

The Neon Demon (2016): Aesthetics of Falsehood

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ABSTRACT / The present work proposes a reconstruction of the aesthetic poetics of the film *The Neon Demon* (2016), using a hermeneutical analysis of the relationships established between the hypotextual references to the Judeo-Christian traditions and the Narcissus myth articulated in the audiovisual discourse and the dialectic exposure of the achievement of the beautiful, through different ways, as a duty and ultimate goal of the human being.

KEYWORDS / Intertextuality, Hipotextuality, Fake, Aesthetics.

RESUMEN / El presente trabajo propone una reconstrucción de la poética estética del filme *El demonio neón* (2016), empleando un análisis hermenéutico de las relaciones que se establecen entre, las referencias hipotextuales a las tradiciones judeocristianas y el mito de Narciso articuladas en el discurso audiovisual y la exposición dialéctica de la consecución de lo bello a través de diversos medios como deber y fin último del ser humano.

PALABRAS CLAVE / Intertextualidad, hipotextualidad, falsedad, estética.



The Neon Demon
(Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016).

A renowned contemporary US philosopher once said: *There is no a priori reason to assume that the truth, when revealed, will be interesting.*

It will be enough for it to be true, or even an approximation to the truth; consequently, I'm not ashamed to say it. The truth, said Tolstoi, is the most beautiful thing in the entire world.

Isaiah Berlin

The *Neon Demon*, 2016, is a film directed by Nicolas Winding Refn and co-written by Mary Law. Some sources regard it as a psychological thriller or a horror movie. The film tells the story of Jesse, a small town young woman who travels to the city of Los Angeles in pursuit of her dream of getting a job as a model. Her beauty and freshness earned her the rivalry and envy of two other models, Gigi and Sarah, who coexist in the competitive, closed fashion circuit; on the other hand, she will awaken uncontrollable desire in Ruby, a makeup artist, in a distinguished clothes designer and in an important photographer.

In the reading I am proposing, the film is understood as a sense unit made up and arranged by the concept of falsehood. The present paper will use narrative action, corporeal connotation and intertextuality (hypotexts) as levels in which my central argument is revealed; the film is arranged by an aesthetics of the fake. In this aesthetics the concept of falsehood will operate like a hinge of meaning.

I will start from a conjecture: *The Neon Demon*, just like every other audiovisual product (as a cluster of signs and meanings, and as a text), refers to other texts (ranging from the explicit quote to the rules that were used to construct it and which place it in

a given genre). The two most evident texts that work as sense attractors¹ are, on one hand, the biblical story about the fall of Lucifer, the angel of light, as a result of his pride; and on the other, the myth of Narcissus. Both texts are connected by two constants that are interesting for the reading that this paper intends to carry out: 1) the corporeal question, with the imprint of hubris² and 2) the theme of the fake embodied in its different forms: deception, lie, trickery.

I will take the sequence as the unit of analysis, understanding that it articulates in the relationship of meaning established among the dialogs (claims and argumentative points of view) and the film's shots. These sequences were chosen as they had a connection with the hypotexts that iterate the work's aesthetic thesis. That is why I will lay emphasis indistinctly on the dialogism the characters present as well as on the different dimensions and readings the shot can provide.

THE NARRATIVE AND THE FAKE

If we think of the film as a proposal of a reading correlated and regulated by the different iterations that aim to construct a global sense framework, we will be able to read the first sequence or *incipit* of the film as an epigraph that condenses, in itself, its stand allowing us to view the movie that we are discussing here as an audiovisual essay on the fake.

In the opening sequence, the audiovisual fiction presents us, in a zoom out, the image of Jesse's still head with her eyes open diluted in horizon, only to reveal –seconds later– the apparent motive of this immobility: a throat with a deadly slit; a bloodless body. This apparent quietness is interrupted by a flash, and on a reverse angle shot, amateur photographer Dean's incisive, perhaps excited, stare.

What appears to be a crime scene that is revealed with the utmost gentleness and, to a certain extent, taking great

care over color and composition harmony, with lighting based on neon lights and interrupted by the photographer's stroboscopic camera flash, is nothing but a fake scene. Rupture in this scene is brought about by contrast, when on the following shot we see Jesse in front of the mirror working hard at wiping the prop blood and the makeup. From this diegetic construction, the movie warns us about the centrality of the theme of the fake, where falsehood is set on the dialectic tension between the avid eye longing for beauty and the body that embodies it.

On the other hand, there is constant allusion to lying as a habit that allows Jesse to survive. Jesse has to lie, first, to be able to dodge the sharp questions about her past and her family; she claims that they died, which earns her a condescending attitude from her new "friends". She lies, afterwards, to be able to get a job, because she is a minor, and in view of the sly, neglectful attitude of the modeling agency that is eager to hire her, they overlook the forgery of her parents' signature and tell her how to lie better on the issue of her age. She lies to Dean, the boy who is courting her, the one we see on the first scene taking the "disturbing" photos where she lies dead, when he asked her what the modeling employment agency actually thinks about his work, and she says that they did not say anything, when in fact their comments were quite negative.

The plot center in which the narrative action develops lies in Jesse's decline, transformation or decadence: from a primary stage where innocence prevails, embodied in her natural beauty, to a state of haughtiness induced by the knowledge and power that having a beautiful body entails in the westernized society.

In the narrative aspect it will also be possible to observe that the relationship among the female characters is set on a key of falsehood. Betrayal is a constant element, where the opportunities to stand out, in this restricted world, are few and far between and the –metaphorical– cannibalization

¹Think visually in this concept starting from the Lorenz attractors (1993).

²Hubris understood as the excess or lack of moderation caused by punishment by the gods.

among the rivals is represented as a natural result of the interaction among the different beautiful bodies.

Now I will expand on the levels that I have indicated as the hub of this correlation between the body, the intertexts and the topic of falsehood as a representation of the beautiful.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FAKE AND INTERTEXTUALITY

In *The Neon Demon* the network of meanings directed at other texts has its meaning core in the iteration of the fake and its relation with a given aesthetics. This relationship lies in the figure of the demon, not as man's adversary like in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but rather as a distorted, fake representation of the divine. In this text I will use –to confer more precision to my main argument– the concept of hypertextuality taken from Genette (1989 [1962]). Although it is true that the debate on intertextuality has taken new courses (Worton and Still, 2001) and it has been updated from Genette's conception, and my choice can be objected to adducing temporal and intellectual distance within the field of fiction studies, I must clarify that these contributions do not question the conceptual core of Genette's work, and the most recent contributions do not excel the conception and understanding of Kristeva's and Barthes's pristine texts on the phenomenon in terms of systematicity and clarity.

In this sense, the clarity that Genette's work exhibits when it comes to explaining what a hypertext is, is extremely powerful. Genette (1989) expounds that hypertext is a concept to define the relationship between a base or source text (also called hypotext, or text A) and another one derived from it (text B), which would have no way of expressing a complex meaning without the existence of that original main text.

Although in the 1990's the boom and saturation of academic productions whose center was the concept, its application and use in the literary field caused several researchers to point out the overuse and simplified use of the concept, the use I make of this term does not intend to bring about

new courses in its theoretical dimension, but its versatility as explanatory framework is necessary to understand the relation between the aesthetics proposed by the film and the hypotexts that I will review below.

Under these terms it is possible to assert that the most superficial intertextual relation exhibited by the film *The Neon Demon* is that which links it to certain references to the representation of the demon existing in the compilation of biblical stories, more specifically in the Old Testament, as it is known in the Christian tradition, or Tanakh, as the Jewish tradition calls it.

The film iterates, by means of the references reconstructed and re-appropriated from the visual discourse, the demon's attributes, as the being opposing the divinity that lies in those books. As an example, here I retrieve three sequences of the movie that are connected to these hypotexts: 1) The reference to Lucifer as a being of light, 2) casting and worshipping a golden calf (false god) by the Jewish people in Exodus and 3) the fall of Lucifer on account of his pride (Is 14:12-14) and his wish to be "god-like".

EVERY PRECIOUS STONE WAS THY COVERING

One of the first relationships displayed around this hypotext appeared in an extratextual form in the posters that were used to advertise the film. One of them shows Jesse's face made up in a way so that she appears to have glittering multicolor stone inlays, a makeup that appears in the close-ups. This decision of representing the main character is linked to one of the most symbolic descriptions the hypotext makes of the demon, and above all it is connected with the change she underwent from being favored to falling from grace by being distant from her creator, a distance and condition that was beyond repair as a result of the sin of pride [FIGURE 1].

Every precious stone was thy covering: the sardius, the topaz, and the diamond, the beryl, the onyx, and the jasper, the sap-



FIGURE 1. *The Neon Demon* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016).

phire, the emerald, and the carbuncle; and gold: the workmanship of thy tabrets and of thy pipes was prepared in thee in the day that thou wast created (Ez, 28: 13).

However, in the movie, the adornments of the covering were embodied in the face of the main character, thus attaining a connection to and a transformation of the hypotext, this way generating a reading around the figure of the demon and mainly its Old Testament conception.

The representation of the demoniac in Judeo-Christian culture and its oral and literary stories has the unique characteristic of conveying a connection with lying and with all that which, like the mirror (or the Greek *katoptron*), reproduces a distorted reality. Hence, the demon will have these two types of attributes, on one hand, those belonging to a primordial state—before the fall—when it enjoyed divine grace, and it was the most beautiful being; on the other hand, attributes belonging to his degradation, which will be close to the conception of an imitation that distorts the image of the divine, by inversion in a concave mirror.

This type of distortion or falsehood about the relationship with divinity is a common theme when we deal with the demoniac attribute. For example, Salvador Elizondo, in his *Theory of Hell* (1992), when he refers to earliest representations and characterizations of the demon, pointed out that they were repeatedly based on the halo of falsehood that he possessed as a being that mediated between divinity and humanity, this was—as explained by the author of *Farabeuf*—a central theme in the forefathers of the catholic church.

These usual characteristics in the definition of the demon in Old Testament literature will serve as the meaning nodes in which the diegesis is articulated in what respects Jesse's character.

(...) AND CONSTRUCTED A MOLTEN CALF

In this sense and by this reading, in the sequence where Jesse is photographed, we witness the way in which the relation between the bodies that dwell the space and the way they are

viewed as proposed by the film change from this narrative and hypertextual inflection point (in its relation-reconstruction of the biblical hypotexts that make an allusion to the demonic figure).

At the beginning of the scene, Jesse is stripped until she stands nude, the cold, white light is turned off, and a warm light appears in the darkness, which will be the catalyst, the reinforcer of the golden color with which the photographer illuminates-paints Jesse's naked body.

The lightning and chromatic arrangement exhibit a gradation. In this scene it is possible to see one of the inflexion points around the thematic composition of the main character. In the sense that the first sequences had been aimed at the composition of shots using an array of strong colors, lighting that once again is achieved by stroboscopic neon lights, which is contrasted or alternated by sequences with shots aimed at opaque, pastel colors. This sequence of Jesse's "golden unction" is set by shots where the color white predominates, both as the background and as the color of Jesse's underwear; black, worn by the photographer; and golden: the tint that the photographer uses in the warm lights, it is also the color with which he "bathes" Jesse's body for the shoot session. Beginning with the golden bath of Jesse's body, a scene cut is made, in which the viewer's vision is deleted, zealously reserving what has happened for any eye, like an initiation act.

I consider that this "golden unction" is an inflexion in lighting and the chromatic orientation of the shots in a way so that it influences on the interpretation of this act as one of initiation, whether at a metaphorical level as initiation into sexual life, or at the narrative level as initiation into the modeling world, which in turn proposes a reading from another hypotext. Thus, the golden inlays provided by Ruby's makeup for Jesse's face relate in this ecosystem of signs and meanings, with a new construction of meaning from the hypotext of the Hebrew people's idolatry or "worship of the golden calf". The emancipated people of Israel in the desert, in Moses' absence, construct a golden calf and they worship it. This

activity is the reason why their deity gets annoyed and intends to destroy them, on account of the fact that they had replaced their god and created a material representation which was so harshly penalized in this religion.

The composition of this hypertextual relation lies in two large meaning nuclei which structure the story through their relationships or imbrications. One is made up by elements that allude to the body, to a sexualization of that body. The denotations of a sexual awakening are, somehow, more than evident. The bodies' loneliness, the immaculate emptiness of white that is used as background; the visible asymmetry between the photographer's experienced position and Jesse's inexperienced one as a model; the "bath" of golden paint, or unction with gold color; Jesse's interpellation by the photographer's orders at the beginning of the photo shoot.

The other nucleus is made up by the elements of meaning existing in the golden calf hypotext: first an allegory of the passage in which the Israelites employ their children's and wives' golden earrings to be melted and cast to construct a calf to be worshipped. This meaning nucleus is conveyed in a way so that the golden dye that is poured over Jesse, as well as the gold leaf makeup on her face, refers us subtly to the verses of Exodus.

2 Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me. 3 So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron; 4 He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." 5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord." 6 So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. 7 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt." (Ex, 32: 2-7)

The metaphor based on the topic of falsehood uses elements of a replacement of the immaterial god for a material one, where the model's body is a metaphor of this replacement carried out in the following manner. Through this textual referent there is a system of substitutions, where the material is linked to the fake, and the true to the immaterial: Jesse is represented within this system of references about beauty and she is erected as the golden calf that everyone will worship and by transference of meaning between the hypotexts she represents the fake and what has expired, what is prone to punishment by the divinity. In both cases, the gold calf and Lucifer embody an entity that is contrary to the divinity brings about order (the divine will have the attributes of immaterial and perennial and hence true). These entities are promoters of "scandal" (Girard, 1999), of something diabolical [FIGURE 2].

HOW YOU FELL FROM THE HEAVENS, OH, MORNING STAR, SON OF THE DAWN!

Regarding the hypotext of the "fall" of Lucifer, the film does not present too complicated a version. It is easy to see that it is presented in a direct manner: literally Jesse falls (or is dumped) into an empty pool. Jesse appears in the diegesis wearing a mint green dress, swinging on the edge of a springboard over an empty swimming pool, while in the background we can see the Los Angeles skyscrapers. Right after that, Ruby appears and Jesse delivers a speech about her awareness of her natural beauty as a "thing" that other women covet. From her awareness of her own beauty, as a way of becoming aware of the danger inherent to a "natural"



FIGURE 2.
The Neon Demon
(Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016).

beauty, the narrative that operates in this audiovisual fiction piece proposes that pride arises in Jesse as a kind of evil. This distorted awareness that Jesse has about her own beauty is what makes it “dangerous”, quoting her mother’s words, who conceives her, according to Jesse’s memory, as a dangerous woman because she has what others cannot have, not even artificially (not by getting injections, or having body parts removed) not with discipline (exercising or starving to death).

This scene is also susceptible of being read by expanding its meaning in a recomposition of the Greek hypotext, where Narcissus is annihilated by being captivated, and by his desire to kiss his own reflection on the water’s surface. In the interpretation of the myth, Narcissus falls victim to his distorted vision by numbing egotism (or narcotic: from the Greek *narkoyn*, to numb) of the senses through the fake, since his reflection is also an artifice of sorts. Jesse’s narcotic egotism undergoes a transformation throughout the film: from being aware of her beauty and having a naive attitude to becoming aware that she is desired by others and boasting proudly of her “power” derived from her superficial and corporeal beauty³. Jesse, upon delivering this speech about the dangers entailed by beauty on the springboard of the empty swimming pool, allows us to carry out a reconstruction that makes this myth even more complex. Jesse finds her reflection in the fact that her friends and competitors covet her youth and beauty, and it is before this reflection that her judgment is clouded. Her fall into the empty pond or the punishment pit by the sin of pride is overlaid by a moralizing Christian logic, since time immemorial, on Narcissus drowning [FIGURE 3].

The iterated appearance of mirrors, from the photography camera as a mechanical, fixating mirror of sorts, going through the breaking of mirrors and mirror triangulations, to the eye that is vomited and swallowed in the final sequence, it is a reinterpretation of the Greek myth, in the light of the

³Although this apparently superficial beauty is expressed as something immaterial linked with the flesh that can transmigrate to (or possess and be possessed by) other bodies by means of ingestion.

Judean-Christian texts that delve in pride as a vice or sin of the human being.

So the speech delivered by Jesse from the springboard above the empty swimming pool is the peak of her fake awareness of her beauty, and an exhibition of the degree of pride that this awareness has conferred or caused, and it also acts as the correlate of the dialog she holds with Dean in a couple of previous sequences. In them, Dean rebukes her about the transformation of an innocent Jesse to a visibly haughty Jesse, one that is proud of her beauty, because in his opinion, Jesse should not want to be like the other models and what they represent (falsehood, betrayal, decadence, artificiality). In view of this way of thinking, Jesse replies to Dean that “she doesn’t want to be like the other models”, what’s more, “they want to be like me”.

The Old Testament literature does not deal with the fall of Lucifer more clearly, but it is explicit that it was because he proudly wanted to be like God. In *The Neon Demon*, Jesse goes beyond that, in the substitution of elements, it can be interpreted that the other models are actually the demonic ones, who through the falsehood and artifice of bodily modifications want to get what they did not get from nature, and in their aspiration to be like her lies the actual blasphemy, because Jesse is, in their illusion, God.

THE EMBODIMENT OF THE FAKE

In one of his texts, Yehya (2001), when speaking about how the models participate of her body as a window for the fashion world, presented them as the product and the effect of romanticism in the following manner:

Eradicating death, or at least prolonging life, is one of the goals that have defined scientific progress; the models, exactly like Frankenstein’s monster, are also technological triumphs, just like Theodore Roszak writes, ‘Frankenstein’s monster is monstrous, not only because it is ugly, but also because it is a living dead. The final triumph in extending life is a collage of dead body parts that have been sewn together and forced to come back to life’ (Yehya, 2001, pp. 168-169).

FIGURE 3.

The Neon Demon

(Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016).



In the film at hand, Refn goes beyond and altogether he proposes that it is not only the extension of life what is attempted through this collage of dead body parts, but the extension of beauty itself, thus granting the same status to the artificial, the fake, the expired as to the dead.

Once and again this rivalry between artificial beauty and natural beauty is repeated in the movie, revealing rhetorical and visual arguments in which the latter always “wins”.

We find examples of this in two essential, correlated moments: first in the girl talk that Gigi, Sarah, Ruby and Jesse have in front of the mirror in the lady’s bathroom, and second when the designer and Dean were talking. In the first dialog Ruby introduces Jesse to the models as her new friend and the following exchange occurs:

Gigi: “Is that your natural color? You are just so beautiful.”

Ruby (to Gigi): “Don’t you think that she’s just perfect?”

Gigi (to Jesse): “Is that your real nose?”

Jesse: “Yeah.”

Gigi: “God, life is so unfair ...”

Ruby (to Jesse): “Gigi just got out of the body shop. She’s still a little sensitive.”

Jesse (to Gigi): “You had work done?”

Gigi: “You say that as if it were a bad thing. Sweet, plastics is just good grooming. Imagine going a year without brushing your teeth. I go to this guy in Beverly Hills. Andrew. Dr. Andrew.”

Ruby: “She’s in love with him.”

Gigi: “Of course I love him. Look at me. He calls me the bionic woman!”

Jesse: “Is that a compliment?”

The dialog exchange also reveals two types of calological paradigms, or paradigms on beauty: one that is presented by Gigi who assumes that beauty has to be something that is acquired by making-transforming and it has a sense of reward or change; that is why to her Jesse’s beauty is “unfair” because she did not make any effort, it has not “cost” her anything. However, Jesse’s stand on beauty is that she has been lucky enough to be born beautiful and being beautiful in this society is a source of wealth.

This expression of Jesse’s innocence conveys an aesthetic stand, one that is ethical as well: the bodies that are modified artificially can be and look similar to what is naturally beautiful, and by extension to the divine; however, this desire to be likened to the divine is taken as a demoniac stand. These artificial beauties have to inflict violence on the beautiful

body that is desired and ideal to restore an order that has been upset by her arrival. In addition to inflicting violence on this “escape goat” (Girard, 1986) it is necessary to assimilate it, and they do so by swallowing it, eating it.

This leads us to a false aesthetic dilemma that is also proposed in the women’s bathroom scene and in the moment Jesse is introduced to the fashion world friends. While the photographic composition plays with the triangulation of elements in the shots and the superposition of images in the mirrors, the conversation turns on the supposition that marketing experts and lipstick designers name their products using a sexual or food theme, because –according to them– women are more prone to buying these items by identifying them with these two options. So they enumerate several examples: Red Rum⁴, Black Honey, Plum Passion... Pink Pussy. With this little play of words, a guideline is established about the film’s cannibal theme, but one that is based on a statement on the beautiful, that is, one that has an aesthetic character. I claim that this false dilemma about being food or sex is, precisely, false, because the proposition that is made about natural beauty is the following, a being gifted with the utmost beauty is a being on whom the sexual rules govern. That is, she is human because you can have sex with her, if you cannot have sex with her, she is not human and therefore she is eatable. Because eating is something natural for human beings, eating the properties of objects is something natural too, something that is in addition necessary to humankind.

In this sense, there is a scene that is a correlate of this first proposition on the aesthetics of the false and the artificial, the scene in which Jesse and Dean meet in a restaurant with the designer, Gigi and another model. The designer holds that natural beauty has a supremacy over the artificial one, in addition he goes on to argue that beauty experienced by the sense of sight reigns supreme over inner or subjective beauty.

⁴Perhaps it is hint at the anagram of Murder, made famous in *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980).

To prove his point, he asked Dean to compare first Gigi and Jesse:

Gigi (to model 1): “Well, you can fix your face.”
Designer: “No, don’t do that.”
Model 1: “why not?”
Designer: “Because you can always tell when beauty is manufactured and if you aren’t born beautiful, you never will be.”
Model 1: “That’s terrible.”
Designer: “No, it’s true.”
Gigi: “I don’t think you can always tell.”
Designer (to Dean): “Dean, we are having a little debate over here and we need your expertise.”
Dean: “Okay.”
Designer: “You know Gigi, right?”
Dean: Well, I mean we just met ...
Designer (to Gigi): “Will you stand up so that he can take a look at you?”
Designer (to Dean): “What do you think? Do you think she is beautiful?”
Dean: “I don’t know, I mean: yeah, I guess she’s fine.”
Designer: “Yes, yes. That’s exactly the word I was looking for.”
(...)
Designer (to Dean): “Now look at Jesse, nothing fake, nothing false. A diamond in a sea of glass. True beauty is the highest currency we have. Now, without it, we would be nothing.”
(...)
Designer (to Dean): “Well, I think that if she wasn’t beautiful, you wouldn’t have even stopped to look. Beauty isn’t everything. It’s the only thing.”

There is a powerful essayistic form: the platonic idea of beauty, in which it is perceived by the senses, especially sight, is called upon to destroy a *naïve* stand where beauty comes from the “inside” and because it is deep and not shallow, it is good. This way of thinking about the beauty of human beings is objected to once and again by the different sequences that support the thesis of the audiovisual work that I am dealing with here.

Hence, these dialogs have a close relationship with the film's thesis, specifically this final claim: beauty is the only thing (that matters). Here is a statement on how terrible it is not to be beautiful in this type of society, especially because beauty is also put in the same ontological category as truth; hence the truth is subsumed in beauty and *ex natura* beauty is the value combined with being something capable of being possessed.

This way of thinking about the body and the beautiful, which is constantly referred to throughout the movie, can be found many times in an allegorical manner; the most visible example, the sequence in which Jesse is invited to a party by Ruby.

At the party, as the central act, there is a *performance* in which by using stroboscopic lights, a body is rendered asexual by the costumes, bandaged up in a way so that it is not possible to distinguish its facial features. The body is restrained by what

appears to be a *shibari* technique, bound and subjected and raised before Jesse's and Ruby's expecting, cheerful eyes as a triangular form of flirting and thrill. Such thrill or joy in view of what is new to Jesse is juxtaposed in a series of shots which show signs of boredom and monotony in the two models' (Gigi's and Sarah's) facial expressions [FIGURE 4].

CONCLUSION

In this reading proposal we have related elements that report the diegesis in the composition of a character on the basis of biblical hypotexts that allude to the myth of the fall of Lucifer, as well as his transformation and appropriation through allegories constructed from the chromatic element to the replacement of elements carried out in the audiovisual narrative.



FIGURE 4.
The Neon Demon
(Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016).

The re-appropriation and construction of the hypotexts are used to support a series of statements that allow us to reconstruct a production on the crisis of aesthetic values in western and westernized society. In this aesthetic proposal the condition of fake plays a role of the utmost importance, as I have pointed out. This way, according to the film's canon, extreme natural beauty is something that disarranges and disrupts interpersonal relations causing a hubris of sorts, a curse, for those who possess it, the truth as something terrible (*deina*) that can only be understood from the point of view of esthetics. An aesthetic proposal that this case questions and counter-argues epicurean aesthetics with an ostensible example: Jesse's transformation (decadence). Let's remember that, for epicurean aesthetics, which is among the ones with the strongest influence on Christian morality, beauty is isomorphic and equivalent to good. Ugliness, on the other hand, is an attribute contrary to the divine, since it would also be false, and characteristic of the demoniac (as opponent to the

greatest good or the ultimate good). In this sense, Aristotelian aesthetics explained this discussion in their own way: by problematizing argumentatively the natural relation between verisimilitude and beauty. This relation is treated in different ways and gradients in the film to show how not even the beauty that comes from the natural, embodied in Jesse, or the one in which artifice intervenes, like the one represented by Gigi or Sarah, is in no way connected with kindness or the attributes of honesty and dignity (*honestum* and *decorum* in the epicurean aesthetic sense, like in Chrysippus and Seneca). Contrariwise, beauty which understood as an exchange value, plus value, a sign of social promotion and economic welfare, as equivalent—for a society located in the realm of *sensorium*— to power, brings about its vices and, ultimately, ends up corrupting and getting corrupted. So, it may be understood that, in its relationships with the truth, displayed in ***The Neon Demon***, they are disjointed from the ethical, to ultimately rest on the field of aesthetics. 🍷

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