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## Drive

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## Drive

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Drive* (2011), directed by Nicholas Winding Refn.

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Nicholas Winding Refn's latest film, *Drive*, recontextualizes the traditional superhero myth as it uses unconventional means to explore the nature of goodness. Part-western, part-film noir, *Drive* is a generic hybrid that references the stoic masculinity and repressed compassion of the gunslinger archetype and the urban alienation, visual style, and moral ambiguity of L.A. film noir. On one level, this is the story of a heist gone horribly wrong and the extraordinary lengths taken to contain the consequences. On another level, by subverting generic and stylistic conventions, this film challenges the traditional understanding of the American hero as champion and protector of the Good.

*Drive*'s unnamed, affable protagonist (Ryan Gosling) is a movie stunt car driver who also works as a car mechanic for a small garage. When we first meet this anti-hero, he operates as a calculating and efficient getaway driver for a pair of thieves. As he successfully evades capture by the police, his preternaturally deft driving skills and quick wits suggest that his ability to handle the car as if it were an extension of his own body is both an extraordinary power and valuable commodity.

Known as "the Kid" or "Driver" by the small cast of characters who populate the film, he is a "masked" man of few words with even fewer acquaintances. Playing Alfred Pennyworth to his Bruce Wayne is Driver's employer and stunt handler, Shannon (Bryan Cranston), a tragic figure crippled by his grasping opportunism. Also sharing the screen with Driver are the unsavory, noir archetypes of: Bernie Rose (Albert Brooks), the entrepreneurial mob boss; Nino (Ron Perlman) Bernie's sadistic business partner; and Blanche (Christina Hendricks), the double-crossing femme fatale.

Like the cars he chooses for his heist jobs, Driver is a nondescript figure content with the anonymity offered by his urban environment. Mirroring the relational bankruptcy of his public persona is his apartment: utterly devoid of the lived history often characterizing a personal space. As such, he appears to be a man without the past, communal bonds, or moral conscience often associated with traditional heroes.

And yet, the development and loss of an unexpected romance between Driver and his neighbor Irene (Carey Mulligan) reveals a suppressed longing for connection that transforms this outsider into an agent of redemption. When Irene's husband Standard (Oscar Isaac) is released from prison, Nino's thugs demand Standard's involvement in a robbery as repayment for his prison protection. With the safety of Standard's wife and young son Benicio (Kaden Leos) also at stake, Driver barter his services as getaway driver to secure their freedom without any expectation of reward.

During a brief and seemingly insignificant conversation between Driver and Benicio about the rigid duality of cartoon sharks, the film's conclusions about the nature of goodness emerge. According to Benicio, it is possible to identify the good guy in a cartoon just by looking at him. When considered alongside the film's recurring use of the song "A Real Hero," this exchange seems to self-consciously challenge its viewers to consider whether it is possible to determine if Driver is a good or bad guy just from looking at him.

On one hand, *Drive*'s protagonist is like many traditional comic book heroes in his utilization of his special abilities to fight crime, protect the helpless, and save the innocent. Almost the criminals' polar opposite, Driver demonstrates a willingness to make amends with those responsible for the botched heist and forgive their offense if they promise to leave Irene and Benicio alone. In short, he is reluctant to use violence to achieve his objectives. However, this course of action is something the universe cannot allow. For instead of the rigid dualism of superhero comics, cowboy westerns, and cartoons, *Drive* presents a world in which the larger moral framework necessary to make sense of the human condition is absent. As such, the film's title could even refer to the protagonist's "drive" to make sense of the world and his place within that world as he embarks on this quest to redeem Irene and Benicio.

On the other hand, Driver's dissimilarity from these traditional figures emerges most clearly in his willingness to bash in a few heads along the way...literally. Nicholas Winding Refn's films are often noted for the director's generous depiction of stylized violence and sympathetic figures who could equally be understood as villains. *Drive* continues within this tradition, and as such, is not for the squeamish or the faint of heart as there are a number of scenes that are quite cringe-worthy. It is important to note, however, that *Drive*'s formal qualities visually distinguish between two types of violence: the crime bosses' senseless brutality and Driver's redemptive vigilantism. It is almost as if just by "looking," the camera intuitively differentiates between violence perpetrated by the good guys and the bad guys, and chooses the framing to record the violence, accordingly.

As a good guy transformed by the possibility of a love relationship with Irene, Driver was able to identify the Good and see it as something worth protecting, regardless of the cost. *Drive* symbolically illustrates this cost as Driver's white *Member's Only* jacket becomes progressively dirtied by blood and gore while killing and maiming the bad guys. More than just a nod to the film's setting, Driver's jacket is reminiscent of the white hat of justice often used to identify the good guys in cowboy westerns. The film concludes this thematic motif in its final action sequence, the struggling silhouettes of Driver and his adversary visually evoking the "high noon" battles of cowboy westerns. As he drives into the distance, wounded but victorious, with the open road before him, we are certain of one thing: the film casts Driver as a hero. However, the question of whether Driver's brand of hero is more like Travis Bickle than Shane is left unanswered as it extends beyond the boundaries of the film's exploration of the nature of goodness.