

Is Performative Cinema Spoiler-Resistant?

The specter of the spoiler is haunting the social media community—especially when it comes to the long-awaited new season of a streaming series. Narrative media that rely on surprising turning points and plot developments can be spoiled if those aspects are shared on the internet. But can media narratives be spoiler-resistant? And if so, under what circumstances?

When Danish maverick director Nicolas Winding Refn shot his feature films *ONLY GOD FORGIVES* (DK/FR 2013) and *THE NEON DEMON* (FR/DK/US 2016), he insisted in interviews and workshops (especially at the Film Festival Cologne 2019) that his films were framed to look equally appealing on the big screen and on small iPhone displays. Apparently, he was thinking of the whole digital distribution process when making his films. In addition, he did not rely on established forms of plot development, turning points, and climaxes. As a result, it is hard to spoil any of his films in the usual sense, since everything we see is part of a complex web of eTvents that can hardly be explained in a *Twitter* post. The fact that the protagonist dies in the end—a reveal that would constitute a major spoiler in many other films—tells us nothing about the respective films, as they often lack a clear protagonist to begin with. Refn has, in other words, managed to create spoiler-resistant films that rely heavily on the performative power of *mise-en-scène* instead of a conventional “strong narrative.” His cinematography is the answer to the spoiler phobia of the internet community.

byNWR—the Refn Brand

When Refn claims that his cinema is created in a way that makes it equally effective on the big screen and on small smartphones, he refers to his unique cinematographic style, which he developed over a career of more than two decades. He began as an autodidact with the harshly realistic hand-held-camera gangster thriller *PUSHER* (DK 1996), which led to a full trilogy where the style changed along with the protagonists. With the minimalist psycho-thriller *FEAR X* (DK/UK 2003), Refn entered David Lynch territory, focusing on the alienated point of view of a traumatized man desperately searching for his vanished wife. In contrast to the dynamic and literally dirty naturalistic

images of the *PUSHER* films, *FEAR X* showed Refn's talent for highly stylized and at times even uncanny static tableaux. The protagonist's apathetic gaze is reflected in the symmetrical, brooding scenery and highlighted by occasional spots of light.

With his biopic *BRONSON* (2008) about the ultra-violent British inmate Charlie Bronson, who turns his prison surroundings into a stage and his own body into a piece of art, Refn took his experiments with film form even further. Here, he mixes temporal levels, reality, and imagination to such a degree that it becomes hard to tell the different layers of the film apart. In all this chaos, the protagonist appears as a guide to his own performance. With extreme body art and bizarre theater concepts, Refn creates a "performative cinema" (Stiglegger, *Ritual & Verführung* 210) that never relies on the basic nature of the narration. The whole film portrays the violent thug as an artist: very much a representation of how Refn saw his own position within genre and auteur cinema (Schlösser 68–69).

It was not until his breakthrough success *DRIVE* (US 2011) that Refn managed to get his foot in the door in Hollywood. He moved to L.A. with his family and continued to work with Ryan Gosling and Elle Fanning as his male and female muses, respectively. For the mass audiences who had loved *DRIVE*, *ONLY GOD FORGIVES* and *THE NEON DEMON* were provocative, highly enigmatic, fragmented, spiritually coded nightmares, painted in primary colors and underlaid with pulsating techno sounds. They learned that Refn is in fact color-blind and that he aims for a new performative cinema that relies on form, style, and composition not so much above substance but *as* substance. After *NEON DEMON*—which is tellingly set in the fashion industry—the director created his own fashion label, *byNWR*, and started collaborating with Gucci and Prada, even casting his own wife and daughters in fashion promos (2023).¹

It became increasingly clear that Refn aims to work outside the conventions of contemporary cinema. In the case of *VALHALLA RISING* (DK 2009), he uses long shots, very slow pacing and intentionally washed-out colors and occasionally monochromatic images. The effect is that scenes set in the Middle Ages often resemble a dystopian scenario with otherworldly landscapes, alien creatures and strange rituals. The topography and the actions of the small ensemble remain mysterious until the end. The freed slave and the young boy move through the landscape like the three men in the mythical Zone of

1 Gucci: youtu.be/fxJeEwkB8yw, Prada: www.prada.com/us/en/pradasphere/special-projects/2022/touch-of-crude.html.

Andrei Tarkovsky's *STALKER* (SU 1979). But while there is plenty of dialogue in Tarkovsky's film, Refn's protagonist is mute, which forces us to focus on the body, the landscape and the sound. The director does not believe in the mimetic idea of simulating history; rather, his view of history seems to be cyclical like in mythic transformations.

Refn has a strong interest in contemporary media and new forms of expression. When he announced his first streaming series for Amazon Prime, it sounded unique and exciting. But when *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* (US 2019; Creator: Nicolas Winding Refn and Ed Brubaker) was finally released in 2019, Amazon Prime didn't promote the series, but instead hid it on its platform, as it was considered too extreme for a mass audience (Brown). Refn had used the occasion to create something like a 13-hour feature film, split into segments of 30 to 100 minutes. Many parts are in Spanish with English subtitles (especially episode 2); some individual takes last several minutes. His unique idea of a streaming series highlighted his signature style: *streaming byNWR*. But how can this style be described?

Performative Cinema, Refn Style

Feature films usually balance performative and narrative aspects (Stiglegger, *Ritual & Verführung* 210–11). Audiences are used to the narrative aspect, especially with the popularity of serial narratives. Yet it is the performative aspect of film that marks Refn's style and audiovisual artistry. Over the course of his career, Refn has increasingly focused on a performative style *as* the substance of his films and series. At first glance, the concepts of film and performance seem to be mutually exclusive, at least if one follows Erika Fischer-Lichte's *Ästhetik des Performativen*, which deems a theatrical performance strikingly different from that of a film or series. For example, Fischer-Lichte emphasizes the "bodily co-presence of actors and spectators," which creates a bodily intersubjectivity that can address the relationship between the performance artist and an active, possibly interacting audience (Fischer-Lichte 63–64). This results in a performative production of materiality that is corporeal, spatial, phonetic, and temporal (129–30.). What emerges from this—in all its randomness and arbitrariness—Fischer-Lichte calls the "autopoietic feedback loop" (66–67),² a term with origins in neurology. Here, an artistic performance is understood as an experimental test arrangement.

2 All translations from German by the author.

To paraphrase Fischer-Lichte's argument, everyone co-determines the experiment and at the same time allows themselves to be determined by it, without any individual having full power over it (268). In the process, "emergence" can occur, phenomena that the artist cannot plan in advance or influence in any way: For Fischer-Lichte, "emergence" designates the phenomena that occur unpredictably and without a clear motivation, even if some of them seem quite logical in retrospect (186). This aspect guarantees the non-repeatability of a given performance, as it always "produces another performance [...], [so] that in this sense each performance is unique and unrepeatable" (82). These aspects of the interactive and the unpredictable characterize the aesthetics of the performative and lead, as Fischer-Lichte puts it, to a "re-enchantment of the world" (318–19): the aesthetics of the performative, Fischer-Lichte claims, aim at crossing boundaries (356).

The medium of film differs in several respects from performance art as defined here. First of all, the film screening is not a unique act but can always be repeated. The projected film can always be watched anew, unchanged. And while the audience's reaction remains unpredictable to an extent, it has no direct influence on the film shown. Thus, it is basically impossible for an "autopoietic feedback loop" to emerge. It is also difficult to conceive of emergence in the context of film, since this would presuppose an audience's direct influence on the work or a reaction by the artist. A "re-enchantment of the world" by means of film must necessarily remain absent. However, if we take a closer look at the *dispositif* of cinematic reception—the conditions under which film is received—we notice numerous variables that nevertheless speak for the uniqueness of film screenings. In analog cinema, the celluloid can wear out or tear, and the spliced film may differ from its previous form; the audience can force the termination of the screening or create shadows on the screen; distributors or filmmakers can circulate various cuts of a film; the screening can suffer from technical deficiencies and malfunctions. In addition, audience members can influence each other's reactions, i.e., the feedback loop develops within the screening space. This may give rise to a media aesthetics of disruption, but there is another approach to the performative quality of film.

As mentioned, movement, bodies, and sensuality—which are also central to theatrical performance—are elements of performance in film. These elements are ultimately impossible to intellectualize. They address the viewer's affective memory (Stanislawski) and provoke unintentional movements (e.g. protective impulses in the case of surprising bursts of movement in the image), spontaneous emotional outbursts (tears in melodramatic moments), and

psychosomatic affects (disgust, fear). The spectator's specific reaction is highly individual and shaped by their respective socialization. Herein lies another element of unpredictability in film reception. In addition, there is the question of individual media competence, because well-trained viewers can process more stimuli and information than inexperienced ones. In any case, we must distinguish between these performative sensual attacks of the film and its narrative flow, for although the two are not mutually exclusive, the sensation can take on a life and quality of its own. A key to analyzing the performative sensation of film, then, lies in its audiovisually evoked corporeality and its appeal to the spectator's own corporeality by means of haptic images and sounds.

Since the 1970s, filmmakers have reflected on these qualities of sensation and have tried to link avant-garde strategies of modern visual art with radical borderline forms of feature film. Examples include David Lynch with *ERASER-HEAD* (US 1979), E. Elias Merhige with *BEGOTTEN* (US 1990), and Philippe Grandrieux with *SOMBRE* (FR 1998). The strategy of these filmmakers is to create haptic images that bring a performative quality to the film:

Haptic images can give the impression of seeing for the first time, gradually discovering what is in the image rather than coming to the image already knowing what it is. Several such works represent the point of view of a disoriented traveler unsure how to read the world in which he finds himself. (Marks 178)

For the performative film, the viewer must be willing to surrender to the *mise-en-scène* just like the fan at a rock concert, wedged between like-minded people, robbed of their breath by the energy of the performance and the yearning push towards the stage. Film scholar Martine Beugnet emphasizes that "to open oneself to sensory awareness and let oneself be physically affected by an art work or a spectacle is to relinquish the will to gain full mastery over it, choosing intensity and chaos over rational detachment" (3).

This intensity arises when film is no longer understood as a merely narrative medium but transcends that boundary, bursting the secure membrane of the screen and pouring over the viewer, confronting them like a performative act. Film, then, exists only in its immediacy, making us forget the original distance and the dimension of time. The performative film literally touches the viewer physically through the retina, penetrating the body through the optic nerve and activating the affective memory without reservation. The seeing eye, the vibrating eardrum become organs of "CineSexuality" (MacCormack) and re-experience the world "like a disoriented traveler" (Marks).

Robin Curtis, in her essay "How Do We Do Things With Films?" (75–77), rightly refers to Dana Polan's 1986 paper emphasizing the limits of film

theories focused solely on individual works. Accordingly, film theory can only move forward by ceasing to be a theory of film as an object to be grasped in its essence, its specificity (Polan cited in Curtis 75). Thus, film should no longer be understood as an object or a work, but as an event: “Films perform, and every performance requires the presence of a series of supporting institutions” (75). However, this “performative turn” called for in film theory did not materialize immediately, only entering the general discourse after 2000, first with Patrick Fuery and my own publications (“Rituale der Verführung” 163–65; *Ritual & Verführung* 201–03.). Later, these issues were discussed in the Collaborative Research Center Kulturen des Performativen at Humbolt University Berlin, and specifically in the work of Curtis, who emphasizes the importance of the corporeal dimension for cinema as performance: The body is the site of the manifestations produced by the cinematic event, the literal “institution” that allows this act of perception to occur (Curtis 77).

Performative cinema acts out a sometimes gruesome spectacle on the “cinematic body” (Shaviri) invoked in cinematic performance. Prefilmic reality becomes the material of a film-aesthetic performance. As in a theatrical performance, the point is no longer the art object itself but the process that brings forth the object. This process questions and transgresses the boundaries of theoretically- and aesthetically-defined genres of art as well as the artist’s role. It is no longer what is told that counts—for the narrative content is unstable and interchangeable—but how it is told in the moment. Cinematic illusion, the simple mimesis of everyday social life, is completely abandoned, as is the psychological dimension of the characters. In this respect, it is hardly surprising that Marcus S. Kleiner, for example, takes a very similar approach to the cinematic miniature form of music video, because the video clip is, by definition, a fusion of pop as performance and cinematic performance. What is important is what these films do to the viewer, and especially *how* they do it. A close reading that explores this *how* can illuminate the seductive and performative quality of a film or series. In the following section, I will return to Refn and explore these aspects in the series *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG*, showing how his directing method makes spoilers irrelevant for the reception.

Case Study: *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG*

What Refn first attempted in his feature films after *FEAR X*, he managed to take further in his big-budget L.A.-based cop series *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG*. At the Cannes Film Festival, he decided to show only two episodes (4 and 5, according to film critic Jens Balkenborg in the podcast *Projektionen*

Kinogespräche ["Kinogespräche"]) to prove that it is possible to understand his concept without knowing the first three episodes. The audience should be able to begin viewing the series at any point. Following this concept, spoilers may be possible, but they are of no consequence. Refn works with false leads and unexpected turning points, including the replacement of the supposed protagonist, who is killed off long before the season's finale. In fact, the male protagonists are replaced one by one by female counterparts. The two male-dominated systems of the series, the police and a cartel, are gradually challenged and replaced by a matriarchy, embodied by a female serial killer (Cristina Rodlo as Yaritza) and a supernaturally gifted lawyer (Jena Malone as Diana DeYoung). In terms of style, Refn again values performance over narrative, especially in the form of duration instead of narrative efficiency. In episode 1 (VOLUME 1: THE DEVIL), cop Martin Jones's (Miles Teller) partner is executed by Jesús Rojas (Augusto Aguilar), the son of a female gang boss (Carlotta Montanari) who had been killed by the police earlier. We will later learn that Jesús killed the wrong person: it was in fact Martin who had killed his mother and who therefore should have been the target of his revenge.

In excessively long takes, Refn works with high-contrast image compositions. He uses long lenses in close framing to create a blurred background, so that the different layers of the image are separated from each other. The combination of focused textures and foggy diffusion creates surreal impressions of hyperreal figures in a dreamworld. When the camera moves, it does so very slowly and mostly in parallel to the acting space. In static takes, we see center-focused images, which have a confrontational effect while also isolating faces in the case of close-ups. This is underlined by a primary color palette of blue, red, and yellow, filmed from unusual perspectives.

On the soundtrack, Refn employs ambient drone sounds, combined with hyperreal sound effects. The world of *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* presents itself as highly artificial; here, the inner space—the psyche of the protagonists—resemble club spaces. The electronic music by Cliff Martinez and techno tracks by Julian Winding add to this club-like impression. Even the living room of a teenage girl is illuminated with stroboscope lighting, such as in episode 6 VOLUME 6: THE HIGH PRIESTESS, where Yaritza attends a Hollywood party.

The acting in *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* is dominated by silent gazes during long takes, an ultra-slow pace, and nearly slow-motion movements. For the dialogues, Refn asked his actors to wait a few seconds before they reacted; this adds to the overall calm and otherworldly atmosphere (fig. 1). The director often works with iconic actors like Tom Hardy, Elle Fanning, Mads Mikkelsen, John Turturro, and Keanu Reeves. For his series, he aimed for similar iconic



Fig. 1: Miles Teller in Episode 1 of TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG

figures: Miles Teller as Martin Jones is a handsome but psychopathic cop, Augusto Aguilera plays the gangster Jesús as a rap star, Cristina Rodlo as Yaritza virtually becomes Santa Muerte, the sacred goddess of death, and Jena Malone appears as the openly esoteric lawyer Diana DeYoung, who also leads a ring of vigilantes killing pedophiles. DeYoung's handyman Viggo Larsen (John Hawkes) is a one-eyed ex-cop turned vigilante who suffers from cancer and kills criminals. There is clearly a strong mythical dimension to this ensemble, as many of them are named after characters from mythology like Diana, the hunting goddess, or Jesús the Messiah, while Viggo's character hints at Odin, the one-eyed god of Germanic mythology (also referred to in Refn's *VALHALLA RISING*, with Mads Mikkelsen as One-Eye). Thus, these characters always appear both as their straightforward role and as something bigger that goes beyond their function in the story. To push this aspect even further, each episode is named after a tarot card:

1. THE DEVIL
2. THE LOVERS
3. THE HERMIT
4. THE TOWER
5. THE FOOL
6. THE HIGH PRIESTESS
7. THE MAGICIAN
8. THE HANGED MAN

9. THE EMPRESS

10. THE WORLD

These cards refer to characters in the respective episodes, such as Martin with his dark secrets in Episode 1, Viggo as the Hermit in 3, Yaritza as the High Priestess in 6, or Diana as the Empress in 9. But they also are related to the unfolding events, such as Viggo's speech about the transformative downfall of society in episode 4, with "The Tower" signifying apocalyptic change. These references are not merely superficial, but are meant to convey the worldview behind the series. In his workshop at Film Festival Cologne in 2019, Refn revealed that he regularly visits his idol, filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky, for Tarot readings before he starts shooting a new project. Refn is, in other words, well versed in the world of Tarot. This additional layer also turns each episode into a stand-alone work. The titles themselves could actually be seen as spoilers—provided the audience is aware of their meaning. This is especially true for Episode 8, which covers the martyrdom and death of Martin Jones (VOLUME 8: THE HANGED MAN) at the hands of Jesús.



Fig. 2: Miles Teller and Nell Tiger Free in their final minutes

Taking the symbolism and mythical subtext of the series seriously is not only key to understanding what is going on, but also to appreciating the somnambulistic overall style, which produces its own reference system of style *as* substance. As we deal with mythical—and thus potentially cyclical—events and characters, spoilers become irrelevant. There is a meta-meaning to

everything here that simply cannot be spoiled by the information that Martin and Janey (Nell Tiger Free) will be killed in Episode 8 (**fig. 2**). It is always the performative *how*, not the narrative *why* and *when* that counts.

Despite its slow pace, each episode of *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* climaxes in a performative situation: violence, dance, sex, speeches, and rituals referring to such events. As in his previous films, Refn focuses on excessive graphic violence, shown in gory detail and slow motion. These scenes are not shown to merely shock, but rather to fulfill a promise given during the preceding slow passages. They are more about the mythical logic of violence as a sacred blood sacrifice, to be enjoyed as a brutal “payoff” much like the cum shot in a pornographic film. Refn also underlines this discourse of violence that his films feed by focusing on eyes and gazes. To be a witness is crucial in this series. Violent acts must be witnessed and endured like in ancient martyrdom (the “blood witness”). Thus, violent acts are not presented as dramatic turning points or surprises but as logical solutions to a mythical cycle within the heightened framework of the *mise-en-scène* (**fig. 3**).



Fig. 3: Mass executions closing episode 2

These existential liminal experiences (in the sense of “Grenzerfahrungen” as formulated by Karl Jaspers) are underscored by brooding drone sounds penetrating the body, sometimes with ecstatic rhythms, emphasized on the visual level by contrasts and primary colors. In this way, the duration of violence or the acting out of deviant sexuality (like the whip-handle penetration in Episode 8) produce transgressive moments. The seemingly neutral and

emotionally indifferent acting style becomes a projection screen for all the feelings we develop as we face the performative excesses of the series. We do not relate to psychologically “true” characters but to the events as such. This is how the ultimately dream-like, hermetic world of *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* works.

Conclusion: A Truly Spoiler-Resistant Series

To prepare for this paper, I watched the whole series three times. Each viewing turned out to be more effective, exciting, and more entertaining than the previous one. So far, I have outlined how the series works on an aesthetic level. I will now summarize the elements that make *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* a spoiler-resistant series that goes far beyond the usual mechanisms of serial narrative streaming formats.

1. *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* features multiple characters of equal narrative importance. Protagonists change unpredictably from one episode to the next and eventually re-appear later. Thus, each episode works like a self-contained feature film with its own micro-dramaturgy. There is also a horizontal dramaturgy of episodes linked by an overarching plot, but it is vague enough that viewers might not be sure about the order of the episodes while watching.
2. Several subplots begin in certain episodes but are not followed through later, especially in cases where they lead in directions that hint at world-building beyond the core events. Yet many subplots are simply left unresolved like in David Lynch’s film *MULHOLLAND DRIVE* (US/FR 2001)—which was originally also conceived as a series.
3. The supposed main plots of *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* are interlaced with paranoid and spiritual themes, like underworld networks, extra-terrestrial influences, vigilantism. Refn paints a spiritual landscape of the United States that is marked by superstition, abuse, and openly celebrated fascism (like in the police headquarters scene, where the cops are chanting “fascism”).
4. *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* is built on archetypal and mythical character design. As foreshadowed by their telling names, the protagonists gradually transform into the mythical characters they were always supposed to be. The psychological depth some series are praised for was never Refn’s aim. He never spends time on so-called backstory wounds or psychological motivation.

5. The heightened realism of the seemingly generic cop series aims at something bigger than life. Patriarchy is violently replaced by matriarchy in a slow apocalyptic process. This interpretation is also fueled by the intertextual connection with other films by Refn like *THE NEON DEMON*.
6. And finally, Refn's use of primary colors, high contrasts, low-focus range, and planimetric image composition grant his series (and his feature films) effective viewing on the big screen as well as on small smartphones. His performative and expressive mise-en-scène is created with a view to contemporary modes of reception.

TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG is a spoiler-resistant streaming series because it chooses performance over narrative and atmospheric immersion over rational understanding.

It is worth mentioning that Amazon Prime seems to intentionally hide the series within its freely accessible archive. It must be searched for specifically, and it will never appear as a suggestion. Apparently, the studio was not happy with the result and stopped collaborating with the director after completion of the series. There is no public statement available as to why Amazon Prime hides this expensive production and never properly promoted it after its release. However, in a 2023 interview with *Vulture*, the director stated:

Well, they took all my marketing money away because they were afraid that the show would reflect badly on Amazon. They told me that directly. They were so shocked by it. I was like, "What's so shocking?" They said, "It's going to make us look bad." And I said, "But I don't think anyone's going to look at you at all." Certain parts of Hollywood are so self-absorbed that they think they're at the center of the universe. The rule of fear is very dangerous. Amazon released the show, but they said, "We will bury you." And so they did. However, you can't bury a diamond. (Brown)

While there were in fact some promo posters and clips displayed on the US website, nothing of that sort appeared on the German Prime website (Miller). The series became available in a dubbed version on the official start date, but was not even placed in the recommended or news section.

The *byNWR* label continued the director's concept of streaming series as conceptual art on the rival platform Netflix with *COPENHAGEN COWBOY* (DK 2023, Creator: Nicolas Winding Refn), which employs stylistic strategies very similar to *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG*. A female superhero miniseries set in Copenhagen's underworld, the show again heads for a final showdown between patriarchal and matriarchal structures. *byNWR* has become a unique stylistic and artistic trademark that has shaken up the world of commercial entertainment by tempting and seducing audiences into supposedly generic narratives that turn out to be apocalyptic and mythical mediascapes.

Filmography

BEGOTTEN. Director: E. Elias Merhige. US 1990.
COPENHAGEN COWBOY. Creator: Nicolas Winding Refn. DK 2023.
DRIVE. Director: Nicolas Winding Refn. US 2011.
ERASERHEAD. Director: David Lynch. US 1979.
FEAR X. Director: Nicolas Winding Refn. DK/UK 2003.
MULHOLLAND DRIVE. Director: David Lynch. US/FR 2001.
THE NEON DEMON. Director: Nicolas Winding Refn. FR/DK/US 2016.
ONLY GOD FORGIVES. Director: Nicolas Winding Refn. DK/FR 2013.
PUSHER. Director: Nicolas Winding Refn. DK1996.
SOMBRE. Director: Philippe Grandrieux. FR 1998.
TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG. Creator: Nicolas Winding Refn and Ed Brubaker. US 2019.
STALKER. Director: Andrei Tarkovsky. SU 1979.
VALHALLA RISING. Director: Nicolas Winding Refn. DK 2009.

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