

# On the Depths of Surface: Strategies of Surface Aesthetics in *The Bling Ring*, *Spring Breakers* and *Drive*

---

Maryn Wilkinson, University of Amsterdam

(M.C.Wilkinson@uva.nl)

## Abstract:

The films *The Bling Ring* (Sofia Coppola, 2013), *Spring Breakers* (Harmony Korine, 2012), and *Drive* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2011), were all dismissed for their depthlessness. This article argues that we need to explore the depths and variety of their engagement with surface in order to fully appreciate what these films are trying to say. The article proposes that these films in fact employ three different “strategies” of surface engagement, in and through their aesthetics; *The Bling Ring* relies on a sense of “skimming”, *Spring Breakers* engages ideas of “drifting”, while *Drive* promotes a sense of “gliding” or “coasting”. Analysis of these strategies of surface aesthetics reveals that the films make dialectic categories of depth and surface, sign and meaning, form and content, indistinguishable, and it is precisely in doing so that they offer complex critique on the crimes they display, and the state of our current hyper-mediated and networked world. These films are not only about the stories they tell but about how the very function that the films themselves perform is intricately intertwined with those stories. This makes the films self-reflexive and postmodern, but it also shows that surface itself, in the cinema, cannot and should not be dismissed as a monolithic, indeterminate nothing. The article argues that we must analyse and engage the depths of surface if we want to understand meaning in cinema today.

**Keywords:** Style; aesthetics; surface; Korine; Coppola; Refn

*Film-Philosophy* 22.2 (2018): 222–239

DOI: 10.3366/film.2018.0074

© Maryn Wilkinson. This article is published as Open Access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Licence

(<http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction provided the original work is cited. For commercial re-use, please refer to our website at: [www.eupublishing.com/customer-services/authors/permissions](http://www.eupublishing.com/customer-services/authors/permissions).

[www.eupublishing.com/film](http://www.eupublishing.com/film)

## Surface Aesthetics in Contemporary Cinema

[W]hen I look at *The Big Blue*, I do not see the sea, I see an advertisement concept of the sea that has definitively replaced the sea.

—Serge Daney (1993, p. 293)

In the early 2010s, three new films addressing crime in contemporary America were critiqued for their apparent “depthlessness”.<sup>1</sup> Richard Corliss called Harmony Korine’s *Spring Breakers* (2012) “all surface and sham” (Corliss, 2013), Jeffrey Lyles said Sofia Coppola’s *The Bling Ring* (2013) was “a film as vapid and empty as its subjects and inspiration” (Lyles, 2012), while Will Leitch wrote of Nicolas Winding Refn’s *Drive* (2011): “None of these characters add up to much: They are almost entirely all pose [...]. [Winding Refn is] just having fun and showing off [...]. There’s nothing behind the curtain.” (Leitch, 2011).<sup>2</sup> The critics seemed preoccupied by the shallowness of the films, by their “lack of content”, their superficiality, and long for a meaning that supposedly resides underneath the surface, in the depths of content. Depthlessness, it would seem, is still considered, instinctively, the corollary of vacuity, and these postmodern films, for all their emphasis on style, surface and self-reflexivity, thus become emblematic of the failure of the project of postmodernism (see Jameson [1991], Hutcheon [1988], and so on) to undo that very supposition.

In this article, I analyse the surface aesthetics in *The Bling Ring*, *Spring Breakers*, and *Drive*, and argue that it is only by understanding the depths and variety of their engagement with surface that we can fully appreciate what these films are trying to say; about America, about crime, and about how we currently engage with media and film itself, in these hyper-consumerist, hyper-material, hyper-real times.<sup>3</sup> I propose that even though the three films are similar in many ways, they in fact employ three different “strategies” of surface engagement, of ideas about surface, in and through their aesthetics. *The Bling Ring* relies on a sense of “skimming” (as though one were flipping casually through the pages of a magazine),

- 
1. The author wishes to express her sincere thanks to the reviewers and the editors, and to her colleagues Eva Sancho-Rodriguez and Blandine Joret (who referenced Daney in her PhD thesis) for their kind, generous and incredibly valuable input.
  2. This indicates but a few voices among many other reviews that followed a similar vein. See also for instance the reviews of John Hank (*Spring Breakers*), Jeff Beck (*The Bling Ring*), Tom Huddleston and Anthony Lane (*Drive*), all accessible through [www.rottentomatoes.com](http://www.rottentomatoes.com).
  3. Please note this article builds on (and occasionally repeats) select observations and arguments made by the author in a different article that looked at leisure and crime in *Spring Breakers* and *The Bling Ring*, and analysed these two films from a political, Marxist/feminist perspective. See Wilkinson (2017).

*Spring Breakers* engages aesthetics of “drifting” (a more organic, floating, semi-immersed act that can move aimlessly and unpredictably in any direction), while *Drive* promotes a sense of “gliding” or “coasting” (the specific movement of a car when the clutch is released and it glides on at speed in a neutral state – a harder, more linear and directional movement, yet propelled without the thrusting, controlled power of a motor driving it forward). At stake here is front and foremost the aesthetic choices and textures of the films; how, where and why do they place such an emphasis on surface, and why is this important?

I propose that the very point of the strategies of surface aesthetics in these three films is to make dialectic categories of depth and surface, sign and meaning, form and content, indistinguishable, and that in doing so, they offer complex critique of the crime on display and the state of our current hyper-mediated and networked world. In addition, it is my intention here to challenge the sense of “surface” in cinema as a monolithic, undifferentiated aesthetic nothing, and rather to unpack and complicate the notion of surface by suggesting that there are multiple ways of shaping and engaging it in film<sup>4</sup>. Under three different subheadings I analyse how *The Bling Ring*, *Spring Breakers* and *Drive* engage senses of skimming, drifting and gliding/coasting respectively, while also pointing towards the similarities and differences in their film style. Within their distinct “surface engagement” approaches, all three films present distinct colour schemes and limited palettes, have electronic music and dialogue loops on the soundtracks, employ various image formats, stocks and speeds of editing, play with notions of “performance”, appropriation and circulation, and impose a certain “matter-of-fact” lack of ethical judgment, or detachment, on the criminal actions of their protagonists. All of this ultimately, I argue, makes the films inherently self-reflexive and postmodern; these films are not only about the stories they tell but also about how the very function that the films themselves perform is intricately intertwined with those stories. Yet these films push their own critical (self-)reflexivity so far that the boundaries between surface and depth, between style and substance, form and content, become obsolete. In a way, these films can perhaps best be understood as interfaces; they use the “depths of their surface” to invoke an affective engagement with the film-on-screen, whereby the surface itself becomes a connective, sticky

---

4. Please note I wish to analyse surface strategies here within the confines of the debates around postmodernism, cinema, style/aesthetics and meaning. For an alternative reading of surface, as an affective, haptic, Deleuzian texture in the cinema, see for instance the inspiring work of Giuliana Bruno (2014).

force that drives and shapes the films' meaning – and that precisely seems to be the point.

In the quote taken from his discussion of Luc Besson's highly aestheticized *The Big Blue* (1988), Serge Daney suggests that when we look at the sea on screen, it is possible to see the sea (or the advertisement concept of the sea). The surface of the sea, the appearance of the sea, he seems to propose, is one with the idea of what the sea entails: it is one with its form, with its matter, with what it is – in the same way that the glimmering surface of water in a swimming pool indicates the nature of the pool itself as well (and, for example, its being distinct from the sea). The surface is not flat, shallow or superficial. Engaging the surface in all its richness and complexity is to engage the very thing itself. Let us look at the different ways in which these three films do so.

### Skimming (*The Bling Ring*)

Sofia Coppola's *The Bling Ring* tells the story of the real-life band of teenagers who robbed celebrities' houses in Beverly Hills in 2008–2009. The crimes were covered extensively in the media at the time; a *Vanity Fair* article famously inspired Coppola to make this film about the topic. The film introduces us to a group of bored, privileged Los Angeles high school girls, Rebecca (Katie Chang), Chloe (Claire Julien), Nicki (Emma Watson) and Sam (Taissa Farmiga), who eagerly “adopt” the gay new kid, Marc (Israel Broussard), into their popular clique. A shared love of fashion and celebrities soon evolves into an exclusive friendship, when Rebecca suggests she and Marc should “check” unlocked cars and houses in their neighbourhood for money, drugs and other goods. Upon discovering they can use their celebrity gossip knowledge to find out where celebrities live and when they are out of town, the group begins to “hang out” at It-girl Paris Hilton's house while she is away, taking clothes and valuables with them to show off at parties, in clubs, and on their social media accounts. The group continues to burglar their favourite celebrities' houses in LA, taking valuables and personal effects, until the media and police finally catch up with them and they are arrested. After a trial that is extensively covered by the media, some of the group are sent to jail. Their friendships evaporate, evidenced by their “unfriended” status on social media. Nicki, meanwhile, is shown to turn the media attention to her benefit, as she becomes a celebrity herself.

The surface aesthetics of *The Bling Ring* can best be read in terms of acts of “skimming”. Skimming the pages of a magazine infers a quick and hasty “surface” browse, where information or input is swiped through in hastened, unfocused and semi-distracted flânerie. Skimming relies on a sense of surface in that it merely engages a temporary, fleeting, bouncy

(first) impression of that which resides on the surface, or on the “face of it”. One may skim a magazine, a catalogue, internet search results, or the news, to just get the gist of it, to get the headlines. It is purely the act of looking for potential access points within the surface – not the focused reading that might follow later or any other in-depth engagement with what potentially does or does not lie underneath. Skimming is about a swift surface engagement with the “first look of things”.

The aesthetics of the opening of the film present this idea of skimming by its quick succession of different visual styles. The film opens with a shot from the perspective of a sepia-toned night security camera image – surveillance footage that shows a group of teenagers (their clothes and posture clue us in to their age) as they jump a fence and walk onto private property. The static surveillance camera barely “skims” its targeted vista for points of light and dark in the night, allowing us only to vaguely infer what is going on. It plays with what we are seeing and hearing. From this grainy perspective, the round post light doubles as a full moon, while the sounds of crickets chirping in the silent night seemingly suggest a calm and natural environment. The emphasis on the potential discrepancies of what things “look like” is set from the beginning. Within this shot, the group of teenagers appear only as dark silhouettes, as shadowy avatars, coming in from the edge of the frame, from out of nowhere, in this assumedly affluent neighbourhood.

The film then cuts to a handheld colour-film camera that takes on the point-of-view of someone in the group walking onto the property. Suddenly the viewer is one of the gang, one amidst the bodies all hooded and unidentifiable from behind, as they walk past a shimmering swimming pool and approach the glass façade of an expensive-looking house (the shiny appeal of these set elements draw the eyes briefly to their surface and quickly onward, while the play with exterior/interior “access” here becomes about surface transgression, rather than the layering of content). The second attempt to open a sliding glass door (again, a significant element; it slides rather than opens, and never concealed to begin with) proves successful, and as the camera point-of-view follows the group into the house, the soundtrack breaks into a loud, repetitive, upbeat electronic guitar riff. One of the girls turns around to face the camera in a dim pool of light, and says smilingly: “Let’s go shopping!”, before opening a cupboard to reveal the edges of fur coats hanging inside. In another “slide along the surface” transgression, the house becomes a mall. As the music swells with added instrumentation, the camera cuts into a montage sequence of sorts that recalls the opening of 1980s teen film *Valley Girl* (Coolidge, 1983); a rapid “pop” succession of quick-fire glossy shots of clothes, bags, jewellery and underwear, exposed by hands opening

drawers, picking up items and stuffing them into bags – or simply on display for the camera in well-lit “glamour” photography (overhead or head-on shots of rows of commodities in symmetrical composition). The montage sequence is now the film’s title sequence. Bright, large, yellow letters spelling out ‘The Bling Ring’ splatter briefly across the screen, on top of an aerial shot of LA at night, before the names of the film’s cast and crew run across more rows of shoes and close-ups of luxury items. This is intercut with shots of the teenage characters filmed by media crews in the street, or trying on items, with social media pictures of them wearing those same items, footage of celebrities posing at red carpet appearances, a return to the surveillance camera (but now from a slightly different angle, and showing the teenagers in green – as opposed to sepia – as they leave the house with goods in hand to drive off), and then a close-up of jewellery on display with a notice of “evidence” next to it, seemingly part of a later police examination.

All of this happens within the first two minutes of the film and before the actual story of the film “begins”. This opening sequence exposes the viewer to a wide range of different visual styles and formats that follow one another in quick succession (from static surveillance footage to handheld point-of-view, from glamorous commodity photography to Facebook pages, red carpet footage, and so on) that all engage ideas of emulation. Here, we are skimming through a mediated landscape, swiping through an endless range of different image formats all notably or potentially artificial – or in any case no longer strictly, logically, indexical – none of which are necessarily connected to the main story (the red carpet footage especially). As we skim from visual to visual, from page to page, from format of mediation to format of mediation, we only briefly touch upon any particular surface before quickly moving on. The fleeting nature of our engagement with what we are seeing seems precisely the point. This is not about a layering of images to create depth; rather, it is about imploring our affective engagement with the screen to move through this landscape frenetically, continuously, horizontally. We are just skimming the surface, and it is this movement, this action, that matters here.

The strategy of surface “skimming” both evokes and performs the casual consumption/conglomeration of multiple (simulated) media forms, and this continues throughout the film. The interiors of the teenagers’ homes are presented in limited palettes of beiges, pastels and whites – as though they came directly from glossy interior design magazines or catalogues (Ikea, Habitat and Pottery Barn come to mind). As characters discuss their vision boards during their home-school sessions, or try on a range of items in a shopping sequence, or flip through the pages of

a fashion magazine, or browse the gossip pages online on screen, the film itself takes on those formats, simulating fashion vlogs, music videos, advertisements, and/or in its references to other teen films and teen TV. The film inserts shots of (real) TMZ-footage, black-and-white Skype-style images from laptop camera's, flashing red carpet slide shows, news footage and security cameras, phone-camera footage, and full screen stills of social media pages – transforming the surface of the film itself into a television, phone or computer screen. The fleeting access that skimming media entails becomes part and parcel of the narration here. What is inside or outside the diegesis (and what is “real” or not), what is of surface and image, or within and underneath, of subjective perception or objective truth, can no longer be separated; moreover, the separation here no longer matters. *The Bling Ring* itself performs a skimming of networked media, and as such constantly thrusts its own performance (as a fleeting, mediated commodity itself – a commercial retelling of these events) back to the surface; the film becomes about the swiping consumption of the tale, the skimming of it, and about the indistinguishable role the film plays within the media circus. Is the film the result (a victim?), or an active perpetrator here? Perhaps that too no longer matters, and perhaps that too is precisely the point.

The aesthetic surface strategy of skimming is intricately interlaced with the criminal skimming of “surplus”, excess(-ive) goods in the story of the film. Brand names proudly, fleetingly circulate in the dialogue (“Look at all the Louboutins! Chanel! It’s Hervé Leger! They’re Rolexes! It’s a Birkin! That’s sooo cute!”), as the girls try on and “perform” one commodity after the other, one image after the next. They slip in and out of personas and places (including celebrities houses), as though their acts of skimming simply allow them to insert themselves anywhere. Meanwhile, the commodities themselves are merely “skimmed” for their image too; here, they are mere props in a mediated world of consumption that requires nothing more of them than that. The material functions of the commodities carry no weight; they are transitory, symbolic, and performative – as image driven as the teenagers themselves – and the film uses them all in the same way. The constant listing of brands emulates, mocks and “performs” product placement, advertisement-style, whilst the changeability of the girls’ performance too is both highlighted and exploited. The film ultimately situates both the teenagers within it and the film itself as active producers and consumers of a mass mediated, hyper-consumerist North American culture. Again, where one ends and the other begins no longer matters – the surface aesthetic becomes a slippery “skim-able” Möbius strip where there is no (clear) beginning or end, no (clear) lineage of accountability or culpability. The act of

skimming, of continuous fleeting consumption (of celebrity, immaterial and material commodities), engaged by and through the media – of which the film itself is a part – is exactly what the film is, what it performs, and what it is about.

**Drifting: *Spring Breakers***

In Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers*, we meet four lower middle-class girls, Faith (Selena Gomez), Candy (Vanessa Hudgens), Brit (Ashley Benson) and Cotty (Rachel Korine), as they study at college. The group of friends bemoan their "trapped" state: "We really need to get out of here," "We've been stuck here too long," "[We] need to see something different," they say, voicing their desire to go to Florida for "Spring Break" (a raucous American college tradition that is introduced during the opening credits for all the carnivalesque "Girls Gone Wild" debauchery it has become associated with in popular media). When their collective funds fall short, three of the girls come up with a quick fix for their plight: they rob a Chicken Shack fast food restaurant with a hammer and squirt guns. Once in Florida, the girls enjoy beach time, drink, take drugs, and party, vowing to keep the fun going with the mantra: "Spring Break Forever." After a local rapper and gangster, Alien (James Franco), bails them out of a situational drug-arrest, the girls join his gang, and two of them take on sexual relations with him. As their situation becomes increasingly uneasy and begins to escalate, Faith returns home. After being injured in a drive-by shooting by a rival drug dealer, Cotty too leaves. In revenge for Cotty's shooting, Alien, Candy and Brit decide to murder the rival gang. As they arrive by boat at the gang's compound, Alien is shot dead. The two remaining girls retaliate by massacring everyone on the compound before driving away in the rival drug lord's car.

The surface aesthetics of *Spring Breakers* can best be defined in terms of drifting. Drifting commonly refers to the experience of an object being carried along by a body of air or water. There is an ethereal quality to it – a sense of elusiveness – because it is guided by morphing forces that are unpredictable, and not under (human) control. It is a more organic, fluid motion, and inherently transgressive; the act of drifting opposes solid structure, and that which is set and controlled. It engages the idea of surface in that it often relies on a suspension of some kind "on the surface"; it requires a (partial) surrendered immersion of sorts, in order to let the drifting force take you elsewhere (particularly when drifting by floating, where one is suspended on the surface of water, partly submerged, partly on top). It is generally a horizontal movement, but quite unpredictable in its direction; one may well just be "bobbing along",



or remain in place for a bit. On top of that, drifting is often associated with dreamlike reverie; one finds one's thoughts "drifting off" when daydreaming, or slowly falling asleep. Drifting is about being in an in-between like state – in limbo, motionless but moving, wherever the drift will take you.

The opening of *Spring Breakers* introduces us straight away to the idea of drifting. It engages a range of "forces" that circulate in contemporary (American) popular culture, and shows them not in any clear, cohesive (chronological) order, but rather through drifting, affective sensations: in flickers, whiffs and waves – each moving at their own speed and direction. The opening credits present intensely bright coloured letters on black, as though taken from a neon sign at night. The letters are constructed of other images; dolphins, parrots, butterflies, palm trees, waves bursting out in swooshes. They flicker on and off as different sets of names and credits follow one another in quick succession – it is equal parts advertising, tropical holiday, cocktail bar, and gaudy Vegas sign. The loud electronic pop music on the soundtrack bridges a sudden cut to a slow motion sideward track of bikini'd bodies partying on a beach. The camera prioritizes the bodies and their actions along the surface of the beachfront, leaving the faces and identities of the youngsters on screen relatively anonymous. The colours and details, like the neon letters on black before it, are crisp, intense and bright, with an almost surreal quality (the intensely saturated cinematography is reminiscent of the photographs of Martin Parr). The camera is constantly moving, but the slow motion makes the shots look and feel more like "moving stills". By cutting between details without a clear establishing shot (the film rejects Classical Hollywood continuity throughout), and taking on different directions of movement and speeds of motion with the camera, the actions we see are not placed in any clear linear progression, but instead come together as though in a dream (or nightmare?); harshly, illogically, yet they are sensual and connected. As the electronic sounds on the soundtrack slowly begin to warp and distort, the beach party scenes too take on an increasingly "dirty" tone; shaking naked breasts are now doused in beer, beer cups look like bongos, shots of female bodies become pornographic, as girls suck suggestively on ice lollies, and so on. The beach scenes have transformed into "the worst of MTV"; an indulgent delirium of excessive debauchery. All of a sudden, the sound of a cocking gun accompanies a cut to a red filtered interior of a small group of college students watching *My Little Pony* on a television, while lounging on sofas and taking drugs. Again, there is no clear establishing shot or obvious connection with the previous scene; the viewer has to piece together a range of close-ups to get a sense of the space and action. The smoke from the bong onscreen

## *Surface Aesthetics in Contemporary Cinema*

billows through the red light, rendering even the surface of the air visible in whiffs of diffused glow.

In these first few minutes of the film, we enter a world that is subject to drifting imagery, to circulating sounds and images, without a clear point of origin. They may be familiar to us from popular culture – we recognise the gaudy cocktail bar neon letters, the “Girls Gone Wild” scenery, and the TV in the centre of the college dorm – but here, they float in and out so easily; each informing the other, but not necessarily directing one another explicitly towards something. The girls at the heart of the story seem the product of, but distinctly ungrounded by, their environment. They are marked by their elusive, plastic ability to constantly adapt, appropriate, perform, and transform. We see Brit and Candy in a darkened lecture hall where students’ faces are lit only by their computer screens; light catching but the surface of their expressions and actions. Below, in the distance, a lecturer talks about slavery and the history of civil rights, when Brit, notably bored, draws a note on her notebook that reads: “I Like Penis”. After she holds it up to her friend, a giggling Candy draws a giant penis on her own notebook with the words “SPRING BREAK” inside the shaft, which she then pretends to fellate for the viewing pleasure of Brit. The girls’ playful interaction, reliant on surfaces (they draw on the surface of their notebooks, all symbols and labels, and play-act their way through the performance of sexual actions), entirely disregards the formality, or the content, of their setting. It is as though the girls are disconnected from it; the public space that surrounds the girls – of serious information and the depths of political history – is transformed into a different space by the content of their lighter, surface engagements; their interaction insists we lift them out of their direct context and allow them to drift elsewhere. The film places them on a surface plane that connects back instead to the opening montage of the film.

The whiffs, waves and bursts of loosely associative dreamlike imagery form the backbone of the affective “drifting” surface aesthetic in *Spring Breakers*. Scenes, shots and actions come together, but without any clear chronology they remain relatively loose and disconnected, each drifting along for a bit, before turning back on themselves. Throughout the film, excerpts of past, present and future dialogue loop in circles on the soundtrack (slowly immersing the viewer in the girls’ desires and state of mind). We observe the girls tumble over one another and do hand stands in the college corridors. The shots are backlit and filtered in light blue, as though the girls were synchronised swimmers in a pool. Moments later, they sing a Britney Spears song in a parking lot. Moments later again, they dance around a piano on the beach, machine guns in hand, and dressed in bikinis and pink balaclavas. Their sexual appeal,

their desire, their agency, their actions, drift in and out of scenes so fluidly. They are never passive, yet never fully active either. The film seems to be saying: these girls, and their actions, do not move in a regular, linear, or gravitational way – they are not grounded by a specific context or causality, they rather drift, float and bounce around within the image, or in their own imagined version of it. All the while, the camera swerves, drenched in filtered colour, both shaping and emulating their movements.

Where *The Bling Ring* confined its characters to limited palettes of beiges and pastels, the girls in *Spring Breakers* are doused in hard candy neon colours, all Skittles and Starburst. Both palettes pertain to surface and image more than they do to “world”, but the character of neon resonates particularly with the superficial. Its lack of gradation and volume, and its inter-textual references to nightlife, to advertisements, to the steady (mere) projection of light, position its affective qualities strongly on and along the surface. The film appears to be playing with this, entertaining and engaging the drifts of popular (shallow? superficial? artificial?) entertainment throughout. The hues of the screen move us swiftly from red, to blue, to green, yellow and pink, both across and within a range of settings, and then through different film stocks as well (from the high grain of blown up 8 mm film, to the drained qualities of [simulated] VHS tape), while the rhythms of the electronic music on the soundtrack bind it all together to in a kind of trance. If *The Bling Ring* were about the skimming of conglomerated media formats, *Spring Breakers* drifts along its own surface more like a music video; its actions appear a product of osmosis, one scene infusing another, yet the quality of the film is more directly carnal in its prioritising of texture and the senses. We can almost smell the chlorine, the scent of the smoke, feel the glass to the lips, the brush of the hair, the touch of the girls’ hands, and are startled by the cock of the gun, the whisper of the voice. But all the while, these sensual affectations remain at the level of the film’s own fabric, creating an engagement with the screen that feels more like a sticky, glutinous interface, as opposed to it offering clearly marked “access points”. For in spite of its invitations to connect to the sensuous appeals of the surface, we remain detached, indifferent, and removed from the action on display. We are drifting on its surface – only partially submerged.

The crime and violence in the film too is subject to drifting; it is distinctly mediated, appropriated and constantly redirected, and always “performed” in *Spring Breakers*. It is both visually and narratively presented as an extension of computer game play or media consumption (“pretend it’s a computer game”, “just act like you’re in a movie”, says Candy, before the girls rob the Chicken Shack with their fake guns). The robbery itself is shown under several layers of “surfaced”, see-through

context; it is observed from outside the restaurant, through a glass car window (screen), through the glass restaurant-window (screen), through the semi-transparent signs on that window (screen), under diegetic music that performs non-diegetically on screen as well. All this points us towards the performance of the cinema screen itself. The criminal acts on display are absorbed, embedded and regurgitated within the world of imagery that produces it. By the time the true nature of the violence is revealed, through Faith's later imagination of it, when the other girls "simulate" and "perform" how they went about it once more, the acts themselves are of another time, and no longer carry any real impact. The gravity of the violence is brushed aside and mostly ignored – we remain outside, mere observers of the scenes on-multiple-screen, both watching and drawn in by the surface drifts.

The aesthetic slippages between "real" and "representation" flow throughout the film. The guns handled by the girls are either fake props (squirt guns that dispense liquor), or guns that transform into props for sexual play. Even when they are actual guns, the shots and their deadly consequences are erased. There may be extreme violence and murder at the end of *Spring Breakers*, but we do not see the actual blood of the bloodshed. The final scene renders the film itself transformed. The camera walks eye-level with the girls into the house, the neon of the girls' bikinis glowing in black light, as music and a monologue of one of the girls describing the utopia of her Spring Break overtakes any diegetic sounds on the soundtrack. The film itself, in its conclusion, has become a music video, a video game; a performance of "acting like you're in a movie". Victims quickly drop to the ground like faceless renderings, without signs of bloodshed, and, as we walk with the girls through the house, their hands with guns are held high and pointed forward, like in a first-person shooter video game. The highly stylised visual aesthetic and slow motion of this final sequence of *Spring Breakers* undermines the impact of any "real" violent consequence, and maintains the action instead as one of drifting simulation and image – but that, again, seems precisely to be the point. In this world of drifting along the surface, justice and consequence remain virtual and elusive – and the girls just drift on, as they drive off into nowhere.

#### **Gliding / coasting (*Drive*)**

*Drive* tells the story of a nameless "Driver" (Ryan Gosling) who works as a mechanic and car-stuntman in Hollywood, and doubles as a getaway driver for criminals at night. Markedly isolated and alone in his life and endeavours, Driver slowly develops a close relationship with his neighbour Irene (Carey Mulligan) and her son Benicio (Kaden Leos).

When Benicio's father Standard (Oscar Isaac) returns from prison, it becomes clear he still has ties to the criminal world and owes gangsters money for protecting him in prison. After those criminals threaten the lives of Irene and Benicio, Driver offers to drive a getaway car for Standard during a final robbery to exonerate his debts. When the robbery goes awry, and both Standard and helper Blanche (Christina Hendricks) are killed in an apparent double-crossing, Driver goes on an elaborate killing spree to protect Irene and Benicio. Irene and Driver share a kiss, but upon her witnessing an outburst of his violence towards a hired killer, their relationship dissolves. After his manager Shannon (Bryan Cranston) is murdered, Driver kills the two gangster heads responsible, Nino (Ron Perlman) and Bernie Rose (Albert Brooks). At the end of the final fight with Bernie, Driver appears to succumb to his injuries, but then drives off into the desert.

As opposed to the fleeting consumption of *The Bling Ring's* "skimming" and the suspension and unpredictable movement of *Spring Breakers'* "drifting", the surface aesthetics of *Drive* engage a sense of gliding or coasting; the sustained horizontal "traveling" movement of a car across a road surface that occurs when the clutch is depressed and the vehicle continues to freewheel, no longer powered directly by a motor. Unlike skimming or drifting, the coasting of a car is strictly reliant on the hard, smooth surface that sustains it – it glides along a structured surface. Coasting, therefore, is dependent on a specific context (in a way, it is a kind of propelled "hitchhiking" on a force already in motion); it requires an external trigger or power to start it, to carry it along, and then a surface that allows for a prolonged and continued direction of movement. But coasting is also driving's undoing – without the force of a driving motor, one ultimately goes nowhere. If skimming is casual and of a frenetic time, and drifting is unpredictable, transformative, and of a dream-like time, coasting is machine-driven, directional and technical, but highly contradictory. It moves at great linear speed along the surface, without a connection to the ground.

The act of driving is *Drive's* most central motif, and sensations of gliding and coasting inform its aesthetics right from the start. The film opens with a black screen that is quickly overlaid with 1980s-style, bright pink, handwritten credits, as we hear the sounds of cars speeding by on a highway on the soundtrack. These sounds are then joined by a low but fast-paced electronic pulse that resembles another motor of sorts, and a male voice over that says: "There's 100.000 streets in this city..." The proclamation is both specific and vague at the same time, seemingly factual, and yet containing little information or content. The camera cuts to a shot of a city map on a table (a generic city reduced to a surface,

a two-dimensional rendering) that in turn has been covered with black marker lines on its surface that indicate sections of “route” across it. “You don’t need to know the route”, the voice continues, again emphasising the non-specific nature of the content of what we’re seeing, and undermining the nature of the markings. The camera slowly moves up from the map across the room to reveal the back of a man dressed in a white shimmery satin jacket with a yellow scorpion sewn on to it, staring out of the window at a city at night. As the voice over continues to set out the terms of a generic “getaway driving” contract, the man appears to us only as a dimly lit, half-reflection in the window. The camera continues to move through the room, past the bright flicker of a television set showing a basketball match, to a large non-descript duffle bag on a bed that the man, now enveloped in shadow, proceeds to pick up before he leaves the room. “You won’t be able to reach me on this phone again”, the voice says – as if to emphasise his disconnected, “nowhere specific”, unreachable status. The camera moves forward across the bed, towards another window that looks out on the city at night, as the sounds of cars and motorcycles become louder on the soundtrack once more. The dazzling display of city lights in the window evokes the allure and anonymity of the surface image of the city: all streetlights and distant sparkle among the high-rise.

The camera next cuts to the inside of a driving car, looking out through the front window on the streets it proceeds to devour. It is not quite a point of view shot from the perspective of the driver; it is taken right from the middle of the car (next to the driver’s right shoulder), to reveal a part of his face reflected in the rear-view mirror. This is a shot that will return many times in the film: it doubles the frame and its direction, both literally (we see a frame in a frame, one facing outward, one inward) and figuratively (we are moving forward and looking back at the same time). The camera then cuts to a low angle shot of the Driver, from the apparent perspective of the gear stick, which highlights the speed of the surrounding landscape moving past through the window behind him, whilst showing the Driver sitting stoically, facing forward. The apparent stillness of this moving image plays with its own paradoxes – it is an image of a specific set moment, a capturing of stillness, in a fast-moving car, to indicate a generic passage of time. The driving here feels like coasting; the movement is driving us forward, but it is unclear where “the motor in the car” is taking us. A shot of Shannon (Bryan Cranston) places us suddenly in a mechanic’s garage. We observe the Driver enter through the door in the background, before the camera begins to move in a steady slow track to the right, following the men as they walk through the back of the space. In front of them, a series of cars glisten

briefly as their shiny lacquer catches the overhead lights, with the man “stuck” behind them, in front of a back wall that has been again divided by a hard line, into a reverse horizon of sorts (with a large sky blue strip at the bottom and a sandy yellow desert strip at the top). As Shannon introduces the Driver to his getaway car, a Chevy Impala (“the most common car in California, no one will be looking at you”), the premise for action is set to go.

In these opening scenes, *Drive* introduces us to a range of hard, unspecific “non-places”, “non-identities” and “non-times” – with a speed of motion and glossed-out slick that implies intent and direction, but that really could be propelling the viewer anywhere. What makes it more about gliding and coasting than actual driving is its dependence on the generic, and its rejection of the specific. We are merely “speeding along” lines we are already familiar with; of dialogue, of urban landscapes, of crime-film characters, of generic props, and actions. The film coasts on such tropes of the neo-noir genre, across a wide range of stereotypical locations; the streets of the high-speed chase, the auto-shop, the pawn-shop, the strip-club, the pizza-place, the diner, and so on. These places are all equally empty and in-between, yet instantly familiar and seemingly informative. The camera is perennially moving across them – in long tracking shots that glide the action in a set pace along the surface – and even in shots that seem “still” (either because the background is moving, or because the camera adjusts its focus in subtle dolly-zooms). The lack of establishing shots often inserts the viewer in the middle of the action, and, like with *Spring Breakers*, the editing rejects a clear grasp of chronology. Throughout, the film repeats, reorders and intercuts different scenes – blending past, present and future – yet the film remains constantly moving forward, coasting on plot points and the nature of its own construction.

The film’s continuous motion relies on the affective experience of the Driver in the car. But rather than showing off the speed of his driving skills from a perspective external to the car, we remain inside, a mere travel companion in the vehicle. The Driver too is all surface and performance; a convenient bit-player, a hitchhiker, on other men’s journeys. His actions are always triggered by someone else’s action, or ulterior, external force. As a stunt driver, he is a double for another man’s “acting”. As a second mechanic to Shannon in the garage, he fixes cars to allow other people’s driving. As a prospective race car driver, he drives another man’s car, to make yet another man money. As a getaway driver, he is in service of another man’s criminal activities. As a potential partner for Irene, he takes up the space left by Standard, a stand-in for a father to Benicio, and proves himself ultimately unable to settle into this

domestic role. The driver (a drifter, a coaster) without a name or backstory, barely moves into view, and barely speaks – he is but the Driver, and as such, is barely there. In a *mise-en-scène* that is so very precise and stylised, he is most often shown in reflections, in glass and mirrors, as a shadow or a mere silhouette. He wears uncanny rubber masks on set (to emulate the look of the actor he is a double for) as well as during his final acts of revenge on the crime bosses. Again, the film places him continuously in states of limbo and waiting, coasting the “in-between” spaces; behind the scenes of the set, in front of a bridge that doubles the highway, in the corridor, in the elevator, in a parking lot.

The film’s surface strategy is marked as coasting because it is infused by a constant undoing or undermining of its own (potential) impact. The style of the film, for all its postmodern referencing (see also Backman Rogers and Kiss [2014], and Bauer [2012]), only coasts on generic tropes and the cinematic familiar, because it constantly shuts down its own “motor”. Every shot in the opening sequence carries its own contradiction within it; the shot of the map is juxtaposed by the talk of not needing to know routes, the seemingly informative voice-over never offers any real content of information, there is stillness in the moving image, the interior offers an upside-down artificial horizon, and so forth. The wide-screen frame often leaves the “wrong” side of the frame open; when the character looks left off screen, he is positioned on the left side of the frame, leaving the other side empty. The hollowness of the frame, the vacant space on its surface, becomes as important as the action elsewhere. In scenes between characters, eye-line matches refuse to line up, emphasising and undermining both their missed connection and the cross-routed linear direction of the eye-lines. At other times, characters are suddenly revealed to be present in the scene; they are never introduced to be off-screen yet instantly appear through a sudden cut. The highly stylised look of the film is so glossy and slick (at times, it is even intensely symmetrical) that it constantly reveals itself to be a construction, or an advertisement reflection/detraction of that construction; as though the film itself were coasting on “the rules of the image”, but is no longer truly powered or bound by them.

The extreme violence too comes on fast and unexpectedly. The speed and force of kinetic energy of the kicking in of heads, the blowing out of brains, the hammering of fingers – the physical gore of the violence – is on sudden, frank display, as the red blood bursts and splatters all over the surface of the sets and costumes. The viewer has no moment to adjust; we have been propelled into this direction, are subject to its crime on display, and can only briefly acknowledge the residue, before moving on to the



next. These scenes “perform” the genre at its most extreme and explicit; they are in line with what is to be expected, but because they are so brutal and yet also matter-of-fact, the film flattens out the violence, as though it were merely interested in coasting on its effects. And this, perhaps, is precisely the point. By wrapping the motion, the driving, around a non-entity, around generic actions, and along non-spaces, but interspersing it with intense moments of crime and extreme violence, the film becomes about its own coasting, and its debts to the nature of cinema itself. The complexity in and of the surface here makes it about that very thing.

### Conclusion

In many ways, the three films discussed here are similar. In their stories about crime and America, they each employ highly stylised and commercial aesthetics that constantly re-emphasise the surface of the screen; they use distinct palettes, they simulate other media forms, use loops and non-chronological editing, and are accompanied by electronic music on the soundtrack. But they employ different strategies in their engagement of the surface. Marked by a sense of skimming, *The Bling Ring* critiques a hyper-mediated world defined by mindless (criminal?) consumption and commodification, but ultimately proclaims itself as much a part of it. *Spring Breakers* employs strategies of drifting to reflect (on) its own performances and plastic transgressions of “transposable” criminal behaviour, in both a resistance to and re-appropriation of its own position in a hyper-mediated network, while *Drive* questions the nature of its own generic inheritance by employing a surface strategy of coasting that ultimately both relies on and undoes its own hyper-mediated character. In the end, again, this makes all three films highly self-reflexive of course (it is, after all, as Sulgi Lie suggests; “still postmodernism that follows postmodernism” [Lie, 2016, p. 45]). But in the variety of their engagements with surface, the films reveal that surface itself, in the cinema, cannot and should not be dismissed as a monolithic, indeterminate nothing. Surface and content as dialectic categories are now indistinguishable; they have collapsed into one. There separation no longer matters. And that too would precisely be the point. With the sticky, ever-changeable (or malleable), interface-like surfaces they now offer, these films explore their own spectacular nature; they mark, mock, celebrate, and critique how simulation, image and affect perform in our hyper-mediated times. Much like Daney observed with *The Big Blue*, these films suggest that all we need to do is consider, experience, poke, analyse, entertain, and engage the depths of their surface, to understand meaning in cinema today.

## Surface Aesthetics in Contemporary Cinema

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bauer, M. (2012). Pure West: Drive, nostalgia for postmodernism. Retrieved February 21 2018, from <http://sensesofcinema.com/2012/feature-articles/pure-west-drive-nostalgia-for-postmodernism/>.
- Bruno, G. (2014). *Surface: Matters of aesthetics, materiality, and media*. University of Chicago Press.
- Corliss, R. (2012). "Spring Breakers": Disney Channel Girls Gone Wild. *TIME.com*. Retrieved 7 February 2018, from <http://entertainment.time.com/2012/09/07/spring-breakers-disney-channel-girls-gone-wild/>
- Daney, Serge. (1993). *L'exercice a été profitable, Monsieur*. Eds. Jean-Claude Biette and Emmanuel Crimail. Paris: P.O.L.
- Hutcheon, L. (2003). *A poetics of postmodernism: history, theory, fiction*. Routledge.
- Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Duke University Press.
- Lie, S. (2016). From *Shame* to *Drive*: The Waning of Affect; or, The Rising of the Drive Image in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema. *Social Text*, 34 (2 [127]), 45–70.
- Leitch, W. (2011). Review: "Drive". *Yahoo.com*. Retrieved 7 February 2018, from <https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/bp/review-drive-193544103.html>
- Lyles, J. (2013). Review: *The Bling Ring*. *Lyles Movie Files*. Retrieved 7 February 2018, from <http://lylesmoviefiles.com/2013/11/14/review-the-bling-ring/>.
- Rogers, A. B., & Kiss, M. (2014). A Real Human Being and a Real Hero: stylistic excess, dead time and intensified continuity in Nicolas Winding Refn's *Drive*. *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, 12(1–2), 43–57.
- Wilkinson, M. C. (2017). Leisure/Crime, Immaterial Labor, and the Performance of the Teenage Girl in Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers* (2012) and Sofia Coppola's *The Bling Ring* (2013). *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, 12/13, 20–37.