

# AN AESTHETICS OF SELF-HATRED

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One of my favourite movies is Nicolas Winding Refn's *DRIVE* (2011). Whenever I watch it, I am reminded of "On the Youth at Night" by Anne Carson:

The youth at night would have himself driven around the scream. It lay in the middle of the city gazing back at him with its heat and rose-pools of flesh. Terrific lava shone in his soul. He would ride and stare.<sup>1</sup>

I always wonder who is doing the driving. What does he see? Will he die glamorously or shrouded in anonymity?

*DRIVE* (based on a novel by James Sallis of the same name) centres on a stunt driver (Ryan Gosling) who also drives for heists in Los Angeles in his spare time. The opening scene is one of the best in contemporary cinema, featuring sweeping shots of a bedazzled, nocturnal LA set to a thumping beat by Chromatics. Known only as Driver, our protagonist is never anything more than an accomplice until he falls in love with his shy but beautiful neighbour Irene (Carey Mulligan). While her husband is in prison, Irene and Driver share a sexless romance consummated by a synth-pop road trip. When Irene's husband Standard (Oscar Isaac) returns from prison, their family is threatened for protection money, and Driver offers to help hold up a pawn shop to pay off Standard's debt and keep Irene and her child safe. I won't ruin the movie, so I will just say that the last we see of Driver is him speeding off into the night while "A Real Hero" by College and Electric Youth plays. The song is an ode to Chelsey "Sully" Sullenberger's goose-striking, water-landing fame: "You have proved to be a real human being and a real hero." I hate that such an atmospheric score is based on something as pedestrian as a story that got turned into a Tom Hanks movie.

*DRIVE*, which I just watched for the eighth time, is vaguely queer in its brazen manliness. Driver has leather gloves that squeak ever so slightly when he grips the wheel. The relationship among Standard, Irene, and Driver is one blow job away from a threesome. Despite being so commonplace looking (or maybe exactly for that reason), Gosling/Driver embodies my fascination with masculinity that has always been a vexing part of being gay and gay male history generally. Driver is the father I have always wanted—stoic and sensitive. He is also the lover I have always wanted, the kind of guy who would run his fingers through my hair while I contemplate the fact that he could kill me with his bare hands. That Lana Del Rey archetype who would fuck me up against an un-ironic pinball machine and take the wheel while I smoke a cigarette and put my feet out the window. I want to be the silent Irene—passed around by men and only required to pick up the phone while the dudes are fighting on my behalf (a tried-and-true action movie and *film noir* trope).

I have always thought that my inability to create homosocial bonds in my youth *made* me gay.

The late queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick certainly had better taste than I do, but she seemed to be speaking to me when she wrote: "I think that for many of us in childhood, the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meanings seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love."<sup>2</sup>

First it was *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*—perfectly acceptable by heteronormative standards. My attachment to film and literature only became a problem when it veered into *ANNE OF GREEN GABLES*—a story for girls. I never knew that gay people didn't go to Hell until I went to college, but I think that, as Sedgwick suggests, my interest in the melodramatic reassured me that there was something *beyond* the strictures of Catholic school—something flamboyant and carefree and just as pretty as the veiled, ghostly holy statues during Lent.

The meanings of *DRIVE*, however, seem to line up too tidily, and it is here that my fantasy begins to break down. It's about men saving a woman—a woman who is being subtly punished for having a mixed-race child.<sup>3</sup> This hearkens to Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959), which makes a melodramatic spectacle of a mixed-race child (who can pass as white) driving her mother to an early grave as punishment for being black. All of this is complicated by the fact that Irene was originally Latina and named Irena in Sallis's book.<sup>4</sup> In addition to being racially fraught, *Drive* is a kind of revenge porn wherein women are brutalized and battered even as we are meant to understand their abuse as romantic.

A little more "over-reading" (Sedgwick's term) yields further complicating results. While researching Refn's work, I discovered that a song he used for a key scene—"Oh My Love" by Riz Ortolani and Katyna Ranieri—was part of the score for perhaps the most disgusting Blaxploitation movie ever made. *Addio Zio Tom* (*Goodbye Uncle Tom*) (1971) is an Italian faux-documentary,

also called a Mondo film, about filmmakers who go back in time to expose the horrors of slavery in the Antebellum south. It was shot in Haiti, and the directors Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi were guests of the dictator François "Papa Doc" Duvalier who allowed them to use his own people as filmic guinea pigs. Duvalier was known to submerge his enemies alive in sulphuric acid while he watched through peepholes in the torture chamber walls. Under Duvalier, some 30,000 Haitians were murdered. "Oh My Love" attempts to put an operatic gloss on the collaboration between filmmakers and a known murderer with an ode to the beauty of liberation: "A day/A brighter day/When all the shadows/Will fade away/That day I'll cry/That I believe/That I believe." Jacopetti and Prosperi believed they were ushering in this brighter day by revealing the brutality of American slavery, but no amount of sonic beauty can fix what is fundamentally a deeply racist film made under the pretense of progressive values. I then discovered that Refn has actively defended Jacopetti and Prosperi, calling them "great cinematic masters."<sup>5</sup>

Of course, Refn's inclusion of this song could reflect *DRIVE*'s critical homage to exploitation movies of all kinds—carsploitation, rape and revenge films, splatter movies, and vigilante films.<sup>6</sup> Many postmodern critics would be willing to absolve Refn of any ethical responsibility simply because of his status as an auteur. I'm not willing to do that, but I'm simultaneously not willing to give up my beloved *DRIVE* and the sexual spaces it makes available to me. I hate myself for wanting what is "normal" and ultimately steeped in oppressive fantasies. I hate myself for writing it down and taking up yet more space in the name of (white) guilt. Is writing about this just a method of explaining away being a shitty person? A fundamentally evil and unsympathetic person? That's what therapy is for, to pay someone to tell us that we aren't all that terrible despite knowing that the opposite is true.

<sup>1</sup> ANNE CARSON, *PLAINWATER: ESSAYS AND POETRY*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 41.

<sup>2</sup> EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK, *TENDENCIES*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>3</sup> I owe this point to Micah Angelus.

<sup>4</sup> I owe this point to Felipe L. Núñez.

<sup>5</sup> BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE, "NICOLAS WINDING REFN INTRODUCES FAREWELL UNCLE TOM," 1 October 2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4czp8qKgF0>>.

<sup>6</sup> I owe this point to Michael Thomas Vassallo.

