

# For Fame and Fashion: The Cannibalism of Creatives in Chuck Palaniuk's *Haunted* (2005) and Nicolas Winding Refn's *The Neon Demon* (2016)

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## Abstract

*This research explores the ways cannibalism in Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Haunted* (2005) and Nicolas Winding Refn's film *The Neon Demon* (2016) are a consequence, and reflective, of the consuming nature of creative industries. The research draws from this exploration that the consumptive characteristics of cannibalism often allegorise the processes and careers of artists. Specifically, the sacrificial nature of putting oneself into one's work, the notion of the tortured artist, and the competitive nature of creative industries, where the hierarchy is ascended through others' losses.*

*In the framing narrative of *Haunted*, seventeen writers are trapped within an isolated writing retreat under the illusion of re-enacting the Villa Diodati and writing their individual masterpieces. When inspiration fails them, they sabotage their food supply in order to enhance their suffering, and thus their eventual memoirs. The writers turn to cannibalism, not only to survive but to remove the competition. By consuming each other, they attempt to manufacture themselves as 'tortured artists', competing to create the most painful story of the 'writing retreat from hell'.*

*In *The Neon Demon*, the protagonist, Jesse, begins as an innocent young woman who becomes embroiled in the cutthroat modelling industry. Favoured for her natural beauty, Jesse antagonises her fellow models, developing narcissistic tendencies in the process. At the film's end she is cannibalised by these rivals, indicating the industrial consumption of her purity, the restoration of individual beauty by leeching off of the young, and the retaining of the hierarchy by removing the competition.*

*Employing close readings of both literary and cinematic primary source material, this interdisciplinary study investigates a satirical trend within cultural representations of cannibalism against consumptive and competitive creative industries. In each text, cannibalism manifests as a*

*consequence of these industrial pressures, as the desire for fame forces people to commit unsavoury deeds. In this regard, cannibalism acts as an extreme extrapolation of the dehumanising consequences of working within this capitalist confine.*

**Keywords:** cannibalism; capitalism; Marx; horror; literature; film

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In the first volume of *Das Kapital* (1867), Karl Marx draws upon the language of horror in order to critique the bourgeoisie's endless thirst for wealth. 'Capital,' he writes, 'is dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, more labor it sucks' (1990: 342). For Marx, capitalists and capitalism are leeching presences, possessing no life of their own; they feed off of the working population in order to sustain themselves, relinquishing their hold only once there are no more hours to be worked, no more labour to be wrought, no more blood to suck. A century and a half later, such a grotesque image continues to sustain itself, lent ever-increasing weight by the proliferation of zero-hour contracts, misclassified independent contractors and tax evasion.

Yet, the relationship between capitalism and horror extends beyond simply Marx's application of its tropes. The horror genre is a phobic cultural form, critiquing and reflecting society's cultural preoccupations, fears and anxieties during any given period (Jones, 2018). Thus, horror becomes a lens through which capitalist infrastructures can be interrogated and dismantled, with the development of modern capitalism shadowed by a development of counterculture genre fiction. As David McNally suggests, 'as capitalism globalises war, hunger and environmental destruction, [horror warns us] that monstrous forces prowl our planet' (2011: 16).

Considering literature, for instance, Horace Walpole's seminal Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), cemented the generic convention of the corrupt, wealthy authority during 'the rise of an early capitalist configuration of financial speculation, public credit and other ghostly abstractions of value' (Kantor, 2017: 136). In turn, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) offered a monstrous vision of the dehumanised and manipulated proletariat worker, while Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) repositioned the vampire as a symbol for the fear of foreign capital.

Similarly, the horror fictions of other mediums, such as cinema, have frequently warned against the dangers of unchecked capitalism. Until the ending was altered to suggest the narrator's own madness, Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920) censured the abuses allowed to anyone with 'unlimited authority that idolises power as such, and, to satisfy [their] lust for domination, ruthlessly violates all human rights and

values' (Kracauer, 2004: 65). More recently, Greg McLean's office battle royale, *The Belko Experiment* (2016), portrayed employees fighting to the death at the behest of their employer, while Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019) adapted the trope of the doppelgänger in order to expose America's growing social inequality.

The office building, shopping mall, deforested land and other symbols of modern capitalism have all been warped through the medium of horror in order to expose the exploitation upon which capitalist societies are built. These fictions take aim at particular substructures, such as the transformation of humans into commodities in Eli Roth's *Hostel* (2005), and come from varied social and global perspectives, as evidenced by Bernard Rose highlighting the racial biases of capitalism in *Candyman* (1992), yet the overarching critique remains. As an ideology, capitalism dehumanises the population, fabricates competition between individuals, exacerbates social divides and is prone to recurrent and wide-reaching crises (Frieden & Rogowski, 2014). Judith Halberstam concludes this link by suggesting that capitalism is 'positively Gothic in its ability to transform matter into commodity, commodity into value, and value into capitalism' (1995: 103).

Yet, within these critiques there remains a singular figure: that of the cannibal. The consumerist zombies of George Romero's original, *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968), have only intensified following the turn of the millennium, be this due to the global financial crisis of 2008 (Drezner, 2015), the increasing capitalisation of health (Shapiro, 2014), or a post-apocalyptic swing in discourse in the aftermath of 9/11 (Abbott, 2016). A horde of new zombie media has risen, including video games (*Dead Rising*), films (*Train to Busan*) and literature (*World War Z*), with each critiquing a generation increasingly zombified by materialism and increasingly left behind in turn.

Alongside this, an increasing number of capitalist cannibals have shed their zombified skin; the shambling and senseless zombie has given way to the civilised serial killer. A transition has taken place from the cannibal fictions of the 1970s and 1980s, where flesh-eaters were either foreign others (*Cannibal Holocaust*) or backwoods savages (*The Hills Have Eyes*). Now, as with Patrick Bateman or Hannibal Lecter, the cannibal has become one among many, indistinguishable from the common populace and able to operate freely within a capitalist society which enables them. As Priscilla Walton highlights, 'the cannibal, instead of appearing as a savage, [has become] an ultra-sophisticated being, with impeccable taste and a refined sensibility, whose desires are never satiated' (2004: 144).

This article considers these cannibalistic anti-capitalist critiques in particular reference to creative industries. In these fictions, the quest for

profit necessitates a need for personal branding, publicity and perfection, in order to become the best artist, writer, model or designer. The frequent fallacy of fame and fortune, and the rivalry inherent to capitalist infrastructures, leads to cannibalistic competition between creatives as they attempt to consume and surpass their peers. As such, this article extends Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's concept of the culture industry: of 'culture as the realization of the right of all to gratification of desire while in reality continuing the negative integration of society' (**Bernstein, 1996: 3**). However, instead of focusing on the impact upon the consumer, this essay examines the position of the creative within such a system, at once cannibalised and forced to commit cannibalism by the practices of the industry. As Ashley Lee Wong explains,

*in creative work in particular, we are willing to sacrifice our free-time, work more for less, pursue unpaid internships and often work for free in exchange for the preeminent currency of the creative economy: recognition ... through promotion of lifestyle, recognition and fame, the creative industries makes [sic.] jobs desirable and at the very same time creates the conditions for self-exploitation and exploitation by employers. (Wong, 2017: 199)*

Both Chuck Palahniuk's 'novel of stories', *Haunted* (2006), and Nicolas Winding Refn's dark fairy tale, *The Neon Demon* (2016), use cannibalism in order to critique different creative industries. Specifically, Palahniuk finds fault with the writing industry, while Refn censures fashion and modelling. Coinciding with Walton's analysis that, 'following a postmodern displacement paradigm, flesh-eating has shifted from 'there' to 'here'' (**2005: 152**), these works present two distinctly American narratives; the once outdated and xenophobic associations of anthropophagy with 'exotic' or 'less civilised' cultures have since been thoroughly dismantled (**Arens, 1979**). Instead, *The Neon Demon* transports the cannibal into the supposed glitz and glamour of Los Angeles, while *Haunted* contrasts this with the faux luxury of a dingy writing retreat hidden somewhere within the absent American dream.

First considering *Haunted*, Palahniuk employs cannibalism in order to construct a depraved satire of the writing industry, literary celebrity and the notion of the tortured artist. Comprised of a framing narrative interspersed with poetry and short stories, it is within this overarching structure that the majority of the text's anti-capitalist critique resides.

Seventeen writers sign up to an isolated writing retreat, organised by the illusive Mr. Whittier. Believing that they will be completing their 'masterpieces', the writers envision the retreat as a re-enactment of the Villa Diodati: the now-infamous night of spontaneous creation which acted 'the genesis of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and John Polidori's *The*

*Vampyre* (1819)' (Camilletti, 2018: 214). 'Writers' Retreat: Abandon your life for three months,' the advertisement reads:

*Just disappear. Leave behind everything that keeps you from creating your masterpiece. Your job and family and home, all those obligations and distractions – put them on hold for three months. Live with like-minded people in a setting that supports a total immersion in your work. Food and lodging included free for those who qualify. Gamble a small fraction of your life on the chance to create a new future as a professional poet, novelist, screenwriter. Before it's too late, live the life you dream about. Spaces very limited. (Palahniuk, 2006: 83–84)*

A. L. Kennedy suggests that a creative career is often seen as a 'ridiculous luxury if it's for non-paying, non-middle-class people' (2013: 252). In this advertisement, Mr. Whittier seems to offer the writers the financial security and middle-class lifestyle that will allow them to write unimpeded: the removal of the capitalist 'obligations' of maintaining a job, a family, a home.

Providing an initial glimpse of the reification used by Palahniuk to critique the dehumanising and commodifying culture of creative industries, the writers are then introduced as stock figures, their names representing their personalities at a glance. 'Comrade Snarky' is snide, acerbic, uptight. 'Chef Assassin' is cold and good with knives. In lieu of cinema's ability to convey personality through physical presence, with film actors able to portray a unity of body and character (Hanke, 2008), literature proves uniquely reliant upon the connotations of names. As Benedicta Windt-Val suggests, names in fiction can convey 'family history, social setting, environment, self-image, personal ambitions, social status, and relationships between the characters' (2012: 278). In *Haunted*, the writers' names become grotesque exaggerations of their experiences and behaviours. Consequently, each writer is consigned to their brand, never more than a caricature and distilled from the outset.

Upon arrival, the writers are fully intent on completing their masterpieces: 'those three months we'd spend writing and reading our work. Getting our stories perfect' (2006: 25). However, almost as soon as they settle, they begin to make excuses. Lady Baglady asks, 'how can I write anything profound if my environment isn't... ideal?' (2006: 40), while Miss America refuses to write because 'her breasts were too sore ... her arms, too tired' (2006: 41). Eventually, procrastination consumes every writer within the retreat: 'they'd complete their masterpiece. Just not here. Not now. Later, outside' (2006: 44). The illusion of doing what you love, 'living the life you dream about', as the advertisement claimed, is no longer enough to motivate the writers. Miya Tokumitsu explains that:

*there's little doubt that 'do what you love' (DWYL) is now the unofficial work mantra of our time ... labor is not something one does for compensation, but an act of self love ... in masking the exploitative mechanisms of labor that it fuels, DWYL is, in fact, the most perfect ideological tool of capitalism. (Tokumitsu, 2014)*

As this ideology dissipates, the veil of personal gratification is removed, and the writers begin to recognise their own positions within the capitalist infrastructure of the writing industry. They decide that they are no longer there to write their masterpieces: their eyes are set on 'books, movies, plays, songs, television, T-shirts, money' (2006: 82). The writers shift from implicitly operating within the culture industry to actively facilitating it.

By abandoning their masterpieces, the writers subsequently abandon any belief in the cultural worth of fiction. 'Screw the idea of creating anything original,' they claim. 'It's no use writing some let's-pretend piece of fiction' (2006: 96). Individually and collectively, the writers decide that in place of their masterpieces must come marketability: doing what you love gives way to the fame and fortune of literary celebrity. Instead of their fictional creations, each writer thus chooses to tell their own narrative of the writing retreat: 'this three months trapped together could be enough to make a memoir. A movie. A future of not working a regular job. Just being famous. A story worth selling' (2006: 85). The allure of wealth and no work further inches the writers from passion to profit. However, they conclude that in order for this narrative to sell, they must become a specific form of literary celebrity: that of the tortured artist.

George Becker proposes that 'the combined force of the most recent studies has led to something resembling a consensus, one that views the link between creativity and illness as a genuine, pervasive, and timeless phenomenon with decided biological roots' (2014: 3). However, Arne Dietrich counters this with the claim that 'creative imagination and expression is the hallmark of a well-adjusted, self-actualising, fully functioning person' (2014: 3). Regardless of the scientific truth, the image of the tortured artist has sustained, through the likes of William S. Burroughs and Kurt Vonnegut. Indeed, Judith Schlesinger highlights that 'the notion of the "mad genius" – the artist who is both brilliant and doomed – is too popular to ever disappear' (2014: 60). In *Haunted*, Palahniuk takes this image to its extreme. As each writer decides to write their memoir of the retreat, they conclude that they will need to position themselves as its most sympathetic character. As with a capitalist creative economy, the writers are placed in direct competition with one another to become the most marketable and thus the most publicised. To do so, they embellish their narratives.



The writers' retreat subsequently becomes the writing retreat from hell: 'we'd say how the place was freezing cold. There was no running water. We had to ration the food ... we'd turn our lives into a terrible adventure. A true-life horror story ... we'd survive to talk about' (2006: 85). Within this fabrication, Mr. Whittier becomes the villain due to his refusal to let the writers leave, holding each to their word that they would write their masterpiece. 'Evil, sadistic old Mr. Whittier' (2006: 86), they call him. 'Mr. Whittier, our villain, our master, our devil, whom we love and adore for torturing us' (2006: 89). The writers' desire to surpass their competition leads them to manufacture their own tragic narratives. However, their embellishments swiftly become true. The writers start to believe that a slight increase in their actual suffering will increase their worth in the creative economy: that pain begets publicity. Joe Moran identifies literary celebrities as a 'fetishised commodity' (2000: 9). In order to achieve the invaluable currency of recognition, to make themselves the most prized commodity to the market, the writers compete to increase their own suffering.

The Countess Foresight breaks every door lock. Comrade Snarky disables the heating. Saint Gut-Free and Chef Assassin spoil the food. As these self-sabotages increase, the writers become the architects of their own collective misery:

That's how it happened. How no one knew everyone else had the same plan. We just wanted to raise the stakes a little. To make sure our rescue team wouldn't find us pillowed in silver bags or rich food, suffering from nothing but boredom and gout. (2006: 102)

Having deliberately shed the image of comfort afforded by their temporary middle-class lifestyle, soon afterwards the writers begin to fall. Lady Baglady bleeds to death having cut off her own ear. Mr. Whittier dies shortly thereafter. Consequently, the writers begin to understand that the removal of life equates to the removal of competition: 'the royalties to our story split one less way' (2006: 206). However, each writer cannot bring themselves to kill another, for fear of becoming the villain. Instead, they turn the knives on themselves.

Through increasingly extreme self-mutilation, the characters seek to increase their eventual sympathy with consumers. 'We all want some way to pad our role,' the narrator says, 'whoever can show the worst suffering, the most scars, they'll play the lead in the public mind' (2006: 147). Director Denial cuts off her fingers and toes. Saint Gut-Free chops off his thumb and the Reverend Godless hacks off the smallest toe from each of her feet. In their competition for literary fame and fortune, the writers slowly destroy themselves, reified now into 'characters' and slowly carving themselves up for the market. However, as a consequence of their

previous self-sabotages, food swiftly becomes scarce. Reaching the final extreme of their embellishment, the shortage of food and desperate hunger that follows pushes the survivors into cannibalism.

At first, the writers joke that anthropophagy will become another of their exaggerations: 'in our version of what happened ... every toe or finger, it was eaten by the villains whom no one will believe' (2006: 150). When they discover Comrade Snarky passed out and presumed dead, however, they realise that their hunger necessitates this extreme act. To overcome the moral dilemma of cannibalism, the writers thus rationalise their behaviour in a manner reminiscent of the meat paradox:

*By somehow separating the animal we eat from their animalness, we can think of them, in effect, as merely meat. This tendency can help explain the linguistic camouflage and the ways in which we try to create a mental distance between an animal capable of thought and a possible source of food. (Zaraska, 2016: np.)*

First dehumanised into brands, then into carved-up characters within their own narratives, the writers enter the final stage of capitalist dehumanisation: they become products to be consumed, become meat. Comrade Snarky is described as little more than 'a thin steak. The way a cutlet looks. Or those long scraps of meat labelled 'strip steaks' in the butcher's case' (2006: 240).

When it is later revealed that Comrade Snarky is not dead, but had simply fainted, the writers' conceptions remain resolute. 'Nobody says anything ... all our mouths are stuffed full. We're picking at shreds of meat stuck between our teeth' (2006: 252). The distinction between Comrade Snarky as person and as product then fully dissolves when she consumes her own flesh: 'standing there, her face and the pile of her wigs collapse onto the plate of meat' (2006: 253). Palahniuk uses cannibalism to facilitate his broader cultural criticism. If to Marx the lexicon of reification was human becoming machine, within the anti-capitalist critiques of cannibal fictions it is humans becoming meat. Rather than ascending to literary celebrity, the writers thus descend to the bottom of the creative economy's food chain. Laurence R. Goldman suggests that 'cannibalism invariably implies a set of *products, producers and processes*' (1999: 3). Through exploitation and self-exploitation, the writers have become meat, become products to be consumed by capitalism.



Yet, still the writers believe that being pushed into the final extreme of cannibalism will only increase their value. Much like the horrific eating challenges of *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!* (2002–), anthropophagy becomes a means for the writers to further increase their worth as tortured artists:

Even the Link knows that eating a dead man's severed penis will get him extra prime-time exposure on every late-night talk show in the world. Just to describe how it tasted. After that it will be the product endorsements for barbecue sauce and ketchup. After that, his own novelty cookbook. Radio shock-jock shows. After that, more daytime game shows for the rest of his life. (2006: 359)

Come the text's conclusion, Palahniuk finalises his connection between capitalism and cannibalism. He suggests that writing is a method of cannibalising the self:

*You digest and absorb your life by turning it into stories ... Those are stories you can use to make people laugh or cry or sick. Or scared. To make people feel the way you felt. To help exhaust the past moment for them and for you. Until that moment is dead. Consumed. Digested. Absorbed.* (Palahniuk, 2006: 380)

Throughout *Haunted*, the writers are not only carving up themselves but carving their experiences into stories. Interspersed throughout the framing narrative, the writers consume their own lives and perform them for the group as poetry and short stories, with Palahniuk's combination of narrative forms and use of multiperspectivity making the text itself cannibalistic. In 'Guts', Saint Gut-Free recounts an early childhood trauma. In 'The Nightmare Box', Mrs. Clark recalls how her daughter's life was irrevocably changed. The writers' experiences are chewed up and regurgitated throughout the novel, until, at the end, their stories have been told and little of them remains.

As a consequence of operating within the writing industry, the writers first must dehumanise themselves into products, commodities, literary celebrities, tortured artists, stories or meat. To achieve status, they are forced to stave off their competition and fight for recognition through increasingly extreme self-sacrifice. Before being consumed by the industry, Palahniuk suggests, writers must first consume their rivals and then themselves. Returning to Marx, the interrelationship between capitalism and cannibalism was twofold. It emphasised 'the sheer brutality of the profit-motive as a measure of human affairs', and it exposed 'the profound irrationality of a system that must perforce devour itself' (Phillips, 1998: 115).

Similarly, Nicolas Winding Refn uses cannibalism as a culmination of the anti-capitalist critique he develops over the course of *The Neon Demon*. Specifically, Refn interrogates how the fashion and modelling industries enforce hierarchy, objectify and commodify women, and encourage consumptive competition between individuals. Joanna Finkelstein suggests that 'fashion is really about maintaining the eternal sameness, preserving the status quo; it is a quixotic gesture, a coin trick, a sleight of hand, which makes us think change is happening when the opposite is closer to the truth' (1998: 5). Proving reflective of Marx's capitalist vampires, Refn highlights this cyclical stagnation by portraying the modelling industry as consuming the young in order to retain the hierarchy of the old.

*The Neon Demon* is the story of Jesse (Elle Fanning), a sixteen-year-old girl who moves to L.A. with the hope of becoming a model. With her parents suggested to be dead, Jesse is initially presented as innocent and pure, frequently wearing virginal white in contrast to the darker shades of surrounding characters. Consequently, Jesse allows herself to be guided by the industry. Her talent agent, Roberta Hoffman (Christina Hendricks), is overwhelmed by Jesse's natural beauty and potential for profit. As such, she encourages Jesse to fraudulently sign a parental consent form and to lie about her age, selling her on the capitalist dream: 'you'll work with all the top designers. International success' (Refn, 2016: 0:17:59–0:18:04). As Jesse alters her age, she takes the first step towards becoming something she is not. Refn plants the initial seeds of Jesse being pressured to transform, and thus her gradual commodification into an object to be consumed, be that as model or meat. Rebecca Arnold suggests that models are 'physical emblems of consumerism' (2001: 32). In the opening scene of the film, Jesse is introduced as the perfect commodity: a corpse.

For the duration of this scene, Jesse is entirely still. With no semblance of life, she is presented only as something to be photographed and thus consumed. Victoria E. Collins and Dawn L. Rothe explain that 'by reducing women to faceless, broken, body parts, they are stripped of their humanity and more easily objectified ... for the purpose of selling goods' (2017: 67). In positioning death as the perfection of beauty, Refn critiques this trend in advertising; he suggests that fashion's perfect commodity is lifeless. Furthermore, Laura Mulvey proffers that:

*the presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual pleasure tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This alien presence then has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative. (2009: 19–20)*

This opening scene is indeed constructed as a moment of immobility and eroticised voyeurism, with the camera slowly approaching Jesse's motionless body. However, Refn intertwines this disruption of narrative flow with the narrative itself, establishing the common processes of women becoming ornaments that occur within the fashion and modelling industries. Mulvey furthers that in order to overcome the castration anxiety, men build 'up the physical beauty of the object, transforming [the female body] into something satisfying in itself' (2009: 22). As the blood pools beneath Jesse's arm, Refn ensures that the bleeding wound of the castration anxiety is made manifest. The scene then concludes by cutting back to the original shot, with Jesse now absent.

With the photographs taken, and Jesse converted into a product for mass market consumption, she ceases to exist as an individual. Having been dehumanised and commodified, the only reminder that she existed is the blood still pooled on the floor. All that remains is Mulvey's bleeding wound, a provocation to the male even in the loss of the female. As a consequence of Roberta's influence, Jesse then completes her first photoshoot in L.A. with Jack McArthur (Desmond Harrington). In this scene, Refn's next overarching criticism of the fashion and modelling industries is established: that women are commodified through a predominantly male gaze. E. Ann Kaplan defines this suggestion in her explanation that 'the gaze is not necessary male (literally), but to own and activate the gaze given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the masculine position' (2009: 216).

In his previous breakthrough films, *Drive* (2011) and *Only God Forgives* (2013), Refn critiques two distinct images of masculinity. In *Drive*, Ryan Gosling's Driver embodies the action-hero mentality, with Refn engaging with 'the contemporary focus on masculinity in crisis via this nostalgia for a 'real hero' who lives by his own ethical code and is always able to act accordingly' (Rogers & Kiss, 2014: 52). Meanwhile, in *Only God Forgives*, Julian, again played by Gosling, enacts Freud's Thanatos, wishing to be engulfed by his own mother and thus return to the womb.

*The Neon Demon* maintains this critique of masculinity by interrogating fashion photography's predominantly patriarchal perspective. In a scene of meta-construction, as the events can be viewed with Refn himself behind the camera, the voyeuristic male gaze is once again exposed as Jack composes Jesse into a second object of desire. Highly eroticised, Jack rubs gold paint over Jesse's body, transforming her into a statue. Once more, Jesse becomes an object traditionally lifeless and appreciated only for its aesthetic qualities. Further demonstrating the corruptive influence of the male gaze into Jesse's world of light and purity, Jack is positioned against a backdrop of total darkness. Mark Featherstone suggests that this scene

is unsettling 'because it's clear that she's a thing, a valuable commodity, an object in his visual field and that he has no sense of her humanity' (2017: 282–283). As Jesse then encounters more male presences, including her boyfriend, Dean (Karl Glusman), and her landlord, Hank (Keanu Reeves), the voyeuristic gaze is maintained, removed from the safety-net of the camera.

Yet, Refn broadens this critique to also include the female, portraying fashion and modelling as at-once patriarchal and matriarchal. As Jesse continues to immerse herself in Los Angeles, she is soon taken under the wing of Ruby (Jena Malone), a make-up artist who introduces her to two other models, Gigi (Bella Heathcote) and Sarah (Abbey Lee). Each of these female characters then comes to represent a different aspect of anti-capitalist critique.

Focusing first on Ruby, her character embodies Marx's capitalist vampires, leeching off of the lifeblood of young models to sustain her own youth and career. In her introduction, Ruby immediately reveals her envy and desire to consume Jesse, commenting that she has 'such beautiful skin' (2016: 0:05:01–0:05:03) while she is covered in fake blood. Of the three, Ruby is friendliest towards Jesse, offering her phone number. However, as the film develops it becomes clear that Ruby is in limbo. Alongside her career as a make-up artist, she works at a morgue, preparing corpses for wakes. Ruby's job is thus to make the lifeless look living, something she strives to accomplish with herself. That she later has intercourse with a corpse only emphasises her gruesome connection with death: she is manifestly 'dead labor'. Indeed, Mark Neocleous cements this connection by suggesting that 'only vampires (and necrophiliacs) find anything sensuous in the dead' (2003: 682).

Gigi, meanwhile, critiques the dehumanising aspects of the fashion and modelling industries. Echoing *Haunted*, she frequently alters her body to increase her own worth as a commodity. However, rather than self-mutilation, Gigi indulges in plastic surgery:

*I thought I'd get more work if I went down a cup size. If I looked like a hanger, you know? But then my surgeon, Dr Andrew, he pointed out a lot of other problems with my body. So I had them shave my jaw, I had a slight eyebrow lift, new nose, cheeks, inner and outer lipo, oh, and they pinned my ears. (The Neon Demon, 2016: 0:58:07-0:58:27)*

If in *Haunted* the economy of the writers is sympathy, in *The Neon Demon* it becomes beauty. The unrealistic pressures for perfection placed upon those working within fashion and modelling leads to Gigi believing that she needs to change her body to increase its value. Debra Gimlin suggests that 'cosmetic surgery ... has epitomised for many ... the astounding lengths to

which contemporary women will go in order to obtain bodies that meet current ideals of attractiveness' (2000: 78). She then furthers that 'the body ... becomes a commodity' (2000: 80).

However, once more echoing the writers in *Haunted*, Gigi's dehumanisation of herself resultantly decreases her worth. Midway through the film, the designer, Robert Sarno (Alessandro Nivola), claims, 'you can always tell when beauty is manufactured, and if you aren't born beautiful you never will be' (2016: 1:06:31–1:06:36). Refn positions that artificial beauty cannot surpass natural beauty, and thus Gigi's efforts to perfect herself and retain her position within the industry are ultimately moot.

Lastly, Sarah represents Refn's most explicit anti-capitalist critique, interrogating the creative industries' cultivation of competition. Much as the writers in *Haunted* pit themselves against one another, Sarah immediately sees Jesse as a threat:

*What? Isn't that what everyone wants to know? Pretty new girl walks into a room, everyone's head turns, looks her up and down wondering... who's she fucking? Who could she fuck? And how high can she climb, and is it higher than me? (2016: 0:11:33-0:11:50)*

Sarah's fear of Jesse only increases as she begins to receive opportunities at her expense. When both Jesse and Sarah audition for Robert's runway show, Robert finds Jesse enrapturing whereas Sarah is quickly dismissed. Following the audition, Sarah smashes a bathroom mirror and cuts up her previous headshots, claiming, 'I'm a ghost' (2016: 0:49:16). Featherstone further suggests that 'Sarah represents the horror of the commodified self, endlessly on the run from the truth of essential estrangement through the construction of an over-blown imaginary ego' (2017: 272). However, Sarah's breakdown only comes as a result of the fashion industry pitting models against each other in a 'fierce and cruel competition' (Poppi & Urios-Aparisi, 2018: 305). With her ego shattered alongside the mirror, and Sarah thus seeing her diminishing position, she is driven to eventual murder.

As Jesse finds increasing success within the industry, she slowly begins to succumb to the same desire for fame that afflicted Palahniuk's writers. When Sarah asks Jesse what it is like to walk into a room and immediately be its focal point, any sign of previous innocence is lost: 'it's everything' (2016: 0:49:48). When she is then chosen to close Robert's runway show, the catwalk morphs into a fevered representation of the Narcissus myth. Isabella Maher suggests that Jesse 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'

(2018: 66). As the colours shift from blue to red, Jesse slowly succumbs to the corruption of L.A. and of the fashion industry. In the very next shot, Jesse emerges from behind a veiled curtain looking physically altered. Arnold further suggests that 'as sex [becomes] more glamorous, it also [becomes] more threatening' (2001: 74). With Jesse now fully established as a threat to Ruby, Gigi and Sarah, they decide that they must consume her.

Much as *Haunted* foreshadows cannibalism through the gluttonous language of food, *Refn* frequently foreshadows that his story will end in anthropophagy. When discussing lipsticks, for instance, Ruby asks Jesse, 'are you food... or are you sex?', to which Gigi answers, 'she's dessert' (2016: 0:9:14–0:9:25). Later, Sarah asks Gigi, 'who wants sour milk when you can get fresh meat?' (2016: 0:42:18–0:42:20). The first act of cannibalism, however, occurs in the aforementioned scene following Sarah's rejection by Robert. When Jesse accidentally cuts herself on a shard of broken glass, Sarah lunges forward and attempts to drink her blood. As the violence then escalates through nightmarish sexual abuse, rape and Jesse's eventual murder, it temporarily shatters the previously motionless world of modelling and fashion. Arnold adds that 'spiralling violence is shown as a response to exclusion, boredom and lack of opportunity that a culture predicated on the drive for more and status based on consumption and wealth generates' (2001: 32-33). Returning to Finkelstein's belief in cyclical stagnation, in the final act of the film the haze is shattered so that it may restore itself.

Having killed Jesse, Ruby, Sarah and Gigi each consume her and bathe in her blood. Though far less prolonged than in *Haunted*, the consequences of this anthropophagy then conclude each character's anti-capitalist critique. Further establishing Ruby's presentation as a vampire, for instance, while Sarah and Gigi shower, Ruby bathes in Jesse's blood in an image reminiscent of the 'blood countess', Elizabeth Bathory. Then, in a contentious scene which Maher suggests may be a reclamation of 'her own femininity and womanhood' (2016: 17), Ruby menstruates under the eye of the moon. Having absorbed Jesse's youth by consuming her, Ruby allows blood and life to flow through her once more. Where before she was associated with the dead, her consumption of the young has rejuvenated her.

For Gigi, however, the consumption of Jesse is unsuccessful. When she and Sarah are chosen for Jack's next photoshoot, Gigi begins to feel increasingly sick. Having attempted to manufacture her own artificial beauty, her body rejects the consumption of Jesse's natural beauty: she rushes out of the shot and throws up Jesse's eye, repeating, 'I need to get



her out of me' (2016: 1:49:07). In an attempt to exorcise the mistake of anthropophagy, Gigi then stabs herself with a pair of scissors and dies.

Sarah, however, who saw Jesse as competition in need of consumption, devours the regurgitated eye. For Sarah, anthropophagy has restored her position at the top of the hierarchy. Having been at Jack's shoot simply to support Gigi, Jack dismisses another model, now noticing Sarah's 'natural' beauty. Maher suggests that in this scene, Sarah 'breaks out from the background to claim a place amongst the great beauties. She not only takes Jesse's place, but also Gigi's' (2016: 77). However, evidencing Finkelstein's belief that any suggestion of change within the fashion industry is merely a 'sleight of hand', Sarah then wanders into the desert. As Featherstone suggests, Sarah's exile into a barren landscape 'symbolizes the desertification of the self in the LA fashion world' (2017: 284).

'Women, empowered by the very markets that oppress ... willingly consume the very products that contribute to the broader oppressive regime' (Collins & Rothe, 2017: 171). As with *Haunted*, Sarah and Ruby have cannibalised their competition in order to increase their value and retain their positions within a creative industry. Yet, it is that same industry that has forced them into crises of dehumanisation, commodification and anthropophagy. By thus existing within and enabling the culture industry, the role of the creative becomes a contradictory one, frequently attempting to communicate with each other and to the audience while being embroiled within a process where production is based upon competition and cannibalisation of self and other.

Maggie Kilgour suggests that, 'while cannibalism has traditionally been used to satirise members within a society who are seen as parasitical ... in a capitalist society ... [it attacks] those who are seen as consuming without producing' (1998: 241). In the two cannibal fictions considered, the creative industries at-large are those who consume without producing, forcing those who work within into a vicious cycle of anthropophagy and auto-anthropophagy. Cannibalism thus becomes a vehicle to facilitate the final extreme of dehumanisation, when those working within creative industries can no longer identify themselves or others as anything but products to be consumed. In the exploitative system of the creative industries, the workers are not cogs, but meat.

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