***‘The Letting Go’*:**

**The Horror of Being Orphaned in Nicolas Winding Refn’s Cinema**

**Mark Featherstone**

**Sociology**

**Keele University**

**Keele**

**Staffordshire**

**ST55BG**

**UK**

[**m.a.featherstone@keele.ac.uk**](mailto:m.a.featherstone@keele.ac.uk)

**February, 2017**

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**I**

**Orphanus Sum**

In this article I explore the recent cinema of the Danish-American Director Nicolas Winding Refn through the lens of Jungian psychoanalysis, Bataillean philosophy, and Buddhist thought. By focusing on Winding Refn’s three most recent films, *Drive* (2011), *Only God Forgives* (2013), and *The Neon Demon* (2016), I show how he represents the horror of contemporary orphan identity, which he contrasts with a mystical sense of wholeness and unity that I suggest we find in the works of Jung, Bataille, and before both of these writers, Buddhist philosophy. Against the lonely figure of the orphan who we find outlined in Jung’s (2002) work on child archetypes, Winding Refn constructs a nightmarish dystopia, the post-modern city, which is characterised by violence, objectification, and estrangement. Inside this frame, Winding Refn tells the story of the destroyed self of the lonely orphan lost in post-modern urban space, and considers possible futures for the abandoned, exposed, desperate individual. It is precisely this story of loneliness, abandonment, and tragic attempts to escape which I explore in this paper by first, showing how *Drive* exposes the horror of the orphan in contemporary Los Angeles and captures the terror of the self endlessly on the run; second, reading *Only God Forgives* in terms of an attempt to think through possible escape from the desperate condition of the orphan by taking up Buddhist philosophy and the ritualistic destruction of the self; and finally thinking about the way *The Neon Demon* opposes these two positions through a psycho-politics of on the one hand desperate self-making and on the other hand the Buddhist non-self and cosmological escapism. In this respect, I read Winding Refn’s films through a dialectic of ego-building and self-annihilation, and show how the urban back drop to his story of self-making and unmaking is important, first for opening up the possibility of a socio-psychoanalysis of the self, and second for thinking about the globalisation of the traumatic condition he makes central to his vision. By staging his story across two world cities, LA and Bangkok, I think that what Winding Refn achieves is the globalisation of his contradictory Freudian-Jungian complex defined by the traumatic pursuit of self-identity, and the construction of a narrative that speaks to the psychoanalysis of both western and eastern visions of what it means to have and be a self. In Winding Refn’s cinema, there is no easy way out of the nightmare of the orphan, since what he presents is either what we find in *Only God Forgives*, which is the annihilation of the self through the ritualistic destruction of the ego, or perhaps the ultimate message of *The Neon Demon*, where the horror show focuses upon attempts to internalise or swallow the violence of objectification and present the mutilated self as somehow indestructible and immortal.

In the first instance my interpretation of *Drive*, *Only God Forgives,* and *The Neon Demon* takes the form of an Oedipal reading of the lonely protagonists’ loss of parental support and attachment, but deeper analysis reveals a wider frame where the estrangement of the orphan takes on cosmological proportions. Here, the normal Freudian struggle between little boys, little girls, Mom, and Dad, which passes through the phallic stage of the original orphan Oedipus, shades into the Jungian interpretation of loss and estrangement where the fate of Sophocles’ tragic hero becomes a symptom of the more profound mutilation of the self, construction of the ego, and repression of the collective unconscious into mythological symbols. This is why I entitle the first section of the article *Orphanus Sum* (I am Orphan), because I seek to move beyond the Freudian (1991) interpretation of Oedipus, which connects to the phallic stage of psycho-sexual development that is normal and necessary for the emergence of the more or less healthy individuated ego, in order to emphasise the Jungian (2002) vision of the universal archetypal orphan which says something more about the profound loss and deep wounds brought about by apparently normal processes of western psychological individuation. According to this perspective, which Jung outlines across his works, but most specifically in his essays on the primordial child, Freud plays down the horror of Oedipus, and the horror of being orphaned, and somehow normalises the profound estrangement that ruins lives. It is this violence, the true horror of Oedipus exposed on the mountainside, estranged from his parents, and left to live out his life in exile, which I think it is possible to observe in Winding Refn’s cinema, more than the basic Freudian interpretation of Sophocles’ hero which revolves around the love for the mother and hatred of the father. Where Sophocles’ (1984) Oedipus in exile wanders about crippled and blinded, Winding Refn throws his own orphans into the urban wilderness of contemporary LA on the west side and Bangkok on the east side of our globalised world, where they undertake their desperate search for some relief from the horror of their loneliness. But there is very little relief to be found for the tormented self.

Wandering these urban spaces, characterised by crime, sex, violence, consumption, fame and every other kind of narcotic known to humanity, we see that Winding Refn’s protagonists find that there is no relief for the ego haunted by primordial loss. The options here are either western drive, and the endless pursuit of the object that will apparently result in the completion of the self, or eastern emptiness, and the annihilation of the ego in rituals of self-destruction comparable to the Buddhist practice of *chod*, where the imaginary persona is torn asunder by demons and devils until they vanish into nothingness. It is this latter possibility, which reflects the profundity of the orphan’s loss and the potential unity of opposites that waits on the other side of the ego, that provides the cosmological dimension of Winding Refn’s films based in two cities known for their angels and demons – Los Angeles and Bangkok. This is why his films, which similarly recall the noir of the 1940s and 1950s and neo-noir of the 1980s and 1990s where the civilized spaces of the city are revealed to be places of crime, violence, and uncivilization, also have a kind of mystical side that turns on the opposition between the profane world and the sacred cosmos. Here, the deep contrasts of the noir universe, where light and dark reveal the duality of the city first identified by Simmel (Frisby and Featherstone, 1997) and Benjamin (1999), symbolise existential and cosmological alternatives that frame the fatal choice that confronts Winding Refn’s characters. They can either remain caught up in the meaningless world of base materialism, where things are women, children, narcotics and other objects that can be bought and sold for self-satisfaction, or abandon the hopeless ego for immersion in some universal anonymous substance. This substance is the Freudian (2003) oceanic, the Jungian (1991) unconscious, Bataillean (2015) communication, and the Buddhist state of nirvana. This is the death of the self and the end of the ego consumed with its own survival in the face of the truth that it can never stands on its own.

It is this fatal choice that I think Winding Refn sketches across *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and *The Neon Demon* and that I propose to explore through my article. In the first instance, I take Winding Refn’s *Drive* as a story of exposure, abandonment, alienation, estrangement, loss, and the drive to escape. My argument here is that what we see in the film is Driver’s desperate attempt to create a whole self through a surrogate family in the psychotic spaces of LA. The problem with this strategy is that it ultimately ends in failure and the ensuing blood bath means that Driver’s escape is into an empty future characterised by endless drive. Moving on, I consider *Only God Forgives* and emphasise the way that Ryan Gosling’s Julian must fight to secure his sense of self in the face of the cosmic emptiness represented by Chang, ‘the Angel of Vengeance’, who polices the streets of Bangkok. From the cosmological point of view, Chang is representative of a Buddhist demon who promises the extinction of thirst, the painful end of drive, and the violent death of the self. Although Julian resists throughout the film, this is the choice he makes in the end when he offers up his arms up to the demonic cop. Finally, turning to *The Neon Demon* and returning to LA, Winding Refn explores the horror of the insulated self, self-making, and objectification in the fashion industry where Jessie becomes a thing of beauty consumed by those hungry for immortality and escape from the horror of being orphaned. Here, cold electric neon simultaneously captures the way Jessie is visualised, objectified, commodified, and eventually consumed by the industry that promises to make her famous and consequently immortal, but also opens out onto the empty light of contemplation or enlightenment without an object that promises some other way of living. This is the final, cosmic, perspective that Jessie adopts on pain of death.

While the principal monster of *The Neon Demon*, the reptilian Sarah, consumes Jessie in the name of her own survival on screen, Jessie herself dies in the swimming pool and escapes into the cosmos that stretches out above her smashed head. In this respect, my argument is that Sarah represents the horror of the commodified self, endlessly on the run from the truth of essential estrangement through the construction of an over-blown imaginary ego (what else is beauty on screen?), whereas Jessie follows Gosling’s Julian and plunges into the emptiness of ego-less undifferentiated space when she falls victim to her beauty hungry killers and becomes their ticket to the immorality of the self that is never really an option. Throughout my reading of both *Only God Forgives* and *The Neon Demon*, I make use of Bataillean philosophy in order to show how the orgy of crime, violence, sex, visuality, and luxury eventually tips over into a mystical, atheological, form of escape from the horror of drive. Here, I draw upon Bataille’s work on the economics of excess and luxuriousness (1991), his dark atheology (2014, 2015), plus his pornography (2001) concerned with the destruction of vision. In each case Bataille shows how violent attempts to capture, consume, and destroy ultimately lead beyond the world of profane things towards a sacred universe of dark divinity where even the self ceases the exist and continuous being reigns. In the case of *Only God Forgives*, this tension between the profane world of things and the sacred universe of continuity takes the form of the opposition between sex, violence, crime, and the commodification of bodies *and* Buddhist history, culture, and philosophy which is written into the very fabric of the Thai capital Bangkok. Where *The Neon Demon* is concerned, the profane world is similarly represented by the objectification of bodies and the violent pursuit of fame and beauty, where the endless space of the sacred is captured by the end of the narcissistic, desperate, self and the emptiness of the cosmos that eventually absorbs the film’s main character, Jessie.

Although symbols of light, darkness, the seen, and the unseen are present in *Only God Forgives* in the form of stylistic devices familiar from noir and neo-noir cinema, these become far more pronounced in *The Neon Demon* where concepts of visibility and invisibility and enlightenment and darkness structure the narrative of the film, which revolves around Jessie’s progressive exposure in the LA fashion scene; her increasing transformation into a beautiful image; her murder, consumption, and fall into the darkness of the cosmos; and finally Sarah’s refusal to recognise the horror of her own monstrous metamorphosis. The similarity between the final scene of *The Neon Demon*, where Sarah eats Jessie’s eyeball, and the close of Bataille’s pornographic *Story of the Eye* (2001), where the matador’s gouged eye disappears into the female protagonist’s vagina, is clear but the political and philosophical meaning of the consumption of the eye and the violence against visibility is reversed. While Bataille’s protagonist inserts Granero’s eyeball into her vagina in a gesture which captures the way extreme visuality eventually tips over into divine darkness, my sense is that the meaning of Sarah’s consumption of Jessie’s eyeball brought up by Gigi who can no longer take the horror of objectification, commodification, and estrangement is ultimately conservative. What Sarah’s consumption of Jessie’s eye means is that she refuses to recognise the inhuman horror of the LA fashion scene which turns bodies into things to be destroyed in the name of beauty because she thinks she can stay ahead of the game. This is why she prefers to swallow the possibility of escape represented by recognition of the horror of the orphaned armoured ego in the name of the endless, cynical, drive for immortality that ultimately leads nowhere.

This is precisely the psychological problem Winding Refn sets up in *Drive*, where the main character, Gosling’s Driver lives in a city where everybody is reduced to the status of an object that can be bought and sold. Akin to his construction of Bangkok in *Only God Forgives*, which is a failed utopia of sexual desire unleashed where people relate to each other on the basis of ‘fucking’ or ‘being fucked’, Winding Refn’s LA is a profane utopia, characterised by broken dreams, a deep sense of loss, and a desperate desire for escape. The loneliness of Winding Refn’s noirish LA is captured by Driver’s own anonymity and lack of identity. He has no name, or at least we never learn his name, and spends his time searching for a surrogate family to establish some kind of connection with others. He seeks this out with single mother Irene and her young son Benicio, but this results in the blood bath that forms the centrepiece of the film, and he ends up on the run into the endless future. Sociality is barred for the orphan Driver, who wanders about looking for some form of human intimacy, and it becomes clear that there is nothing beyond drive. In the end we learn that ‘he drives, that’s all he does’ and realise that the only relationship he has is with the engines that relentlessly propel him into the future. In this respect the engine is a defensive technology that prevents Driver from ever having to face the horror of his being orphaned through the way it relentlessly moves him around the city which is itself a metabolic system set up less to provide a space for civility and intimacy and more to endlessly defer loneliness and estrangement in the possibility of utopia somewhere far off down the road. While this is perhaps *the* Californian utopia, or autopia, where happiness means never stopping to realise the horror of the present defined by the pain of loss, Winding Refn imagines a similar psycho-social space in the Thai capital in *Only God Forgives*. Here, Gosling’s Julian traffics drugs and prostitutes for the family which is broken and destroyed. Dad is dead, Mom is at home in America, and Julian has to keep the business running and take care of his psycho brother, Billy. In much the same way that Driver circulates the metabolic city of LA, looking for, but failing to find hope in others, Julian is caught up in the criminal economy of narcotics and women that never ends. Akin to Driver’s loneliness, the problem of Julian’s dark economy is that everybody is a thing with the result that he’s completely alone. He can’t find human connection by relating to inhuman things. But if that’s not bad enough things take a turn for the worse when Billy kills an underage prostitute and sets off a cycle of violence that brings Julian into conflict with Chang, the demonic cop who destroys the family business and eventually saves him from his life of crime.

From a Freudian point of view it looks like Chang is Winding Refn’s Oedipal father, who brings Julian under control, but I think the wider Buddhist frame of the film suggests that what this demonic figure actually represents is the philosophical idea of salvation through the annihilation of the self and the extinction of thirst, which is, of course, precisely the opposite of the Freudian position concerned with the defence of the ego. Although Julian clings to his sense of self through the film, and asks Chang if he wants to fight (a key tagline of the film is ‘wanna fight’), his profane world is ultimately meaningless before the vast emptiness represented by Chang and the film ends with violent amputation that suggests Julian’s transcendence of material concerns. The horror here is that Julian loses his arms, which represent his ability to fight and make his self, so that he can let go of his addiction to his ego and become one with the universe. At this point Julian escapes his self and the cycle of drive set up to provide some sense of the possibility of immortality and comes home. This is how, I think, Winding Refn imagines escape from the condition of being orphaned, which is perfectly captured by Gosling in both *Drive* and *Only God Forgives*. In both films Gosling portrays the profound loss of the orphan through an inability to communicate that reflects his estrangement from sociability and intimate relations. In the face of their traumatic family lives, Gosling’s Driver and Julian have both retreated back into their selves in a kind of defensive autism organised to seal their fragile egos from external attack with the knock on effect that they are also completely alone in the world.

Although the root of Driver’s trauma is never explained in Winding Refn’s *Drive*, which potentially make his condition somehow originary and universal precisely because it seems to have no basis in his life story, James Sallis’ (2006) book of the film explains that Driver saw Mom kill Dad with a kitchen knife. In the face of this family horror Driver makes a prefab family out of his boss Shannon and later Irene and Benicio who live in his building, but everything breaks down when Standard (Irene’s husband and Benicio’s father) returns from prison and casts Driver into a new crime family drama which leads him to kill the mafia bosses Nino and Bernie Rose and drive off to escape the rest of the family. Similar family trauma is at the heart of *Only God Forgives*, where we learn that Julian killed his Dad who beat up his Mom, who then projects her hatred for her husband onto her son. Enter Chang, who looks like a surrogate father, particularly when he kills Mom and saves Julian from the horror of the Freudian engulfing mother, but I would say has a more profound role concerned with the destruction of the criminal logic of equivalence that structures the endless cycle of violence (an eye for an eye and so on ad nauseum) in a divine calculus which suspends drive in the extinction of thirst and the ‘letting go’ of those things that sustain the self in its lust, anger, hate, and greed. This is precisely what the title of the film, *Only God Forgives*, means.

Akin to Driver and Julian, the main character in *The Neon Demon* is similarly orphaned, even though we never find out what happened to Jessie’s Mom and Dad. All we know is that ‘they’re no longer around’ leading Jessie to sign her own parental consent form when her agent wants proof of age. Of course, Jessie lies, changing her age from 16 to 19, and growing up before her time. In this way Jessie is, like both Driver and Julian, caught somewhere between the worlds of the child and the adult, and it is precisely this confusion that Winding Refn captures in his return to LA. Where the LA of *Drive* is a kind of criminal utopia-dystopia, the same is true of the spaces of *The Neon Demon*, which represents the city full of predators, sadists, abusers, vampires, and cannibals. Following the pivotal scene where Jessie returns to her motel room to find a mountain lion has wrecked the place, Jessie meets an array of violent characters, including Keanu Reeves’ motel manager cum sexual predator, the sadistic photographer Jack McArthur who treats women like pieces of meat, and the vampyric cannibals Ruby, Gigi, and Sarah who start off friends but end up killing and eating Jessie in the name of the consumption of her beauty. The ultimate objective of the various predators who populate *The Neon Demon* is the consumption of youth, beauty, and perfection for the sake of the defence of the ego, the Lacanian imaginary, in a city obsessed with spectacles of immortality that can somehow screen out the reality of the finitude and vulnerability of the self. The result of this project is Sarah, who by the end of the film looks less than human, and more like a cold blooded reptile who lives by the warmth of the lights that set the scene for her fashion shoots. While the fashion scene sustains Sarah, we know that she is nothing beyond the lights, the cameras, and the mirrors that enable her to escape herself into images. It is precisely this truth, the truth of nothingness, the truth of emptiness, that Julian eventually realises at the end of *Only God Forgives* when Chang cuts him up. At this point Julian is a body or ego in pieces (Lacan’s corps morcele) and no longer needs to engage in the endless pursuit of drive. Akin to Jessie who is torn to bits by Ruby, Gigi, and Sarah, but at the same time disappears into the cosmos that stretches out above her dying body, Julian finally tells Chang that the first thing he remembers is nothingness. Following this memory of first moments, this memory of emptiness, the film fades to black symbolising the realisation of the non-self, ‘the letting go’ of the ego, and the escape from the horror of the drive to immortality.

**II**

**‘I Drive, That’s What I Do. All I Do’**

Based upon James Sallis’ (2006) book of the same name, *Drive* tells the story of Driver who works on Hollywood stunts and drives getaway cars in his spare time. In the first scene of the film Driver explains his role to the crooks employing him. He says ‘I drive, that’s what I do. All I do’. Although we understand this line in terms of Driver explicitly setting boundaries, and explaining to the robbers that he won’t get involved in violence, the evolution of his story leads to the conclusion that his identity with drive and driving is also descriptive of his unconscious psychological state. Here, the Freudian-Lacanian concept of drive, which first appears in Freud’s (2003) *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to explain the endless compulsive, repetitive, attempt to solve some past unresolved trauma through present symbolic action that always misses its mark, perfectly captures Driver’s psychological state. Wounded by the horror of his past, which is set out in the book where we learn that Mom killed Dad, Driver’s psychology is based in autistic withdrawal from others and world through identification with cars, engines, and the act of driving. In this respect psychological drive is manifest in automobility and the technological drive that allows Driver to endlessly take flight from the trauma that defines his identity. But he does try to find ways to repair his life through relationships with others. As the narrative of the film develops Driver meets Irene and Benicio who live in his building and starts to become a family man. Unfortunately this attempt to create a family of his own breaks down when Standard, Irene’s husband and Benicio’s father, returns from prison leaving Driver on the sidelines. However, he sticks with the family and helps Standard commit a robbery in order to pay off his debts. This is when everything starts to go wrong because Driver is thrust into a whole new set off negative family relations organised around the crime bosses Nino and Bernie Rose. Following the botched robbery, which leaves Standard dead and Driver holding a bag of stolen money, the crime family come after him and he ends up killing them one by one. But he knows that the bad family will continue to come for him and so he leaves Irene and Benicio and retreats back into drive. As the film ends we see Driver abandon his hopes for salvation in the good family and take flight from the horror of the bad family that has been chasing him around his entire life.

In my view *Drive* is essentially a story of the imagined utopia of the good family, the family organised around love and support which we can never reach, and the reality of the abusive bad family where those closest cause pain, torment, and exposure to the horrors of the world. Caught inside this schizoid psychological frame, which recalls Melanie Klein’s (1997) theory of the good / bad breast that alternatively nurtures and frustrates, Driver hopes for the best, but lives the worst and ends up permanently on the run from the hell that he finds in his relationships with most other people. Since this is Driver’s experience of life from very early on when Mom killed Dad, we can assume that he’s an orphan, in both the practical sense that his parents are no longer around, but also in the existential / philosophical sense outlined by Jung (2002) in his book with Kerenyi where the idea of the orphan describes the psychological pain of emotional abandonment, exposure, and torment that comes with the condition of individuation. In this respect, Driver is a hyped up, extreme, version of the traumatised orphan Freud describes through his theory of psycho-sexual development and then seeks to normalise in such a way that makes estrangement, pain, and loss everyday experiences, but Jung problematises through his theory which opposes the mutilated individual who has too much sense of their own ego to a more balanced unified vision of the (non-)self submerged in the collective unconscious. This is, I think, the psychoanalytic sub-text of *Drive* which explains why Driver seeks out a good family that will take him out of himself, only to find that he cannot escape his bad relatives and is for this reason permanently on the run looking for love somewhere else. From a certain point of view, then, *Drive* is a bleak film that suggests that the Californian utopia where the perfect life is somewhere out there on the road ahead is a fantasy that we never realise. It is this fantasy of the road that Winding Refn develops through his representation of LA, where the stability of the family and the social is dispersed and dissolved in circulation, which never goes anywhere but simply moves. The fatality of the notion of circularity, which recalls Freud’s (2003) theory of drive, and that returns centre stage in *Only God Forgives* where it takes the form of the endless cycle of violence and the Buddhist vision of wholeness and unity (the mandala), is captured in the first instance by the image of the motor or the engine. *Drive* starts inside the engine of Driver’s car and from this moment on the image of the motor that simply works but nothing more colours our understanding of the entire film.

We soon learn that Driver drives, that’s what he does, that’s all he does, and realise that he’s on the run from something that turns out to be the misery of his own self. He is empty, disassociated from himself in the face of a history of trauma, and we see this in his choice of car. He drives a silver Chevy Impala, the most popular car in America, precisely because of its anonymity, which leads to the conclusion that there is a kind of universality about Driver’s estrangement, pain, and inability to communicate. Where Freud thinks this universal pain is normal, Jung’s conclusion that the estrangement of the self is more or less intolerable and requires us to find ways to reconnect the individual to their collective unconscious base is borne out in Driver’s inability to sleep. His insomnia is evidence of this alienation from himself, from the unconscious that emerges in sleep, and the trauma that eats away at him. Unfortunately Driver finds cold comfort in the spaces of the city itself, which is similarly sleepless, being characterised by flickering neon and the low hum of electric charge. In this way the ‘always on’ city has one purpose, which is to provide a space for circulation driven by the endless effort to escape, since its function as a place of community and sociability was forgotten long ago. There is, of course, little sense of recognition of this hopelessness, or at least reflection that would enable a working through of the horror of the orphan that might actually lead somewhere else, and we see this reflected in the geography of the city. Here, transcendence, and the verticality of perspective that would allow for self-reflection, which we might find symbolised in skyscrapers and tall buildings, is replaced by the horror of horizontality represented by endless urban sprawl without human coordinates. In his *Ideas* (2012) Husserl connects horizontality to futurity, and suggests that the ability to imagine and create the future relies on perspective and the ability to look towards the horizon, but the problem with the inhumanity of sprawl is that it cancels possibility in the way it throws the self into absolutely uniform space that seems paradoxically entirely closed in its endlessness.

The LA of *Drive* is endless, a drive-through city devoid of places where people meet positively and form friendships, and for this reason it seems to contain absolutely no possibility. Contrary to Husserl’s utopian horizon, which allows the self to look out onto some imagined future, Winding Refn’s LA feels like a fatal space bounded in its endlessness. The precise coordinates of this bounded, claustrophobic endlessness are represented by Driver’s lack of positive psychological structure, which Klein (1997), Winnicott (2005), and the object relations theorists tell us comes from parents who provide a way of looking at the world and behaving within it. Since Driver has no parents, and sense of a family to ground him, he moves around aimlessly, endlessly circulating the city, looking for positive others to provide him with some sense of purpose in the world. But there seems to be no exit, no escape, from this endless space. Of course, from the perspective of the American, Californian, ideology this lack of parental over-sight looks like freedom. Like Pinocchio who has no strings to hold him back, the Californian utopia is Anti-Oedipal in its negative view of family ties, simply because parents make rules and regulations and stop us having our own way. However, the problem with this refusal of regulation and positive structure is that the self ends up thrown into a lonely world without landmarks or worthwhile vantage points and that this psychotic environment feeds back to undermine the self’s own socio-psychic structures. I think that this is precisely what we see in *Drive* where the 1960s Anti-Oedipal utopia is revealed in its true horror – the destroyed urban environment and ruined psychology of the orphan – even though Deleuze and Guattari (1983) sought to prevent this reversal through their opposition to the self-identical organism.

While Deleuze and Guattari (1983) opposed the capitalist, egoistic, sovereign individual through their opposition to Kurt Goldstein’s organism and later vision of schizophrenia as a kind of Buddhist / Jungian project for the emergence of a (non-)self fused with some kind of collective unconscious (their BwO), the problem is that their idea was taken up by a kind of Americanism that transformed the schizophrenic into a rugged individual faced with a hostile environment set on its destruction. From the point of view of the sovereign individual, who has already been subject to Oedipal regulation and transformed into a lonely orphan, it looks as if their project is about drive and the attempt to escape from the horror of the loss of intimacy through things that will somehow make the self whole once more. This is precisely how the psycho-cultural theorist Laurence Rickels (1991) understands Californian culture in his work on the golden state. For Rickels California is an dreamworld without parental constraint, a utopia where you can have what you want and nobody ever grows up, but where the flip side is that Californian identity is defined by a demonic drive to construct a perfectly self-identical ego sealed from the outside. This is why Rickels thinks that California is the death drive state of total consumption defined by the thanatological desert form. Here, the emptiness of the desert moves inside the city and then moves inside the self to create a post-structural psycho-cultural space without limits or impediment which looks like the Buddhist utopia with one important difference. This western, Californian Buddhism brings the ego with it, and for this reason it not only never escapes from thirst, but actually enflames the desire to be everywhere and consume everything – this is the utopian self of total consumption. Following Rickels we can then build up a picture of Californian culture organised around the desire to endlessly extend and augment the self in the name of the defence against the horror of emptiness which is, of course, precisely the opposite of the vision of Buddhist philosophy where the ego is the enemy.

We can see this ultra-egotism represented in the high tech utopia of Apple and Google, where the self is perfectly formed and informed and knows everything and everybody, and in the San Fernando valley hardcore utopia, where bodies becomes sex machines devoted to orgasm and endless pleasure. Taken together the tech and sex utopias fuse in the utopia of cosmetic surgery, where bodies are made immortal, beautiful, and perfect symbols of a life without friction. Finally, the Hollywood utopia puts everything on the world stage and sells the movie star who has everything and lives a perfect life to the masses who aspire to reach this condition from their state of being defined by estrangement, pain, and loss. This is, of course, precisely how Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) understood the culture industry, which sells things to people to enable them to construct utopian selves, and formed the basis of their vision of American society focused upon the transformation of a utopia of pleasure, satisfaction, contentment into a dystopia of loneliness, thirst, and frustration. It is this vision of Americanism that Winding Refn captures in his representation of LA and uses to structure Driver’s situation defined by the loneliness of the orphan and the desperate search for relief. But unfortunately there is no escape and there is no relief in *Drive* because the ideology of the sunshine state is a noirish nightmare. Under these conditions the only way forward is to endlessly defer loneliness in movement, which is precisely how Reyner Banham (2009) explains LA in his classic work on the city, and never stop for long enough to have to face up to the trauma of the destruction of the social that defines the psychology of the orphan left completely on their own.

Although they never refer to psychoanalysis in their history of Californian utopianism, Wim De Wit and Chris Alexander (2013) write of the dreamworld of LA through the idea of over-drive. Of course, there is no concept of over-drive in psychoanalysis, because Freud’s (2003) idea of drive already describes the endlessly repetitive motor function of the ego desperate to escape some traumatic experience that it cannot handle, but instead a debate about what waits on the other side of pathological circularity, which is potentially what over-drive means. From the Freudian point of view, then, over-drive, or the conclusion of drive, would be the end of life in an inferno of sadistic-masochistic instinctual violence set on taking the individual back to the point before they were born. By contrast, a Jungian (2008) reading of this situation suggests that the other side of drive-based individualism would be the kind of non-self intimate with the collective unconscious we also find worked out in Buddhist philosophy and the idea of emptiness. It is this debate that I think Winding Refn restages in *Only God Forgives* which moves beyond the problem of drive set out in his film of the same name to consider how the orphan might escape his loneliness. Where *Drive* takes place in LA, *Only God Forgives* moves eastwards in order to translate Mike Davis’ (2006) Californian dialectic of ‘noir and sunshine’, which underpins Driver’s desperate attempt to escape to some better place, into a psycho-urban condition characterised by on the one hand the absolute profanity of a situation where everybody and everything is for sale, and on the other hand a sacred transcendent side to the city that opens out onto the egoless space of the oceanic and the empty. *Only God Forgives* starts by foregrounding the profane horror of Bangkok, which similar to the LA of *Drive*, is a place of desire unleashed, a place of drive, where crime, sex, and violence trump civilizational norms every time. It is into this urban inferno that Winding Refn throws Gosling’s character, Julian, who could easily be Driver’s twin brother, and then proceeds to track his journey through traumatised orphanhood towards painful selflessness. Everything takes place against the backdrop of Bangkok, which Winding Refn presents as a perverse city, where economy governs every aspect of life.

Indeed, the Bangkok of *Only God Forgives* is precisely the kind of city that Freud might have imagined in his *Civilization and its Discontents* (2002), which considers the sociological dimensions of the individual death drive set out in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (2003), because there is a sense in which this is urban space on the very edge of collapse into some savage pre- / post-civilizational form. In *Civilization and its Discontents* Freud’s nightmare of civilization collapse was related to both his view of World War I and his own death anxiety and he never went further than this, mainly because he was concerned to try to defend the integrity of the self, but what *Only God Forgives* is able to suggest because of its eastern backdrop is an egoless future where the (non)self is no longer pitted against a frightening outside populated with dangerous others, but rather lives in intimacy with other living creatures in a world sensitive to the ecology of the earth itself. In this way I think it is possible to extend Rickels’ (1991) theory of Freud’s two systems, which he sets out in his book on Californian culture, to take in a third move. For Rickels Freud’s first system emerges from *Totem and Taboo* (2001), where the kids of the primal father turn upon him, tear him apart, and end up eating him, resulting in the emergence of primitive guilt, phallic law, and a prohibition against the war of all against all. Beyond this system, which sets up Oedipal law, social regulation, and the world of the ego, Rickels’ point is that Freud’s second system comes from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (2003) that shows how the constrained, castrated, Oedipalised self seeks escape from the horror of their traumatic separation from Mom through drive, which is all about heading back to start and effectively ending life in a confused attempt to erase the horrors of the past through the destruction of the present and future.

Even though Freud could not see beyond the self, and wrote *Civilization and its Discontents* (2002) in an attempt to articulate the horror of generalised sociological death drive, the dystopic vision of the post-civilizational world that the book conjures (a world without us, a world without the ego) could be seen to represent his third, unconscious, apocalyptic system which he could not admit because of his own death anxiety, where the self breaks down and becomes non-self intimate with the universe of the collective unconscious. This is, I think, the move made by Jung, Bataille, and also eastern philosophy that Winding Refn opens up in *Only God Forgives* and which shows how there is hope beyond drive in the borderline society. In Bataille’s *The Accursed Share* (1991) this move entails pushing the restricted profane economy of more or less equal exchange over the edge in the formation of a new excessive general economy where everything is intimate with everything else and continuous being reigns. Where the self is concerned, we find the same logic in Bataille’s earlier *Inner Experience* (2014) which seeks to ruin the project-based self of action in the world in the dark incandescence of the abyssal non-self that no longer thinks or acts upon things but is rather continuous with the universe and existence itself. Watching *Only God Forgives* it is possible to see how Winding Refn follows the Bataillean logic of ruination on both economic and egoistic levels by tracking Chang’s destruction of Julian’s family business which leads onto the destruction of his drive-based self in the emergence of the intimate, inactive, communicative, empty non-self. The narrative of the film itself starts by setting out the life of Julian, an American living in Bangkok, who runs a criminal enterprise into gambling, prostitution, and narcotics with his psycho-brother, Billy. Julian is largely silent, cut off, and emotionally remote. He looks out for Billy, but is homeless himself, and we suspect he carries some traumatic secret inside of him. We soon learn that Julian grew up surrounded by family violence and that he’s in charge because he killed Dad in order to save Mom from his rage. However, he’s never really in control because he’s under Mom’s thumb and cannot seem to escape his mother complex. He tries to relate to Mai, a Thai prostitute, but he’s locked in and can’t open up to establish any kind of intimacy. On top of this his attempts to please Mom by becoming part of a couple crash and burn because she hates his lack of independence from her. In Mom’s eyes Julian is a joke and no kind of man.

Eventually the story turns around when Julian escapes his Freudian engulfing mother for what looks like a surrogate father, the demonic cop Chang, but who I think turns out to be a Buddhist symbol of the annihilation of the traumatised, thirsty, self in the emergence of the non-self immersed in emptiness. The final moment of the film which sees self become non-self occurs when Chang cuts off Julian’s arms in a violent amputation that represents *either* western Oedipalisation and the end of the violence of the undisciplined self in the emergence of a controlled ego *or* eastern annihilation and the destruction of the self in itself in a new intimate non-self that no longer thirsts in the name of its own completion. My view is that the latter is the case, and that the intention of *Only God Forgives* is to suggest a Buddhist escape from the horror of the orphan who inhabits a world of estrangement, loneliness, and violence, because Chang’s final words concerning Julian’s first memory (his answer is that he remembers nothingness) and the consequent fade into darkness suggest the self giving way to the emptiness of the non-self, rather than the emergence of some Freudian normalised subject who operates within man-made laws. Although Chang is a cop, and for this reason represents the Freudian law, I think his wider, atheological, significance is more important to understanding his function in the story. From the very start his role is to end the endless economy of violence, the drive of crime, sex, and narcotisation that characterises Bangkok, and this begins when psycho-Billy kills a prostitute. When Chang arrives he allows the girl’s father to take revenge on Billy by beating him to death before taking the father’s own arm in order to punish him for this neglect of his daughter. When Julian’s Mom arrives, she blames him for Billy’s death, and puts out a hit on Chang. Surviving the hit, and after killing various gang members, Chang eventually comes face to face with Julian who tells him he loves violence. We never learn why Julian loves violence, but it’s likely that fighting provides a distraction from the horror of his loneliness and a negative form of interaction that allows him to connect to others. Either way, Julian asks Chang if he wants to fight (‘Wanna Fight’) and the battle between symbolic son and his surrogate father begins.

In many ways this scene is key to understanding the meaning of the film because the fight that takes place is essentially a fight over Julian’s ego and a struggle between self and non-self that he loses on the basis of his inability to overcome the lack and loss that defines his identity. There is a kind of inevitability about this outcome, which we might understand psychoanalytically through Freud, who understood that the repression of unconscious trauma can never be complete, and Jung, who saw that there is no way for the self to ever escape the reality of the collective unconscious, that Winding Refn captures through his highly ritualistic staging of the fight itself. In this respect the screenplay of the film and the eventual film itself are very different. While the screenplay includes a crowd and imagines a more equal match, the final film strips everything back. There is no crowd and the fight takes place in an empty venue against the projected image of a dragon head, which symbolises on the one hand the circular eternity of drive and on the other hand the coincidence of origins and ends in the emptiness of the non-self. Here, then, the fight is between Freud’s Oedipus, which looks to stay on the right side of drive in the name of the preservation of the ego, and Jung’s eastern perspective influenced by Buddhism which we can also find in the work of Bataille, where the objective is to move beyond the restricted economy of drive in the name of the annihilation of the self. The fight itself is a non-event. Chang’s superiority is absolute and Julian never lays a glove on him, with the result that Julian decides to take revenge on Chang’s family. He kills Chang’s wife, but importantly leaves his daughter alive (one more traumatised child), only to see Chang find and kill his own mother. Julian is now entirely alone, free of his engulfing mother, and Chang’s family is also destroyed.

Against the backdrop of this ruination, the two main protagonists meet in the final scene of the film, and Chang cuts off Julian’s arms below the elbow in one last act of vengeance, which also frees Julian from the cycle of violence, the cycle of drive, that had characterised his life up to this point. That Chang takes Julian’s lower arms is important because Winding Refn repeatedly makes use of the symbol of the clenched fist in the film to symbolise violence and the self that imposes its will upon the world in search of some sense of completion. Chang’s removal of Julian’s arms is, therefore, symbolic of the destruction of the violent Freudian self and the emergence of the non-self in the darkness that takes over when the film fades to black. This is the same nothingness that Julian remembers in his very first memory before the horror of drive took over his life. But beyond the narrative of the film itself, the nothingness that concludes *Only God Forgives* is important from a formal point of view, because of the way Winding Refn structures his representation of Bangkok around an noirish economy of light and dark. Following the chiaroscuro style of noir, which represented the civilizational / post-civilizational duality of the city through clashing light and dark, Winding Refn lights up the urban spaces of his Bangkok by bathing them in cold electric neon. The night is never far away, but neon lights up the despair of his characters. He casts them in deep reds and purples and paints them in the colours of madness, chaos, blood, sex, and violence. In this way Winding Refn’s colour consciousness recalls the paintings of Mark Rothko and evokes the same feelings of dread in the viewer. Akin to Rothko’s images, which confront the viewer with an abyss colour, the palette of Winding Refn’s Bangkok plunges his characters into the inferno Barry Bell (2003) explores in his book on the city. He explains that Bangkok is formless, characterised by speed, movement, flow, drive, and the kind of brutal materialism that Winding Refn captures in *Only God Forgives*. However, Bell notes that there is another Bangkok, the city of the Buddhist Wats, which symbolises escape from the horror of base materialism.

This other Bangkok is the aquatic city, where watery foundations represent groundlessness, the oceanic, and the nothingness beyond the thanatological principle. Understood together these two sides of the city, the base materialist and the dark atheological, reflect the dualism at the heart of *Only God Forgives*. As the story develops we see that Julian is caught between the horror of drive that never ends and a kind of endless Freudian death in the shape of his engulfing mother, and escape from compulsive repetitive violence and the ego itself through the demonic Chang. On the side of Mom, drive promises a kind of living death that lasts forever. By contrast Chang offers a different kind of death defined by the annihilation of the self in the Buddhist, Jungian, Bataillean non-self intimate with the collective unconscious. There is no painless outcome. This is clear when Chang sings Johnny Cash in a karaoke scene in the screenplay that never made it onto screen because of excessive costs:

I fell into a burning ring of fire,

I went down, down, down,

And the flames went higher,

And it burns, burns, burns,

The ring of fire, the ring of fire.

(Jonny Cash, ‘The Ring of Fire’)

What is the ring of fire, but the violent cycle of drive that burns, burns, burns, and drags the lonely orphan ever deeper into the abyss, but which also offers hope on the other, empty side of self. In the final section of the article I show how Winding Refn develops the story set up in *Drive*, which shows the desperate orphan endlessly on the run, and *Only God Forgives*, where the orphan faces the choice between living with a destroyed self and escaping through the annihilation of the ego and ends up choosing non-self, in his most recent film, *The Neon Demon*, which contrasts the destruction of the self and the endlessness of the drive-based self back in LA and holds these two positions in dialectical tension.

**III**

**‘Beauty is not Everything, It’s the Only Thing’**

In his most recent film, *The Neon Demon*, Winding Refn throws his lonely orphan back into the psychotic spaces of LA and develops the chiaroscuro style that first emerged in *Only God Forgives* in order to highlight the nightmare of drive. Where *Drive* and *Only God Forgives* focuses on the horror of Ryan Gosling’s Driver and Julian, *The Neon Demon* follows the story of Ellie Fanning’s Jessie who makes the leap from small town America to big city LA in order to find fame and fortune. Extending the story of *Only God Forgives*, however, everything in *The Neon Demon* is framed by concerns around visuality, light, and colour consciousness. The entire film is painted in deep reds to evoke blood, frenzy, and madness and ice cold blues in order to symbolise death, nothingness, and emptiness. But colour is never simply a stylistic device in *The Neon Demon*, since there is a sense in which the opposition between the fiery abyss of redness and the ice cold surface of blue represents the two modes of death set out in *Only God Forgives*, where the bottomlessness of deep red refers to the endlessness of drive and the absolute surface of cold blue evokes the end of life which becomes the end of the self in the pivotal scene towards the end of the film where Jessie flat lines into cosmic oneness. Beyond Winding Refn’s use to colour, he also employs light and darkness in order to emphasise the opposition between drive and death (and consequently the death of the self), leaving his reds shrouded in darkness and lighting up his blues so that his viewer feels the cold, stillness, and emptiness of the other side of the drive based self. All of this is then projected into the core theme of *The Neon Demon*, which concerns the fashion industry and the attempt to create the perfect imaginary self on screen and hide the horror of the vampyric processes required to produce this vision of beauty in dark spaces that never see the light of day. Following Lacanian (2007) psychoanalysis, where Oedipal discipline entails growing out of a selfless body in pieces (le corps morcele) into a unified self-image that is estranged from the substance of the real body, *The Neon Demon* represents Jessie’s transformation from small town girl into fashion icon through ideas of loss, estrangement, and ultimately the death of the real in self-image. From the point of view of Winding Refn’s film, this is precisely how the fashion industry survives. It is a vampyric system, defined by necrophilia and the transformation of bodies into objects that can be bought and sold in the name of a fantasy of the perfect self which has one purpose - to deny and erase the horror of the orphan. This is precisely why I entitle this, the final section of the article, ‘Beauty is not Everything, It’s the Only Thing’, because this line, spoken by Winding Refn’s sleazy fashion designer, Roberto Sarno, seems to me to capture the role fashion and beauty plays in the film itself. They are desperate fetish objects, things constructed, and then made absolutely visible to everybody, to hide the true horror of orphan identity defined by a deep sense of loss, need, and consequently the drive-based attempt to save the self.

That *The Neon Demon* is concerned with the immortality project based deep inside the fashion industry is evident from the very first moments of the film, where we see Fanning’s Jessie draped across a chase lounge drenched in blood in a pose that recalls some famous Hollywood murder or suicide. Although we soon realise that the pose was staged for a fashion shoot, what this first scene reveals is the way that fashion, beauty, and the visual image of perfection identifies with death and the bleeding out of the body. The irony of the immortality project of the fashion industry represented in *The Neon Demon* is, therefore, that it is absolutely necrophilic and founded upon the endlessness of death, which is already beyond life and therefore resistant to decay, decrepitude, and the horror of dying. In many ways this project looks like the sacred, Buddhist, commitment to destruction set out in *Only God Forgives*, but the key difference is that the demonic Chang is concerned with the annihilation of the self for the sake of the extinction of thirst, where the necrophilia of the LA fashion industry in *The Neon Demon* is focused on the absolute preservation of the self made possible by the generalisation of death. Under these conditions the self is made immortal, precisely by embodying death and becoming a cold visual image beyond the flows of life which eventually result in decay and decrepitude. It is this pornographic, over-exposure of the self that screens out the pain of loss and comes to characterise the horror of drive in *The Neon Demon*. Early in the film we learn that Jessie is, much like Winding Refn’s other key characters, on the run from herself. Akin to Driver who circulates the roads of LA, and Julian who inhabits the profane economy of Bangkok, we see that Jessie is chasing her dream living out of a motel. But her practical homelessness is supported by a deeper existential sense of loss which becomes clear when she explains that her parents ‘are not around anymore’. Although she meets Ruby, a make-up artist, who seems to care about her, there is no sympathy in the fashion world that Winding Refn creates. This much is evident from her first interaction with the experienced models she meets, Gigi and Sarah. Gigi is cold and inhuman when she comes straight out with it – ‘ I heard your parents are dead or something?’ – and Sarah is similarly brutal in her attempts to learn about Jessie. She wants to know how Jessie found her way into modelling, asking her who she’s fucking (in this world sex is a brutal mechanism for career advancement and nothing more).

Jessie gazes into the mirror, looks at herself, but at this point this is not the self-scrutiny of Gigi and Sarah who inspect their own objectivity, looking for human flaws that need technological correction. Instead, Jessie is self-reflexive, and knows enough at this point to wonder whether she really wants to become a thing. However, she continues her pursuit of fame, visiting a model agency where she lies about her age. She’s 16, but she says she’s 19 on the advice of the agent in order to make it in the business. Since Jessie is out on her own, an orphan lost in the big city, she signs her own parental consent form, and then proceeds to visit the sadistic, necrophiliac photographer Jack McArthur who treats her like a piece of meat. The horror of this meeting is that we know that Jessie is still a child, which is made evident by her naïve asexual relationship with her boyfriend Dean, but this does not stop McArthur stripping her naked and covering her in gold body paint. Although there is nothing explicitly sexual about McArthur’s handling of Jessie, the scene is unsettling because it’s clear that she’s a thing, a valuable commodity, an object in his visual field and that he has no sense of her humanity. The predatory nature of the culture Jessie has entered is further revealed to the viewer in the key scenes where she returns to her motel room to find a mountain lion – ‘a wildcat’ – has taken up residence and the lunch meeting where Ruby, Gigi, and Sarah talk about the new arrival’s prospects. In the context of the mountain lion’s representation of the predatory world of fashion, Sarah asks her friends ‘who wants sour milk when you can have fresh meat?’ and confirms the profane horror of the universe they inhabit.

At this point, when Jessie is ‘fresh meat’, she is clearly on the rise and the sleazy designer Roberto Sarno picks her up to close his show. Again, he regards Jessie the way one would consider a beautiful thing, and totally ignores those who fail to measure up. The impact of rejection on those who want to make it becomes clear when Jessie meets one of the models Sarno rejected in the bathroom after the audition. The rejected model tells Jessie that she’s a ghost and that Jessie is the sun before proceeding to try to drink her blood in order to try to steal some of her beauty. At this point it starts to become clear that Winding Refn’s fashion industry is based in a kind of vampyric cult that sustains the fantasy of the perfect self through the consumption of youth. We are left in little doubt that this is the case when we learn that Ruby also works in a mortuary making up corpses in ice cold blue light that Winding Refn uses to represent the nothingness of death. Of course, the horror of this mortification is that this is not the escapism of the Chang’s Buddhist violence in *Only God Forgives*, because what Ruby wants to achieve is the creation of corpses that somehow look alive and in this way sustain the integrity of the self even in death. While Chang seeks the annihilation of the ego in order to create a non-self free of drive, Winding Refn uses Ruby’s mortuary work to foreground the horror of cosmetic surgery in his LA fashion world, which is based on the attempt to eliminate all forms of humanity in the emergence of a kind of fatal utopian form of identity where age no longer exists. The fatality of this project, and in fact the entire fashion world, is represented in the dream sequence that Winding Refn uses to imagine Sarno’s show – Jessie is bathed in warm deep red and blue light inside a mirrored pyramid that symbolises the womb / tomb of the imaginary self projected onto an endless array of screens.

Following this scene Jesse meets Dean, Sarno, and Gigi for coffee and Sarno explains his utopian theory of beauty - where beauty is not everything, but rather the only thing - but this insight is immediately thrown into relief when Keanu Reeves’ motel manager, the sexual predator Hank, breaks into Jessie’s room and proceeds to slide his knife down her throat. Upon hearing Hank brutalise the young girl next door, Jessie runs to Ruby’s place, but this is no safe haven. Ruby attempts to seduce Jessie who refuses her advances. As a result Ruby imagines Jessie as she masturbates over a corpse in the ice blue light of the mortuary. She wants her now and returns home to take her. Chasing Jessie through the house, Ruby, Gigi, and Sarah finally surround her in the garden, before pushing her into the empty pool. As Jessie lay dying in a pool of blood, she looks into the cosmos spread out above her and losses herself in the universe, in a scene which symbolises the annihilation of the self in communion with the collective unconscious. Following Jesse’s death, we see Ruby, Gigi, and Sarah bathed in her blood, which they imagine will enable them to reflect her youth and beauty, and then see how her ingestion impacts upon them. While Ruby sleeps on Jessie’s grave, and appears to be in the process of giving birth to her new improved self under the moonlight, we see Gigi and Sarah back on the fashion scene. This is, I think, the key Bataillean moment of the film, which frames the rest of the film, and makes Winding Refn’s message explicit. Although Sarah is not part of the MacArthur’s shoot in the first place, she’s soon brought into play when Anna (the original model) walks away. After a reptilian make over, which makes her look less than human, Sarah is part of the shoot. But Gigi can’t take the horror of the scene, which takes place in front of a swimming pool similar to the one where she consumed Jessie, and starts to vomit, bringing up what we assume is Jessie’s eye. Desperate to expel Jessie from her body, Gigi stabs herself, ripping her stomach open, before dying on the floor.

This is where the real villain of *The Neon Demon* makes her appearance, because Sarah feels no horror about the consumption of Jessie and eats the eye brought up by Gigi in order to continue to hide the desperate state of the drive based culture of the LA fashion world. This is the final moment of the film, which then cuts to the credits that appear against the backdrop of a desert landscape that symbolises the desertification of the self in the LA fashion world, and that highlights Winding Refn’s key message. This key message is that the lonely orphan desperate to escape from the horror of loss, estrangement, the despair can only pursue their drive to immortality on condition that they repress the truth of the trauma. This is where I think the final key scene of *The Neon Demon* separates from the comparable scene from Bataille’s (2001) *Story of the Eye*, where the destruction of the eye, the organ of visuality, symbolises an attack on western ocularcentrism that ensures the reign of the estranged relationship between the subject and object, because what Sarah’s consumption of Jessie’s eye achieves is the refusal of the true horror of the criminality that enables drive to persist. In the case of *The Neon Demon* the crime that Sarah’s consumption of Jessie’s eye hides is the destruction of youth in the name of a deathly cold glacial image of beauty which saves the self through a process of mortification. The alternative position, and what the visibility of Jessie’s gouged eye reveals, is that the perfected sense of self, the utopia of the beautiful self, relies on the violence of objectification that only furthers the estrangement of the lonely orphaned self looking to escape from its trauma. It is only when we reach this point, the point when we see that the eye, the organ of visibility, is a thing itself, that the true horror of the regime of ocularcentrism and objectification comes to light. This horror is the horror of the estranged orphan, the objectified self, that cannot be resolved through drive-based culture, but must rather be approached by the annihilation of the self suggested by Buddhist philosophy. It is this philosophy, the philosophy of ‘the letting go’ of the self transformed into a desperate defensive formation that I think Bataille outlines in his works which push towards the ecstatic limits of the self, Jung opposes to Freud’s Oedipus through his theory of the collective unconscious, and Winding Refn plays with in first *Only God Forgives* where Chang dismembers Julian’s ego and second *The Neon Demon* where Jessie dies in communion with the cosmos.

**Filmography**

*Drive*, 2011, Nicolas Winding Refn, Icon.

*Only God Forgives*, 2013, Nicolas Winding Refn, Icon.

*The Neon Demon*, 2016, Nicolas Winding Refn, Icon.

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