auteur, or a creator who creates both texts and discourses that both contribute to the construction of a brand that spans and unites numerous media and platforms, as opposed to a traditional auteur whose work is often associated with a specific medium or modality. This type of creator appears well suited to the contemporary polymediated ecology because they can leverage their brands to create and/or navigate multiple media, platforms, and discourse(s), which are then connected through intertextual references. There exist examples of other creators that have worked across different media,[1] but Refn differs from them in that he utilizes all the tools provided to him by an increasingly polymediated ecology.

Refn thus demonstrates how an author can transition from creator to curator to content by drawing on both transdiscursivity and polymediation. During the early part of his career, Refn conformed to the traditional idea of a cinematic auteur in that, aside from a brief detour into television, he primarily made films that contained a core of meanings and thematic motifs. Then, in the latter half of his career, Refn emerged as a transmedia auteur, a creator whose work spans various media and platforms but nevertheless retains recognizable elements of the person who produced them. It was during this period that Refn also established himself as a curator dedicated to preserving low-budget regionally produced exploitation films of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s

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[1] For instance, Orson Welles, Lucille Ball, Alfred Hitchcock, Agnes Varda, and Quentin Tarantino have all moved between different media, including theater, television, and film. However, these creators are mainly associated with a specific medium (film in the case of Welles, Hitchcock, Varda, and Tarantino, and TV in the case of Ball). They were also not afforded the opportunity to use different media and technologies in the same way as a twenty-first century creator like Refn.

alongside the subcultures that spawned them. At the same time, Refn became content, as other creators such as Hideo Kojima appropriated and played with Refn's mediated persona in their own works.

This transformation from creator to curator to content was made possible by Refn's discursively generated brand, which established his ethos as a creator and remained consistent across an increasingly converged mediascape, made ever more interconnective thanks to polymediation. As such, an idea of "Refn" emerged, one that united not only his own works but also works produced by others. This idea in turn became a signifier that other creators could then draw on in their own works, using it to evoke a "Refn-esque" impression that conveys specific notions about art, exploitation cinema, the film industry, and more. In this way, Refn has established himself as an author who creates both texts and discourses that contain traces of his personality and remain recognizable across various media and platforms. Thus, he must be considered a transdiscursive auteur.

In addition to demonstrating how transdiscursivity facilitates the move from creator to content, Refn's career trajectory also offers vital insight into new forms of exploitation that can potentially result when an author makes that shift. Refn continues to work, most recently directing the longform advert *Touch of Crude* (2022), a 28-minute short film that showcases Prada's SS23 women's collection. Following this, Refn created the six-episode miniseries *Copenhagen Cowboy* (2023) for Netflix. The show, which follows an enigmatic young woman as she navigates Copenhagen's criminal underworld on the way to a showdown with her arch-nemesis, premiered in the United States on January 5, 2023, and much like his previous works it received a mixed (though generally positive) critical reception.[2] Next, Refn directed a music

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[2] As of this writing, the series holds a 67% "fresh" rating among critics on the review-aggregation website Rotten Tomatoes, which deems the series "Beautiful and mystifying as an art installation, Copenhagen Cowboy

video for rapper Travis Scott's song "Delresto (Echoes)," which is included in the anthology film

Circus Maximus (2023).[3] Refn has also announced additional projects, including a new

adaptation of *The Famous Five* (based on a series of beloved children's books by Enid Blyton)

for the BBC,[4] as well as an animated TV series.[5] Looking at these various projects, it becomes

obvious that Refn will continue to confound audience expectation during the next phase of his

career.

While it remains to be seen what this new phase will look like, and whether it will alter

Refn's discursively created brand in any way, it will nevertheless unfold within an increasingly

polymediated landscape that continues to experience upheavals. The next phase of Refn's career

coincides with the apparent implosion of streaming, as services have seen subscription rates

plummet since 2022. Netflix, for example, "lost 200,000 subscribers and nearly 40 percent of its

market value."[6] In response, streamers like Disney Plus and Max have raised their prices while

also canceling numerous high-profile shows and films to cut costs.[7] At the same time,

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follows in Nicolas Winding Refn's polarizing tradition of glacially paced crime thrillers that exude stylish cool." At the same time, *Copenhagen Cowboy* also boasts an impressive average score of 82% among general audiences. For more, see "Copenhagen Cowboy (2023)," Rotten Tomatoes, accessed August 22, 2023, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/copenhagen_cowboy/s01.

[3] The film also features segments directed by Gaspar Noé, Harmony Korinne, and Valdimar Jóhannsson, among others.

[4] See Max Goldbart and Melanie Goodfellow, "Nicholas Winding Refn's 'Famous Five' Adaptation Sets Cast; BAFTA Film & TV Committees; Screen Australia Access Program; 'All Quiet' Composer Honored – Global Briefs," last modified July 26, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/07/famous-five-nicholas-winding-refn-sets-cast-bbc-global-briefs-1235448299/.

[5] See Samantha Bergeson, "Nicolas Winding Refn Announces Animated TV Series in the Works," last modified July 22, 2023, https://www.indiewire.com/news/general-news/nicolas-winding-refn-animated-tv-series-1234886438/.

[6] Jason Parham, "Streaming is Too Big for Its Own Good," last modified June 13, 2022, https://www.wired.com/story/streaming-too-big/.

[7] For instance, Disney canceled the fantasy series *Willow* – a sequel to the 1988 film directed by Ron Howard – and removed it from their proprietary streaming service as part of broader cost-cutting measures. Warner-Discovery, meanwhile opted shelve a nearly completed direct-to-streaming Batgirl film (directed by Adil El Arbi and Bilall Fallah) as a way of reducing the company's tax liability. See Kat Bailey, "Willow Ended Less Than Six Months Ago, and Now It's Leaving Disney Plus," last modified May 19, 2023, https://www.ign.com/articles/willow-ended-less-than-six-months-ago-and-now-its-leaving-disney-plus; and Peter Bradshaw, "Tax Concerns Axed Batgirl, but Studios will Suffer if They Become Too Cynical," last modified August

blockbusters and franchise films have begun underperforming at the U.S. box office, with films like *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* (Peyton Reed, 2023), *The Little Mermaid* (Rob Marshall, 2023), and *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* (James Mangold, 2023) all falling short of expectations.[8] Meanwhile, Netflix is ending its DVD mail-order business, and Disney has begun making moves to discontinue physical media (though the company recently announced a physical 4K Ultra HD release of the 2022 film *Prey*, directed by Dan Trachtenberg).[9] Much like the first two phases of Refn's career, which occurred in a period when media increasingly merged into a digital platform of entertainment (to borrow Refn's phrase) thanks to the introduction of new technologies, the next phase appears as though it will unfold against a similarly tumultuous backdrop.

The advanced digital technologies that emerged over the course of Refn's career have seemingly opened new avenues of exploitation, and massive media conglomerates appear primed to grasp these fresh opportunities to take advantage of creators. At the time of writing, members of both the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and Screen Actors Guild – American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) continue to strike over an ongoing labor dispute with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). The coinciding strikes, which began on May 2, 2023, and July 14, 2023, respectively, involve the lack of agreement over a new contract between SAG-AFTRA and the AMPTP. Points of contention include a disagreement over streaming residuals and regulation of self-tape auditions, as well as studio usage of artificial intelligence to scan actors' faces to generate performances digitally. With these

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3, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/aug/03/tax-concerns-axed-batgirl-but-studios-will-suffer-if-they-become-too-cynical.

[8] Lewis Glazebrook, "9 Upcoming Disney Movies We're Worried About After 2023's Box Office Struggles," last modified August 15, 2023, https://screenrant.com/disney-box-office-fail-upcoming-movies/.

[9] Hilary Remley, "Disney Discontinues Physical Media Releases for an Entire Continent," last modified July 30, 2023, https://collider.com/disney-physical-media-release-discontinue-australia/.

strikes, creators and performers are pushing back against exploitation by media conglomerates.

The studios and streamers have responded by allegedly declaring that they plan to let the strikes

"drag on until union members start losing their apartments and losing their houses," largely

because they feel as though they "would be in a position to dictate most of the terms of any

possible deal."[10] At the same time, one of the world's largest advertising firms is working to

thwart a California bill that would enhance people's control over the data that companies collect

on them.[11] These developments demonstrate that both tech companies and media conglomerates

will do whatever it takes to exploit creators, performers, and users, all while reinforcing Refn's

assertion that a handful of corporations currently control every aspect of culture.[12]

Such exploitative practices become significant when considering how a creator becomes

content through transdiscursivity and polymediation. This dissertation points to the need to

understand how these processes work and how they serve to transform creators into exploitable

content across various media and platforms. As such, the analysis here could be applied to other

creators to try to determine whether they conform to the idea of a transdiscursive auteur who

discursively creates a branded persona capable of being appropriated and played with by others.

For instance, the Game Grumps (Arin Hanson and Dan Avidan) could potentially be considered

transdiscursive auteurs; the duo has created a highly recognizable brand that remains consistent

across live performances, digital platforms (e.g., YouTube, Twitch, Twitter/X), and video games

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[10] Chris Murphy, "Studios Allegedly Won't End Strike till Writers "Start Losing Their Apartments," last modified July 12, 2023, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2023/07/studios-allegedly-wont-end-strike-til-writers-start-losing-their-apartments.

[11] Alfred Ng, "Ad Firm Plans to Use People's Data in a Maneuver to Sink Data Privacy Bill," last modified August 18, 2023, https://www.politico.com/news/2023/08/18/ad-giant-data-regulation-bill-00111849.

[12] See Nicolas Winding Refn, "Our Times Need Sex, Horror, and Melodrama," last modified July 4, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jul/04/nicolas-winding-refn-apocalyptic-times-cult-movies-can-save-us-bynwr.

such as *House Party* (2022), which features virtual avatars of Hanson and Avidan, who voice themselves.

Similarly, professional wrestlers Matthew Massie and Nicholas Massie, two brothers professionally known as Matt and Nick Jackson aka the Young Bucks, could also be considered transdiscursive auteurs. After spending years performing on the independent circuit, the Young Bucks launched a YouTube vlog called "Being the Elite," which helped them develop both their audience and their branded personae. This series eventually gave rise to the major wrestling promotion All Elite Wrestling (AEW), which spawned three weekly TV shows (*Dynamite*, *Rampage*, and *Collision*), two weekly YouTube series (*Dark* and *Dark: Elevation*), a reality series (*AEW: All Access*), a video game (*AEW: Fight Forever*), and several additional vlogs founded by other wrestlers such as Ethan Page (Julian Micevski), Evil Uno (Nicolas Dansereau), and Thunder Rosa (Melissa Cervantes). The Young Bucks appear in all these different media and platforms, which discursively contribute to the development of their brand while also allowing others to exploit and play with their mediated identities. As such, the Young Bucks could also be considered transdiscursive auteurs. The current analysis could reveal other transdiscursive auteurs and other forms of exploitation.

Furthermore, an additional analysis of byNWR could uncover how digital technologies assist in the creation of a brand while also considering how they contribute to or disrupt exploitative practices. The website offers all this material free of charge, but questions remain regarding what that means in terms of accessing the content. For instance, does the site disrupt those political economic structures that shore up the power of multimedia conglomerates? Is it more democratic than other streaming services or does it simply replicate their closed infrastructure, just without the subscription fee? After all, users still need internet connection and

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thus participation in the capitalist structure of streaming services. Other questions arise regarding the site's content. How do things like distribution rights impact or complicate the model that Refn and his collaborators developed with byNWR? Refn owns the prints, but how does he go about acquiring the rights to stream them? Does the free model impact this issue in any way? Finally, there are questions about what Refn's brand does for the archival organizations with whom he works. Does he raise their brand with consumers? Do these organizations and the films they preserve fall under Refn's own brand and thus become less visible? Questions remain regarding the streaming model, digital media, access, and copyright, but these remain beyond the scope of the current analysis.

Ultimately, Refn and "Refn" both emerge as useful case studies for popular culture scholars to explore, because they each allow researchers to consider how an author goes from creator to content via a discursively generated brand that remains recognizable and consistent across various media and platforms. In Refn's case, his brand provides insight into alternative popular cultures that exist alongside of – or even in opposition to – core culture, both from a historical and contemporary perspective. At the same time, his brand comes to encompass works produced by himself and others, and it becomes a readable text that other creators can incorporate and play with in their own projects. By developing a brand discursively devoted to celebrating the past while disrupting the present to bring about a more creative future, Refn shines a light on obscure subcultural histories that remain worthy of remembrance while simultaneously highlighting developing forms of exploitation, revealing how both contribute to the creation of a new digital platform of entertainment.

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APPENDIX

The Works of NWR (1996-2019)

This appendix contains brief plot synopses for each of Refn's film, television, and streaming projects discussed in this dissertation.

Pusher (**1996**)

Two low-level criminals, Frank (Kim Bodnia) and Tonny (Mads Mikkelsen), struggle to establish themselves as legitimate gangsters in Copenhagen's thriving gangland. Along with a former cellmate, Frank concocts a plan to sell heroin to a group of wealthy Germans, but the job goes south when police show up and bust Frank in the middle of the deal. Frank manages to escape conviction by tossing the heroin into a nearby lake before the cops catch him with it. Unfortunately, this decision leaves Frank unable to pay back his supplier, the amiable but cruel Serbian drug lord Milo (Zlatko Burić), who demands Frank return the money by the end of the week or face dire consequences. Enlisting Tonny's help, Frank sets out to raise the money, but each attempt ends in failure. Desperate to obtain the cash that can save his life, Frank grows increasingly abusive toward those around him, including his long-suffering girlfriend, Vic (Laura Drasbæk). Frank even beats Tonny within an inch of his life. When Frank finally manages to secure the money, an irate Vic steals it and flees to Spain. With this final failure, Frank finds himself alone, facing fatal consequences at the hands of Milo and his enforcers, who in the film's final sequence are seen laying down a plastic tarp in the dirty backroom of Milo's restaurant in preparation for the bloody torture they plan to inflict upon Frank.

Bleeder (**1999**)

A pair of disaffected slackers, aspiring tough guy Leo (Kim Bodnia) and shy film fanatic Lenny (Mads Mikkelsen), drift through Copenhagen's working-class neighborhood of Nørrebro. Leo lives in a rundown apartment with his girlfriend, Louise (Rikke Louise Andersson), while Lenny spends his days working in a video store and his evenings pining after a beautiful bartender named Lea (played by Refn's real-life wife, Liv Corfixen). When Louise announces she is pregnant, Leo erupts in anger due to feeling trapped in what he considers a dead-end life. That night, Leo and Lenny visit a dance club where they witness another patron receive a savage beating, an act that inspires Leo to purchase a gun for protection. To the consternation of Lenny and their mutual friend, Kitjo (Zlatko Burić), Leo grows increasingly aggressive and violent, to the point of pulling his newly purchased gun on his pals during one of their usual get togethers. Soon after, Leo viciously beats Louise, causing her to miscarry. In response, Louise's brother (and possible incestual lover), Louis (Levino Jensen), kidnaps Leo and forcibly injects him with HIV-infected blood obtained from a homeless drug addict and AIDS sufferer. Leo retaliates by shooting Louis in the stomach before shooting off his own hand and letting the blood drip into Louis' wound, after which Leo commits suicide. Following these events, a distraught Lenny finally works up the courage to speak to Lea, who seems equally shy but interested.

Fear X (2003)

Mall security guard Harry Cain (John Turturro) lived a quiet life in a sleepy unnamed Wisconsin town with his wife, Claire (Jacqueline Ramel), until she was gunned down in a seemingly random shooting at the shopping center where Harry works. Frustrated by the local authorities' inability (or possibly unwillingness) to turn up any leads or suspects, Harry sets out to solve the case on his own. He eventually comes to suspect that the deserted house across the street holds some clue to Claire's murder, so he breaks in to search for evidence. There, he discovers a

photograph of a woman and a child standing in front of a restaurant somewhere in Montana. Harry travels there in hopes of locating and interrogating the woman. Soon after arriving, Harry learns that the woman's name is Kate (Deborah Kara Unger) and that she is married to decorated police lieutenant Peter Northup (James Remar), who seems plagued by a dark secret. Unknown to all but his closest associates, Peter belongs to a secret society devoted to cleaning up corruption and crime within the police force, but during a previous mission he accidentally shot Claire. Peter confesses his mistake to his superiors, who order him to eliminate Harry, thereby halting his investigation. A guilt-ridden Peter arranges a meeting with Harry and confesses to the crime. In response, Harry physically attacks Peter, who shoots Harry and shoves him into an elevator. The doors shut and the wounded Harry experiences a series of disturbing blood-red visions of a woman's anguished face. The film then cuts to Harry lying in a hospital bed and speaking to a police officer. Harry confesses to the murder of Peter Nothrup, but a second officer soon arrives and announces they found no evidence of a murder. Later, the officer drives an emotionally exhausted Harry to the middle of a desert highway where Harry's car awaits. Harry gazes at the empty, arid landscape for several long moments before tossing the photographs pertaining to Claire's death to the ground. He then gets into his car and drives off.

Pusher II (2004)

Upon being released from prison, Tonny (Mads Mikkelsen) joins the criminal organization run by his estranged father (Leif Sylvester), a ruthless gangster known as the Duke. Soon after, Tonny bumps into a sex worker named Charlotte (Anne Sørensen), who informs him that he is the father of her child. She demands child support, prompting Tonny to embark on a series of disastrous criminal acts to try and raise the money. During one escapade, Tonny teams with a

local pimp and drug dealer known as Kurt the Cunt (Kurt Nielsen) to sell drugs to Serbian crime lord Milo (Zlatko Burić), but the deal falls apart, leaving the duo in debt to the Duke. Meanwhile, Tonny grows to care for his son and settles into the role of a father. Nearly all of Tonny's problems come to a head during the wedding of his friend, Ø (Øyvind Hagen-Traberg), who also works for the Duke. There, the Duke announces that he thinks of Ø as a son and Charlotte snorts cocaine with the bride. The next day, Tonny volunteers to convince the Duke's ex-wife Jeanette (Linse Kessler) to drop her custody claim over Tonny's younger half-brother, but the Duke orders Tonny to kill Jeanette instead. Tonny agrees but finds that he cannot go through with it, so he returns to his father to admit his failure. The Duke then berates Tonny, who snaps and stabs his father to death. Tonny flees the scene and makes his way to Charlotte's place, only to find her once again getting high instead of looking after their son. An irate Tonny gathers the boy in his arms and leaves the apartment, and together they board a bus and leave the city.

Pusher III (2005)

Aging Serbian drug lord Milo (Zlatko Burić) has grown tired of the criminal lifestyle and wants to straighten up prior to his daughter Milena's (Marinela Dekić) 25th birthday party. Nevertheless, Milo continues to engage in illicit activities, such as selling heroin and ecstasy. As Milo juggles running his criminal empire and preparing the lavish birthday feast, he runs afoul of an ambitious young drug dealer known as Little Muhammed (Ilyas Agac), who agrees to help Milo unload a large shipment of ecstasy but instead absconds with the drugs. Following Milena's party, Milo contacts his Albanian supplier Luan (Kujtim Loki) and admits that he lost the ecstasy. Luan uses the opportunity to force Milo into using his restaurant as a front for an underage prostitution ring. Initially, Milo agrees, but his conscience soon compels him kills Luan's henchmen. Soon after, a corrupt cop who worked with Milo in the past shows up with Muhammed in the trunk of his car. Milo contacts his old associate

and enforcer, Radovan (Slavko Labović), and the two torture the young drug dealer until he admits that the ecstasy was fake. Radovan then helps Milo dispose of the Albanian henchmen's bodies, after which Milo returns home, where he lights up a cigarette and gazes into the empty pool that dominates his back yard.

Marple, "Towards Zero" (original air date: January 28, 2007)

Miss Marple (Geraldine McKewan) attends a party thrown by the wealthy invalid Lady Tressilian (Eileen Atkins). The guest list includes tennis star Nevile Strange (Greg Wise), the former ward of Lady Tressilian's deceased husband, along with Strange's current wife, Kay (Zoë Tapper) and his ex-wife, Audrey (Saffron Burrows), making for a potentially awkward gathering. When the hostess and her friend, solicitor Frederick Treves (Tom Baker), both turn up murdered, Miss Marple sets about trying to nab the culprit, only to discover that Nevile committed the murders because he wanted to inherit Lady Tressilian's estate.

Marple, "Nemesis" (original air date: February 25, 2007)

Miss Marple and her nephew, novelist Raymond West (Richard E. Grant), embark on a tour of historic English houses at the behest of deceased solicitor Jason Rafiel, who had knowledge of an unsolved murder. The duo is accompanied by an eclectic group of characters that includes tour guide Georgina Barrow (Ruth Wilson) and retired butler Laurence Raeburn (George Cole). When a member of the tour dies under mysterious circumstances, Miss Marple, with Raymond's help, discovers that the case relates to the murder of Verity Hunt (Laura Michelle Kelly), a young woman who disappeared in 1939 while on the run from an over-amorous landlord. Marple learns that Verity traveled to Medhurst, where she found sanctuary with the nuns of Saint Elspeth's Convent. While there, Verity nursed and fell in love with a handsome young German

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pilot named Michael Faber (Dan Stevens). Unbeknownst to Verity, however, Sister Clotilde Merryweather (Amanda Burton) had fallen in love with her. In a fit of jealous rage, Clotilde killed Verity and disguised her corpse in the uniform of an unknown soldier also recovering at the convent. Clotilde then buried Verity's body in a grave next to another unknown soldier in the cemetery behind the convent.

Bronson **(2008)**

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 celebrity comes when a judge sentences him to seven years in prison for robbing a post office. While incarcerated, Peterson sets out to create a reputation for himself as Britain's most violent prisoner, unleashing all his violent impulses upon guards and fellow prisoners alike. Later, the government commits Peterson to a psychiatric ward where they keep him sedated. Peterson still manages to nearly kill another patient, however, and winds up in 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, during which time 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 ends up back in prison, spending nearly 30 years in solitary confinement.

Valhalla Rising **(2009)**

In this existentialist Viking epic, a mute one-eyed pagan warrior known only as One Eye (Mads Mikkelsen) struggles to survive in the harsh land of Scotland in the year 1000 A.D. For years, a

Norse chieftain named Barde (Alexander Morton) held One Eye captive and forced him to fight other prisoners to the death. One Eye eventually kills his captors and escapes along with a slave boy named Are (Maarten Stevenson). Almost immediately, the duo encounters a group of Christian Vikings on their way to Jerusalem to fight in the Crusades. One Eye and Are strike up an uneasy alliance with the warriors and join them on their journey the Holy Land. After spending several days lost in an ominous fog, One Eye and his new companions end up in a strange and unknown land where they all come face to face with their own mortality.

Drive (2011)

A nameless stuntman and auto mechanic (played by Ryan Gosling) living in Los Angeles moonlights as a getaway driver for the city's criminal element. Following a tense opening sequence, the driver moves into a new apartment and almost instantly falls for his attractive neighbor, Irene (Carey Mulligan). Yet complications arise when Irene's husband, Standard (Oscar Isaacs), returns home from prison. Meanwhile, the driver's partner, Shannon (Bryan Cranston), borrows money from a Jewish gangster named Bernie Rose (Albert Brooks) and uses it to purchase a stock car and set up a race team that the driver will lead. It turns out that Standard also owes money to one of Bernie's underlings, so the driver agrees to help him pay off his debt by orchestrating a pawn shop robbery. Unfortunately, Standard is killed during the heist, which the driver learns was just a set up to cover the theft of some Italian mob money. The driver returns home to explain the situation to Irene but must first deal with the hit man that Bernie has sent to kill Irene and her young son, Benicio (Kaden Leos). The driver violently dispatches the hit man and then sets out to take down Bernie and his brutish associate Nino (Ron Perlman) once and for all, even though he knows he likely will not survive the encounter.

Only God Forgives **(2013)**

Impotent American expatriate Julian (Ryan Gosling) operates a Muay Thai boxing club in

Bangkok as a front for his drug smuggling activities. One night, Julian's deranged brother Billy

(Tom Burke) kills an underaged prostitute and almost immediately winds up in police custody.

Chang (Vithaya Pansringarm), a retired police lieutenant turned vigilante, arrives at the location

with the girl's father, who proceeds to beat Billy to death. Afterward, Chang uses a sword to

sever Choi's right forearm as punishment for allowing his daughter to work as a prostitute. Soon

after, Julian's mother Crystal (Kristin Scott Thomas) arrives in Bangkok and orders Julian to kill

the man responsible for Billy's death. Julian refuses, believing the punishment to be justified.

Crystal then hires a pair of hitmen from a rival gang to kill Chang, who survives the attack and

quickly learns about Crystal's involvement. He hunts her down and stabs her to death, freeing

Julian from her domineering ways. Afterward, a contrite Julian offers his hands to Chang, who

cuts them off using the same weapon he used to kill Crystal. Chang then performs a song in a

karaoke club for an audience of his fellow police officers.

The Neon Demon **(2016)**

Following the unexplained deaths of her parents, sixteen-year-old aspiring model Jesse (Elle

Fanning) moves from Georgia to Los Angeles. There, she meets Dean (Karl Glusman), a

photographer who does her first photo shoot, and Ruby (Jena Malone), a makeup artist who

introduces Jesse to fellow older models Sarah (Abby Lee) and Gigi (Bella Heathcote). Jesse

signs with a modeling agency that organizes a test shoot with notable photographer Jack

McCarther (Desmond Harrington). Later, Jess lands a gig modeling for fashion designer Robert

Sarno (Alessandro Nivola), earning the ire of Sarah and Gigi. After the show, Jesse hears her creepy landlord Hank (Keanu Reeves) break into the room next door and assault the thirteen-year-old female occupant. Jess flees from her apartment and ends up at the home of Ruby, who makes unwanted sexual advances toward Jesse. Later that day, Ruby, Sarah, and Gigi kill Jesse and consume parts of her flesh while bathing in her blood. The following day, Sarah and Gigi attend one of Jack's shoots, but in the middle of it, a distressed Gigi suddenly runs to the bathroom and vomits up one of Jesse's eyeballs before stabbing herself with a pair of scissors. Sarah then calmly eats the regurgitated eyeball and returns to the shoot.

Too Old to Die Young (**2019**)

After his partner is murdered, a grieving police officer finds himself in an underworld filled with working-class hit men, Yakuza soldiers, cartel assassins, Russian mafia captains, and gangs of teenage killers. LA cop Martin Jones (Miles Teller) encounters an underground network of mobsters who order Martin to carry kill criminals on his own time with the help of fellow freelance avenger Viggo (John Hawkes). Martin agrees because he believes that the mobsters leader Damian (Babs Olusanmokun) can lead him to the man who killed Martin's partner.