

“Are You Food, Or Are You Sex?” Mimetic Desire, Sacred Violence, and Precarity in Nicholas Winding Refn’s *The Neon Demon* (2016).

Nicholas Winding Refn’s postmodern horror film presents LA as a lonely, fragmented, urban landscape. Elle Fanning plays Jesse, a teenage transient from Georgia trying to break out as a model in the fashion industry. We see her introduced in the opening shot of the film recumbent on a couch, with her throat slit, in an expensive gown and make-up as blood spills on the floor. This is the image of the aestheticized gendered violence, the fetishization of a female corpse that has been repeatedly criticised by feminists since the mid-2000s. At this point the context is assumed to be a performance of death but it is ambiguous as to whether she is in fact alive or dead; human being or arranged mannequin doll until it cuts to the next scene where we see her cleaning the blood off her arms and neck in the make-up room. There is another woman in the room watching her in a mirror that faces Jesse’s mirror and the two women are framed in a sequence of repetition that continues beyond the camera’s perception.

Here we see some of the key concepts that will be explored throughout the film: woman as commodifiable object; woman understanding herself as a commodifiable object in a competitive and individualist society; and woman’s mimetic desire for a model’s (pun intended) superior market value. In this paper I discuss how these concepts are explored in *The Neon Demon* through Renè Girard’s philosophy of mimetic desire and collective violence.

According to Girard the idea of desire as existing in a straight line between subject and object is an illusion. It operates in a triangle with a third presence motivating the subject’s admiration of the desired object and that is the mediator or model. In Girard’s words, the subject:

desires *being*, something he himself lacks, and which some other person seem to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being. If the model, who is apparently already endowed with superior being, desires some object, the object must surely be capable of conferring an even greater plenitude of being.¹

The subject wants things because they have a hypothetical idea of their potential desirability to others. Girard imagined mimetic desire initially in pre-capitalist, pre-industrial age but it is more apparent in the post-industrial capitalism “where the tyranny of the fashion has never

¹ Renè Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.164

been more absolute.”² Thus the fashion industry is quite a natural choice of setting for filmic exploration of Girard’s theory.³

The film resituates mimetic desire and mimetic violence in a specifically postfeminist, postmodern context. Mark Fisher preferred the term “capitalist realism” to postmodernism. Where postmodernism more accurately describes a world system where there were still political alternatives to capitalism, capitalist realism describes an ideology where “Capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable.”⁴ This new state of world economics and patterns of technological consumption has impacted the mental health of world citizens. New capitalism is a gig-economy where only privileged few can expect long-term positions. Workers today must be flexible and versatile, re-skill at will as they move from job-to-job with no guarantee of improved salary or working conditions. Thus:

As production and distribution are restructured, so are nervous systems. To function effectively as a component of just-in-time production you must develop a capacity to respond to unforeseen events you must learn to live in conditions of total instability, or ‘precarity’ as the ugly neologism has it.⁵

There is no planning for the future as the worker does not know for how long they will remain in a state of secure, paid employment. This is true for not only unskilled workers, workers without third-level education, but for women of all-levels of education and workers in traditionally more feminine or female-populated industries like arts, design, journalism, fashion.

Although the ideologies of postmodernism and postfeminism attempts to erase and transcend gendered issues, there is no doubt that the adjustment to precarity is experienced differently through gender. As Sarah Cefai and Maria Elena Indelicato say in their intersectional analysis of *America’s Next Top Model*, “neo-liberal values of choice, flexibility, and self-transformation come to be differently embodied according to the social specificity of identity categories.”⁶ Perhaps the international success of *America’s Next Top Model* which has over

² Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 174

³ Natasha Stagg makes this connection too in the opening paragraph of her short article “The Neon Demon: Understanding the Link Between Horror and Fashion,” in *V Magazine* [online] June 24 2016 [cited 12 December 2017] Available at < <https://vmagazine.com/article/the-neon-demon-understanding-the-link-between-horror-and-fashion/>>

⁴ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Hants: Zero, 2009) p. 8

⁵ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* p. 32

⁶ Sarah Cefai and Maria Elena Indelicato, “No Such Thing as Standard Beauty: Intersectionality and Embodied Feeling on America’s Next Top Model,” *Outskirts*, 24. May 2011,

24 seasons and 45 country-specific adaptations is in part due to its literal glamorisation of the gig economy in late capitalism. Cefai and Elena claim *Top Model* offers a compensatory narrative of self-transformation transcending circumstances of race and class, contestants but under the tutelage of Tyra Banks, contestants are not allowed “complain, make excuses, or blame external circumstances and are always told to take responsibility for themselves.”⁷ *The Neon Demon* takes visual and generic cues from *Top Model*, particularly the casting scene where 13 models stand in front of a panel of four casting agents. This scene closely echoes the elimination-before-the-judges segment that closes each episode of *Top Model*. *The Neon Demon* takes this one step further and makes the girlish rags-to-riches fantasy eerie and nightmarish when Jesse performs her walk and the casting director looks on in spiritual awe.

If we are to consider the mindset of capitalist realism intersecting with a gendered experience of the world, we must consider the value-judgement that is attributed to women historically and how that is interpellated in a postmodern, postfeminist context. The schism between the importance of image to men and women in the fashion industry is expressed through representation of space. Female characters are continually framed beside and captured by their reflections in mirrors. In many of the scene taking place in Jesse’s Pasadena motel, the camera tracks in to the mirror in her room until we can no longer see the edge of its frame. The few men in the film: the motel manager (Keanu Reeves); the amateur photographer; the professional photographer; and the casting director are never in the presence of a mirror, even in scenes where it seems like there are or else there should be. Several scenes take place in locations we assume are populated with and reflected in mirrors because of the vast space and repetition of panels, panes of glass and pillars. We expect to see reflections of the actors onscreen where vampirically there are none. This, as well as the fact that these few men are introduced singularly as characters instead of collectively like the models, gives the impression that they are individuals whose existence does not need to be reflected for verification.

<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/55933/1/__lse.ac.uk_storage_LIBRARY_Secondary_libfile_shared_repository_Content_Cefai%2C%20S_No%20such%20thing_Cefai__No%20such%20thing_2014.pdf>

⁷ Cefai and Indelicato, “No Such Thing as Standard Beauty: Intersectionality and Embodied Feeling on America’s Next Top Model,”

<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/55933/1/__lse.ac.uk_storage_LIBRARY_Secondary_libfile_shared_repository_Content_Cefai%2C%20S_No%20such%20thing_Cefai__No%20such%20thing_2014.pdf>

In the intersection of privileges enjoyed by different identity categories, possessing physical attractiveness is a chance of birth, having a specific set of physical and facial attributes that are valued in one's own given historical period. The 'beauty myth' is the narrative that the advantages of physical attractiveness leapfrogs over any other plights of circumstance. "One woman's worth fluctuates in the presence of another" as Naomi Wolf describes making individualism inevitable and collective thinking nigh impossible.⁸ The existential horror of *The Neon Demon* lies in the supposition that there *is* such a thing as this sublime sense of 'being' that allows the subject to transcend mimetic desire. In our first scene without Jesse, she is being discussed in an empty diner by Ruby, Gigi, and Sarah. Ruby says Jesse has "that thing," referring to that *je ne sais quoi* or 'X' factor that 'expert' judges claim to look for in talent-search reality shows. Or what Richard Dyer's star studies describe as a person happening to embody, cohere, and effectively mask the contradictions and cracks of hegemonic ideology.⁹ Jesse's beauty is not just otherworldly, it's presence and 'realness' threatens to obliterate the essence of all women in her proximity. The casting director says that Gigi's 'artificial' beauty, achieved through plastic surgery, can be sensed as inauthentic where Jesse's can be sensed as real. This thwarts even the capitalist beauty myth that this transcendent identity category can be attained through work and consumption.

In *The Neon Demon*, feminine beauty presented as 'real' both in the sense of cultural currency in a postfeminist, late capitalist system and in the ethereal, almost religious value that fits under Mark Fisher's description of "the eerie" in *The Weird and the Eerie*. Extending from the Freudian conception of 'the uncanny' the sensation of 'the eerie' occurs when there is presence where there should be absence, using the example of the malicious consciousness of the birds in Alfred Hitchcock's film.¹⁰ He argues that it is not a feeling exclusive to horror but a symptom of living in a state of global economics where the forces that govern our lives are not available to our sensory perception.¹¹ Beauty operates in this film as an eerie power, not as means to money and fame but an end in and of itself. When rival model Sarah attacks Jesse and begs to know, "What's it like? To walk into a room and it's like in the middle of winter, you're the sun?" Jesse replies "It's everything," suggesting that her own beauty is something that can be phenomenologically experienced and enjoyed.

This eerie essence of beauty makes Jesse's disruptive presence; a 'model' without a

⁸ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), p. 284

⁹ Richard Dyer, *Stars: New Edition*, (London: BFI, 1998), p.3

¹⁰ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*. (London: Repeater Books, 2016), p.61-62

¹¹ Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, p.63

rival whose difference sets this urbanised micro-community into a sacrificial crisis. Jesse has remained sexually and romantically unavailable to her admirers in Hollywood. This frustrates their desire and increases her own value as a model in their eyes because she deems them unworthy to receive her. Girard describes the process as the source of human loathing:

The mediator can no longer act his role of model without also acting to appearing to act the role of obstacle. Like the relentless sentry of the Kafka fable, the model shows his disciple the gate of paradise and forbids him to enter with one and the same gesture.¹²

Jesse's increased awareness of her own eerie beauty makes her self-sustaining. She does not *want*, she *is*. Her lack of envy makes her different, even inhuman or superhuman. Since she cannot be either competed with or 'possessed' sexually, the only acceptable substitute for her rivals is to devour her cannibalistically. Earlier in the film, Ruby asked Jesse what would her lipstick be as lipsticks tend to be named in terms of food or "Are you food, or are you sex?" Evidently, if Jesse will not be sex, she must become food.

After the sacrificial murder of Jesse has been performed, Ruby, Gigi, and Sarah bathe in her blood and consume of her flesh and experience eerie, tangible results from their actions. Ruby lies naked in the moonlight as water flows forth from her vagina, suggesting an immaculate conception and birth. In life, Jesse described a deep longing to be acknowledged by a great all-seeing presence describing the moon as the eye that sees her. Here, she is recognised by the moon in the body of Ruby. Similarly, Sarah is enjoying Faustian success as a model. At a photoshoot, Gigi gets violently sick, vomits up Jesse's eye and slits open her belly in front of a couch. With the heavy make-up she is a double of Jesse in repose in the opening shot of the film. Sarah eats the vomited eye and sheds a tear in an expression that looks like holy enlightenment. The credits roll, and we see Sarah walking into middle of the desert alone. Before her sacrificial murder, Jesse was visited in her motel room by a wild mountain lion in an encounter that held portentous but elusive meaning. In Ruby's home there is a stuffed leopard mounted in a pose, which hints at the destiny of a beauty that refuses to be claimed. This ending suggests that Sarah is now in possession of this eerie beauty, this realness, and like the mountain lion belongs in the wild where she can be completely self-sustaining. This concluding image suggests that the only way for a woman to overcome the systems of consumption and self-commodification, is through radical,

¹² Renè Girard, "Triangular Desire," p. 38

transcendent narcissism, retreating from the pains of their own mimetic desire and the desires of others.