

## Of Male Bondage

Violence and Constraint in *Only God Forgives*

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### Abstract

Classical Hollywood melodrama, often referred to as “women’s films,” are defined through their heightened emotional intensity and their confrontation of social issues. While usually regarded as finished by the late 1950s, in the past decade melodrama has returned in the different form of the male melodrama, articulating a concern with and anxiety of male frailty. In Nicolas Winding Refn’s delirious male melodrama *Only God Forgives* (2013), violence takes the place of crying as the expression of emotional intensity. The movie’s primary deviance from classical melodrama comes through in its emphasis on the body in pain as the locus for contemporary male gender trouble. This paper will investigate the gender negotiations of the movie through its reactualization of melodrama as a male gender form.

*Keywords* masculinity, melodrama, sensation, violence

In the following, I will investigate negotiations of masculinity in *Only God Forgives* (Refn 2013) through the film’s reactualization of melodrama as a masculine form. The movie’s primary deviance

from classical melodrama comes through in its emphasis on the body in pain as the locus for contemporary male gender trouble. I begin with the observation that melodrama is a cinema of heightened emotional intimacy. This is certainly not a radical statement in any way, and versions of this argument can be found in many critical works on melodrama. However, in Refn's delirious male melodrama violence takes the place of crying as the expression of emotional intensity. The film exchanges one form of sensation for another, thereby also changing the expression of classical melodrama's concerns of gender, sexuality, and family issues. My claim is that the concerns remain the same, despite their different sensate forms.

It is the bodily sensation of violence which interests me here, as distinct from Peter Brooks' (1994, 11) argument that melodrama re-invents a semiotics of the body. While Brooks' argument remains true, I find his explanation insufficient. While violence, posturing, and lack of expression are certainly semiotically coded, there is also an intensity which overflows signification. It is this excess of signification which cannot be captured narratively that becomes the focus of my discussion of *Only God Forgives*. Masculinity is at the crux of this overflow, something which is produced in the expression of emotions through violence. Such production of masculinity is presented as limiting and problematic throughout the film, setting up a tension between violence and constraint in unusual ways. How men's emotions play out on and with their bodies as violent sensations and sensations of violence become the focal point for how masculinity is embodied in the film, in ways which allow us to understand a deeper complexity of masculinity.

*Only God Forgives* is the story of Julian (Ryan Gosling), who deals drugs and runs a Thai boxing club in Bangkok. His brother Billy (Tom Burke) rapes and murders a young girl, after which police officer Chang (Vithaya Pansringarm) allows the father to kill Billy as revenge. Julian and Billy's mother Crystal (Kristin Scott Thomas) fly to Bangkok, demand that Julian avenge his brother's death, humiliate Julian for dating a sex worker, and finally hire a hitman to murder the father. This makes Chang hunt down and kill the hitman Byron (Byron Gibson), after which he faces off against Julian. Beating Julian, Chang proceeds to kill Crystal and the film concludes with Julian hallucinating having his hands cut off by Chang. The

final scene shows Chang at his favorite karaoke bar, singing. Throughout the film Julian experiences several hallucinations, and it is often difficult to separate the two levels as they intertwine. The film is hardly an exercise in realism and instead gains a lot from its surreal mode, employing degrees of heightened reality to add layers of intense sensations. Stylistically, the film is kept mostly in vibrant, rich red tones, with a droning ambient sound design which unsettles the tranquility of the *mise-en-scène*.

### Intense Sensations

What makes *Only God Forgives* distinct is the way it vacillates between violent sensations and sensations of violence. I take this approach from Gilles Deleuze's argument in *Francis Bacon* (2005), where violence is viewed as a cliché but all sensations act with violent force upon us. Sensations, for Deleuze, occur when we enter into a work of art and are filled with the most appropriate sensation, "not the most agreeable sensation, but the one that fills the flesh at a particular moment of its descent, contraction, or dilation" (Deleuze 2005, 29). This is, of course, in a different vocabulary, precisely what Linda Williams discusses in her essay "Film Bodies" (1991), where she argues for attention to how certain film genres, including melodrama, affect our bodies directly. Particularly, Williams emphasizes how female bodies are "the primary embodiments of pleasure, fear, and pain" (Williams 1991, 4).

This embodiment of affective states is precisely my interest in terms of *Only God Forgives* simply because pleasure, fear, and pain are primarily embodied in and through male bodies, in ways which Deleuze would identify as sensations of violence through representation: i.e. we see acts of violence directly. Rather than simply regarding Refn's film as a failed melodrama which resorts to clichéd representations, we should pay attention to how male bodies are subjected to violence, and how this affects our experience of the film.

Melodrama viewed this way becomes a set of felt intensities instead of a sign structure; in this case, a figuration of male bodily experience. Stuart Cunningham is on to something similar in an early article in which he argues that melodrama is a force-field – it serves as a dynamic space in which a variety of concerns are drawn into shifting, changing patterns (Cunningham 2000, 191). The problem with Cunningham's account is that he considers melodrama to

be mimetic, i.e. representational, of periods of social crisis. While I agree that melodramas deal with social crises, I am more wary of the notion that melodramas represent social crisis through narrative means.

My concern arises from the fact that most canonical definitions regard melodrama as inherently excessive. It is this excess which makes narrative-semiotic analyses insufficient for properly understanding the emotional and bodily sensations of watching *Only God Forgives*. My resolute turn to embodiment is connected to the fact that male bodies are often seen as central to articulations of masculinity. Fintan Walsh argues that hypermasculinity excessively emphasizes physical strength, often by reducing the male body to its basic motor function of punching, kicking, stretching, and so forth (Walsh 2010, 65). It is the friction of reduced embodiment and failure which turns *Only God Forgives* into something other than a martial arts thriller – what I refer to as a male melodrama with an emphasis on the body as caught between sensations of violence and violent sensations. In this way, Jennifer Barker argues, we feel the film's body and its movements so much so that we often leave a film physically and emotionally exhausted and drained (Barker 2009, 83).

If, as Jane Shattuc argues, melodrama is a major site for political struggles of the disempowered (Shattuc 1994, 148), then *Only God Forgives* does something completely unexpected: it places the strong, violent male protagonist in a disempowered position and by extension makes us feel disempowered. The hyper-formalist framing of the entire film serves as a kind of constraint, not only of Julian but also of us. Narratively, Julian is constantly acted upon by outside forces, while visually he is consistently placed within a limiting *mise-en-scène*. Julian's body is consistently rendered powerless, which produces a significant tension between the typical emotional intensity of melodrama acted on women's bodies with men as the agents of action, and the violence committed on Julian's body. Violence of sensation translates through sensations of violence and registers as disempowering affects on us: we are stunned by the violence and left powerless by the surreal visuals of the film.

## Violence

The violence represented and acted out in *Only God Forgives* comes primarily in the form of Chang, the singing police officer. While the

other acts of direct, bodily violence are either left out in a narrative ellipses (the rape and murder of the girl) or only seen indirectly (the revenge murder of Billy), Chang's violence is presented in all its gory detail and excess. It is this stylized display of violence which turns the bodies into figures of violence rather than the violence of the represented. When the hitman who tried to kill Chang is sliced open, we do not see the blade cutting through his flesh. We only see the pulsing, squirting gap left in his body in extreme slow-motion which abstracts the violence into shock.

Classical melodrama presents emotional intensity through close-ups of teary faces, gestures of dismay, and bodies quivering with sobs. By contrast, *Only God Forgives* revels in broken and beaten bodies, flowing with blood instead of tears. The sensations are no less violent than in classical melodrama but suggest a different vibration. Peter Brooks argues that melodrama is marked by "acting out" rather than repression: bodily actions and gestures represent meanings otherwise inaccessible to representation (Brooks 1994, 19). While there is some truth to this argument, it overlooks that fact that melodrama is a genre of bodily presence, one in which we feel a "lack of proper esthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion" (Williams 1991, 5). I shudder as Chang drills knives into Byron's hands and then legs, my body jolts when Chang thrusts his sword into Crystal's throat and blood spurts as he pulls it out. These visceral shocks are not Brooks' semiotics of the body but the excessive presence of a hysteric's body (Deleuze 2005, 36).

Clearly, violence in *Only God Forgives* is enacted through male bodies, just as male bodies are also the sources of negative affects of lust, pride, and inadequacy. Billy's lust makes him rape and murder, Chang's pride leads him to torture and maim, while Julian's inadequacy leads to his mother's death and his own symbolic emasculation. Masculinity is shown to be fraught with complexities and anxieties but only expressible through violence. What is more, it is also primarily male bodies that suffer violence acted upon them. Billy is murdered, Byron tortured to death, and Julian is maimed. Yet there is an intimacy to this violence, the brutality makes up for, or stands in for, the emotional intensity which the characters clearly feel. While all the actors' performances are generally disaffected, almost numb in their facial expressions, intense sensations play across their bodies and that of the spectator.

The embodied feelings enacted through the excessive violence are overly present; they force themselves upon me and allow for no distance. The slowness of the film, the glacial narrative pacing, the languid acting are all features which almost lull me to sleep, transpose me into a sedate state of mind, only to erupt into stunning images of violence. The sensation of the film is one of placidity and visual hypnosis in contra-point with moments of spectacular pain. The resulting embodiment is intimate and brutal at the same time, a disturbing combination.

If masculinity has traditionally been seen as proceeding from male bodies, as Raewyn Connell argues in her classic *Masculinities* (Connell 2005, 45), then masculinity is positioned as inherently violent in *Only God Forgives*. However, Connell's main argument is that masculinity is not the same as men. In a move drawn from feminist theory, Connell dislocates biology and sociology and insists that masculinity is best understood as multiple - masculinities. While my interest here is not in unweaving Connell's sophisticated argument, I wish to emphasize the importance of her notion that masculinities emerge with male bodies even if these bodies are not static or pre-given and even though we do not experience the world through our body as if it were a medium. Rather, masculinities articulate differently through complex foldings irreducible to identity, being instead embodied relations with itself and other bodies.

### Physical Constraint

I have already pointed out how violence works as one articulation in the film. Through a contrapuntal strategy, *Only God Forgives* opens up an embodiment which is decidedly shocking and unexpected. While melodrama has traditionally emphasized emotion as its bodily excess, *Only God Forgives* emphasizes violence, but keeps the perversion of masochism in place, I would argue. Furthermore, the presumed audience might be women considering Ryan Gosling's star image, but is actually closer to a male audience due to the film's emphasis on men, male emotions, male interaction, and male-on-male violence. While this may appear trivial at first glance, the fact that the spectator position remains primarily passive as well as masochistic is in fact surprising.

The active, action-oriented male with a free range of agency has become orthodox in film studies, where the challenge has primarily

been to articulate how and why others might still enjoy and negotiate films which are inherently chauvinistic. While certainly a necessary approach, what fascinates me instead is how *Only God Forgives* figures a male body primarily placed under physical constraint. While Refn has argued that Chang is the same character as Driver (Ryan Gosling) in *Drive* (2011) (Barlow 2014), the main difference is that Chang is not the protagonist. Instead, any form of narrative identification comes through Julian and he is consistently figured as incapable of action.

Throughout the film hands become the body parts mostly associated with action and capability. There are several close-ups of Julian looking at his hands or fists, the first before he has even spoken. Of course, as punishment for his misdeeds Julian's hands are cut off by Chang in a hallucination at the end of the film, symbolizing Julian's inability to avenge his brother and protect his mother. This importance of hands is also evident in how Julian prefers to be tied up while Mai masturbates, rather than engage in more traditional forms of sex. Julian clearly enjoys being passive and constrained. In the same manner, the raped and murdered girl's father Choi Yan Lee (Kowit Wattanakul) has his hand cut off for letting disgrace fall on his daughter. Byron, as mentioned, has his hands pierced by knives. In other words, hands and their maiming are central in figuring capability and incapability.

The significance of hands comes primarily from their use as fists, clearly on display in the climactic battle between Julian and Chang. Poised narratively to be the moment when Julian vindicates himself, defeats Chang, and wins back the love of his mother, Julian is instead severely beaten. The camera swirls around Julian and Chang as they fight making the fight feel like dance, which first creates an uplifting sensation that turns into frustration as Julian cannot even land a single punch. Constantly Julian's body cannot express itself as it desires, and our embodiment is similarly frustrated and constrained. The scene begins to cross-cut between the fight and a bronze statue of a younger Chang as a Thai boxer. Not only do these shots suggest Chang's Thai boxing skill but also suggests a hardness of his body, something which Julian cannot compete with as his face gets pummeled and begins to bleed, faltering and finally falling over, defeated. In a long shot, we see Julian alone ly-

ing on the floor of the boxing ring, the camera tracking away from him, leaving him behind.

Much like Julian is framed by the boxing ring when he is defeated, so do we generally find him framed by doorways, windows, and porches in the last part of the film, when he goes to Chang's house to kill him. The framing remains tight, so that while the shots are generally plan-american (knees-up framing), Julian is visually constrained and reduced along the visual plane to only one element among others. As his options narrow, he has no place to go, and the walls start to come in quite literally. This sense of confinement stands in contrast to Chang's framing, which at first may seem similar. Chang is framed in the final third of the film by the porch and by windows. However, with his confident stance and his back turned to the spectator, he seems more in control than Julian, surveying a landscape, in charge of his body and his fate.

Julian's bruised, battered body cannot but bend away, bowing in admission that he has been bested. Our embodied feelings curdle into admiration, frustration, and reduction. Julian's final refusal to avenge his rapist brother and defend his controlling mother remains ethically valid, yet does not release the pressure and tension built up throughout the film. We are physically constrained by the film as it offers no embodiment for the conventional feelings of action or agency for a male protagonist. Instead of a climactic battle where Julian vindicates himself, the film ends with his hands being cut off, yet even this reduced embodiment cannot be resolved narratively; it only exists as a hallucination. Presumably Julian fantasizes about this form of punishment as an extension of his sexual fetish of bondage, thereby positioning the punishment ambiguously as both feared and desired.

Yet the spectator position of violence and masochism remains incongruous and unusual for male spectators; we are not used to this blurring of the boundaries between passive suffering and active masculinity. There are no scenes of the type spoken of by Williams (in relation to horror films), where a female stand-in character suffers punishment. Instead, only the male body is punished on screen, while also being visually constrained. The ensuing reduced embodiment is one of violent passivity, an inability to act out sensations and affects through the cinematic images.



Masculine embodiment in *Only God Forgives* is both intense and ambiguous. We are placed in a passive-masochistic position rarely delegated to men, while at the same time even experiencing hints of fetishization of this position. The primary critique of masculinity comes through in the paucity of male emotional expression as limited to moments of violence. Such limited capacity to experience emotions is in itself constraining. As such, the film reveals that the end point of masculinity as a singular expression of power and force is a dead-end, as crippling for men as for anyone else. That dead-end also reveals that the fetishization of a crippling form of masculinity makes it very easy for men (in this case Julian) to step into positions of innocence, and argues that men are as much victims of patriarchal violence as women are. Such arguments always ring hollow in the way they overlook the privileges of being male. *Only God Forgives* does not resolve this tension, but the film does subject the spectator to sensations of violence and constraint in ways that most films rarely do. As such, at least *Only God Forgives* articulates what is at stake in producing new forms of masculinity: forms must be found that are not productions of violence.

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