

Holly Cao

Professor Straayer

Expressive Culture: Film Noir

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### The Demon of Beauty

*The Neon Demon* (Refn, 2016) is a neo-noir directed by Nicolas Winding Refn about a girl's traumatic experience entering the fashion industry. A combination of horror and glamour, this film focuses on the film noir themes of gender roles and the self, and how the individual is shaped to fit its role in the fashion industry. With a pessimistic view of beauty, the neo-noir film attempts to demystify the fashion industry in order to draw the audience into the awareness of its toxic influence.

The story is about the 16-year-old Jesse who moves to L.A. to take a chance in the modeling industry. She quickly achieves little steps to success which draws the jealousy of other models and admiration of some people she encounters. She managed to sign a modeling agency, get the opportunity of wrapping up a fashion show, and model for a famous photographer unexpected easily because she is born with beautiful face and body. But as she discovers, almost none of the people she encountered can be trusted. Those who are jealous of and those who admire her beauty eventually led her to her demise.

The film was shown in the Cannes Film Festival 2016, immediately starting a controversy among the critics because of their proximity to the world of the story. One of the special things about this film is that the purpose of the film is contradictory to its nature. It confronts the entertainment industry, deeming it harmful, even though the film itself is produced within the environment of such industry. The fashion industry, as Refn describes it in the film, is

guarded by the standard of beauty with a double-edged sword. The process of getting to beauty and achieving beauty are both harmful and unsustainable. The film shows that the modeling business is a process where models like Gigi get dissatisfied about their looks and goes through pains to change it to something unrecognizable. She goes after beauty but never achieves the true definition of it. The designer in the film comments that Jesse's natural beauty is "a diamond in a sea of glass" whereas Gigi only looks "fine". Even when naturally beautiful models such as Jesse do achieve beauty, they establish and enhance the presence of the standard of beauty for others to follow, which creates a vicious cycle. Like the neo-noir film *Chinatown* (1974, Polanski) in which the society is discovered to be mysterious and too convoluted for the characters to reach true resolution, the society in *The Neon Demon* is also portrayed as pessimistic to no end.

In *The Neon Demon*, Refn presents beauty as a problem as well as the only resolution to the problem, but the resolution cannot solve the problem completely. "Beauty isn't everything," remarks the designer, "it's the only thing." The problem lies in the existence of beauty standards in the society. Towards the beginning of the film, Jesse meets the experienced but not so successful models Sarah and Gigi. Sarah comments on the L.A. fashion industry that "A pretty new girl walks into a room, everyone's head turns, looks her up and down and wondering 'Who is she fucking?', 'Who could she fuck?', and 'How high can she climb and is it higher than me?'" Her words truthfully reflect the jealousy towards the fate of others within the film and within the society. In this society of the film, beauty is what everyone cares about and the only thing that the models can make a living in many ways. As technology advances and new forms of media develops, people have more subjected speculation on others through these medias.

Entertainment and social medias make the lives of others seem glamorous and flawless, but the film demystifies this stigma by showing what goes behind the scene of beauty.

In the film, Jesse feels despair about the society because she could not trust anyone. The source of the despair is that she has something that people value. The designer says that “Beauty is not everything. It’s the only thing”. Echoing the existentialism in classical noir films, *The Neon Demon* discusses the problem of being. In the film’s fashion industry context, to be beautiful is to exist at all, and to be beautiful means a deathly existence. In the scene by the pool before Jesse’s death, she confesses that she knows that her beauty is deadly.

While traditional noir films portray the femme fatale as duplicitous, this neo noir justify the two sides of Jesse as two separate entities, one the Jesse as a human being and the other as a possessive, robotic beauty demon. In the fashion shoot scene, there is an abstract sequence of Jesse seeing triangular prisms in the dark, and she sees herself in the mirror. In the beginning of the sequence, the camera shoots from a slightly low angle as Jesse glazes at three upside-down triangles. Neon blue edges of the triangles stacking up into a bigger triangle in the dark. Jesse’s eyes show bewilderment but the rest of her face expressionless. She does not blinking as if she becomes possessed and inhuman. Staring at the triangles, she seems to lose the ability to walk away from something irresistible and powerful. Then the flickering flares of cameras continuing from the last scene stops. Jesse sees a silhouette of herself in a right-side -up triangular prism emitting blue light, it started to move and become alive, to walk out of the prism and become full-colored just like her real self. The triangle moves closer and closer to Jesse in the stroke light. Then we see a triangular prism glowing in blue light, and in it the shadow of Jesse in the gown she wears to close the fashion show. Unlike the real Jesse, her shadow is incapable of being vulnerable in showing human emotions. Yet the shadow appears more powerful in the low

angle shot which shows her whole body, displaying her power and physical beauty. Her shadow symbolizes the extrinsic beauty within Jesse. There can be many of it seen in photos taken by the photographers, but her personality that makes her human cannot be duplicated by the camera. When the shadow walks out of the prism, it is as if it steps out of a throne and turns full-colored. This sequence is a conversation between the two identities of Jesse. Before this sequence, Jesse seems unalarmed and confused when others tell her that she is beautiful. The fashion demon Jesse as a femme fatale successfully intices the human Jesse into embracing her deadly beauty. From now on, Jesse would behave more soullessly and seductively. The sequence shows that the process of recognizing, confessing and accepting the pursuit of beauty leads to death. The reason that natural beauty is preferred over the artificial beauty, at least in the context of this film, is that natural beauty is the origin of beauty. Artificial beauty is attempts to imitate natural beauty, but the imitation cannot be flawless, and possibly morally wrong. According to the rules of noir, the morally wrong should be punished. Therefore, once beauty is acknowledged and imitated, it becomes artificial and deadly. But at the same, Jesse gains the strength to advance in the fashion industry in this sequence, when she realizes that being less vulnerable and less human becomes a necessity for Jesse to survive in the fashion industry with all the competitions and pressures.

Since the industry is revolved around beauty, natural beauty cannot be sustained when it is being discussed. In *The Neon Demon*, what the minor characters say can be pieced together into Refn's argument. When Jesse is offered opportunity at an agency, the casting agent tells Jesse that "People believe what they are told." According to Jesse, her mother used to tell her that she is a "dangerous girl" because of her beauty. She admits her belief in what her mother says and proceeded to be killed. This tendency for people to believe and do what they are told is a form of passivity on the part of the protagonist. Like in classical noir, the lack of masculinity

and strength allows the femme fatale to lead the protagonist to his or her demise. The phenomenon of people being controlled by whatever they hear and see is the core of the entertainment industry, reflected on the society as a bigger issue. The ability of beauty and glamour to attract every character in the film implies the control of the entertainment industry over the mass media. The implication is the film's critic on its very own form. Commonly, neo-noir films are reflexive of their noir identity. This film takes a step further and criticizes its identity as a film.

Noir films often explore sexuality and the way that it dominates people and instinctively drive their desires and identity. In *The Neon Demon*, all other characters appear to be undesirable or hostile to Jesse, and sexuality is presented in the form of narcissism. Throughout the film, she starts taking credits for others complementing on her beauty. In the scene at Ruby's house before her death, she speculates herself in a more fascinated way than before. Jesse represents one facet of the fashion industry which is self-love. The other facet, as exemplified by models such as Gigi and Sarah, is self-hate. Refn argues with his mise-en-scene choices that the models are eventually one and the same, therefore self-love and self-hate must be symbiotic. In the casting room scene, all models are barely dressed and waiting in a room with quite generic white background. The camera shoots all the models from afar, making them look like puzzle pieces making different shapes but has essentially the same purpose and quality. In the fashion shoot scene, a tracking shot captures all the models standing in a straight line all facing the right of the frame. With identical lighting and speed of camera movement on each model, the shot creates a steady pattern on screen.

Refn applies the idea of sexual domination and the coexistence of self-love and self hate into Jesse's character transformation. In the abstract fashion show sequence, three reflections of

her shadow self with the prism as backgrounds are pieced together filling up the screen. The reflections of Jesse stare at the camera and then slowly turn to each other as if they are about to kiss, then cuts to a shot shows the real Jesse raises her eyebrow, terrified. This time the camera is at a high angle, as if something has dominated her. The color red suggests love, devilish hatred, aggression and sexual objectification altogether. Jesse's eyes become expressionless, looking without reactions as the three reflections of her kissing each other in slow motion. The blue flare of the camera reappears and brings back the presence of the reality of the fashion show. Then the camera zooms out of the three red upside-down triangles. We see for the first time the real, possessed Jesse facing back to the camera, with red lights shining from behind her. She has transformed into her devilish, inhuman shadow, walks into the red prism and disappears. In this sequence, Jesse goes through the process of self-speculation and objectification. Once she learns to value and appreciate her appearance above all other aspects of herself, she becomes the beauty that she looks like and beauty is not of good nature.

The sequence marks the power of commercialized art to overpower individuality. In the case of the film, love and hate should not be defined in the conventional, romantic way. But these two strong terms should still be used because it captures how they are used nowadays in a loose sense, and the impact of the entertainment industry on people in contemporary culture that makes it easy for people to say that they "love" or "hate" something. Love and hate are both forms of self-obsession. With the growing popularity of selfies, instagram, and other entertainmedias that focus on the self, self-obsession dominates contemporary culture, and *The Neon Demon* provides a justification of it. As Jesse starts to succeed in the industry, her story on the contrary actually becomes more and more cynical as she turns down the one guy Dean who cares for her and as Gigi, Sarah and makeup artist Ruby (who has an obsession on Jesse but gets

rejected by her). Embracing her beauty means to Jesse not to care about anyone else and not have anyone else care about her in a deeper way than her appearance. In turn, beneath the confidence of her look is Jesse's insecurities about her human self. In his article " 'The Letting Go': The Horror of Being Orphaned in Nicolas Winding Refn's Cinema", Mark Featherstone explains Jesse's transformation from her human self to the devil: "Jesse attempts to internalise or swallow the violence of objectification and present the mutilated self as somehow indestructible and immoral."(Featherstone) Because she accepts the objectification of herself, she does in a sense achieve immortality in a few ways by influencing others: Firstly, she influences the mass media consumers who see her images. Second of all, her successful auditions mean that many other models are rejected, stempering their careers and damaging their self-esteem. Thirdly, she stands out from the crowd and haunts in the memory of those whom she knows, such as Sarah, Gigi, Ruby and even perhaps Dean. "I need to get her out of me" is Gigi's last words when she gets choked to death by Jesse's eyeball. Even though Jesse is killed, her influence remains.

In the events of death and immortality, the film adaptes a ritualized solution of the existential issue of beauty. Jesse's transformation into a demon is one scene of religious connotation with possession and triangular patterns that often symbolize religion. Another scene is Jesse's death scene when she dresses as a goddess and walks around the pool, admitting to Ruby that she knows her danger, before she is killed by the three characters: Sarah, Gigi and Ruby. Featherstone explains in his article about *The Neon Demon* what it means for Jesse to pursue success and fame and have her human self killed along the way:

*There is no relief for the ego haunted by primordial loss. The options here are either Western drive and the endless pursuit of the object that will apparently result in the completion of the self, or Eastern emptiness and the annihilation of the ego in rituals of*

*self-destruction comparable to the Buddhist practice of chod, where the imaginary persona is torn asunder by demons and devils until they vanish into nothingness.*

(Featherstone)

Jesse's transformation into the beauty demon is her western resort of materialistic pursuit. It is understandable and common in the western culture to become ambitious and emotionless, almost asexual, to achieve goals. This resolution signifies Jesse's gain of masculinity which is the solution in many classical noir films with hard-boiled protagonist characters. With masculinity, the characters attempt to achieve monetary stability, life security, and good reputation as Jesse is starting to do when she starts to succeed in the modeling industry. But the film eventually resolves to recognizing the flaws of such solution, and embraces the emptiness and annihilation of human existence brought forth by commercialization. The experiences of the mankind whom are instinctively drawn to beauty is freed from the pragmatic American-dream resolution and into the eastern endlessly unpredictable and unknowable mystery.

In the very beginning and the very end of the film, Refn imposes sadism scenes as an attempt to alleviate the impact of the extreme pessimism on the mood of the audience and to suggest them to extend Jesse's existence beyond her as a character. The beginning of the film is a scene of the photoshoot where Jesse lies on a couch posing, with colorful makeup on her face. Blood drips down her neck and arm. With glamorous set, costume as suspenseful electronic music, the scene is both disturbing and aesthetically pleasing. Before Jesse's death at Ruby's house, Jesse looks at her face in the mirror and recreates her makeup in the starting scene. The same sequence of music occurs. After Jesse's death, Gigi and Sarah get the opportunity for a photoshoot. The last scene takes place in a beautiful place by the beach. The audience witness

Gigi's death as she gets choked by Jesse's eyeball. Through these scenes, Refn justifies sadism by connecting beauty with pain and death.

*The Neon Demon* is not the only film that interprets beauty as a sort of cult. Some other neo-noir films do the same. *The Big Lebowski* (Coen, 1998) for example depicts the distorted beauty to demystify the beauty standard. One scene in *The Big Lebowski* comicalizes the long legs of femme fatale which were sexualized during the classical noir era by making them unexpectedly long and artificially editing them to have two pairs of knees. Inheriting the trait of transgressiveness of classical noir, neo-noir films such as *The Neon Demon* and *The Big Lebowski* continue to question the validation of contemporary social values and to offer alternative solutions to social norms. The questions that these films tackle are the existential questions about the entertainment industry and about film as an art form. In the photographed images, how can one know what they know, and how can one know that what they know is true? Some critics argue that film noir is the death of some other genres they mimic. Therefore neo-noirs like *The Neon Demon* exist contradicting to its commercial value, which explains the source of its controversy.

Bibliography:

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