Hero in the Shadows
Film Noir, Fairytale and Postmodernism in Drive

GABRIELLE O’BRIEN
Drive (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2011) is a film that revels in surfaces and reflections, and seduces the spectator with its irresistibly polished veneer. Yet this emphasis on surface offers paradoxical viewing pleasures. The film’s ultra-cool neon artificiality codes the film as self-reflexive, while also drawing attention to the conflicting narrative blueprints that underpin it. For like the sleek 1973 Chevrolet so thrillingly piloted by Driver (Ryan Gosling), Drive’s narrative framework is always on the move. The film self-consciously draws on both fairytale and film noir tropes and archetypes, and these often-contradictory reference points produce a highly kinetic aesthetic that is not easy to pin down.

Drive happily slows down for extended sequences that exude a distilled fairytale quality. These scenes privilege silence and slow-motion tableaux as Driver is rapturously inscribed as valiant hero. However, such sequences are increasingly disrupted by elements associated with the film noir tradition, most notably operatic bursts of violence and an oppressive atmosphere of moral decay. The dominant register is transformed from contemplation to action, from stillness to abrupt movement.

This alternating register responds to the changing circumstances of the film’s protagonist. Driver is a mechanic by day who also drives stunt cars for Hollywood movies. His driving skills are in demand; after hours, he drives the getaway car for robbers. Driver meets his neighbour Irene (Carey Mulligan) and is instantly captivated by her and her son, Benicio (Kaden Leos). Irene’s husband, Standard (Oscar Isaac), is released from jail instantly to help Standard enact a robbery to pay back his underworld debt, but the heist is a mafia set-up and Standard is shot dead. Driver agrees to help Standard enact a robbery to pay back his underworld debt, but the heist is a mafia set-up and Standard is shot dead. Driver is left with the money and must confront the criminals in that adorns the back of the garment. Driver’s reflection is caught in the centre of his identity like the masks we see him don on set: unfixed and fluid and available to hire for the right price. His white jacket connotes purity, but this is compromised by the threat of the scorpion that adorns the back of the garment.

FAIRYTEALE NOIR

The narrative recalls classical fairytale ‘quests’ in which characters must face treacherous challenges to restore some kind of order or balance. Winding Refn specifically cites Grimm fairytales as his inspiration: ‘You have the driver who’s like a knight, the innocent maiden, the evil king […] and the dragon’.4 This interplay of fairytale archetypes is pared back to a series of signifiers that resonate across literary and film forms. Driver’s car offers a potent example, signifying the white horse of classic fairytale mythology – the accomplice to his heroic deeds. Driver also possesses the selfless moral code of the fairytale prince or knight: he is committed to protecting Irene and Benicio, regardless of the cost to himself.

This fairytale narrative competes with the noir moods of ‘alienation, pessimism, moral ambivalence, and disorientation’.5 Many staple conventions of noir are evident throughout the film, such as the use of mirrors.6 In Drive, reflections and mirrors emphasise fluid identities, as well as the subjectivity (and therefore unreliability) of vision. This uncertainty escalates the often-pessimistic atmosphere of Drive’s diegesis. During a visit to Irene’s apartment, Driver’s reflection is caught in the centre of a mirror hanging on the wall. Tacked to the bottom of the mirror is a photograph of Standard and Benicio. Irene commands the front plane of the frame in medium close-up. Driver’s reflection is partially obscured by shadow, marrying his potential identity as fairytale saviour with that of noir antihero. The dominant moods here are ambivalence and uncertainty; the spectre of the absent father effects further disorientation. The highly stylised mise en scène fragments the spectator’s attention, underscoring a sense of disquiet.

Drive takes up film noir’s narrative tropes of criminality and violence, doomed love and the corrupted boundary between good and evil.7 The men in the film all have some kind of criminal connection, and are well acquainted with violence as a means of power and control. Even Driver’s employer, mild-mannered Shannon (Bryan Cranston), is not exempt from this economy of violence. ‘I repaid my debt,’ he says in ominous reference to his limp. Clearly, violence functions as stand-by currency in Drive’s noir-inflected landscape. However, the duality that underpins the character of Driver reinforces the sense of collapsed boundaries so central to noir cinema. As a stunt and getaway driver, he wears his identity like the masks we see him don on set: unfixed and fluid and available to hire for the right price. His white jacket connotes purity, but this is compromised by the threat of the scorpion that adorns the back of the garment.

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BORROWED STYLE

This overt use of film noir tropes and moods aligns Drive with neo-noir cinema. The term neo-noir refers to ‘any film coming after the classical film noir period that contains noir themes and the noir sensibility’. These films often self-reflexively respond to the aesthetic and thematic concerns of the classical film noir period, borrowing themes, narratives, characters and formal aesthetics from the original noir films. What emerges is a postmodern aesthetic that looks to the past and employs disparate formal elements to tell its story. ‘Everything is possible, and everything is recyclable in the polymorphous universe of virtuality,’ claims postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard. This ‘recycled’ aesthetic universe is evident in Drive, as the film borrows from both fairytale and noir conventions and archetypes.

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The film won Winding Refn the Best Director prize at Cannes, despite some commentators complaining about the film’s preference for style over substance. The New York Times film critic AO Scott called it ‘somber, slick and earnest, and also a prisoner of its own emptiness, substituting moods for emotions and borrowed style for real audacity’. This ‘borrowed style’ can also be read as nostalgic longing for the sensibilities of noir, notably the moody low-key shadows of such 1940s and 1950s films as Rebecca (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940) and The Big Combo (Joseph Lewis, 1955). In fact, Winding Refn references so many generic elements that Drive moves into the territory of postmodern pastiche, or ‘blank parody’. Fredric Jameson describes pastiche as being ‘the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry’. Unlike parody, pastiche is devoid of humour. It is repetition for the sake of repetition, without the knowing bite of satire.

This derivative approach is clearly signalled through Driver. His name is never disclosed, and his spoken dialogue is sparse, adding to the ambiguity of the character. This then opens up a space for the competing archetypal templates to manifest. Ultimately, this (superficially) fascinating tension between fairytale and noir narrative tropes takes precedence over the construction of a fully fleshed-out, recognisably human character. So although he exhibits the fairytale hero’s strong (often selfless) moral code, he is also the antihero of the noir tradition. Driver is a loner who is on first-name terms with criminality, yet his anonymous identity also amplifies the sense of competing archetypes.

At several points throughout the film – and particularly in scenes that depict violence – the spectator experiences visceral
exhilaration; sensory excess becomes the most insistent keynote. Winding Refn acknowledges that he enjoys movies that arouse him, and this is evident in his visceral style of filmmaking. Drive’s sensory mode of address reveals a fetishistic aesthetic that values elegantly ‘empty’ stylised composition above all else.

LOOKING PAST

The film’s opening sequence sets up a collision between competing archetypes; while the moody Los Angeles cityscape is classic noir territory, Driver’s presence is ambiguous. He signifies the fairytale hero’s command and control as he glides through the streets, yet he is also the noir antihero, hopelessly immersed in this universe. The pulsing electro track (Kavinsky’s ‘Nightcall’) is sensuously engaging, in keeping with Drive’s fetishistic aesthetic. It is also superficial, keeping the spectator’s focus at the surface of the film. This sequence establishes the film’s nostalgia-drenched tone. It is visually anchored in the Hollywood aesthetics of the 1970s and 1980s; the pink cursive retro titles, for example, recall films such as Cocktail (Roger Donaldson, 1988). Yet this temporal reflection is undercut by the synth-heavy pop song that plays, which merges past and present sensibilities, and introduces a postmodern disregard for conventional measures of time. A high-angle crane shot of a freeway with fast-moving traffic hurtling in both directions offers a neat visual metaphor: the past fleetingly intersects with the present, and this collapsed sense of time creates an artificial, highly stylised cinematic space.

The idea of the fetish is important here too, as we are introduced to the kind of obsessive, often-sexualised cinematic ‘looking’ that will characterise the film. The visceral, sensually charged mode of address is designed to arouse our senses purely for the sake of arousal. This reflects a postmodern emphasis on surface reality, and the idea that there is no ‘interior’ value to be found in Western (capitalist) culture. The prevailing postmodern framework makes for an engaging high-velocity encounter. At the same
old-fashioned editing tools (dissolves and superimposition) merge an aerial shot of the bustling freeway with a medium close-up of Driver as he cruises around the nocturnal city. Tellingly, the tension between archetypal fairytale hero and noir antihero is first suggested here. Gosling is contained within a hermetically sealed space; his car represents a symbolic and literal barrier from the dirty, exciting world outside its windows. This idea is developed throughout the film, but initiated here in the opening credit sequence. Selective focus emphasises an emotional disconnect between protagonist and setting; Driver is crisply focused in medium close-up, while the city outside is all brightly lit blur. This demarcation of physical space as a signifier of emotional space suggests that Driver’s fundamental (fairytale) purity is always somehow hanging in the balance. This precarious balance is threatened by staple film noir technical conventions. He is framed by a low-angle shot, suggesting threat or menace. This is amplified further by moody underlighting, which creates sharply defined shadows around Gosling. The ambivalent effect nods again to the competing narrative blueprints; does Driver represent a final bastion of optimism and hope, or is he a sinister figure already corrupted by the shadowy world around him?

The credits conclude with a showy matching of diegetic action with non-diegetic music, as Driver switches off the lights in his apartment in sync with the beat of the soundtrack. This forces our attention to the surface of the film, where we are invited to admire the interweaving of pastiche and fetish sensibilities. We are reminded that this stylised sheen is both the engine and the slick body of Drive. After all, a fetish is not supposed to accurately reflect the world; rather, it functions as a temporary pit stop from the banality of everyday life.
**BETWEEN TWO WORLDS**

This fetish sensibility pares back narrative, character and style to archetypal ‘essences’, and this is particularly evident in Winding Refn’s use of transitional spaces. The narrative tensions of *Drive* are externalised via the transitional rhythm of the lift in Driver’s apartment block. This reinforces the urban anonymity of the noir template, while suggesting the possibility of shifting character trajectories, as Driver oscillates between redemptive warrior and morally defective antihero.

The fairytale archetypes of ‘damsel in distress’ and ‘chivalrous prince’ are engaged when Driver assists Irene after her car breaks down. On the return journey to her apartment, Driver, Irene and Benicio are captured in near-static tableaux as the lift ascends. The possibilities of romantic love for Irene and a stable father figure for Benicio is theatrically invoked. The mise en scène suggests a euphoric moment containing a snapshot of a potential future. The diegetic sounds of the city that accompanied the previous scene are notably absent, and the juxtaposition of bustling metropolis with sudden silence suggests both unreality and reverence for this fledgling family unit. Driver and Irene are partially suffused in a white light that connotes an ‘otherworldly’ purity. A paradoxical implication now hovers over the stylised mise en scène; if realised, this romantic union may elevate Driver and Irene to a higher state of being, but Driver’s role as hero demands that he keep a chivalrous distance. Irene’s gentle nature inspires Driver to protect her and Benicio at any cost. This ironically precludes romantic love, as, in protecting her, Driver must engage with the violent hierarchy of the mob. Albeit innocently, Irene draws Driver into the treacherous web of doomed love usually enacted by the femme fatale of film noir. This dynamic renders their relationship ‘otherworldly’ because it can never be more than idealised fantasy. The shifting archetypes that inform Driver’s character cannot be adequately reconciled, so again our focus is restricted to the very surface of the image. Driver and Irene are contained within an artificial vacuum, a sensuous confection of colliding impulses brought to a temporary point of stasis.
The chivalrous physical distance that Driver, as redemptive figure, must maintain is collapsed in the transformative space of the lift, when Driver-as-hero is ruptured and displaced by Driver-as-noir-antihero. While they wait for the lift, Driver tells Irene that he was at the wheel of the getaway car when Standard was shot dead. Even though Driver’s motivation was always to protect Irene and Benicio, Irene is angry and slaps Driver across the face. The lift arrives to reveal a mafia gang member on the lookout for Driver. His presence signals contamination, as the pure fairytale narrative succumbs to the noir tropes of murder and violence.

The transformative space of the lift now reinforces Driver’s entrapment within the noir narrative. His white jacket matches the jacket of the criminal interloper, underscoring their shared proclivities for violence and illegal activity. The former (fairetale) promise of the white lighting is reappropriated by the treacherous noir fixation with superficial identity and double crossings. The fairytale prince’s life-saving kiss is ironically invoked when Driver leans in to kiss Irene, an extended slow-motion take that poignantly references earlier elevator scenes. His intention is to shield her from the threatening stranger even though he is visually inscribed as part of the noir tradition. The men are matched to the lift’s colour palette; their jackets both reflect and mirror the light inside the elevator and the browns of its newly claustrophobic interior.
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The kiss is emblematic of the contradictory impulses animating Driver, as discordant signifiers are forced to overlap. As the lift descends (its destination the literal and figurative basement), the disjuncture between hero and antihero is registered aesthetically. The gently pulsing synth track is at once wistful and up-beat, evocative of both spirituality and emptiness. The postmodern disdain for fixed meanings tempers the scene with ambivalence. The light that falls on Driver’s head recalls the halo of a Christian saint, yet this symbolic angel is also the harbinger of brutal, devastating violence. Low-angle framing reinforces menace as he brings his foot down repeatedly on the gangster’s face. We hear the horrific sounds of bones snapping as Irene’s face registers shock.

The point-of-view camera forces us to momentarily share the position of the victim; we look up at Driver’s frenzied, blood-spattered face. He has protected his damsel, but released his own primal penchant for violence. The lift door opens and Irene staggers away, horrified and bewildered. The prince’s kiss has orchestrated a perverse convergence between the fairytale and noir archetypes. This disruption bleeds the colour from the frame as Irene is claimed by the dark recesses of the basement car park. Antihero and hero effectively cancel out each other’s narratives; although Driver will ensure the preservation of Irene’s life at any cost, the romantic fairytale ending has been ruptured beyond repair.

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Endnotes

5. Conard, op. cit., p. 2.