

Only God Forgives

Only God Forgives is probably the best film ever made and I make no allusion to hyperbole when I say this. This is a film that moved me unlike anything I had seen before. I spent the 90 minute running time with my hand covering my mouth, my heart pounding deep in my chest and my palms sweating profusely. When I had seen the film, I was immediately flooded with a desperate need to tell every living soul about it. (This confirms Stanley Cavell's concept that cinema produces a 'desire to communicate value'). There are many reasons for such a reaction.

Only God Forgives is one of the most beautifully made films I have ever seen. Aside from the incredibly emotive score by Cliff Martinez, it has a carefully constructed mise-en-scene where every frame is a work of art in itself. Every scene bathes the audience in a neon glow akin to that of Refn's other important works, *Drive* and *Bronson*. This neon glow highlights the grotesque nature of the corrupt Bangkok underworld. Every frame is strewn with leit-motifs which bring to bear hubristic notions.

Figure 1.



Figure 1 depicts the emphasis placed upon hands, strength and masculinity in the film. Placed side by side with a life-size, elevated statue, Julian, played by Ryan Gosling, presents a vain and introverted worship of his own body and might. Moreover, this frame also illustrates that red neon glow which is so much a part of the intense aesthetic of this film.

Capturing this ethereal mise-en-scene are camera movements that appear to glide through the Thai underworld much the same as Chang, played by Vithaya Pansringarm, seems to effortlessly float from one sordid and horrific scenario to another. This creates a supernatural feel, as if we are not in any way partaking in the action but, rather, are privy to small, jagged glimpses. This distance creates the notion of a moralistic parable, as if we are supposed to learn from the hubristic folly that plays out before us. This representation of Chang makes him the film's most intricate character. He is one of so many contradictions. Refn has out rightly said that Chang is

God. Yet he is a ruthless and bloody monster, undoubtedly the most horrific character I have ever witnessed in cinema. He commits acts of the greatest violence in the name of morality that, existing in some universe of perverted morality, justifiable.¹

This beautifully constructed mise-en-scene fortifies the film's brilliant performances. Gosling is outstanding. Where he may come under criticism for replaying his character in 'Drive', this is not necessarily the case. He is stoic and a near mute but this does not make for a shallow character study. On the contrary, this creates a moral ambiguity. Moreover, his awkward and uncomfortable silences serve to highlight the oedipal issues that run deep beneath the relationship with his mother, played by Kirstin Scott-Thomas (see figure 2).



Figure 2: Kirstin Scott-Thomas as Julian's evil mother.

Some critics have sighted her as a clear representation of the Devil to oppose Chang's God. I don't see her as a metaphorical character in this sense, but I do believe she has a function that is to provide the drive of evil within the action of the film. She is less a metaphor, more an embodiment of the horrific world her son inhabits.

For all its bloody violence, stunning and sickening mise-en-scene, subdued and subtle performances, this is surely one of the most divisive films ever made. This is a film that splits its followers and haters straight down the middle. Whether you hate it or see it as perhaps the greatest film ever made, you will not be able to resist the temptation to tell people about it. Whether it makes you pick up pen and paper and write a review for yourself or vomit blood in the cinema aisles, there is, undoubtedly something of the masterpiece in here.

¹ There is a whole field of debate centered around the supernatural in this film. If you wish to explore this further I suggest you start with this insightful review by Chris Stuckmann who explains in depth many of the areas I have touched upon:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nOPZURubLyU>

