

Review: Only God Forgives

Nicolas Winding Refn's divisive follow up to 2011's *Drive* is thrilling and uncompromising but to the detriment of an enjoyable cinematic experience. [George Wood](#) reviews

Sunday 4 August 2013



Director: Nicolas Winding Refn

Starring: Ryan Gosling, Kristin Scott Thomas, Vithaya Pansringarm

Length: 90 minutes

Rating: ★★☆☆☆

Nicolas Winding Refn's previous violent crime thriller *Drive* was a runaway success. At times, Ryan Gosling's character was an emotional black hole to the film's story, but, despite its problems, the film balanced his expressive minimalism and violent acts with a sentimental richness and thrilling chain of events.

In Refn's latest outing, every character is a black hole. Instead of admiring the rickety tension between characters à la *Drive*, in *Only God Forgives* we are expected to marvel at the attempts of each character to envelop one another with their own raging, black-hearted views of justice and vengeance. Witnessing this is certainly an experience, but not always an enjoyable one, thanks to the film's sketchy outline of a narrative.

Essentially the plot follows Julian (Ryan Gosling) trying to avenge the murder of his older brother and co-runner in his Bangkok drug operation, Billy (Tom Burke). When he finds out his brother was killed for raping and murdering a prostitute, he changes track, but the arrival of his brutally merciless mother Crystal (Kristin Scott Thomas) forces him to continue a vicious, bloody cycle of revenge that is eventually dominated by an even more brutal police lieutenant Chang (Vithaya Pansringarm), who had originally sanctioned Billy's murder.

While this might sound the perfect set-up to a Tarantino film, in Refn's hands story serves only at a functional level and is kept to a bare minimum. The "characters" are more like forces of nature, almost totally devoid of personality but hell-bent in purpose. It's like watching the destructive outcome of a hurricane; Refn shocks, thrills and disgusts all in extreme measure, but show little care of how the viewer is meant to feel beyond an exasperation of these responses.

Sure, one could analyse the symbolism and religious imagery – Refn described *Only God Forgives* as "a movie about a man who wants to fight God". For example, Chang's deliverance of justice comes with the

chopping of hands, like the retribution of a sinner, and the other police officers flock beside him like his apostles. His justice must be divine then, since methods supersede all laws and morals as Chang overthrows everything in his path in spite of Crystal's attempts through Julian to have him killed.

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But without a fulfilling story or characterisation, this interpretation is pointless. There's nothing to add weight to the meaning of the images that Refn throws at us. The build-up of Chang as a god-like character (and in contrast, Julian and Crystal as a violent, dysfunctional duo) should make for an epic, if inevitable, showdown, but nothing feels human enough for us to care. People aren't people, and their conversations, actions and motives are so surreal that at times, they are laughable. If you were put off by Gosling's minimalist performance in *Drive*, there's no enjoyment to be found in *Only God Forgives*.

Perhaps this is a slight exaggeration – Kristin Scott Thomas' performance as the blond-haired, bad-mouthed, murderous matriarch is admittedly captivating. *Only God Forgives* is filled with grotesque moments, but Crystal's Oedipal relationship with her son is the only element of the story that feels truly dynamic. The scene involving Julian, his mother and the prostitute posed as Julian's girlfriend will forever make my family dinners far less awkward in comparison.

And it can't be denied that *Only God Forgives* is dripping with style. There's very little respite from the claustrophobic neon-lighted setting of Bangkok. Like *Drive*, the film utilises an impressively stylish colour palette – every shot is a masterclass in aesthetics. Cliff Martinez returns to produce the film's soundtrack, using stirring strings and soft electronic beats to accompany the moody, trippy tones of the film, and Thai karaoke interludes to add to the film's surrealism. The explosion of electronic arpeggios and church organs in “Wanna Fight” is suitably climactic, but the quieter, more sombre tracks are just as effective, particularly in “Crystal Checking In”.

But no matter how atmospheric *Only God Forgives* can be, I still left the cinema feeling empty and uncaring about what I had just seen. This film serves to propagate the style versus substance debate, which is unfortunate. I disagree with those who argue that story or characters must always come first, because cinematography, sound and style are just as much the bread-and-butter of films as their narratives, as long as they complement each other. *Drive* proved that, it's just a shame that Refn's follow-up fails in this regard. While Refn succeeds in making us marvel, he holds no more influence over us on the film's supposed themes of revenge and justice than a box of fireworks.



3 comments

intan

4 Aug '13 at 1:35 pm

Hi ..

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Roy Rogers Mcfreely

4 Aug '13 at 2:17 pm

This film is like a work of art, the somptuous images captivates and make you ponder about the deeper meaning of the story. Now this is just another angle to convey feelings, and provoke thoughts without

having everything served on a plate by the actor's play.

[Report](#)

AK

5 Aug '13 at 6:29 pm

Nicholas Winding Refn said that "Drive was like doing the best cocaine all night long but that Only God Forgives was like being on acid, not just any acid but the good acid, the one where you're sat in a chair but you feel that you are the chair" Honestly, the man has a point, the disorientating splash of colours are superb and excellently done by Larry Smith. The soundtrack by Cliff Martinez pairs up with the Bangkok night so well that you genuinely gain an insight into Thailand's sick criminal underworld. This film is surely under rated by this paper. Only God Forgives can be open to so many interpretations. You can see Chang as a vigilante cop delivering his own brand of justice to Julian and co. or you can see Chang, The Angel of Vengeance, as literally God himself. Only God Forgives and Julian sees Chang as an opportunity to go toe to toe with his creator, angry and enraged at the sick oedipus complex he's been delivered by his psychopathic and dysfunctional family. No film I know of and convey so messages. The film doesn't need a bold outlined narrative, some people can't see what's ingrained in the film so just sit back, enjoy and walk away contemplating what was real in the film and what was surreal. The worst thing to do is compare it to Drive, that's the first mistake, compare it to other Windig Refn films like Valhalla Rising and see that Only God Forgives definitely is one of his finest films.

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