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**This summer, Danish filmmaking maverick Nicolas Winding Refn launches his new, nightmarish visual utopia, *The Neon Demon*. Here, he takes us deep inside the delirium.**

“If I wanted to create something true to life, I’d make documentaries,” Danish director Nicolas Winding Refn tells me over a crackling phone-line from Los Angeles, where he is following his wife around a shop as she picks out underwear.

For Winding Refn, the medium of film enables him to delve deep into the darkest enclaves of his creative mind, and to project these fetishes and fantasies through rich imagery, characters and dramatic plot developments. Winding Refn, or “NWR” as his publicists refer to him, has created a cinematic utopia across a number of modern day masterpieces – think *Drive*, think *Only God Forgives* — with a very precise vision: sharp, nightmarish, surreal, super-saturated and full of odd camera angles. His latest venture, *The Neon Demon*, starring Elle Fanning, Abby Lee and Bella Heathcote, is a halogen-drenched meditation on modern ideas of beauty.

The film follows a 16-year-old small-town girl, Jesse (Fanning), who travels to Los Angeles to benefit from her beauty in the twisted world of modelling. As Jesse’s career rapidly progresses, she enrages and enthrals those around her with her looks, seducing everyone from make-up artist Ruby (played by Jena Malone), to a seedy motel owner Hank (Keanu Reeves) and industry rivals Sarah (played by Lee) and Gigi (played by Heathcote). The intensity of emotions she brings out in the characters leads to a plethora of surreal and horrific events. No plot spoilers here, but trust us when we say it’s a brutal, oddly beautiful look at the dystopia of contemporary LA. Over to NWR... Rollacoaster: I’ve been thinking a lot about the storyline, Nicolas... It follows a very specific, twisted progression of events. What sparked the idea for the film?

Nicolas Winding Refn: I don’t really know why I do what I do, other than I kind of live out my alter-egos or fetishes through the films I make. I couldn’t do anything else, really. I mean I can’t paint – I’m colour blind, I’m dyslexic

— I wasn’t very good at acting at acting school, can’t play an instrument, so I didn’t have a lot of options. So film became my canvas. For *The Neon Demon*, I wanted to make a film about what it would be like being born beautiful, seen through the eyes of a 16-year-old girl, and go on this journey with her and make it about the obsession of beauty and everything that comes with that.

RC: So a thriller was the most impactful way to look at that?

NWR: I guess it’s more of a horror film, in a way. It’s got a lot of melodrama and some visceral suspense. A little bit of camp, some humour, a lot of horror, a lot of beautiful girls... Who wouldn’t want to see that?

RC: The film is based in LA. Why not New York, Paris or another fashion capital?

NWR: Firstly, for a very practical reason – it was the only place my wife wanted to go. So that solved that discussion very quickly between us. And then secondly, it’s interesting that LA is this mecca of communication. Everything in our world of entertainment leads back to Los Angeles — it kind of accumulates from everywhere around the world into itself, and then Hollywood beams it out again.

RC: I’ve never been to LA, but you seemed to present it in a darker way than I’d seen before. What side of LA were you trying to get across?

NWR: The one with the sun and the palm trees... because that’s the illusion of LA.

RC: There wasn’t a seedier, darker – NWR: Oh no, no, no. It’s just glamour, baby.

RC: From your perspective, could this be a twisted, dark, dystopia-as-utopia?

NWR: Yeah, I think the utopia of beauty is probably the most extreme version of any kind of dystopian future.

RC: The visuals are so rich... How did you go about creating this 360 world for the characters to live in?

NWR: Well, it all starts with just waking up and deciding what I would like to see today. I always shoot things in chronological order, so I very much base as much as I can on instincts. So, it’s like, whatever comes at that moment. It’s colossal with a lot of darkness, which is great drama. It’s a heightened reality. What’s interesting about Los Angeles as a city is that it can be perceived as a very extreme version of one component of the universe. It’s a city built on a desert... it was built on death. Yet at the same time there’s so much life in it, so there’s a very strong contrast between life and death. I had this idea to do a movie about beauty and death.

RC: Visually, the film is a strong embodiment of that. What were your references?

NWR: I didn’t really have any, other than what would I like to see. I don’t storyboard... I was lucky to have Elle Fanning in the movie, and you can photograph her in so many interesting ways, so there’s a very real fetishisation of Elle Fanning, [in the] same way that I was able to photograph Ryan Gosling. They’re both very fetishised components.

RC: Elle’s performance was astonishing. How did you meet her and what was it that she embodied that you needed for the film?

NWR: Well basically, she was the only one I wanted for the movie. It was either going to be her or an unknown actress, and in a way, with an unknown actress I wouldn’t even know if the movie would have worked, so it was really that choice that Elle and I made and I offered her the role and she agreed, and that was that — but it was a very extreme, odd situation, that led to this possibility of working together. She’s absolutely unique.

RC: You also worked with model Abbey Lee... What made you focus on fashion industry names when casting for the film?

NWR: Well, it’s not really about the fashion industry, it’s just about the industry of beauty that happens to use a backdrop of the fashion industry. And certainly I could not critique something that I find really fascinating and very intoxicating to look at. You can of course make a horror movie out of something that is very horrific, [which is] at the same time really beautiful to look at. Abbey Lee was also a great discovery as an actress, but also as a helpful component in making all the so-called fashion elements legitimate.

RC: I bet Elle found it particularly useful to work with her in terms of embodying the life of a model...

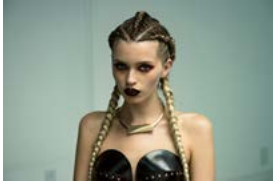
NWR: Yes, she did. Who would have thought a supermodel would be so useful?

RC: Tell us about asking Cliff Martinez back to score *The Neon Demon* — he worked with you on the *Drive* and *Only God Forgives* OSTs...

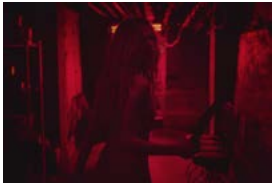
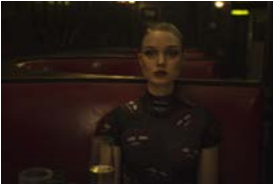
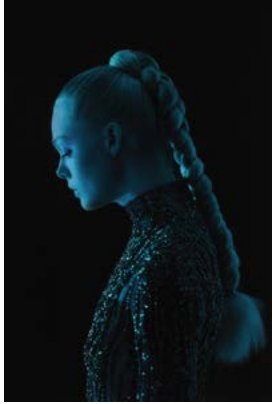
NWR: I consider music vital — it’s the sister of cinema. First came the camera, and then came a musical interpretation of it. I think that my work with Cliff Martinez is a wonderful collaboration. He’s very instrumental in the movie and inspiring it with his music. This is our third film together, but he’s also a family friend. We Skype in our pyjamas, I’ll put it like that.

RC: What can you say about the narrative — how a utopia of models and beauty gradually shifts into a dark, dangerous dystopia?

NWR: I think in the real world, the obsession with beauty just grows and grows. What’s interesting is that the longevity of it continues to shrink, and it becomes more and more young. So what’s going to happen when those three speeding comets collide? People criticise beauty for being superficial, but actually beauty is so much more than what you see, it’s about what you feel. It’s the essence of most fairy tales. Mythology — the inner and outer beauty and the conflicts with that. The narcissists, and all those things that are usually looked upon as very negative terms, they’re very human behaviours. Vanity. Maybe we need to accept those parts of our beings much more in order to take it to the next level... I don’t know what that would be. Maybe scary, maybe not... That’s where you will find the neon demon.



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RC: How did you draw a dark, depraved side out of the actors?

NWR: It depends on who you’re working with. Some people need a lot of guidance; some people need another kind of approach. Acting and directing is very individual. There was certainly a very intense relationship between Elle Fanning and myself.

RC: Can you tell me a bit about something you guys worked on together?

NWR: Everything. Well, it’s like, you know – I said to her: “I always fantasise about being a 16 year old girl and you’re going to be her. How do you feel?” She was like: “That’s interesting.” and I said: “But now I have to channel it through you, so now you are her. You will now very much dictate the evolution of it.”

RC: That’s a very interesting way of looking at it. NWR: Every man has a 16-year-old girl inside him.

RC: Do you think? NWR: Oh, absolutely.

RC: How does that feel? NWR: Well, it feels wonderful when you accept it.

RC: Were you always fascinated with horror and thrillers? Is it the underbelly of the world that you’re interested in?

NWR: I like anything that’s dramatic. I like melodrama, drama, horror, thriller, comedy, camp. I like all of those things above, because they’re all integrated in the DNA of drama. Of course, the saying is: “The darker it is, the more exciting it’s going to become.”

RC: So is your vision of utopia then — this dark world that you portray in your films?

NWR:: It’s not necessarily dark. You’re calling it dark – I’m going to call it glamorous.

RC: But it’s a world where emotions run high... NWR: Well, I think that the essence of creativity is heightened emotion. We don’t make real life. Real life happens. We can never compete with that. We can make a heightened version of it, but it’s so much more interesting when you do it through genre, because on one level it becomes entertaining — and I’m just an entertainer — but there’s almost so much more subtext to it because it’s all subliminal, like fairy tales or the faces of our great dramatic writers, including Shakespeare. Everything was always a little bit more...

RC: So you’re looking for a reaction. NWR: I’m not looking for a reaction. I create reactions.