

Beauty ‘Beyond Feminism’? An Intersectional Analysis of Venerated Beauty in Nicolas Winding Refn’s *The Neon Demon* (2016)

Isabella Maher

Introduction

Beauty is one of the most explored concepts in the Western world. Its inspiration of artworks, poetry, novels, films and other cultural products has positioned it as an object of study across disciplines such as philosophy, aesthetics, religious studies, and sociology. From the Ancient Greeks to the contemporary era, Western scholars and artists have attempted to understand the concept of beauty as a perceptual experience of pleasure. This obsession with beauty has led to a culture and industry that supports hierarchies in society based on perceived attributes of an ideal form of physical female beauty. As such, it has historically served in the subjugation of those who do not conform to such an ideal. As Naomi Wolf asserts “Beauty is a currency system... it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact.”¹ This article will examine how an idealised form of beauty is represented by Danish auteur Nicolas Winding Refn in his film *The Neon Demon* (2016). Refn makes the bold claim that his film is “beyond feminism” because “it’s not quote-unquote *political*. But is it all about women? Absolutely. There is no man that has a place as the movie progresses along.”² The question is, considering the ramifications of beauty as it has historically served to regulate and subjugate women, to what extent can a film about beauty truly be ‘beyond feminism’? Through an intersectional analysis of gender, race, sexuality and sexual orientation, as

Isabella Maher is an Honours student in Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney.

¹ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1991), p. 2.

² Jada Yuan, ‘Nicolas Winding Refn and Elle Fanning on *Neon Demon*, Fanning’s Physical Beauty, and a Knife-Wielding Keanu’, *Vulture*, 30 May 2016, at <http://www.vulture.com/2016/05/elle-fanning-nicolas-winding-refn-neon-demon-sex-keanu.html>. Accessed 11/09/2018.

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they appear in relation to the film's employment of religious imagery surrounding virginity, the colours blue and red, and Plato's concept of *erōs*, this article will highlight how the director presents an ideal of beauty that has been propounded and fortified by patriarchal and traditional religious structures; that is, the young, white, blonde virgin.

The Neon Demon (TND) follows Jesse (Elle Fanning), a sixteen-year-old aspiring model, as she navigates the cutthroat yet intriguing world of the Los Angeles modelling scene. The ingénue immediately catches the eye of designers and photographers alike due to her possession of that something special; a 'natural' beauty, a virginal innocence, a naive purity. In the words of Jena Malone's character, Ruby, "She has that ... thing."³ Just as surely as she is loved for her beauty, so too does she become despised for it, specifically in the eyes of fellow models Gigi (Bella Heathcote) and Sarah (Abbey Lee), who instantly view her youth and purity as a threat to their own careers, "Who wants sour milk when you can have fresh meat?", as Sarah contemptuously asks.⁴ In the modelling world of *TND*, "The camera craves naive, untainted flesh on the brink of destruction – or in other words, 'that whole deer in the headlights thing'", which Jesse possesses in abundance.⁵

Jesse gains success after success; getting signed to a top agency, landing a photo-shoot with a renowned photographer, and ultimately closing the very first fashion show she walks (at the expense of both Sarah and Gigi). It is at this fashion show that Jesse has a vision in which she is seduced by her own reflection, transforming from a wide-eyed innocent aware of her beauty, to a narcissist who is as completely consumed by it as the rest of the world. Following an assault on a young girl in the adjoining room of the motel in which she is staying, Jesse seeks refuge with her friend, make-up artist Ruby, whom she is unaware has fallen in love or, perhaps more accurately, in lust, with her. After having her advances harshly rebuffed, Ruby's attitude shifts from that of a supportive and caring friend to that of a much more sinister figure; it is here that the film's true

³ Nicolas Winding Refn, *The Neon Demon* (2016), at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1974419>. Accessed 11/09/2018.

⁴ Refn, *The Neon Demon*.

⁵ Robbie Collin, 'The Neon Demon's Jaw-Dropping Depravity Will Leave You Wondering Whether to Howl or Cheer: Review', *The Telegraph*, 19 May 2016, at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2016/05/19/the-neon-demon-is-a-depraved-deliciously-divisive-nightmare---re>. Accessed 05/04/2018.

villain is revealed. What follows is a brutal cat-and-mouse pursuit and ritualistic sacrifice of Jesse at the hands of Ruby, Gigi and Sarah, who not only bathe in her blood but also consume her flesh and organs in order to absorb her youthful beauty and virginal essence that has been exalted throughout the film.

Refn revels in the controversy he evokes among audiences and critics, and with each subsequent release is a film more contentious and divisive than the last.⁶ *TND* comes after his two most famous films, *Drive* (2011) and *Only God Forgives* (2013), both of which were submitted to the Cannes Film Festival (Refn won Best Director for the former). Refn has a history of exploring strong themes of masculinity, and he explains how the creation of a female-centered film evolved naturally from these highly masculinised films:

It made sense going from *Drive*, which was the height of masculinity, and my own fetishization of a hero, and even *Only God Forgives*, where Ryan's character is my own male obsession deconstructing itself and emasculating itself, trying to crawl back into the womb of the mother. And now, I am reborn as a sixteen-year old girl.⁷

Refn notes that he was able to explore his fantasy of being a sixteen-year old girl through his creation of a horror film about beauty, one inspired by his desire to understand what it is like to be "born beautiful."⁸ He discusses this notion of 'born beauty' in relation to his wife, Liv Corfixen, asserting that "I wasn't born beautiful, but my wife was... In the end, beauty was what I was making a film about, and the only person I knew around me who was beautiful was my wife."⁹ The extent to which Corfixen influenced the film goes far beyond mere inspiration; in fact, she plays a pivotal role in Refn's filmmaking process, from deciding the locations of films to giving

⁶ Anne Thompson, "'The Neon Demon': Nicolas Winding Refn Reveals Why His Cannibal Model Movie Is Autobiographical", *IndieWire*, 22 June 2016, at <http://www.indiewire.com/2016/06/the-neon-demon-nicolas-winding-refn-reveals-why-his-vampire-model-movie-is-autobiographical-290231>. Accessed 05/04/2018.

⁷ Bilge Ebiri, "'Neon Demon' Auteur Nicolas Winding Refn on His Fluorescent Narcissism", *The Village Voice*, 27 June 2016, at <https://www.villagevoice.com/2016/06/27/neon-demon-auteur-nicolas-winding-refn-on-his-fluorescent-narcissism>. Accessed 05/04/2018.

⁸ C. Molly Smith, "'Neon Demon' Director: 'I Believe There's a 16-Year-Old Girl in Every Man'", *EW.com*, 18 May 2016, at <http://ew.com/article/2016/05/18/neon-demon-nicolas-winding-refn-horror-beauty>. Accessed 06/04/2018.

⁹ Ebiri, 'Refn on His Fluorescent Narcissism'.

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casting advice. For example, it was she who proposed Elle Fanning for the lead role of Jesse in *TND*.¹⁰ It is important to note, especially given this article is a feminist undertaking, Refn's self-proclaimed obsession with femininity. He claims,

I don't like men, even though I've made a lot of films with men in them. I'm not a guy-guy... I don't do guy stuff. I love women. I love anything feminine. I love pink, I love dolls, I only have daughters.¹¹

He also notes that his creation of a film about "vicious beauty" was driven by his realisation that he was "surrounded and dominated by women."¹² This use of language is entrenched in binary ideals and patriarchal framings of a homogenous femininity, and his use of the term 'dominated' is in itself problematic given its connotations. To what extent can Refn's film be 'beyond feminism' if his understanding of femininity and femaleness is so limited?

Refn recognises his inability to fully understand the female experience to a certain extent, reflected in his inclusion of a number of female crew members; specifically, Polly Stenham and Mary Laws as additional screenwriters, and Natasha Brier as his cinematographer. He asserts that their inclusion added a 'natural' authenticity to the film.¹³ This is reminiscent of Paula Black's discussion of the beauty industry and male-owned companies that would employ women as their public face to create the 'illusion' of female-run enterprises.¹⁴ This is also reflected in the narrative of the film itself and its lack of female characters that possess any sense of actual professional authority. Finally, the film is said to be influenced by the life of the notorious female murderer Countess Elizabeth Báthory de Ecsed.¹⁵ Bathory is alleged to have murdered and tortured innumerable young women and is most famously remembered for bathing

¹⁰ Ebiri, 'Refn on His Fluorescent Narcissism'.

¹¹ Hannah Shaw-Williams, 'Nicolas Winding Refn on *The Neon Demon's* Female-Dominated Cast', *Screen Rant*, 7 September 2015, at <https://screenrant.com/nicolas-winding-refn-neon-demon-elle-fanning>. Accessed 06/04/2018.

¹² Ben Child, 'Director Nicolas Winding Refn Takes on *The Neon Demon*', *The Guardian*, 4 November 2016, at <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/nov/04/nicolas-winding-refn-to-director-horror-film-the-neon-demon>. Accessed 06/04/2018.

¹³ Bobby Finger, 'Fuck *The Neon Demon*', *The Muse*, 24 June 2016, at <https://themuse.jezebel.com/fuck-the-neon-demon-1782564674>. Accessed 04/04/2018.

¹⁴ Paula Black, *The Beauty Industry: Gender, Culture, Pleasure* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 32.

¹⁵ Shaw-Williams, 'The Neon Demon's Female-Dominated Cast'.

in the blood of virgins, in order to retain her youth. Yet, what is most compelling about this allusion to Bathory is the assertion of several authors that she was in fact the victim of conspiracy due to her prominent status and power in society.¹⁶ The validity of such claims is not particularly important. What is relevant is the extent to which the myth of Bathory, another powerful female figure who was victimised and imprisoned by the patriarchy, parallels the representation of women in *TND*. Refn's film presents a form of beauty that reinforces patriarchal and religious ideals that have served in the regulation and subjugation of female appearance, as it is linked to their value in society.

Intersectionality as Methodology

Intersectionality is an analytical framework and concept originated by Kimberlè Crenshaw in 1989, which attempts to identify how interlocking systems of power impact those who are most marginalised in society. It takes into account various forms of social stratification like race, class, sexual orientation, age, and gender, and how these do not exist independently from one another, but are complexly interwoven elements of identity that shape an individual's experience of discrimination and oppression.¹⁷ Originally emerging in a socioeconomic and legal context, Crenshaw intended to draw attention to the ways that black women were being excluded from employment due to anti-discrimination laws that favoured 'black men' and 'white women', whereby the former filled all racial requirements and the latter filled all those of gender.¹⁸ Intersectionality addresses the rhetorical and political failures of feminism and anti-racism to comprehend the full experience of black women as it emerges synchronously from separate systems of oppression (racism *and* sexism) and to reveal "the inadequacy of doctrinal definitions of

¹⁶ Irma Szádeczky-Kardoss, 'The Bloody Countess? An Examination of the Life and Trial of Erzsébet Báthory', *Élet és Tudomány (Life and Science)*, trans. Lujza Nehrebeczky, 9 September 2009. Uploaded to *Notes on Hungarian History*, 31 May 2014, at <https://notesonhungary.wordpress.com/2014/05/31/the-bloody-countess>. Accessed 15/04/2018.

¹⁷ Kimberlè Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989), pp. 139–168.

¹⁸ Southbank Centre, *Kimberlé Crenshaw - On Intersectionality - Keynote - WOW 2016*, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DW4HLgYPIA>. Accessed 10/04/2018.

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discrimination to capture and remedy Black women's concrete experiences of discrimination."¹⁹

As Anna Carastathis notes, "In feminist theory, intersectionality has become the predominant way of conceptualising the relation between systems of oppression which construct our multiple identities and our social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege."²⁰ The theory has evolved to include not only black women, but all marginalised bodies, and the specific structures that make these certain identities vulnerable in society. Crenshaw notes the importance of context when considering the intersections of identity. It is important for one to understand the institutional structures that play a role in the exclusions of certain people and not others, and to examine the particular discrimination that is occurring.²¹ For this article, it is important take into consideration not only the structures of patriarchal religion, specifically Christianity, but also those of the beauty industry which have both historically served to regulate the appearance of women in relation to a perceived idealised form. One such example of this regulation is the invention of skin-lightening creams in the nineteenth century that still exist today in certain Asian countries.²² Paula Black notes how such practices situated beauty in relation to race and class and established "an image of delicate and natural femininity" which continues to operate today.²³ Refn's film presents an ideal form of beauty, the young, white, blonde virgin. An intersectional analysis is thus important to highlight how this form only reinforces a patriarchal ideal historically purported by both traditional religion and the beauty industry. In *TND* the intersections that need to be examined are those of race, gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, and age, as they inform the beauty that is being venerated.

¹⁹ Anna Carastathis, 'The Concept of Intersectionality in Feminist Theory', *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 9, no. 5 (2014), p. 306.

²⁰ Carastathis, 'The Concept of Intersectionality in Feminist Theory', p. 304.

²¹ Southbank Centre, *Kimberlé Crenshaw - On Intersectionality - Keynote - WOW 2016*, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DW4HLgYPIA>. Accessed 10/04/2018.

²² Black, *The Beauty Industry*, pp. 23–25.

²³ Black, *The Beauty Industry*, p. 25.

The Neon Demon and the Critics

From its premiere at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival, where it was booed whilst simultaneously receiving a standing ovation, *TND* has received polarised reviews,²⁴ and as the film has to date not received any scholarly attention, reviews and other interviews are the research base from which my argument has been developed. The majority of negative reviews critique the film as being unnecessarily violent, offensive, simply shocking for the sake of shocking. Claire Foges of the *Daily Mail UK* even called for the BBFC to ban the film, due to its superfluity of graphic violence that has no true relevance to the plot, and its lack of social commentary or critique. She claims that films created only “to shock, sicken, corrupt and deprave” have no positive moral or social significance, rather they diminish our moral wellbeing and serve to desensitise audiences as they become mainstream.²⁵ Tim Robey similarly notes the offensive nature of the film, asserting “button-pushing isn’t automatically commendable, when it means sacrificing smart or consistent commentary”; his main concern is the portrayal of the film’s only LGBTQ character. Robey posits the scene in which Ruby has sex with a corpse as not only the “worst scene of the year”, but one that has no place in advancing the narrative of the film.²⁶ He justly condemns the portrayal of Ruby as pathetic and in desperate need of sexual gratification, noting that *TND* serves to “pathologise a gay character as even more beyond the pale” than any other person in this film about corruption, murder, and cannibalism.²⁷ It is agreed that the strength of *TND* is in its command of stylistic and visual elements, such as cinematography, score, colour, and imagery, rather than its narrative, though whether this

²⁴ Andrew O’Hehir, ‘Is “*The Neon Demon*” Gruesome Misogyny or Brilliant Feminist Commentary? Can It Be Both?’, *Salon*, 22 June 2016, at https://www.salon.com/2016/06/22/is_the_neon_demon_gruesome_misogyny_or_brilliant_feminist_commentary_can_it_be_both. Accessed 05/04/2018.

²⁵ Claire Foges, ‘Has Cinema Ever Been So Depraved and the Censors so Amoral? CLARE FOGES on the Extreme Violence, Cannibalism and Lesbian Necrophilia in New Film *The Neon Demon*’, *Daily Mail UK*, 1 June 2016, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-3618911/Has-cinema-depraved-censors-amoral-CLARE-FOGES-extreme-violence-cannibalism-lesbian-necrophilia-new-film-Neon-Demon.html>. Accessed 05/04/2018.

²⁶ Tim Robey, ‘*The Neon Demon* Is the Most Offensive Film of the Year - and Not Because of the Necrophilia’, *The Telegraph*, 7 July 2016, at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2016/07/07/the-neon-demon-is-the-most-offensive-film-of-the-year---and-not>. Accessed 05/04/2018.

²⁷ Robey, ‘*The Neon Demon* Is the Most Offensive Film of the Year’.

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favouring of style over narrative is positive or negative is contentious amongst critics; there are arguments on both sides.²⁸

TND has also been criticised as being derivative and bordering on imitation. Glenn Kenny asserts “Mr Refn composes striking images, but they’re all secondhand: faux Fellini, faux David Lynch and so on”, and he posits the film as “ridiculous and puerile”.²⁹ Similarly, Owen Gleiberman asserts that:

Beauty mingles with mangled flesh, and each fastidiously slick image seems to have come out of *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* or *The Shining* or a very sick version of a Calvin Klein commercial... He sucks up influences like an aesthetic vacuum cleaner.³⁰

Like many critics, Gleiberman also comments on the film’s lack of consistency in both imagery and narrative, ultimately stating that it makes no sense, and presents as an “anything goes dream play” with facile and underdeveloped characters.³¹ Several critics have similarly noted the one-dimensionality of the female characters, and have also criticised Refn for his outright fetishised characterisation. Todd McCarthy also comments on Refn’s apparent “ever-decreasing interest in narrative and [his] growing

²⁸ NEGATIVE: Yohana Desta, “*The Neon Demon*” Is Visually Stunning, but Its Beauty Is Skin Deep’, *Mashable*, 24 June 2016, at <https://mashable.com/2016/06/23/neon-demon-film-review>; Kayleigh Hughes, ‘*The Neon Demon* Tries to Both Fetishize and Vilify Young Girls. It Fails’, *Vox*, 25 June 2016, at <https://www.vox.com/2016/6/25/12024924/neon-demon-review-refn-necrophilia-scene>; Todd McCarthy, “‘*The Neon Demon*’: Cannes Review”, *Hollywood Reporter*, 19 May 2016, at <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/neon-demon-cannes-review-895905>; Robey, ‘*The Neon Demon* Is the Most Offensive Film of the Year’. POSITIVE: Robbie Collin, ‘*The Neon Demon*’s Jaw-Dropping Depravity Will Leave You Wondering Whether to Howl or Cheer – Review’, *The Telegraph*, 19 May 2016, at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2016/05/19/the-neon-demon-is-a-depraved-deliciously-divisive-nightmare---re>; Lauren Wilford, ‘I’m A Feminist, And I Loved *The Neon Demon*’, *Gradient*, at <http://www.gradient.is/features/the-neon-demon>; Rene Rodriguez, ‘We Need to Talk about “*The Neon Demon*” (R)’, *Miami.com*, 23 June 2016, at <http://www.miami.com/things-to-do-in-miami/we-need-to-talk-about-the-neon-demon-r-20962>. All accessed 05/04/2018.

²⁹ Glenn Kenny, ‘Review: In “*The Neon Demon*”, Beauty Masks a Rotting Core’, *The New York Times*, 23 June 2016, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/24/movies/the-neon-demon-review-elle-fanning.html>. Accessed 05/04/2018.

³⁰ Owen Gleiberman, ‘Cannes Film Review: “*The Neon Demon*”’, *Variety*, 19 June 2016, at <https://variety.com/2016/film/festivals/cannes-the-neon-demon-nicolas-winding-refn-elle-fanning-1201778544>. Accessed 08/04/2018.

³¹ Gleiberman, ‘Cannes Film Review: “*The Neon Demon*”’.

tendency toward effect-for-effect's sake" to the extent that the director seems "actively hostile toward story."³² The result, according to McCarthy, is a slow-paced and self-indulgent work that provides an unconvincing critique of the modelling industry and beauty as the director appears to be more enthralled by it than repelled.³³ This is not an unfair assumption; Refn himself has professed his simultaneous obsession and repulsion with beauty in contemporary society on several occasions.³⁴ He has also noted that the film is an exhibition of "one of the most seductive elements of human nature"; Refn is not providing a critique of any kind, rather he posits that this is the responsibility of the audience.³⁵ This assertion is problematic as Refn claims that his film is 'beyond feminist'. This is a value statement that implies, and requires, at least some consideration of the way the film does or does not subvert patriarchal ideals.

What is largely lacking in critical reviews and responses to this film is an attempt to explore or deconstruct Refn's aforementioned assertion, which he justifies primarily through the lack of male characters present within the film, whom he declares serve merely as plot devices.³⁶ The majority of reviews seem to consider the male characters in a similar way; that is, they are mentioned but any deep consideration of their characterisation and place in the film is lacking. The general consensus is that male characters within the film are depicted "as feeble paragons of objectifying lust and sadism" with no real depth beyond the apparently obvious and undeniably stereotypical, masculine threat they pose to Jesse.³⁷ However, a much closer analysis of these characters is required in order to highlight how some play a much more integral and insidious role in the upkeep of the patriarchal ideals of beauty the film presents. Further, whilst many reviewers commend the technical elements of the film, such as score,

³² McCarthy, "'The Neon Demon': Cannes Review".

³³ McCarthy, "'The Neon Demon': Cannes Review".

³⁴ Christine Champagne, 'Director Nicolas Winding Refn On The Beauty And Horror Of "The Neon Demon"', *Fast Company*, 24 June 2016, at <https://www.fastcompany.com/3061243/director-nicolas-winding-refn-on-the-beauty-and-horror-of-the-neon-demon>; Ebiri, 'Refn on His Fluorescent Narcissism'; Thompson, "'The Neon Demon': Nicolas Winding Refn Reveals Why His Cannibal Model Movie Is Autobiographical". All accessed 05/04/2018.

³⁵ Champagne, 'The Beauty and Horror Of "The Neon Demon"'.

³⁶ Champagne, 'The Beauty and Horror Of "The Neon Demon"'.

³⁷ Robey, 'The Neon Demon Is the Most Offensive Film of the Year'.

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cinematography and set and costume design, there needs to be a closer look at the ways in which these elements (most specifically colour) are presented in the film to further support these same patriarchal ideals.³⁸

Finally, there have been a number of feminist critical reviews of this film with the general allegation being that *TND* reinforces sexist ideas of young women as narcissistic, spiteful and competitive.³⁹ Their characterisation, as noted previously, is considered weak and one-dimensional, and the treatment of the sole LGBTQ character has been harshly criticised on several occasions.⁴⁰ The film's representation of beauty (and its idealisation of virginity and youth) has also been briefly commented on, as well as the film's lack of representation in regards to persons of colour.⁴¹ Similarly, brief allusions to the more overt religious elements of the film also exist, mainly in reference to the ritual sacrifice, occult imagery, and the use of triangular geometry.⁴² What is needed therefore, is a much deeper analysis of how all these elements intersect in the film in order to highlight the ways in which the more subtle religious elements play out in regards to the idealisation of female beauty and how this only supports the ideals of the patriarchy and traditional religion.⁴³

³⁸ Collin, 'The Neon Demon's Jaw-Dropping Depravity'; Robey, 'The Neon Demon Is the Most Offensive Film of the Year'; McCarthy, "'The Neon Demon': Cannes Review'; Rodriguez, 'We Need to Talk about "The Neon Demon" (R)'.

³⁹ Wilford, 'I'm A Feminist, And I Loved *The Neon Demon*'.

⁴⁰ Finger, 'Fuck *The Neon Demon*'.

⁴¹ Desta, "'The Neon Demon' Is Visually Stunning'; Hughes, '*The Neon Demon* Tries to Both Fetishize and Vilify Young Girls. It Fails'.

⁴² Tirdad Derakhshani and Staff Writer, "'Neon Demon': Elle Fanning Mesmerizes in Brutal Masterpiece', *Philly.com*, 24 June 2016, at http://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/20160624_Neon_Demon_Elle_Fanning_mesmerizes_in_brutal_masterpiece.html; H. Perry Horton, 'Deltas and Doorways: Triangular Geometry in *The Neon Demon*', *Film School Rejects*, 6 January 2017, at <https://filmschoolrejects.com/deltas-and-doorways-triangular-geometry-in-the-neon-demon-431c7b26dcd>; Alexandra Fursessedonn Howard, 'Witchcraft and Film as Ritual in *The Neon Demon*', *The 405*, 9 January 2016, at <https://www.thefourohfive.com/film/article/witchcraft-and-film-as-ritual-in-the-neon-demon-2016-147>; 'Fairytale Imagery in *The Neon Demon*', *Horror Homeroom*, 3 March 2017, at <http://www.horrorhomeroom.com/fairytale-imagery-neon-demon>. All accessed 06/04/ 2018.

⁴³ Connections have also been made between *TND* and Julia Ducournau's film *Raw* (2016), where a young girl faces a similarly gory and carnal fall into temptation. The character's cannibalistic transgressions coincide with her sexual awakening in a Dionysian-esque ecstatic horror, raising questions around gender, sexuality and 'coming of age', as well as

The Authorities on Beauty

The subject of beauty has been explored across academic fields since the time of ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Plotinus, through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, to innumerable contemporary examinations.⁴⁴ It is also the focus of Refn's film, motivated by his self-proclaimed obsession.⁴⁵ This film is another creation in the long line of "men's continued need to control women by writing about or painting female beauty along with women's attempts to conform to the impossible standards laid out for them."⁴⁶ Refn presents an idealised form of beauty that conforms to long-standing patriarchal and religious criteria, and "as feminists have long underlined, the idealisation of women goes hand in hand with the refusal to grant them equal status."⁴⁷ The very creation of *TND* thus problematises the director's assertion that his film is 'beyond feminism' due to the history of female beauty systems being entrenched in the patriarchy.

As noted earlier, Refn justifies his claim that *TND* is 'beyond feminism' through the lack of male characters. However, this does not mean that the consequent plethora of female characters automatically possess some sense of power or agency. In fact, apart from Christina Hendricks' modelling agent (who appears in a single scene), the only characters who do possess any semblance of power, and professional and aesthetic agency, are all males. Critical reviews of the film thus far have provided reductive descriptions of the male characters, positioning them as simply sadistic, creepy and lustful, and failing to take into account the true extent to which certain male characters play a role in the narrative. The photographer Jack Macarthur (Desmond Harrington) and fashion designer Roberto Sarno (Alessandro Nivola) are the authorities on what counts as

the physical and ethical boundaries between human and animal. See Jeremy Biles, 'Raw. Film Directed by Julia Ducourmau. Focus World, 2016', *Religious Studies Review*, vol. 44, no. 2 (2018), p. 215.

⁴⁴ Caroline Adams and Tracy Adams, *Female Beauty Systems: Beauty as Social Capital in Western Europe and the United States. Middle Ages to the Present* (Newcastle on Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), pp. 1–3.

⁴⁵ Yuan, 'Nicolas Winding Refn and Elle Fanning on *Neon Demon*'.

⁴⁶ Adams and Adams, *Female Beauty Systems*, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Adams and Adams, *Female Beauty Systems*, p. 3.

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beauty within the film;⁴⁸ the women simply compete to impress them in order to work, but they are, of course, only impressed by Jesse. Thus, the ideal of beauty is decided and fortified by the patriarchy, in a film that is itself a product of these same structures.

Apart from a brief glimpse at a party when he notices Jesse from across the room, Jack is introduced at a photoshoot after he volunteers to take some test shots of the young model. After demanding a closed set, leaving just himself and Jesse in the room, he requests that she remove her clothes and he turns off the lights. Viewers might assume that the scene would have a sexually sinister outcome, yet this is not what results. Rather, Jack returns with a pot of gold paint and, as if he is the mythic King Midas, anoints Jesse with his golden touch. He exalts her, rather than exploits her; epitomising Plato's notion of the higher and valued form of *erōs*, "a form of love which seeks to unite with its object, and to make copies of it."⁴⁹ Plato identified it as the origin of sexual desire and the love of beauty, which, in its ideal form is concerned not with possessing the object of beauty but contemplating the form of the beautiful itself.⁵⁰ Jack shows no interest in possessing Jesse; rather he is shown as recognising the form of her ideal beauty, even when it has been absorbed by Sarah through ritual ingestion.

If Jack is associated with this higher form, which is a call to free ourselves of sensory attachment in order for our souls to ascend to a higher sphere, Ruby, Gigi and Sarah are associated with the base form that is concerned with the desire to possess Jesse's beauty as it exists transiently. In this form of desire, one "seeks to unite with its object" through physical means, which plays out in the film in the act of ritual consumption.⁵¹ Plato

⁴⁸ Sarno's position as an authority on beauty within the film is evidenced in the scene following Jesse's self-actualisation, whereby he uses Gigi as a prop, in comparison to Jesse, to highlight his assertion that "You can always tell when beauty is manufactured. If you weren't born beautiful you never will be." Considering Gigi is a representation of manufactured beauty, this scene serves to condemn her as less than the ideal that Jesse encapsulates, thus reinforcing a hierarchy of beauty. Gigi, as a product of plastic surgery, is linked to fake female beauty and by extension, the modern trope of popular culture that equates this with a pretentious and 'mean girl' status. See Jennifer Cognard-Black, 'Beautiful Monster: Plastic Surgery as Cultural Metaphor', in *Female Beauty Systems*, p. 237.

⁴⁹ Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 40.

⁵⁰ Scruton, *Beauty*, p. 40.

⁵¹ Scruton, *Beauty*, p. 40.

asserts that those who are concerned with this base form of love and desire are immersed in sensuous immediacy and are consequently enslaved to “the lower aspect of the soul.”⁵²

Through the performance of the sacrificial ritual at the end of the film – that is the eating of Jesse’s flesh and bathing in her blood – Gigi, Sarah and Ruby attempt to absorb her very essence for themselves. Perhaps, through their destruction of the patriarchal ideal that is Jesse, these women gain some sense of power and agency they did not previously possess. Yet, the ultimate result of this ritual further strengthens my argument that Refn’s film is definitely not ‘beyond feminism’. Gigi, the product of the male gaze whose very physicality has been shaped and changed by male hands, destroys herself. This could be read as a destruction of the patriarchy; however, given Gigi has attempted to manufacture her beauty (something that the authorities of beauty have framed as impossible), it serves more to punish her and reinforce the idealisation of Jesse.⁵³ Sarah, previously a self-proclaimed ‘ghost’, breaks out from the background to claim a place amongst the great beauties. She not only takes Jesse’s place, but also Gigi’s. However, her new power is not realised until Jack recognises it in the final shoot. Finally, Ruby’s fate is similarly divisive. In a way, through her destruction of the patriarchal ideal that is Jesse, she reclaims her own femininity and womanhood through her menstruation.⁵⁴ Yet, as a character, she is still ultimately framed as a patriarchal archetype; not only is she a lesbian, but she is also a witch, signified through the presence of her occult tattoos and her naked moonlight ritual dance following the sacrifice. The male gaze informs the beauty of *TND*, both in the film’s narrative in its very creation; the extent to which it can be considered ‘beyond feminism’ is arguable. Gender informs and reinforces a patriarchal hierarchy within the film, whereby the male characters are the highest form of authority and the females are consequently depicted as inadequate lovers of beauty, enslaved to a subordinate understanding.

⁵² Scruton, *Beauty*, p. 41.

⁵³ Ebiri, ‘Refn on His Fluorescent Narcissism’.

⁵⁴ Ebiri, ‘Refn on His Fluorescent Narcissism’.

The Veneration of Virginity

Throughout history, virginity has been afforded a special significance and value across a multitude of religious and cultural traditions. All major religions have moral codes to regulate human sexuality, such as the prohibition of premarital sex, which have had a strong influence on societal attitudes concerning sexual practice. In the West, the primary example of the sacralisation of virginity is undoubtedly the figure of the Virgin Mary, who also arguably stands as its most venerated female figure. Roger Scruton posits, “There are no greater tributes to human beauty than the medieval and Renaissance images of the Holy Virgin... [whose] beauty is a symbol of purity.”⁵⁵ One can thus identify an interplay between beauty, virginity and veneration. Though most Christian denominations recognise the virgin birth of Jesus, there are those, including both Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, that hold to the dogma of the perpetual virginity of Mary; that she was a virgin prior to, during, and following the birth of Jesus.⁵⁶ As she is a paragon of femininity which Catholic women should aim to emulate, Helene Scheck has noted how her venerated virginity and virtue can prove detrimental to one’s sense of spiritual wholeness as no one can actually achieve Mary’s level of purity.⁵⁷

Within *TND*, Jesse is an undeniable reflection of the Virgin Mary (an assertion which is strengthened by my evaluating Jesse’s associations with the colour blue below). Her youth and virginity are all that separate her from Gigi and Sarah (who are similarly blonde, blue-eyed, thin and tall), and position her as the ideal form of beauty, worthy of veneration. Jesse’s sexual polarisation from Gigi and Sarah is established from their first meeting in the film. Though not explicitly stated, it is implied that these women possess an active sexuality that they have used to sleep their way to the top, evident in Sarah’s hostile assertion:

All she really wants to know is, who are you fucking? ... Isn’t that what everyone wants to know? A pretty new girl walks into a room, everyone’s

⁵⁵ Scruton, *Beauty*, p. 54.

⁵⁶ Mark Miravalle, *Introduction to Mary: The Heart of Marian Doctrine and Devotion*, 3rd ed. (Goleta: Queenship Publishing, 2006), pp. 56-63.

⁵⁷ Helene Scheck, *Reform and Resistance: Formations of Female Subjectivity in Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Culture* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), p. 97.

head turns, looks her up and down, wondering, "Who is she fucking? Who could she fuck? And how high can she climb, and is it higher than me?"⁵⁸

When Sarah inquires as to whether or not Jesse sleeps with men, Jesse claims that she does so "All the time." However, the other women see through this lie and dismiss her as a possible threat. This dismissal subsides when Jesse is officially recognised by the film's authorities on beauty, who quickly situate her as an object of veneration (consider again, Jack's exaltation of Jesse during the photoshoot). Like the Virgin Mary, Jesse is a paragon, and the only form of true beauty which is the ultimate goal that no one can actually achieve, as it is a divine quality that cannot be replicated or revived.

Historically, virginity has been correlated with purity, worth and morality, a notion that many feminist scholars have asserted is a myth. Not only does the loss of virginity have no effect on personality or influence over ethics, the very notion that virginity can be 'lost' is criticized, as there is no scientifically verifiable way to prove it.⁵⁹ Within *TND* this linking of female virginity to notions of morality and worth, whilst it serves to valorise Jesse, consequently positions those women who are sexually active as immoral and unworthy. This association of virginity with purity and worth, however, is only valid when the virginity exists in a female body. As Laura Carpenter highlights, sexual prowess is considered a fundamental aspect of masculinity; male sexuality is seen as something that is innate and competitive and displays a different set of cultural values and stigmas from female sexuality and virginity.⁶⁰ Within *TND* the only character to portray any overt sexuality is Ruby, firstly in her attempt to seduce Jesse and then, when she is rejected, her act of necrophilia with a female corpse. This scene, the only sex scene in the film, is problematic for at least two reasons; firstly, there is the objectification and perversion of lesbian sex, and secondly, it positions Ruby as the only character desperate and deprived enough to settle for less than the ideal that the film offers.⁶¹ Ruby is negatively framed as unworthy and immoral through her active sexuality, and she is also masculinised in an overt display of sexual prowess.

⁵⁸ Refn, *The Neon Demon*.

⁵⁹ Jessica Valenti, *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2009), pp. 1-5.

⁶⁰ Laura Carpenter, *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), pp. 47-49.

⁶¹ Robey, 'The Neon Demon Is the Most Offensive Film of the Year'.

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Sexuality, sexual orientation, and age intersect within this film to present an ideal of beauty that is young and virginal. A hierarchy of beauty is thus established whereby women, like Gigi and Sarah, who possess an active sexuality, are considered less than this ideal. Ruby is further vilified by her overt displays of sexuality, and as the only lesbian character within the film, there is an undeniable intersection of sexual orientation that contributes to this disparagement. This is reinforced as she is the only main female character who is *not* a model.⁶² *TND* therefore, cannot be considered 'beyond feminism' as the film serves to propagate patriarchal notions of a woman's value in society as being inherently linked to her sexuality (or rather lack thereof), highlighted through the veneration of virginal beauty and the subsequent condemnation and negative framing of any character who does not conform to this ideal.

Race also intersects to inform the ideal of beauty within this film, given that it is almost completely absent; the only persons of colour appear during the runway scene, as the camera pans swiftly past them to settle on Jesse. In a film about beauty there is not a single person of colour given a significant role, so not only is Refn's ideal form the young, white virgin, but there is arguably no place in the film at all for a legitimate form of beauty that is not white. In Western culture, there is a long tradition of the metaphorical use of black and white (light and dark) whereby the contrast is often employed to symbolise the moral dichotomy of good and evil. The connotations of this dualism have strongly informed notions of race and racial difference within the West to "underpin a hierarchical system of domination of less powerful groups in society."⁶³ The Bible itself associates light with God, sanctity, and virtue, and the Devil is subsequently correlated with darkness and sin.⁶⁴ The structures of the beauty industry have similarly served to construct a racial hierarchy in the West. The

⁶² Globally, patriarchal religious traditions have vilified and subjugated gay and lesbian bodies throughout history. Given the plethora of information regarding such vilification, it goes without saying how Ruby's similar vilification has undoubtedly been informed (however unknowingly) by such structures.

⁶³ Theresa H. Pfeifer, 'Deconstructing Cartesian Dualisms of Western Racialized Systems: A Study in the Colors Black and White', *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2009), p. 528.

⁶⁴ Acts 26:18 (King James Version), "To open their eyes, *and* to turn *them* from darkness to light, and *from* the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me."

creation of skin lightening products in the nineteenth century reinforces the fact that the hierarchy purported by the beauty industry privileges whiteness.⁶⁵ Just as historical commentators on beauty have situated it in relation to race, so too does Refn in *TND*. His main characters are representations of different forms of beauty, yet all these forms are white, and any beauty that is black has been firmly bracketed out.⁶⁶ Thus, not only do age, sexuality, and sexual orientation intersect to inform venerated beauty with *TND*, but clearly, so too does race.

The Symbolism of Colour

Finally, the use of colour in *TND* also draws upon traditional religious elements that inform the patriarchal ideal of beauty. Natasha Braier, the director of photography, comments on the important and deliberate use of colour throughout the film. Braier notes that colours were used to represent specific emotions. Red, for instance, meant danger and was present in every scene that featured Ruby, whose own name is itself an indicator of the immense danger that she poses.⁶⁷ Red has carried a heavy weight in Christian theology, not only in its connotations of sexual passion, anger and immorality, but also in its strong association with sin and the devil.⁶⁸ Ruby (the erotically driven lesbian) is thus further vilified through her alignment with the Devil and her framing as immoral, sexually charged and sinful. When the use of red is further aligned with the symbolism of blue as the other predominant colour of the film, this denigration is subtly reinforced. Employed in relation to Jesse, Braier notes how the colour is an allusion to the Greek myth of Narcissus and is used to represent Jesse's climactic narcissistic moment; that is, the runway scene which itself is an abstract

⁶⁵ Black, *The Beauty Industry*, p. 24.

⁶⁶ Radiclan Clytus, 'Language in Our Blood', in Yusef Komunyakaa, *Condition Red* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017), pp. 7-16, at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.9462628.3>.

⁶⁷ Natasha Braier, 'Inside the Weird World of *The Neon Demon*', *The Guardian*, July 4, 2016, at <http://www.theguardian.com/global/2016/jul/04/inside-the-weird-world-of-the-neon-demon>. Accessed 04/05/2018.

⁶⁸ Alva William Steffler, *Symbols of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 132; Isaiah 1:18 (KJV), "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow"; Revelation 12:3 (KJV), Satan is depicted as "a great red dragon"; Revelation 17:3-4 (KJV), the Antichrist appears as "a scarlet beast" ridden by the Whore of Babylon "arrayed in purple and scarlet colour." See Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

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representation of both Narcissus' pond and his ultimate doom.⁶⁹ The use of blue also serves to further align Jesse with the Virgin Mary, who has become "inseparable from the colour", strongly reinforcing its connotations of eternity, divinity and otherworldliness.⁷⁰ Jesse (the young, blonde, virgin) is thus further idealised as the idyllic form of beauty. As a filmmaker, Refn had the opportunity to convey whatever meaning he chose through his use of colour. His deliberate employment of traditional symbolism does nothing to support his claim that his film is 'beyond feminism', rather it reinforces patriarchal and religious ideals of beauty that glorify the young, white virgin and pillory the sexually active lesbian.

Conclusion

Nicolas Winding Refn's *TND* presents a form of venerated beauty that reinforces a patriarchal and religious ideal. It valorises the young, white virgin at the expense of those who do not conform to this standard, and the consequent condemnation is reinforced through the employment of religious imagery around virginity, *erōs*, and colour symbolism. The ideal of beauty is purported and fortified by the male gaze within the narrative, and in the creation of the film itself, resulting in a plethora of female characters that have no true sense of agency or authority. As each of these women step further away from the idealised beauty they become more vilified and denigrated, with the most negatively framed character being the sexually explicit lesbian. By examining the intersections of sexuality, age, gender, race, and sexual orientation as they inform the beauty represented in the film, this article has highlighted how Refn's claim that it is 'beyond feminism' is highly problematic. Refn's female characters are pure stereotype with nothing much beyond the surface. Just because a film lacks male characters does not mean that it is 'beyond feminism', especially if this film only reinforces traditional ideals that have been historically perpetuated by patriarchal religious paradigms in order to subjugate and regulate the lives and value of women within their societies.

⁶⁹ Braier, 'Inside the Weird World of *The Neon Demon*'.

⁷⁰ Breann Fallon, 'A(Blue)Nt: Beyond the Symbology of the Colour Blue', *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2014), p. 33.