

Beauty Becomes Beastly in Uneven ‘The Neon Demon’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on June 26, 2016 - 7:49pm

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – “The Neon Demon” is definitely worth seeing, if only to create an understanding as to what you think beauty is, but the film suffers in its last quarter by taking a turn towards horror. This mix of decisions by director Nicolas Winding Refn (“Drive”) is audacious and maddening.

Elle Fanning is the lead actor, a young girl running away to Los Angeles to become “famous” in the world of modeling. As Refn in an [interview with HollywoodChicago.com](#) [16] described it, “an archetype.” Her wide-eyed innocence, in the midst of the competitive bitch-ery, is the highlight of the film. I also liked that she never really was confident with her fast rise, and the palpable embarrassment of her youthful naiveté among women in bra/panties who have to walk in front of people is starkly realized. Refn is definitely on to something, until for some creative reason he decides to switch gears in the last quarter of the film, and the darker tone makes little sense, except to shock. But like a one joke premise, it’s a one shock shock, and belittles what had come before it.

Jesse (Elle Fanning) is “fresh off the bus” in Los Angeles, and finds an amateur photographer (Karl Glusman) who also is attracted to her. He sets up a photo session, and Jesse takes the pictures to an agency, where the make-or-break executive Roberta (Christina Hendricks) sees a new star in her constellation. She is then sent to one of the top photographers in the city, and her rise to the top begins.



The Star Rises: Jesse (Elle Fanning) in ‘The Neon Demon’

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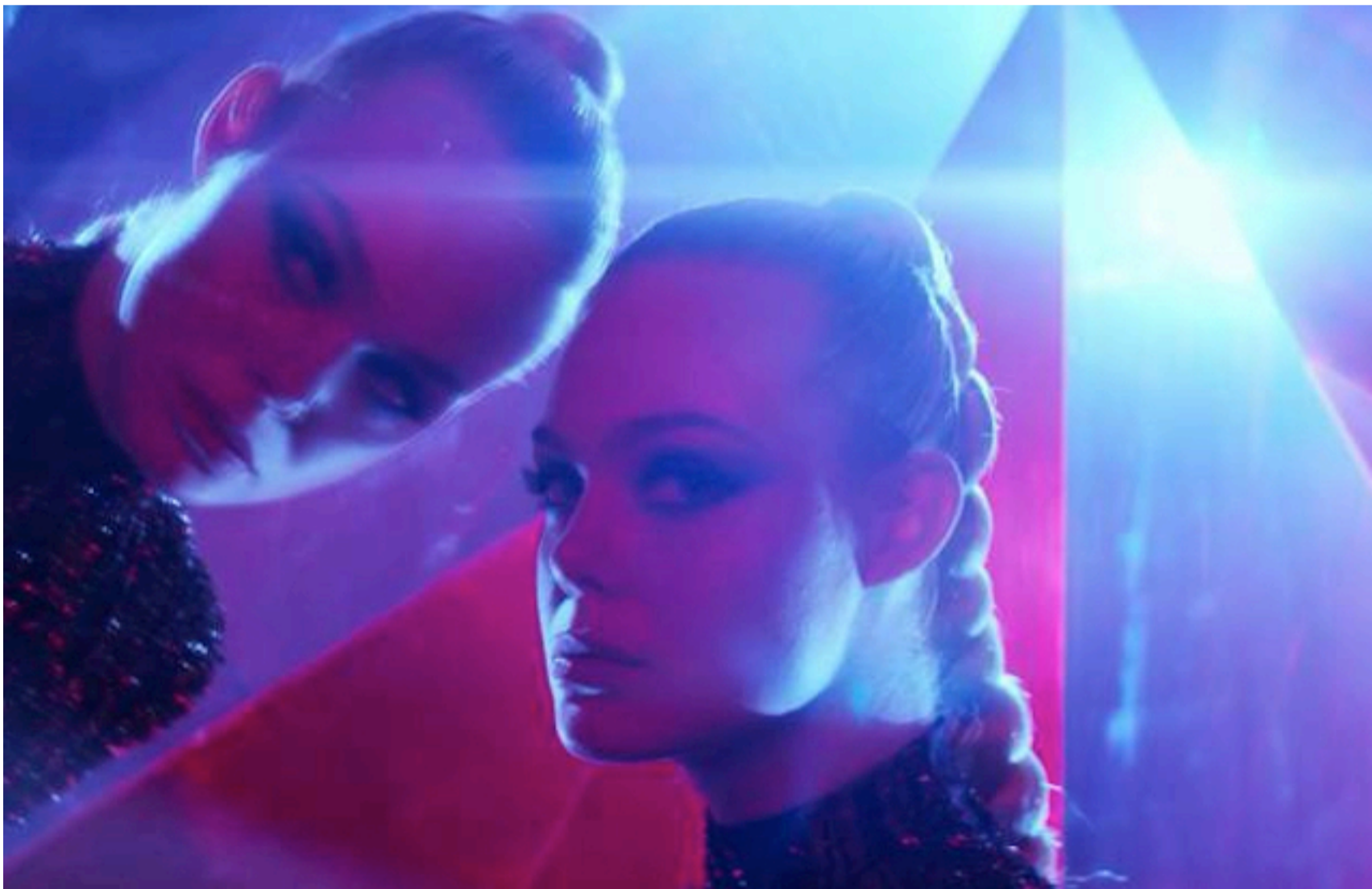
Photo credit: Amazon Studios

There are problems, though. Gigi (Bella Heathcoate) and Sarah (Abbey Lee) are rival models who constantly put the young new star down, much to the chagrin of Ruby (Jena Malone), a sympathetic make-up artist. And like many Los Angeles transplants, Jesse has to endure the downtrodden hotel as the only housing she can afford, and it’s run by a creep named Hank (Keanu Reeves).

The film has a Stanley Kubrick vibe, cold to the touch. But that coldness comes from the modeling world in this story, and Refn makes it more sad than glamorous, which is closer to the truth of it all. This peek behind the curtain becomes essential to the philosophy of the story, which is “what is beauty?” and “how do we capture it?” There are several remarkable scenes early in the film that answer these questions plainly, including a restaurant confrontation that is exactly acted and rendered.

The performances of the cast are top drawer, and speaks to Refn’s assertion that “60% of a film is casting.” Jena Malone is asked to do some really heavy lifting as Ruby, and unfortunately has more transitions than any other character. She almost becomes a scapegoat in the film – especially within the shift in the end – but handles it all with an instinctive quality. Keanu Reeves proves that even in a small character part, he can deliver more than his usual action persona. His participation is a surprise, and a welcome one.

The modeling core of the film is also well performed, as Elle Fanning – as naturalistic and present as an actor as they come – projected a bit of her trepidation regarding the character into her performance. Bella Heathcoate as Gigi and Abbey Lee as Sarah become increasingly major characters as the film evolves, and are memorable in the questionable last part, but they are also intensely off putting. That was the director’s decision, and to their credit they pulled it off – almost too well.



Sarah (Abbey Lee) and Gigi (Bella Heathcoate) in ‘The Neon Demon’

Photo credit: Amazon Studios

That last one quarter of the film is just bizarre, and again I think it takes away from the thematic “goodwill” that had been built up to that point. It makes me think that Refn was stuck for an ending, and came up with it in a self-medication-fueled fever dream. While the personal stamp of the filmmaker is on the whole story, I just couldn’t connect to what the last part was attempting. I will say that it was original, but sometimes that just doesn’t add up to something that works.

Yet in the midst of the summer movie season, “The Neon Demon” is a welcome bit of cultural oasis in the wasteland of the big-splashy-tent-pole films (hello, “Independence Day 2”!). The truth of beauty is what we make of it, and like lemmings we’re all too willing to jump off the cliff.

“The Neon Demon” opened in select theaters on June 24th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Elle Fanning, Christina Hendricks, Bella Heathcoate, Alessandro Nivola and Keanu Reeves. Screenplay by Nicolas Winding Refn, Mary Laws and Polly Stenham. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. Rated “R”



[17]

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