

# Nicolas Winding Refn Welcomes All Your Hate

The director of *Too Old to Die Young* says success and creativity aren't about being likable.

BY [JOSH ST. CLAIR](#) JUN 13, 2019



This year, Nicolas Winding Refn's eldest daughter Lola turned 16, which meant she was finally old enough to accompany her family to Cannes for the premiere of her father's latest project, Too Old to Die Young, a thirteen-hour-long television series featuring the Danish director's signature, perpetually controversial ultra-violence. Cannes marked the first time Lola would witness a Nicolas Winding Refn production.

Refn has to be forced to watch his own films, and he begrudgingly sat through the two-episode Cannes preview with Lola beside him. During his last Cannes appearance with *The Neon Demon*, Refn's on-screen violence goaded viewers. Late in the film, an aspiring 16-year-old model (Elle Fanning) is murdered in a swimming pool, butchered, and then cannibalized by three other models, one of whom later coughs up Fanning's eyeball and then stabs herself with a pair of scissors; another picks up the vomited eyeball, eats it, and returns to a photoshoot. The audience booed. One man reportedly yelled "trash" in Spanish. Another fainted. (Refn's wife told him it was her favorite work so far).

After *Too Old to Die Young* finished at 1:00 AM, however, Refn received a six-minute standing ovation—a reaction similar to that of his 2011 hit film *Drive*, for which he won Cannes' Best Director Award. Refn says his happiest surprise of the night, though, was Lola's enthusiasm; she laughed multiple times during the screening. "She's fucking sophisticated," Refn says, proudly. "She's fast. She reads all the signs and subtexts."

TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG Official Trailer (2019) Nicolas Winding Refn, T...



Beneath those signs and above its subtexts is a largely straightforward story: the series, which premieres on Amazon Prime on Friday, June 14, sends L.A. cop Martin (Miles Teller) on a dozen-hour-long killing spree, gunning down the “worst men”: pedophiles, rapists, kidnappers, etc.

“I’m not running for office,” Refn says, anticipating criticism. “I don’t need to be presentable or acceptable.” Refn leans into his final words with a Danish accent that grows more pronounced and f-bomb-laden as he grows impassioned. He has the habit, too, of punctuating his sentences with “brother” or “man,” as in “I’m here to entertain you, man,” or “I’m here to give you a spectacle, brother.”

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Refn is often accused of being arrogant and bombastic, and it can be difficult to discern which of his comments are sincere and which are simply trolling (a grinning Refn once told William Friedkin on camera that *Drive* should be ranked beside *Citizen Kane*). Over the course of our hour-long conversation, Refn will compare himself to Picasso and call creativity more powerful than a nuclear bomb. But his statements always feel more earnest than egotistic. Refn is unabashedly himself (“I make what I make”) and very clear on how others should judge his work: like *Lola* and “the teenagers”—which is to say, they should fucking take it or leave it, brother.

“If my kids don't like something, they don't spend hours telling me what's wrong about it,” Refn says. “They just go, eh, didn't go for it. Great. On to something else bigger and better. Let's go.”

Refn says he makes films for the teenagers, because they tend to be more curious, more reactionary, and more likely to “embrace extremes”—going for it, or not. Hate and love alone are boring, he says, like good or bad, or what he unapologetically refers to as cheap “Chinese food.” Refn wants love, welcomes hate, but he thinks having both is sublime. “I’m narcissistic, megalomaniacal, and self-indulgent—because that’s the DNA of creativity. Creativity is not about being likable. Creativity’s purpose is to become divisive. It’s to create

dialogue. That's what it does. And in order to create dialogue, people need to disagree. Polarization, to me, is the key. That's the definition of success."



Refn during a moment on set. Refn co-created *Too Old To Die Young* with comic book writer Ed Brubaker.

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**L**uckily for Refn, his films are about as disagreeable and polarizing as art comes. And Refn wants no part in clarifying them. "The danger with creativity is when it becomes explanatory," he says. "All I do is channel my emotional reactions to things around me."

Those things around Refn at the time of writing *Too Old to Die Young* included his move to Los Angeles (and America), raising two daughters, as well as the 2017 social climate. And Refn admits that if anything, the film is a "political reaction."

Indeed, *Too Old To Die Young* plays out like a kind of #MeToo revenge thriller, one set against an action backdrop of assassins including mafiosos, sicarios, yakuza soldiers, and gangsters. Moody and grandiose dialogue between characters suggest that men are

responsible for a kind of “collapse.” Cathartic vignettes then depict acts of retribution. In one, a character tells of a man who rapes his own daughter. The speaker then walks over to the car in which the man sits and executes him through the window with a pocket knife.

“I’m Scandinavian. We’re taught to treat women with utmost equality and respect,” Refn says. “Nothing enrages me more than seeing women not being treated as complete equals on a human level. There’s probably a bit of subconscious thrown in there from my end. I don’t run from that.”

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Refn was born in Denmark and moved to New York City shortly after his parents’ divorce. He is dyslexic and has said he didn’t learn to read until he was thirteen. Film was Refn’s literature, and he broke into Danish cinema after his 1996 debut film *Pusher*, a gritty, documentary-styled tale of drug-debt repayment. It was the first of many films focused on violent, silent men—played by everyone from Tom Hardy to Mads Mickelson to Ryan Gosling—men who navigate underworlds, pursuing catharsis, freedom, and revenge. Their relationships with women are either non-existent or greatly strained. They do a lot of sinning.

*Too Old To Die Young* seems to be—in a weird, no-less violent way—a reflection on these types of men. Of course, Refn would never say this outright. Talking about his films is hard work, man. He wants them to speak for themselves. But he’ll also entertain debate.

**What do you watch more often?**

Amazon Prime

Hulu

When pressed about the potential backlash over depicting so much violence against women, Refn brings up a scene from a middle episode. In it, a man sits uncomfortably in front of a

“rape pornographer” before being ordered to suck his own thumb and then set upon my several older men. “What about that guy, the poor guy who gets abused and ridiculed sexually by other men?” Refn asks. “Doesn’t he also have a voice?” Was that the intent of that scene, to show this? “No,” he says coyly. “I’m just bringing it up. Since you’re not bringing it up. Shouldn’t there be some equality here?”



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**W**hether or not Refn has a thematic agenda, he’s certainly not afraid of misinterpretation. “Look, people throw words [like ‘misogyny’] around, because they’re easy,” he says. “But it doesn’t always mean they understand what they write.”

Did Refn ever worry that his daughter might misinterpret his film, or be offended by it? “Offended?” Refn laughs. “We’re Scandinavian; we don’t get offended.”

Refn explains that his shocks and offenses are necessary parts of entertainment, like a roller coaster ride that plummets into freezing water. Refn wants to wake us up. “We live in a world where we’re so obsessed with painless,” he says. “We are shielded. We walk with so

much armor around us.” Art penetrates the armor, triggers us, brings out our worst memories, goads and inspires. Or as Refn puts it: “You can love it. You can punch it. You can strangle it. You can fuck it. You can scream at it. You can cuddle it.” Just so long as you react and feel something.

Reactions so far have been positive (in the Refn lexicon). The Guardian called the series “just as horrible and upsetting as you’d expect,” a quote that Refn’s team loved so much, they slapped it onto a promo video. Refn, however, doesn’t seem to pay much attention to critics. He never discusses his work with friends or family. His mom, he says, has to call him whenever he makes the news. He simply wakes up. He plays Legos with his kids. He surfs Youtube when he’s cooking lunch. He takes criticism ... and he leaves it.

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“The ones who critique me, they seem to critique me in the same way every time. I always wonder: do they ever think that I’m actually going to change because of that? Am I going to take notes and go, Oh, I got it now? It’s like: what the fuck? These critics who try to educate me; all I’m saying in my mind is: brother, or sister, it ain’t for you. It’s for the teenagers, because they don’t have the same fucking obsession about what is right and wrong with art.” To the teenagers. Amen, brother.

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JOSH ST. CLAIR

Joshua St.