

Spring 2017

## The Emergence of the Feminist Fatale in American Film Noir

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THE EMERGENCE OF THE FEMINIST FATALE  
IN AMERICAN FILM NOIR

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

Central Washington University

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

English Literature

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by

Anne Dennon

May 2017

CENTRAL WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Graduate Studies

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## ABSTRACT

### THE EMERGENCE OF THE FEMINIST FATALE IN AMERICAN FILM NOIR

by

Anne Dennon

May 2017

The femme fatale, a quasi-eternal figure of female transgression and retributory violence, has gradually entered popular culture's symbolic lexicon as representative of mainstream feminism and postmodern femininity. Tracing the development of the femme fatale into a feminist pop culture icon necessitates establishing her sociopolitical status in the late modern era through her presence in Victorian sensational literature. The femme's translation from the Victorian context to the American mediascape presages her evolving presence in three cinematic eras: classic film noir, neo-conservative retro noir, and millennial neo-noir. Feminist film criticism tends to identify the femme fatale as a protofeminist, a productive transgressor of social norms whose worth has only been posteriorly discovered. In opposition to this reading, I propose that the femme's transgressive, exploitive, and consumerist character has been designed by a media industry eager to retain cathartically satiated female consumers.

While traditional noir narratives repair the femme's social rupture through her death or punishment, post-classic noirs respond to feminist approval by celebrating and prolonging the femme's extralegal power. This incremental narrative change shows the femme emerging as not only an acceptable model for female social behavior, but a dominant ideal in the postfeminist age, one paradoxically supported by the very system it

purports to dismantle. Her transgressive status claims a modicum of effectiveness and authenticity during her deployment in Victorian and post-war texts, when existing barricades to female agency rationalize the figure's desperate methods. However, as gender politics advance and the femme fatale continues to revenge herself against a bygone world order, the figure begins to bear witness to a problematic nostalgia within feminism for the galvanizing effects of oppression. The continued conflation of the femme's selfishness and destructivity with social restructure requires contemporary texts to theatrically reinvigorate a paradigm of oppression equal to her crimes. The issue at stake in the popularity of this conflict-based feminism lies in how the postmodern femme fatale makes superficial progress toward female ascendancy but comprehends an underlying regression toward female subordination.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my mother, of course, early awake, preparing the earth.

To my father, of course, early abed, dreaming of revolution.

“Thus is this book, on myths itself and in its own way, a myth.”

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*

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## CHAPTER I

“ITS OWN APPROPRIATE MIDNIGHT DARKNESS”:

### INTRODUCTION TO THE NOCTURNAL FEMININE

*From Baudelaire to Marlene Dietrich is a time-span of more than 75 years. During this period the cult of the femme fatale spread throughout the civilised world affecting painting, sculpture, illustration, the decorative arts, the performing arts, literature – both popular and esoteric – fashion and no doubt the thinking and behavior of ordinary men and women.*

Patrick Bade, *Femme Fatale: Images of Evil and Fascinating Women*

“She is older than the rocks among which she sits,” Walter Pater memorably intones in his description of the beguiling Mona Lisa, to whom he goes on to attribute knowledge of death and deep seas and the Far East (70). Pater’s perception of feminine inscrutability aligns her, in a series of associations now familiar to us, with all the dark flip sides of Western male experience. Dark ladies from Eve to Cleopatra, from Mona Lisa to the Bond Girl are thus draped in cultural cues of exoticism, enigma, and taboo. While the dark lady can be traced back to Judeo-Christianity, Greek mythology, and so forth, her current status derives from Victorian literature.

A number of essential factors contribute to the dark lady’s coming of age within Victorian culture. At this time, a certain cultural groundwork was laid through shifts in social behaviors and concepts of selfhood that allowed the dark lady to appeal to the public as a titillating and allegorical figure. Emphasis on individuality, personal desires, a

taste for leisure and sensual gratification, all were more or less invented by the Victorian marketplace and the rising middle class. The novel, the Victorian literary genre *ne plus ultra*, equally contributed to the modern invention of selfhood. The industrial and cultural renovations of the age lent both the possibility for social advancement and the imaginative tools to project an ideal life.

The intersection of these influences forms the flashpoint for the dark or grim lady, today known as the *femme fatale*. As a woman who operates from a desire for power, wealth, gratification, and dominance, the *femme fatale* exhibits ambitions common to a potentially mobile social class. The damning feature of the *femme*, for which traditional narratives punish her, is that her methods for attaining these goals undermine the very social structure she is attempting to ascend. In this way the *femme fatale* appears to encode a conundrum of the Western capitalist enterprise. If self-realization is the individual's highest calling, should legality prevent its pursuit? If we are operating at our best in pursuit of this high calling, is normal, legal life intolerably stultifying? However, the *femme's* apparent deviance may ultimately be seen as a manufactured product intended to obviate, rather than awaken, the anti-social desires of the socially disadvantaged.

By preemptively exhausting impulses that might otherwise come to obstruct the functioning of normal, legal life, the *femme fatale* represents not transgression but the most extreme form of allegiance. The *femme fatale* problematically vacillates between her expressions of female deviance and her cathartic intervention of the same. The fictional context has historically provided a controlled arena for the *femme fatale's* social reverberations to play out, where both the *femme* and her audience experience the thrill

of violating social norms while the ultimately punitive narrative safely revokes the possibility of women's extralegal power at the last.

If, in this way, the figure merely accomplishes conventional goals by deviant means, what is the status of her merit as both a celebrated archetypal figure and a popular feminist role model? The oppositional or contrary lifestyle of the femme fatale, one that renders her incompatible with society's regular functioning, evokes Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque. Her complex performance of femininity, one that raises questions on the very nature of identity and authenticity, recalls Judith Butler's theory of gender performance. Taken together, Bakhtin and Butler provide a theoretical foundation for understanding the femme fatale as a problematic feminine/feminist paragon.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin posits that the taboo or subordinate within the social order is expressed and managed through "carnival." A time of sanctioned inversion of authority, carnival flips the hierarchy of the high and the low. For Bakhtin, carnival represents "the second life of the people" and its release of norms "is to a certain extent a parody of the extra-carnival life, a 'world inside out' " (9). Through monitored inversions, the subordinate, which always lurks beneath or within the dominant, is periodically and productively expressed. Carnival expresses on the level of world order what the femme fatale expresses on the level of female identity. While the femme fatale narrative does not use carnival's perverse humor to upend convention, it does utilize parody. The femme fatale effectuates an inversion of traditional femininity by parodying the signifiers of the patriarchal female ideal and thereby typifying her second life.

The characterization of the femme fatale derives from inverting the original features of the mother. The mother is the giver of life, the femme fatale is a sexual

destroyer whose warped prerogative is not life but death. Selflessness transforms into egotism, sexual acquiescence into sexual predation, passivity into violence. Internally, the femme is as oppositional to the mother as traditional masculinity is to traditional femininity. Externally, the femme's beauty and beguilement mimics the established requirements for femininity. Discussing the femme as both the mother's doppelganger and the representative of her "second life" brings Butler's ideas on performativity to the fore.

Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* that external signs of gender, customarily understood to emanate from the essential natures of each sex, actually create gender. Butler illustrates this idea using drag. When a man impersonates a woman through make-up, dress, and mannerisms, he reveals that femininity is a performance, and that biological women perform a similar, though normalized, impersonation of femininity in their everyday lives. By underlining the performativity of gender, drag troubles the assumption that "there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is of the very notion of an original" (Butler 175). The flamboyant performance of drag proves comparable to the femme fatale act. The femme uses the markers of ideal femininity as a cover for her criminal behaviors, but moreover, her imitation advances the idea that femininity in all its potential incarnations is performance.

The femme fatale's parody of gender roles upends order in the spirit of carnival and fixed identity in the spirit of drag. But the femme fatale narrative, like any carnival or drag show, must come to an end. When life goes back to normal, the transgressive suggestions made by parody will either persist or lapse. Bakhtin finds that carnival's inversion of hierarchical order does not result in lasting change, and instead helps

maintain societal norms. By temporarily injecting chaos into order, carnival gives new life and purpose to convention. Carnival briefly kills off the original order, but in so doing provides “a pregnant death, a death that gives birth” (Bakhtin 25). Butler too acknowledges that “parody by itself is not subversive” as it may become a method of domesticating the divergent (176). Transgressive energies, if entirely repressed, might accumulate radical strength, but remain controllable when routinely released.

The pleasure of temporary inversions cannot be separated from their time-limited, abnormal status. The exciting energy of drag, carnival, and the femme fatale derives from their exceptionality. If the lights did not come up, if carnival never ended, if the femme was not finally suppressed, their transgressive energies would cease to be. The forward-pushing drive to experience the femme fatale’s narrative is also a drive to exhaust carnival and put the world to rights. In seeking the plot’s resolution, the reader or viewer prepares to exchange the thrill of the abnormal for the satisfaction of the corrected.

The coexistence of order and transgression is key to the femme fatale’s characterization. The femme maintains her alluring transgression by maintaining her underlying disempowerment. While discipline and death conclude the traditional femme fatale narrative, it is not the recuperative ending that invalidates the femme’s extralegal power. Rather, it is her very construction as an extralegal, transgressive being. Without the strong pre-existence of order, transgression cannot exist. Thus, the femme’s deviations require and reinstate the status quo. Her dependence on oppression means that she never meaningfully inserts herself in society, lurking instead outside or beneath society as a negative force and detractor. The retribution and predation she practices are guerilla tactics that reify the structure of which she stands outside.

The femme fatale's enduring popularity as an exciting transgressor requires the continual reanimation of repression. Despite this fact, feminist film theory since the 1970s has predominantly read the femme fatale's transgressions as viable threats to patriarchal oppression. In E. Ann Kaplan's formative collection *Women in Film Noir*, Janey Place interprets the femme as "erotic, strong, unrepressed," traits that together form "a particularly potent stylistic presentation of the sexual strength of woman which man fears" (48). Important feminist evaluations of femmes fatales that echo Place's sentiments, such as those by Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, and Tania Modleski, have ultimately proved self-limiting. In *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for Her Close-up*, Julie Grossman observes that the "institutionalize[d]" femme fatale "has fed into cultural and critical obsession with the bad, sexy woman, which inevitably become prescriptive and influences cultural discourse about female agency in counterproductive ways" (5). Grossman's point on the dual cultural and critical obsession with the femme fatale will be an important one for this study. The critical predilection to celebrate the femme has guided public reception as well as subsequent creative work.

The general appeal of the novels and films in which the femme fatale typically appears becomes important when discussing the effect of the femme fatale on audiences. Successful mass entertainment may be considered an accurate barometer of the moods and desires of its era. Both the femme's attitude and her appeal remains astonishingly constant over time. Grossman coins the useful term "Victorinoir" to discuss the commonalities of the femme and her fictional settings from Victorian novels to present-day films. Sensation novels, gothic tales, detective stories, and pulp fiction share with twentieth- and twenty-first-century noir an enduring interest in the forbidden second life.

While noir's diverse manners of expression depend on the fashion of a given time, the driving interest behind that representation proves an atemporal constant. The tropes of each period of noir both connect to the timeless noir experience and date that experience to a specific era. The iconic femme recalls her origin and her former selves, donning the oppressions along with the costumes of previous eras.

The femme fatale's popularity over time results from narrative updates and marketing that renovates her transgression. Popular culture has resuscitated her as the malevolent temptress of the sensational novel, the criminal schemer of film noir, the sexual predator of erotic thrillers, the enigmatic tormentor of neo-noir. The femme receives new life through these roles and yet she is increasingly bogged down by the associations that accumulate with each costume change. Despite the suggested modernity of the femme garbed in fresh symbols and implanted in new social contexts, the femme fatale is bound within an ossified identity. Her power and sexual agency are store-bought garments, donned to superficially and temporarily transform female subordination into female dominance.

The retroactive conversation that the femme fatale initiates on female oppression responds to outdated concerns and bygone social contexts. There is a sense that the femme fatale figure and her assumed political message is never a fresh topic but rather a Victorian curiosity. Indeed, the belief that the femme fatale champions female agency has most merit within the Victorian context. The femme of the wildly popular sensation novel that peaked in the 1860s faces stifling legal and social restrictions, and duly initiates a carnivalesque parody of patriarchal order. Her portrayal of "the angel in the house" fronts

nefarious deeds. Such a parodic recapitulation of female ideals begins to suggest, per Butler, that all prescribed female identities are performative.

In defiance of strictures on female conduct, Victorian femmes find active means to success in a world that demands femininity be static. Such success is necessarily criminal, as challenging, interesting, or indeed merely tolerable lives for women not already protected by wealth and status came, in this era, through proscribed self-determination.<sup>1</sup> Victorian femmes refuse docile poverty, and the oppression of social codes forces their recourse to antisocial acts. Lydia Gwilt of Wilkie Collins' *Armadale* and Lady Audley of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, apotheoses of the sensational femme fatale, find economic security and outlet for their intelligence only in devious plans.

Though *Lady Audley's Secret* does not directly assert that female constraint provokes female criminality, the text offers illustrative examples of the squalid life that would have befallen a less resourceful woman. For this reason, Lyn Pykett notes Braddon's "subversive depiction of the constraints of women's lives and women's desires" (132). In *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914*, Kate Flint suggests awareness of such constraints places the reader "in a position of complicity with a heroine's transgressive, yet highly understandable desires" (282). The reader has enough knowledge of Lady

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<sup>1</sup> The economic and social oppression experienced by the femme fatale is often not empathetically discussed in the Victorian novel. Though the heroines have so few avenues available to them that their extralegal gestures may be understandable, the texts themselves opt to plead insanity. That psychological diagnosis explains away their acts of murder, arson, bigamy, and blackmail, and given the extremity of these acts, the diagnosis does not seem far afield. Still, by delegitimizing female quests for happiness as products of "insanity," the novels censure women's potentially understandable aspirations. The Victorian voice of morality is strong even within these controversial texts, and it proclaims that a better woman would have passively accepted fate.

Audley's potential counter-life (an abandoned single woman with an infant and a drunken father) to consider the rationale behind her criminality.

Though the overriding narrative arc punishes the femme fatale for her criminal resourcefulness, there is a palpable undercurrent that empathizes with her necessity. Exceptionally bright and beautiful, both Lucy Audley and Lydia Gwilt have capacities that exceed the lot they were born to. Debarred from both inherited and independent means to success, both women rely on the opinions and actions of others to secure their personal well-being. In order to attract and to influence, femmes fatales carefully fashion their identity, orchestrating public reception by selecting appropriate signifiers of selfhood.

The femme's reliance on performative, material identity takes active part in consumer culture, which, like the femme fatale herself, developed many of its modern features during the Victorian period. Kimberly Harrison in "'Come Buy, Come Buy': Sensation Fiction in the Context of the Consumer and Commodity Culture" reports that "a number of sensation fictions' notorious vixens" merely demonstrate the bourgeois desire for acquisition (532). Lucy's girlish mien, her golden curls and pink cheeks, are potentially just as store-bought as her jewels and furs. The question of artifice surfaces when the Lady, seeking a suitable double, suggests to her maid that "a bottle of hair dye... and a pot of rouge" would make them identical (Braddon 58). The inimitable Lady Audley thus could be imitated – after a quick trip to the druggist. Nearly a spinster, Lydia Gwilt obscures both her age and her cunning by donning thick veils and carrying small bouquets, taking care to be seen only at her best by potential benefactors. The femme's

deviant suggestion is that a woman can be multiple, despite (and because of) appearances.

Through the performance of ideal femininity, *femmes fatales* scale the social ladder. That their success can come only through commodity consumption and the criminal redeployment of female ideals speaks directly to the crippling and constructed quality of those ideals. As Flint suggests, “In many ways, [sensational] fiction’s most disruptive potential lay... in the degree to which it made its woman readers consider their positions within their own homes and within society” (276). The validity of the *femme fatale*’s approach to power depends on external social reality. Her inversion of traditional femininity held value in the Victorian context, serving to force reconsideration of women’s roles. But as time and gender politics progress and the *femme fatale* figure remains locked in a mode of Victorian vengeance, the social impact of her performance loses pertinence.

Scholars including Grossman, Jennifer Hedgecock, and Rebecca Stott all link the Victorian novel to American film noir, a gesture, repeated here, that underscores the *femme*’s political vintage. The re-imagined Victorian *femme* prominently appears in three cinematic eras of noir: 1940s film noir, 1980s and ’90s retro and neo-noir, and 2010s *femme fatale* blockbusters. The apparent heterogeneity of these modes belies their essential similarities. The novel was to the nineteenth century what film is to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As genres of mass appeal, both the novel and the Hollywood movie are intended for consumption. They are designed around the projected desires of audiences.

The entertainment industries that have inherited the Victorian femme fatale continue to fixate on her retaliation against Victorian constraint. It is the moment of liberation that provides cathartic pleasure; the rather mundane reality that succeeds such a pinnacle moment is not cinematic. Artificially compacted to ahistorical constancy and theatrically reinvigorated again and again, the post-Victorian femme fatale allows audiences to vicariously experience the intensity of female liberation. The performance of explosive female liberation is thus packaged and peddled to the public by a market-sensitive media.

This marketing has predominantly been met with approval from feminist critics, who adopt Place's estimation of the femme as "active... intelligent and powerful," an authentically renegade figure who creates tears in the patriarchal narrative (47). I find that feminist approbation of the femme fatale is only a by-product of her original intended appeal to general female audiences, one calibrated in the interest of maintaining women's lucrative function as consumers.

Retrospective understandings of the femme fatale as an alternative female ideal during the war and post-war periods in the U.S. inform Chapter II's study of the women of classic film noir. While film scholarship largely continues to propagate Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, I suggest that there is also a female gaze at work in the construction and propagation of the femme fatale. The femme models tactics and ideals to other women equally as much as she sexually displays herself to men. The femmes of *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Gilda* (1946), and even *Rebecca* (1940) illustrate the figure's performativity. She is a marketed female ideal, whose proposed transgression leads back to conventionality.

Sensational literature and classic noirs cancel out the femme's power through her re-containment or death, but the criminality that the femme fatale so enticingly portrays remains the memorable aspect of the narrative. It is an observation well made by scholars of both literature and film that recuperative endings do little to mitigate the impression left by a transgressive character. Though the importance of the traditional punitive end is debatable, it does effectively serve to end the femme's carnivalesque power. The tradition of killing off or domesticating the femme wanes as noir develops into its contemporary guises. The production codes that once ensured that the good were rewarded and the bad punished had strong influence on noir's ethics. In their absence, later filmmakers opt for ambiguous conclusions. Femmes fatales increasingly remain in power at the close of the narrative, in a progression from restricting the femme to rejoicing in her transgressions that occurs simultaneously with feminist critics' commendation.

Academic arguments for the femme's merit gained widespread traction at the same time as popular entertainment renovated the femme fatale narrative. The femme's power, previously doomed to discovery and destruction, becomes, at this point, infrangible. The interconnectivity between scholarly and popular treatment of the femme forms the focus of Chapter III. The notorious femmes of *Body Heat* (1981), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Final Analysis* (1992), and *Basic Instinct* (1992) parade a potency and intellectual deftness that eclipses that of their would-be partners. These films either exaggerate classical punishment of the femme in gory finales or show the criminal femme successfully ensconced in extralegal power at the film's close.

The elongated carnivalesque power of the neo-noir femme fatale demonstrates how films allow for trends in social thought without fully revising diegetic conventions.

The outside realities influencing the construction of Victorian and classic noir texts were oppressive enough that even the ultimately revoked power of the femme held transgressive allure. As women's rights improve and feminist ideology moves closer to the mainstream, a brief stint of transgressive power no longer satisfies audiences. Femme fatale films accomplish the same catharsis and pacification through renovated means, reinstating foregone oppressions and amplifying oppression-shattering vengeance. First, a retro context is implied through casting and costuming, effectively resurrecting a patriarchy of greater strength. Michael Douglas exemplifies the typical male lead – older, urbane, with an authenticated authority necessary for the neo-noir role of guardian of the patriarchy. Second, the film intensifies the femme fatale's transgressions. This trend attains its 1990s acme in *Basic Instinct*, in which Sharon Stone ecstatically stabs her lover to death with an ice pick within the first five minutes.

Oppressive ideology and retributive violence must be heightened proportionately. This cinematic law informs the revenge fantasy films of the 2010s, which fetishize historic oppression in order for modern day retribution to be sufficiently thrilling. However, the effect is less transformative than hoped. The oppressors become the victims and the binary endures in flipped form. Chapter IV explores the significance of the retributive femme fatale narrative on female identity in the novel/film franchise *Gone Girl* (2012, 2014). Amy Dunne, the ultimate postmodern femme fatale, realizes the logical extreme of her sensational and noir predecessors in terms of the scope of her vengeance and the thoroughness of her identity control.

The composite nature of the novel/film franchise, increasingly common in today's entertainment market, is the first and most obvious example of how *Gone Girl* marries

the sensation novel and film noir. Like a Victorian femme, Amy seeks social ascendency, though in updated terms. Rather than rely on conduct books, she follows a personalized literary guideline for success: children's books written by her parents that project her ideal life as *Amazing Amy*. In adulthood, Amy continues to be obsessed with narratological perfection and the admiring regard of an audience. She slips easily from one female prototype to another, depending on the desires of her audience. Amy's agility in this respect casts her as a femme fatale even before her crimes are revealed, as the femme is time and again signaled by her ability to play any part.

Classic femmes fatales utilize the only available female weaponry, affective manipulation, in order to escape subordination. Desire for autonomy fuels their actions, and performative identity is a means to that end. But Amy, inundated by centuries of fictional depictions of femininity, conceptualizes performance as an end unto itself. Rather than seek freedom or female enfranchisement, she seeks to continue her performance – specifically, the performance of the perfect wife to the perfect husband living the perfect life. When Amy's chosen mate slips from his co-starring role in twenty-first-century perfection, her revenge is exacting.

While the *Amazing Amy* books offer a rationale for her exceptional psychological development, her attraction to fictionalized existence is resoundingly ordinary in media-saturated society. Nick Dunne, the homme attrapé to Amy's femme fatale, recognizes that the entirety of postmodern life is tainted by fiction's example and, by his word choice (“amazing”), links that obsessive stain back to his wife in her commodity form:

I can't recall a single amazing thing I have seen firsthand that I didn't immediately reference to a movie or TV show. A fucking commercial. You know the awful

singsong of the blasé: *Seeeen it*. I've literally seen it all, and the worst thing, the thing that makes me want to blow my brains out, is: The secondhand experience is always better. The image is crisper, the view is keener, the camera angle and the soundtrack manipulate my emotions in a way reality can't anymore.... If we are betrayed, we know the words to say; when a loved one dies, we know the words to say. If we want to play the stud or the smart-ass or the fool, we know the words to say. We are all working from the same dog-eared script. (Flynn 98)

All fiction to some extent teaches behavior, condoning and condemning certain worldviews depending on its era and intent. In the fiction that centers on the femme fatale, the ultimate behavioral suggestion for women, if not for everyone, is that external signifiers can and do pass for the real and internal.

This revelation of female identity as dependent on performativity may again be traced back to the cultural shifts engendered by Victorian culture, beholden to rigid ideals and fixated on consumption. At the midlevel between the self and the projected self lurks fashion, accouterment, superficial signal, performance. As exemplified by the Victorian femme fatales, role play projects an alternate life for women, but its transgressive potential languishes over time as female identity becomes synonymous with consumption and caricature. Like the many Victorinoir femmes that came before her, Amy offers audiences a parody of order, a carnival, a gender performance that exhausts transgressive energies and returns, this time within the narrative itself and at the bidding of the femme fatale, to conventionality.

A postmodern Victorian femme, Amy is at her best when she is constructing a new ideal "self." Her facility at switching between characters highlights not only her

talent but also the impossibility of becoming anyone new. All the characters Amy so deftly impersonates already exist in the collective imagination. “Preppy ’80s Girl,” “Ultimate Frisbee Granola,” “Blushing Ingenue,” “Witty Hepburnian Sophisticate” provide Amy with multiple modes of being, but none of them issue from internality (319). Amy dismisses the possibility of internal truth by positing that everyone plays a part. Those with a single role are not more authentic – merely less capable. Her opinion cynically reflects Butler’s theory of gender performance. Butler seeks to express the fluid nature of identity by demonstrating its relation to choice. Amy too posits that identity is choice-based, but it is not so much fluid as restricted to a series of scripted acts.

Rather than the femme’s performativity holding political power, it is the figure’s capacity for multiplicity that has potential merit. Though the femme fatale is herself a single character, a mere evil-twin double, her enactment provides heroines with a fulfilling and nearly successful “second life” that points to more. Such an interpretation requires that she be both presented and perceived with nuance, something impeded by overt renderings of her villainy and overdetermined readings of her retribution.

Throughout her recent existence, the femme fatale has appeared in fiction as feminist role play. Teaching through fashion and marketing, the femme offers both feel-good feminism and the excitement of taboo. As critical appreciation of the femme’s perceived disruption of the patriarchy trickles into popular consciousness, films project a mainstream idolization of the femme fatale. The critical and popular conception of the femme as feminist is damaging insofar as the femme fatale is strongly characterized by her placement on a binary of subordination and dominance. Moreover, the consumerism, superficiality, and script-following that attend the portrayal of her static female type

undermine feminist goals of self-realization, while quite literally buying into patriarchal capitalism. The femme fatale exists at the matrix of socio-sexual politics and pure fashion, pointing to the interchangeability of those two concepts. This work examines the dark lady's dual critical and creative progression along the noir continuum of the past half century, seeking to understand the collective psychology behind the problematic, politicized, and always popular feminist fatale.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ANTONYM OF FEMININE IS FEMME: THE INVENTION OF THE CLASSIC NOIR VILLAINESS

The first and most authentic reaction to a classic film noir may be, “I can barely see it.” The composition of film noir is shadowy – both in terms of the lighting, which uses light as mere punctuation for the enveloping dark, and in terms of the narrative, where serpentine plots twine amongst characters who never fully reveal themselves. The desire to see what is unshown, discover what is withheld, drives the viewer to peer deeper into noir’s darkness just as it drives the investigative premise of the plot. At the heart of noir, the genre of deception and darkness, is the idea of truth and light. From this paradox, the guiding principle of noir can be extrapolated. In the contradiction of opposites noir finds parallelism, rather than divergence. Noir uses extreme contrast in visual and diegetic respects ranging from stark chiaroscuro lighting to hair-color-coded good and bad girls. The ostensible suggestion made by these contrasts that light and dark, good and evil contradict one another belies noir’s deeper truth that opposition is symbiotic. In depending on their opposing other, two extremes approach to the point of coalescing. It is the antonym that provides the definition.

Noir is thus held together by a law of contradictory similarity. The telltale ambiguity of noir arises from the coalescence of two extremes thought to be dependably oppositional. The viewer and the investigator look into noir’s darkness to see the light. It is the voyage into noir’s perverse nighttime that enables viewers to return to the diurnal state of lawful norms. By reestablishing contact with the repressed or rejected aspects of

social life, rousing from forced dormancy the potential for criminality and social perversion, noir allows for catharsis. In the introduction to *A Panorama of American Film Noir, 1941-1953*, the seminal text of film noir analysis, James Naremore notes that noir provides “an opportunity for the audience to... indulge in private fantasies” (xi). In this respect, noir in general and the figure of the femme fatale in particular maps onto the theories of transgressive experience put forth by Mikhail Bakhtin and Judith Butler. After satisfactorily experiencing the repressed via the dark world of noir, audiences may return, satiated, to social norms. The transgressive fantasy of film noir thus contains its own conventional recuperation.

In order for the emotional journey back and forth between the stages of transgression and recuperation to remain effective, knowledge of their symbiosis must be infinitely deferred. A film style that depends on elongating the distance to knowability is aptly (un)known by untranslatable French. The transatlantic origin of noir scholarship and vocabulary (with *Panorama* occupying a foundational position) is an expression of noir’s dependence on illusory contrast. Scholarship maintains noir’s ambiguity by using untranslated French terminology and deferring recognition of generic tropes, of which the femme fatale is a primary example. *Femme fatale*, that famous French loan word, drapes an exotic disguise over a recognizable woman.

The femme fatale embodies the noir paradox. Her darkness takes its meaning from the light. Though she appears, and has been critically understood as, the flipside of the proverbial “angel in the house,” her resemblance to traditional femininity is strong. Their opposing attributes necessitate their constant pairing: the angel or the eternal feminine is supportive, nurturing, and selfless, the femme fatale is destructive, dangerous,

and selfish. Despite seeming contradiction, the identities of both derive from their relationships to men.

While the mother appears to cater to masculine control and the femme appears to destroy it, both female types are inventions of an authoritative masculine system. As discussed in Chapter I, both the original and the original inverted are integral to system maintenance. The femme fatale merely acts as a relief valve for malcontent. If we can establish the concealed identity of the mother and the femme in this respect, the question of their superficial differences comes to the fore. What is it, given her familiarity, that makes the femme fatale such an appealing specter? What can account for her popularity with women, both in the public and scholarly spheres? What is the dubious internal merit believed to be signified by her outer shell? Where can we buy one just like it?

The femme fatale strongly emerges at points in time in which femininity is changing as a cultural concept, apparently providing a contrary option to traditional femininity. She is issued as a fashion trend, designed and marketed for an audience whose nonmaterial desire for change may be transformed into a market demand and satiated by a material product. Evaluating the figure's sociocultural import afresh must begin with reconsidering the intended audience of both noir and the femme fatale.

Film noir and the femme have long been assumed to be tailored to male audiences, however, the genre's prioritization of character development and personal relationships follows female viewer preferences, as does the characterization of the femme. Helen Hanson argues that cinematic femmes fatales since the 1940s have been created with female audiences in mind (217-21). Hanson observes that "the spread and

variety of tough female characters coincides with the industry research undertaken into female filmgoers' preferences" (219). Reviews in *Variety* and *Picturegoer* record the popularity of newly bold women, the latter noting that the trend in female characterization will endure as long as audiences "like them that way" (qtd. in Hanson 218). The femme fatale may therefore be viewed not as an uncontrollable eruption of anxiety and desire, but as a Hollywood invention aimed to please. In this case, the feminist underpinnings of the femme fatale that have legitimized scholarly approbation are not "discovered" by a revisionist reading of noir. Instead, such underpinnings are the intended cachet of a character designed around female audiences.

No doubt contributing to critics' denial of filmmakers' considerations of female audiences, feminist film theory tends to fixate on male viewership at the exclusion of female viewership. Heterosexual voyeurism, as Laura Mulvey contends, controls all visual representations of women. The viewer is thus masculinized, placed in the powerful position of surveying and possessing the sexualized female object on the screen. The possibility that the femme fatale has been marketed to women as well as men has been all but prohibited by the powerful influence of Mulvey's concept of the male gaze. The male gaze well describes desirous looking but disregards another form of spectatorship, that of behavioral observation.

The heterosexual woman pleurably viewing another woman uses spectatorship to learn behaviors and project personal desires. The viewer casts her desires out onto the female object, and the female object in turn teaches the viewer successful behavior. The female gaze trained on the femme fatale takes her sexiness, her beauty, and her fetishized fashion as honest signals of her power. In order to become a powerful woman, the

psychology of the femme fatale teaches, dress and act as I do. The profusion of her external power signs, generally believed to feed off male anxiety and pander to male scopophilia, are then also strategic advertising for a “new” womanhood.

Hanson’s findings as to the designedly female appeal of the noir femme trouble critical assumptions about the figure as a spontaneous expression of building gender tension. Ultimately asking whether the femme’s transgressive status still stands if film noir and its leading lady are intended for female consumption, Hanson’s chapter ironically closes *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts*, a collection that proposes to showcase the variety and validity of femme fatale scholarship. Hanson concludes the work by interrogating the assumptions that have informed critical approbation of the femme since the 1970s. Perhaps through disinclination to write herself out of a subject, Hanson backs away from the conclusions generated by the evidence. She takes aim at the notion of the femme fatale as protofeminist, but then refuses to fire, finishing instead with an exhausted gesture toward the femme’s ambiguity. The femme is indeed ambiguous, but only insofar as she vacillates between the appearance of transgression and the underlying truth of compliance.

The femme fatale’s modern significance is largely due to the work of feminist criticism that has extended, not interrogated, the figure’s original design. As Hanson rightly alleges, “the femme fatale figure has been seductive to a feminist critical practice” that desires to see her as an advance guard against patriarchal control (216-7). Perceiving the femme as an authentic representative of powerful femininity establishes her as an attractive feminist predecessor. A recent generic example of the protofeminist reading, this time by Veronika Pituková, finds that the femme’s desire for wealth and power

rebels against “society’s rules and expectations” and she consequently becomes “a threat to the patriarchal system” (31). To consider the femme a threat to patriarchy assumes that her desire for money and status goes against cultural norms. While the femme’s methods of attaining such hierarchical ends in some ways undermine the hierarchical structure, they also advertise its desirability. The financial underpinnings of the femme fatale’s ambitions relate back to Hollywood’s construction of the femme. The film industry’s pecuniary interest in audience preferences inevitably suggests that the femme fatale was thoughtfully issued. Just as the femme fatale has proved a lucrative formula for filmmakers, the femme’s endorsement of the desirability of buying power and acquisition benefits the exploitive capitalist social scheme that feminist precepts would otherwise criticize.

Feminist scholarship that reads the femme fatale as an early voice against patriarchal domination lights on signifiers of proactive feminism while passing over evidence of her stagnation. In an attempt to historicize the femme fatale’s feminist tendencies, much scholarship takes for granted the connection between the femme and World War II factory workers.<sup>1</sup> In this perspective, returning veterans found male economic and social monopoly threatened by empowered women à la Rosie the Riveter. This generated a widespread reactionary movement demonizing the female independence authorized by wartime necessity. The national momentum that had brought women out of the home and into the factory turned at war’s end to push them in the opposite direction.

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars including Sheri Chinen Biesen, Wheeler Winston Dixon, and Dennis Broe elide post-war gender anxiety with the characterizations of the femme fatale. Yvonne Tasker further notes that at the conclusion of a film noir, like at the conclusion of the war, the woman is ejected from the public sphere, underscoring the unsuitability of female independence.

By aligning the femme with the war worker, film historians have cast the femme's criminality as a desperate bid for independence. In "Phantom Ladies: The War Worker, the Slacker and the 'Femme Fatale,'" Mark Jancovich unseats the notion that the femme depicts female enfranchisement, finding the association ill-founded both in terms of timing and audience reception. If the femme fatale emerged to vilify female independence, her proliferation in film should have aligned with the end of the war and the return of American soldiers. However, the dates of noir production do not correspond with national campaigns promoting women's return to domestic roles. The most iconic femmes debuted before and during the war. Brigid O'Shaughnessy in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* (1944), and Velma Valento in *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), all quintessential femmes, appeared on screens well in advance of peacetime propaganda.

The alignment of the femme fatale with the war worker further assumes that her selfishness equals self-reliance. In reality, the femme operates through men. Her schemes depend on the foolhardy risks men take to attract and please her. During World War II, women who sought personal ends in the manner of the femme fatale would little call to mind independent and socially conscious industry. In that epoch, the femme's behavior would have associated her, not with hard-working women, but rather with reviled slackers. Jancovich contends that "classic femme fatales are, almost without exception, examples of the 'kept woman' who had come to signify decadence and corruption during the war years" (169).

Retroactive feminist readings seek to provide historical justification for the femme fatale's acquisitiveness, amorality, and violence, at times by creatively

misunderstanding her historical context. The femme's desire for wealth and power, which might otherwise be translated as market-created desires conducive to patriarchal capitalism, are translated as the reasonable desires of women long prevented from engaging in public life. In this ahistorical understanding of the femme fatale, which nonetheless purports to offer historical evidence of her feminist constitution, the femme's appearances throughout time have served a united purpose to reveal and trouble patriarchal control.

The femme fatale's midcentury reappearance responds, undoubtedly, to a desire for change in gender representation. The femme is appealing to female audiences because she provides an alternative model for femininity, one unlike both the domestic mother and the assertive war worker. She exemplifies an alternative route to success, one based on personal desires and accomplishments, far removed from the nurturing role traditionally assigned to women. In this way, the femme fatale represents an inversion of traditional femininity, yet in the precision of her reversal she ends by reiterating the original. By shirking social responsibility and prioritizing the self, the femme's immorality demonstrates the moral correctness of the status quo.

Not only does the criminal shortcut to success injure society, but it undermines the legitimacy of female power. The femme's illegally procured power ultimately destroys her, at least in classic noir. This outcome underlines the unnaturalness of the femme fatale's approach. Her route proves both fatal and fated. In "The Female Side of Crime: Film Noir's *Femme Fatale* and the Dark Side of Modernity," Elisabeth Bronfen rightly states that the femme's transgression "obliquely represents diurnal law" by representing "the impossibility to transgress cultural laws" (77). Like carnival's

temporary up-endings to order, the femme's attempts to wrest power through deviant methods can only temporarily invert the power structure, and end by putting the world to rights. The femme's push for extralegal self-determination reifies the existing order. The inescapability of the status quo, and the femme's unexpected collusion in its upkeep, is well demonstrated in the film noir par excellence, *Double Indemnity* (1944).

The conniving, cold yet fiery Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) inveigles an insurance salesman to help plot the murder of her wealthy but tight-fisted husband. Phyllis deftly alters her persona to attract and manipulate men with the goal of one day leading an independent, self-determined life without them. However, the events she sets in motion quickly escape her control. For the femme fatale, both the performed identity and its consequences are predetermined in a society constructed to first allow for divergence and then cancel its effects. In subconscious acknowledgment that she is following a culturally produced script, Phyllis time and again intones, "It's straight down the line for both of us." The line represents the allegorical trajectory of a streetcar whose inevitable destination is death, as well as the written line of stereotyped characterization and dialogue that constitutes all possible acts of the femme fatale.

The illusory promise of self-determination locks Phyllis as well as insurance salesman/chump Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) into identity performance. Their early repartee solidifies mutual attraction but, moreover, mutual willingness to play a part. Costuming is immediately important: Phyllis first appears wrapped in a towel and must exit the scene to dress. She reappears prepared for her act as femme fatale. Phyllis and Walter's first face-to-face interaction then takes place before a mirror. They are

introduced not only to one another but also to themselves in their current adopted identities.

Phyllis and Walter cycle through several metaphoric roles in their initial sexual banter. She speaks as a punishing school teacher to his naughty student and a police officer to his speeding driver. “Suppose I burst out crying and put my head on your shoulder,” Walter goads. At this point, Phyllis transitions to her performance as loyal wife, the necessary precursor to her subsequent performance as mistreated wife. “Suppose you try putting it on my husband’s shoulder,” she retorts.

After establishing their roles as unsatisfied housewife and eager lover, the pair resist breaking character even when the monetary interests of the former and the waning interest of the latter become apparent. Both individuals avoid acknowledging the Other as different from his or her decided role. Recognition of the Other’s performed identity would prompt the subsequent recognition of the self as radically unlike his or her own.

Underscoring the characters’ dependency on performed roles, Phyllis’ performative exploits predate the narrative. Phyllis served as nurse to the first Mrs. Dietrichson, whose death, claims stepdaughter Lola, Phyllis hastened. Phyllis assumedly wiled her way into Mr. Dietrichson’s affections through a different, equally successful performance and became his second wife only six months after the death of his first. In anticipation of the role she assumes following Mr. Dietrichson’s demise, Phyllis tries on a black mourning veil before a mirror – an act Lola witnesses with horror. Phyllis’ premature donning of the mourning veil exemplifies her studied ability to adopt various personas. In contrast to the earnest Lola, Phyllis represses authenticity. She repeatedly examines herself in mirrors, as though visually reminding herself of her current character.

Just as important as the roles Phyllis undertakes are those that she refuses to play. It is resoundingly clear that Phyllis will never play mother. Her antagonistic relationship with Lola is marked by distrust. She rejects maternity and female bonding by making her stepdaughter her competitor, seeking to outrank Lola in the affections of not only her father but also her beau.

The film visually expresses Phyllis' rejection of maternity in the clandestine meetings of Phyllis and Walter in a bright and cheery grocery store. Phyllis' only daytime scenes, she still guards nighttime around her by wearing large black sunglasses. The two confer on matters of murder in the baby food aisle. While the glamorous femme fatale discusses the details of her husband's impending death, humdrum, matronly women placidly fill their shopping carts with packaged foods. The domestic normalcy surrounding the pair appears simple-minded if not mindless, but the contrast is also unflattering to the scheming Phyllis and Walter. Their morbidity and lust separate them from the clean, normal world as represented by the all-American grocery store.

The real difference between Phyllis and the placid, portly women milling around the store is that Phyllis seems truly alive. The significance of the lifestyle contrast in these grocery store scenes relates, writes Erik Dussere in "Out of the Past, Into the Supermarket: Consuming Film Noir," to the essential spirit of noir. American consumption culture arose in force around the same time as classic noir came to prominence in Hollywood. The gritty realism of noir proposes an alternative to the "bright, mass-produced" dream of both consumerism and the heretofore typical Hollywood movies (Dussere 21). Amongst what is suggested to be a multitude of mass-

produced lives, Phyllis' desperate desires appear to elevate her above the pacified consumers, but a closer look reveals similarity where first one sees difference.

The women's busy consumption apparently placates their desires, rendering them harmless, whereas Phyllis' desires remain unquenched, vibrant, and threatening to the status quo. Yet Phyllis' identity, alongside the housewives', is the result of shopping for signs of self in the patriarchal capitalist marketplace. The market sells the props to every act, be it mother or femme. Dussere, as well as Naremore, points out the visible manufacture of Phyllis' character in the grocery store scenes. Her blonde wig and dark glasses are costumey. The artificiality of her hair and makeup, her garments, her fetishized ankle bracelet, are just as store-bought as the cans of baby food she ignores. Her selfhood has been marketed to her, and is in turn marketed to the independent female sector, just like the appealingly displayed stacks of "cand milk" are marketed to thrifty housewives. Phyllis is, quite evidently, playing the role of the femme fatale.

The equal consumerism behind the mother and the femme is at first denied by noir's very stance as an anti-consumption, anti-market genre. Dussere asserts that "noir's self-conscious rejection of the commercial space" represents consumerism as noir's "polar opposite" (16). Dussere finds that despite this apparent opposition, noir depends on the commercial appeal of its tropes, the very marketability of a lifestyle opposed to the market. The commercial bent in the genre of commercial resistance relates back to the noir paradox and the construction of the femme fatale.

Without reference to her evident constructedness, critics often cite Phyllis Dietrichson as a genuine, fully-realized femme fatale. Though other women in film noir may appear fatal, they are revealed to lack Phyllis' essential darkness. They transfer to

the side of the good over the course of the film whereas Phyllis dies enshrined in her villainy. Phyllis' reliance on role play has resulted in her losing contact with socially normal methods of constructing identity, such as through relationships. As she's dying, Phyllis muses, "I never loved you, Walter. Not you, or anybody else." Her adherence to the role, however, does not equate to its authenticity, nor suggest it to be an uncontrollable expression of her identity. Leighton Grist makes a similar point about femme fatale Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer) in *Out of the Past* (1947), noting that she first enters "through the proscenium arch of the bar" and that her many shifts in behavior prompt would-be chump Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum) to repeatedly praise her acting skill: "You're wonderful, Kathie" (210). The statuses of both Phyllis and Kathie as quintessential femmes derive from their performative success.

Their self-constructions as femmes are thorough, while subsequent attempts prove superficial. Released two years after *Double Indemnity*, *Gilda* (1946) inherits the marketable tropes established by the femmes fatales of the war years. Rita Hayworth as Gilda outstrips (literally and figuratively) many of the dangerous women that went before her, but she is not, in fact, a femme fatale. The obvious posturing Gilda undertakes in order to be considered a femme points up the role's essentially performative, inauthentic nature.

Gilda's decision to play the femme fatale arises from the proclivity of men to cast her in that role. Her relationship with hot-headed Johnny Farrell ended because he wrongly perceived her to be a fatal woman, dedicated to the exploitation of men, yet Gilda goes on to play to his perception. When the pair meet again in Argentina's sultry underworld, Gilda is married to Johnny's boss, the sinister Ballin Mundson. Even though

the femme fatale act destroyed their relationship once before, Gilda recognizes the power that attends its portrayal. After influencing men and gaining access to wealth, Gilda's femme fatale act awakens jealousy in Johnny and successfully corners him into the marriage she desired all along. At the end of the film, the couple are shown returning to the U.S. Their nocturnal interlude of crime and female manipulation in the darkly erotic, Latin American space, rotates back to diurnal conventionality.

*Gilda* demonstrates how the femme fatale role provides women with a nontraditional shortcut to a traditional outcome. Despite the transgressive potential of the femme fatale, her final objectives are entrenched in capitalist patriarchal values: marriage, status, and wealth. *Gilda* contains an exceptionally clear example of a woman performing promiscuity as a method of luring men. Making contact with a high number of men increases her chance of lucrative marriage while simultaneously encouraging competition among suitors. Both Ballin and Johnny are in this way repeatedly led to affirm their dedication. The ubiquity of this strategy amongst classic noir femmes may relate to the desperate situation created during the war. The proliferation of cinematic femmes fatales correspond with an era of gender imbalance.<sup>2</sup>

Competition for men and resources also explains the femme's antagonism toward other women. Femmes fatales of the Phyllis Dietrichson model eschew all intra-gender relationships and have only men in their inner circle. This intra-gender hostility even exists between women of non-comparable ages, as in the sexual competition between the

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<sup>2</sup> Deborah Walker-Morrison suggests that femmes fatales respond to the poor marriage market engendered by World War II. She explains, "Large scale war inevitably leads to demographic imbalance: a dearth of marriageable men and a concomitant oversupply of unwed young women seeking marriage partners" (Walker-Morrison 25). When men are in short supply, female promiscuity as demonstrated by the femme fatale becomes a marriage strategy.

mother and daughter figures in *Double Indemnity*, *Murder, My Sweet*, and *Mildred Pierce* (1945). Gilda acknowledges this as typical femme behavior when she notes, “It’s smart to surround yourself with ugly women and beautiful men.” Here again, Gilda’s deviations from the femme fatale performance elucidate its features. While she recognizes what a femme fatale would do, she does not in fact allow her performance to affect her relationships with other women. A clear sign of Gilda’s non-fatal status is her tender relationship with her maid, in whose company Gilda’s most authentic, non-performative moments occur.

Nevertheless, the supposedly genuine, good girl Gilda proves somewhat unbelievable, and more than a little underwhelming, after her majestic deployment of the femme fatale act. The contrast between obedient Gilda in a demure skirt suit after rebellious Gilda in a gold lamé gown underlines the constructedness of both ideals. Gilda’s transition between the two suggests that a dichotomous understanding of female subjecthood is as limiting as a singular ideal. The manipulation is even greater when cultural policing offers female duality, as the choice between two options mimics free expression.

The femme fatale appeals on an aesthetic, emotive level to female audiences, both popular and scholarly. Her persona as portrayed through clothing, speech, demonstrated desires, and behaviors is a focal point of each plot. This is especially notable in films in which the femme fatale herself is absent, such as *Rebecca* (1940) or *Laura* (1944). Both films fixate on the ideal signifiers the real woman leaves behind. The feminine mystique intimated by portraits, possessions, and unworn fine clothing acquire greater significance

when partitioned off from the woman's own fallible identity. These motifs distill the commercialism that creates the femme fatale.

Though the femme fatale flouts patriarchal conventions of female goodness, she makes no more real social advancement for women than her angelic anti-twin. Despite the appearance of transgression, the femme fatale fails to substantially question or trouble the status quo – she merely exploits it. With few exceptions, her method of criminal success has been celebrated by feminist scholars, who praise the femme fatale's circumvention of the system. This widespread celebration fails to consider the ways in which the system is supported by her extralegal maneuvers. By remaining legally disenfranchised, by accepting the status quo so long as it can be lucratively bled for her pleasures, the femme fatale affirms gender subordination. Her gestures to destroy actually protect.

The femme fatale seen through the female gaze appears as a behavioral role model who encourages consumption and male dependency while quelling anti-social sentiment. Viewing the figure as such opens a fissure in feminist film criticism with significant consequences, as the study of film noir has been central to its formation. As Naremore proposes, “much feminist theory grows out of the study of American films noirs” (“American” 15). The film noir and femme fatale analyses put forth by pioneering feminist film scholars have become synonymous with academic feminism. Critical endorsement of the femme fatale as an exemplar of the denigrated female narrative has allowed the character to escape the bounds of fiction to become a plausible role model for female subjecthood.

The femme's caricature of female power as hypersexual, dangerous, and devouring is a marketing ploy. Her external signs advertise transgressive and productive female power, but her true effects are stagnant if not regressive. Scholarly support of the femme fatale figure has resulted in the ad hoc addition of socio-political weight to heretofore empty ideals of purchasable female mystique. The mainstay interpretation of the femme fatale as protofeminist suggests that the character provides redress for subjugated women. However, the femme fatale is incapable of instigating redress because she affirms female subjugation, re-dressed as political fashion demands. Though film noir presents a cinematography and an ideology difficult to see, recognition of the genre's constant feature – paradox – sheds light on the construction of many of its key tropes, including that of the femme fatale. The femme, though feminist celebrants seek to preserve her darkness, is both a product of and a parable for the light.

## CHAPTER III

### “PLAY IT AGAIN, SAM”: NEO-NOIR NOSTALGIA FOR FEMALE OPPRESSION

The most famous line of the noir-esque *Casablanca* (1942), “Play it again, Sam,” never appears in the film. The iconic phrase, assumed to have been uttered either by Rick (Humphrey Bogart) or Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman), requests a jazz pianist to play the nostalgic tune, “As Time Goes By.” While both characters deliver variations on the line throughout the film, the specific wording is a composite creation of remake, reference, and parody. The retro-invention of the line speaks to the powerful creative role viewers have in the making of films. This retroactive creation is one enacted by feminist critics vis-à-vis the femme fatale. Innovative and impactful readings of the film noir femme revised popular reception of the transgressive figure to include liberal political ideology and, in so doing, revised the femme herself. The progressive politics that inform modern reception of the femme arise from the successful creative work performed by critics. Just as “Play it again, Sam” is as much a part of the cultural heritage surrounding *Casablanca* as any of its actual dialogue, the feminist fatale is present in every film appropriated or influenced by feminist criticism.

More than a man-slayer, a siren, a belle dame sans merci, the femme fatale as viewed by feminist film theory is a protofeminist. Many neo-noirs emerging in the wake of the academic discussions of the 1970s and '80s revalue the femme fatale, inserting overt themes of female rights and anti-patriarchal vengeance into otherwise traditional narratives. Importantly, the arguments made for a feminist femme fatale were based on primary texts already thirty years old. The brand of feminism that critics culled from their

interpretations of the classic noir femme may have held merit in a bygone era, when cultural strictures on female behavior almost wholly debarred women from participating in public, socioeconomic life. However, post-classic films noirs that reflect academic celebration of the midcentury femme become necessarily anachronistic as they force their female characters to combat the social orders of previous generations.

Hollywood's recreation of the femme fatale in the image of feminist theory results in a cinematic era of noir remakes and erotic thrillers that represent retroactively vengeful women. The neo-noir femme fatale physically and psychologically punishes male figures whose age, wealth, and profession serve to exemplify patriarchal domination. Rather than explore contemporary gender issues, such as workplace discrimination or divorce and abortion debates, neo-noir resuscitates and aestheticizes the gender politics of prior decades.<sup>1</sup> Yvonne Tasker proposes that

new *film noir*, in its nostalgia and cleverness, in its raiding of the cinematic past, could be seen as part of an American cinema reluctant to articulate the concerns of the present – eager to avoid a staging of the problems of contemporary America. (119)

Neo-noir's tendency to revivify traditional gender roles redoubles the original paradox of noir: it consistently promotes what it defiles. Neo-noir fetishizes the gender dynamics alongside the fashion of earlier eras, oftentimes conflating the two.

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<sup>1</sup> Neo-noir does at times explore workplace gender relations, either as a peripheral factor or as the film's premise, which is the case for *Disclosure* (1994). However, the career women depicted in these films, whether femmes fatales or femmes attrapées, make evident that their ascent and their ultimate ambitions are circumspect. For the business women of neo-noir, exploiting men is both the strategy for and the objective of a professional career. In *Disclosure*, Meredith Johnson (Demi Moore), a former girlfriend of Tom Sanders (Michael Douglas), begins thwarting his career after he rejects her advances. She supersedes him in promotions and nearly destroys his career by falsely accusing him of sexual harassment.

The announced transgression of neo-noir, signaled from the outset by salacious titles, e.g. *Body of Evidence* (1993), conceals a covert conventionality that only increases as its diegetic social context becomes more and more distanced from the audience's. Nostalgia for simpler, more overt forms of oppression against which to stage a gratifying revolt also allows female audiences to partake in the belief that covetous desires and destructive impulses benefit the feminist project, since these "disallowed" drives did at one time push against patriarchal expectations for femininity. By depicting and encouraging explosive but isolated and individualized acts of subversion, pop culture noir adapts feminism for its own commercial purposes.

Noir, like much of media, commodifies zeitgeist. Advertising well demonstrates this stratagem, as it even more obviously than fictional works stands at the crossroads of consumption, politics, and personal identity by suggesting that *being* starts with *buying*. The development of a politically responsive advertising that seeks to conflate progressive female identity with consumption informs Rosalind Gill's exploration of "commodity feminism" in *Gender and the Media* (84). This advertising approach adapts feminist sentiments, domesticates its anti-market attitudes, and encourages women to see themselves as improvable goods whose increasing value will lead to empowerment. Gill asserts, "The positive tone which feminism used to address women is, then, taken up and offered back to us on condition that we buy the commodity being sold" (86). The process of commercializing not only feminism but much of postmodern academic thought renders their precepts inert. By framing already existing conventions of femininity and capitalist individualism as compatible with liberal ideology, norms are at once reupholstered and reinforced.

Pop culture's mainstreaming of feminism transforms the strategies behind both advertising and film noir. Gill notes that commodity feminism as an advertising strategy has found success partly through its accounting for potential opposition. This approach critiques traditional expectations for female appearance and behavior alongside feminist critics, while offering, in the same breath, new expectations.<sup>2</sup> Neo-noir too integrates political ideology, and successfully resells the femme fatale, by passing a sexy, violent caricature of feminism off as either knowingly ironic, vintage cool, or timelessly relevant. The infamous marketing of panty hose and cigarettes as productive of female agency developed coeval with the vigilante feminist fatale, and shares the figure's contradictory status. She is both a compelling metaphor for female power and a superficial emblem, an anachronism that reinstates prior oppression.

Neo-noir's incorporation of critical perspectives on the femme fatale echoes the self-preservation techniques of "fem-vertising."<sup>3</sup> A particularly evident example of the newly self-aware noir, *Final Analysis* (1992) accounts for feminist film theory by building its hypotheses into the narrative. The investigative male lead is not a detective or a private eye, but rather a psychiatrist versed in the same psychoanalytic theory that informs much of early film criticism.

Dr. Isaac Barr (Richard Gere) diagnoses and cures female insanity. His most recent charge, Diana Baylor (Uma Thurman), is a skittish waif seemingly plagued by

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<sup>2</sup> Gill uses the example of a 1993 Nike advertisement that depicts a group of beautiful, fit, semi-nude women, one of whom carries a baby. The diversity the advertisement purports to showcase is restricted to height and minor skin tone variations. The copy reads, "It's not the shape you are, it's the shape you're in that matters" (85). While ostensibly speaking against narrow beauty standards, the ad neither shows true diversity of female body types nor moves away from prioritizing women's physical bodies, instead "merely shifting the criteria by which women will be assessed" (86).

<sup>3</sup> A neologism describing advertising that employs the language and concerns of female empowerment movements.

memories of her father's death. The real female enigma, however, is Diana's sister Heather Evans (Kim Basinger). The two women share an obviously fraught personal history, and Heather is, in addition, unhappily married to an abusive gangster. While stumped for answers to the psychology of the sisters, Isaac attends a psychiatric conference. There a female professor half-seriously, half-derisively presents Freud's analysis of a female patient's dream. In this dream, the patient arranges flowers: lilies, carnations, and violets. The professor first reiterates "Freud's rhetorical question. Women, what do they want?" before turning to the answer "buried in chapter six." Freud suggests the lilies represent purity, carnations carnal desire, and violets women's subconscious need to be violated, violently. This is the exact dream Diana relates to Isaac in the film's opening scene. Isaac realizes that the psychiatric clues he has been following are plagiarized symptoms, culled from the origin of scholarly investigations of woman, unearthed by an entrepreneurial femme fatale who has done her homework on academicians' opinions of transgressive women.

Coopting the psychoanalytic inheritance of feminist film theory, and furthermore including its findings as consummate falsehood, as a clever ploy devised by the femme fatale to delude scrutiny, skewers academic assumptions about the femme's identity and intent. Heather schooled her sister with textbook symptoms of female insanity in order to gain proximity to Isaac, attempting to attain her desires by employing the same tools used to deconstruct them. By implanting a self-awareness of psychoanalytic and thus film theory in an otherwise standard noir plotline, *Final Analysis* destabilizes the critical tradition surrounding the femme fatale narrative rather than the narrative itself.

The film revitalizes the relationship between text and textual analysis by including that relationship in its diegesis, but the story itself is stereotypical noir: a murderous love triangle in which the femme fatale enlists the aid of a male lover in order to escape marital tyranny. The stylistic and thematic features of *Final Analysis* are a patchwork of inherited noir tropes that strongly echo *Double Indemnity* and its many adaptations, as well as Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1948). One of the film's many *Vertigo* references, the female doubling between Heather and Diana serves to underscore the performativity of female ideals. Diana, like Judy in *Vertigo*, reinvents herself in the image of her double in the hopes of replicating a romance. However, like the enigmatic Madeleine, Heather is herself a replica. The infinitely regressing identities of both Heather and Madeleine remain unknown as their narratives end in death.

Diana's impersonation of Heather further reveals the terminal behavioral lessons of the femme fatale. Heather's systematic methods and complex goals reduce, in Diana's redeployment, to a bid for forming a couple. The femme's multiple personas have the potential to point out the artifice of behavioral acts and gesture on toward freedom of identity expression, but the received message is one of stereotype. Per usual, noir harnesses the exciting energies of subversion, particularly female subversion, and ultimately transfers its strength into fortifying tradition. The conscious appeal to female audiences' covert desires – misandric violence, illicitly procured wealth, sexual power – performs concomitant, if subconscious, policing work by assuaging them. Alluring femmes fatales and captivating depictions of criminality successfully channel subversive energies that might otherwise disrupt social functioning. The final effect of subversive

entertainment is placation. Audiences, having experienced catharsis as a result of vicarious contact with the forbidden, return peaceably to the status quo.

Exploring the critical literacy and pseudo-liberalism that characterizes much of neo-noir may be best approached by first examining an outlier that is both anti-femme fatale and anti-feminist. Because of its reactionary politics and hysterical pitch as a cautionary tale, *Fatal Attraction* (1987) remains among the most notorious noirs of recent film history. Unlike the majority of texts discussed here, *Fatal Attraction* flatly condemns transgression, and in so doing makes explicit the implied recuperative message of most noir.

The film disavows the subversion that the femme fatale usually represents, and works instead to glamorize the hearth and home. Beginning with a distinctively noir pan of a misty skyline, the camera moves toward one window of the many, and would typically enter through the window to find a couple smoking post-coital, arguing over a deal, or hatching a plan, revealing from the outset that problems brew in the domestic sphere. *Fatal Attraction* has a different agenda. The camera is forced to stop before entering the window; the wife draws the curtains. The private sphere, the patriarchal nuclear family, is thus preserved from interrogation and protected from harm.

Despite the film's overt interest in preservation, genre requirements compel its exploration of the transgressive, criminal, carnivalesque second life that characterizes film noir. The majority of the narrative evokes the spirit of carnival, as in a parody or perversion of normality. Dan Gallagher (Michael Douglas) has a brief affair with work acquaintance Alex Forrest (Glenn Close) while his beloved wife and daughter spend the weekend in the country. The femme fatale's usurpation of the wife/mother's place and

power occurs on a time-limited holiday: an unusual bachelor weekend for the settled husband and father. While mother and child are safely enshrined in a domestic, pastoral environment, the city and its transgressive possibilities awaken for Dan. A freak downpour signals this unhinging of norms and causes Dan and Alex to race in the rain for cover. The activities that ensue – their frenzied sexual encounters, drinking, and dancing – represent carnival at its height. The limited nature of carnival means that even the next day domestic norms begin to be reinstated between them, with Alex promising to let him do his work in peace as she makes him dinner.

Dan, however, is not interested in simulating domestic normality within carnival. His view is that carnival is over, their liaison must terminate, it is time for him to reinstate himself in his real life. When Alex refuses to allow carnival to expire, Dan, a lawyer, begins making appeals to law. Their dispute over who is in the wrong and what they each deserve takes on a litigious tone, constantly stymied by the fact that Alex will not cede the superior legality of Dan's stance. As Alex's intimidations increase, Dan tries to keep the secret of his affiliation with carnival a secret, but it ruptures continually into his normal life with her incessant phone calls, appearances, and later acts of terror. The first person with whom Dan shares his abject secret is his friend and law office partner. Their discussion takes place in the sanctuary of the law library, a bastion of male authority, knowledge, and social codes.

Meanwhile, endangered by Alex's unending carnival, the domestic world his wife represents becomes increasingly romanticized. The camera's gaze both sexualizes and softens the angelically beautiful Beth Gallagher (Anne Archer). She affirms her status as the feminine ideal through passive displays of her beauty as well as her wifely behavior,

offering Dan a back rub and a brandy when he appears agitated, deferring to his final decision in all things, and remaining unquestioning of even his most obvious lies. Beth's passivity halts only when Alex directly interferes with her role as wife and mother. In these moments, Beth asserts her authority as the patriarchal ideal. While Dan avoids the maniacally ringing telephone, Beth answers it. "This is Beth Gallagher," she calmly states, offering her married name to underscore her patriarchal status, "If you ever come near my family again, I'll kill you."

The height of the carnivalesque in the film takes place at an actual carnival. Alex abducts the Gallaghers' daughter from school and together they visit an amusement park. While the authentic mother races in panic to rescue her daughter, the carnivalesque mother and daughter race around the park, eating junk food and going on rides. Fast-paced camera movement and a string-heavy score intensify the perturbation of the scene. The chaotic revelry builds alongside the symphony, both of which must attain climax and then lapse into silence. The desire for climax and death expresses the growing desire for both the actual carnival and the Bakhtinian carnival to end.

Alex's carnivalesque enactment of the mother role demonstrates how extremes meld into similarities. Though externally Alex appears to be an aggressively confident business woman, internally she is fragile, psychotic, and pathetically envious of the stay-at-home mom. The most categorically fatal of femmes fatales uses her transgression to pursue conventionality. Her deepest desire is to have a child. Here again, *Fatal Attraction* overtly represents noir's concealed ideology. Rather than couch traditionalist messages in provocative guises, the film demonizes everything beyond the domestic patriarchal sphere and the primary, non-parodic life. Alex Forrest's career as well as her demands for

fair treatment and reproductive rights paint her as a feminist, but these occupations and philosophies prove merely alternate methods to accessing motherhood. The femme fatale act as a mating strategy recalls the previous chapter's discussion of *Gilda*. Like that film, *Fatal Attraction* offers an unconcealed glimpse of the underlying principles of both the femme and film noir.

The best films noirs grapple with many expressions of femininity occurring within the same woman. In these, the femme fatale is multi-faceted, and her complex, malleable identity is both threatening (she cannot be known) and culturally supported (she creates herself based on market demands). Because of *Fatal Attraction*'s disavowal of paradox, its blunt monsterization of female deviance debars any meaningful exploration of the femme's transgression. Its femme fatale claims none of the figure's usually appealing features. The visually striking Close, with her wild hair and imposing presence, intimates violence rather than sensuality. Her embodied conflation of sex and death informs the identical structure of the film's first sex scene and first fight scene – both take place in the kitchen amongst knives. The character's excessively sadomasochistic nature precludes audience identification and thereby denies true cathartic release.

*Fatal Attraction* opts out of noir's labyrinthine conversations on identity with the intention of dismissing performativity and advancing essentialist concepts inimical to feminism: the feminine Beth is essentially good and the masculine Alex is essentially bad. The film's absolutist stance on female identity leads to the fantastical vilification of Alex, to the extent that the process of killing her becomes an exercise in vampire slaying. After being strangled under water to unconsciousness, writes Suzanne Leonard, "Alex

rises back out of the tub, a specter of the ‘not dead’ ” (32). Leonard goes on to note that “the bathtub was in actuality a four-foot-deep tub specially built for the set, a fact which explains how Alex’s reemergence feels like she has lifted herself out of a coffin” (32). Alex’s unequivocal evil suggests that Beth, her opposite, is not only good but god-ordained. The unholy power held by Alex can only be quashed by the mother’s reprisal of her righteous power. It is Beth who at last kills Alex, putting a bullet through her heart.

By avoiding a more nuanced conversation on female identity, *Fatal Attraction* inadvertently loses contact with noir’s most powerful recuperative tool. Noir slyly supports the patriarchal status quo by cathartically releasing repressed energies and urging women to form themselves into desirable commodities. In so doing, film noir acknowledges the cultural demands placed on women’s identity while operating in and of itself as a cultural demand. Beth’s and Alex’s absolute constructions reduce the struggle between these competing ideas of femininity into a simplistic tug of war between good and evil.

The film’s aggressive message of patriarchal preservation was not quietly received. Susan Faludi epitomizes the enraged feminist response to *Fatal Attraction* and other neo-conservative texts in her major work *Backlash*. Faludi argues that the film fits squarely within a media trend of the late ’80s that shames and undermines the feminist agenda. While the anti-feminist backlash originated outside the film industry in magazine and television exposés on the self-inflicted ruin of working women, “Hollywood restated and reinforced the backlash thesis: American women were unhappy because they were too free, their liberation had denied them marriage and motherhood” (113). Alex Forrest’s life as a powerful executive makes her unfit for the idealized maternal life of

Beth Gallagher. The film proclaims that single, successful women go against nature and offers a paean to the patriarchal nuclear family. Both feminism and feminism's critique of patriarchal norms are thus rejected.

The film's re-entrenchment in traditionalist values takes part in a larger reactionary movement. According to Faludi, Hollywood held a financial interest in conforming to this cultural mood, with "moviemakers... relying more heavily on market research consultants, focus groups, and pop psychologists to determine content, guide production, and dictate the final cut" (113). Hollywood's embrace of the national mood results in the creation of a literal-minded noir. *Fatal Attraction*, like all the noirs discussed here, responds to audience desires. But while typical noirs proffer an excitingly transgressive second life to a constrained culture, *Fatal Attraction* offers a reassuringly staid primary life to a threatened patriarchy.

While feminism's response to *Fatal Attraction*'s essentialist doctrine is clear, the ambivalent messages put forth by other neo-noirs and erotic thrillers of the age interact with ongoing gender discourses in more complex ways. *Body Heat* (1981) and *Basic Instinct* (1992), which flank *Fatal Attraction*'s release date, eschew the recuperative impetus that force classic noir and nostalgic neo-noir to end with the femme fatale's death. These femmes seize the power available to women in modern society and continue unthwarted at the film's close. By taking an ambivalent stance on the femme's outcome, these films ideologically align with academic feminism rather than neo-conservatism.

As is the case for *Fatal Attraction*, the narrative decisions in *Body Heat*, *Basic Instinct*, and other potentially "feminist" noirs respond to preexisting cultural tastes. The profit to be had in appealing to the independent female sector, interested in the

possibilities of a politically enfranchised lifestyle, receptive to the jargon of emancipation, and eager to reap the proposed dividends of feminism, influenced film as it did all media.<sup>4</sup>

The neo-noir femme's transgressions continue to enact the Victorian female taboos of greed and sexual assertiveness, but these transgressions increasingly come to be portrayed as synonymous with the necessary skills of business world success. The equation between sexiness and business savvy made by neo-noir feminism results, as Tasker states, in "an evolving hybrid stereotype produced from a *femme fatale* defined by sexual power and an independent woman defined largely by professional success" (131). While the neo-femme exhibits impressive abilities to negotiate and influence, her overall success depends on masculine aid and her projected outcomes derive from patriarchal values.

The femme fatale's strategy of outsmarting men both useful and inconvenient to her plan has left noir's leading men with the unflattering epithet "chump." Despite the femme's apparent contempt for men, and her demonstrated ability to outwit them, she never acts alone nor in the company of other women. The narrative necessity of a fall guy, and the ease with which the femme can seduce men into obedience, partly explains her choice of male co-conspirators. In *Body Heat*, an adaptation of *Double Indemnity*, Matty Walker (Kathleen Turner) declares to her soon-to-be accomplice Ned Racine (William Hurt) that she likes men who are "not too smart." But even prior to the concocting of plots which require a fall guy answering to this description, neo-noir

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<sup>4</sup> Tasker also points to financial consideration regarding potential film franchises: "The demise of the Production Code, together with the desire to build in a sequel if possible, has meant that the *femme fatale* can (sometimes) survive to the end of the narrative and be successful in her schemes" (124-5).

femmes already choose dependency on men by opting for lucrative marriage as a shortcut to success.

The wealth and independence that the femme strives to attain through male aid generally evade her at the last. *Matty Walker* may be the first femme fatale to realize the abstract dreams of her predecessors. The investigation of the femme that traditionally informs the noir plotline only commences at *Body Heat*'s close, and its juxtaposition with the femme's happy ending results in a powerful commentary on the outcome of fatale desires that has been largely overlooked in scholarship on the erotic thriller. The film offers a glimpse into *Matty*'s heretofore shadowy prior life with the retrieval of her high school yearbook. She was Mary Ann Simpson then, and assigned the telling moniker, "The Vamp." Beneath her photograph, she states that her ambition is "To be rich and live in an exotic land." Evident from her reputation as a vamp (derived from vampire, a seductive woman who exploits men) and her demonstrated ability for role switching, the femme fatale role is an act *Matty* assumes early on, along with a new name, as a means to her ambitious ends.

In the final scene, *Matty* appears to have attained all her ambitions: she lounges on a tropical beach, having eluded capture and made off with the entirety of her husband's estate. She has reached at last a life of unchecked pleasure, free from the grip of male lovers and male law, free too from the need to perform for the male gaze. Her male companion now is a plaything. He sits on a lower chair, his fruity cocktail topped with a cherry, and she speaks to him curtly. Yet even in the paradise of her own devising, the femme's languor is marked by anxiety. The image of her enthusiastic black-and-white yearbook photo dissolves into a shot of her face in the sun, stationary and emotionless

though her eyes bat irritably, she releases sigh after sigh. After a fraught existence of oppression and vengeance, she has crested the hierarchy (the male Other beneath her now), only to find boredom instead of bliss. The implied simultaneity of Matty's unease and Ned's detection suggests that fear of discovery is the source of her worry, but an attentive viewing of her dissatisfaction with her dominated boyfriend offers another explanation. *Body Heat's* unique ending reveals that a flipped gender hierarchy reiterates the failures of the original construction.

Carnival's project, to invert the high and the low, maintains its exciting transgression only so long as it remains abnormal, challenged, tenuous, an exception to the social scheme. Basing a feminist femme fatale utopia around carnivalesque insubordination is impossible: as soon as the inversion of hierarchy has been accomplished, its transgressive potential evaporates. In place of the old hierarchy, a new hierarchy is established which must work to maintain power and quell opposition. While Matty is uneasy in paradise, an imprisoned Ned is figuring out the machinations of her master plan. Only the disempowered victim (who Matty once was) has the power to effect retributive change.

The femme's retributory powers reach pinnacle expression in *Basic Instinct*. Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone), the sole suspect in her lover's brutal murder, uses her sexuality and insouciance to hoodwink investigators, interrogators, and a lie detection test. Her culpability is glaringly evident: not only does she befriend known murderers, but she is also a mystery writer whose tales curiously presage real-life cases. The chump too reaches pinnacle expression with the recasting of Michael Douglas. Douglas reprises the reactionary role he established in *Fatal Attraction* as police detective Nick Curran.

Though each noir role victimizes Douglas, he is nevertheless represented as sexually confident, even macho. Miranda Sherwin in “Deconstructing the Male Gaze: Masochism, Female Spectatorship, and the Femme Fatale in *Fatal Attraction*, *Body of Evidence*, and *Basic Instinct*” finds his bravado to be at odds with his appearance. She claims that “for women, the basic instinct when confronted with Douglas’s body of evidence is ambivalence,” going on to assert that his very casting invokes “the myth that men are sexually desirable to women” (176). While his age and physical appearance may hinder some critics from accepting the depiction of Douglas as a desirable mate, the films work to express his desirability as a function of his authority. This authority is informed not only by his established cachet as an A-List actor, by his roles as lawyer, judge, detective, financier, and even U.S. President, but also from his inherited stature within Hollywood patriarchy as the son of actor Kirk Douglas.

Douglas as bastion of patriarchal might contends against the irreverent Catherine, a relative newcomer to Hollywood, one unconnected to patriarchal tradition and unassociated with its ideology. The narrative is thus free to intimate that Catherine’s femme fatale persona is her authentic identity. Evidence for the authenticity of Catherine’s transgressive spirit derives from the fact that her lethal conduct began during childhood and that her divergent sexuality is apparently innate, typified by her conflated homosexual and homicidal drives. The film opens on a fatal sex scene, whose fetishism and intensity will be revealed to be her norm. Catherine pulls a concealed ice pick from the covers and begins to stab her restrained lover ecstatically as she climaxes. The spider woman metaphor could not be more literally depicted. Since Catherine’s guilt is already established, the ensuing cat-and-mouse between Catherine and Nick does not have as

much to do with revealing her crimes as dramatizing her deftness at evading discovery and standardization.

Nick's status as representative of the threatened patriarchy impels him to contain and punish Catherine's homicidal impulses, but Nick's personal manhood is also under threat if he cannot successfully convert her promiscuity and bisexuality to monogamous heterosexuality. That the femme fatale as depicted in *Basic Instinct* is not solely or even equally interested in men provides interesting insight to the figure's performed identity. Katherine Farrimond offers a positive reading of the bisexual femme in "Stay Still So We Can See Who You Are': Anxiety and Bisexual Activity in the Contemporary Femme Fatale Film." Farrimond admits that the femme's bisexuality works in traditionally noir ways to demonstrate her duality, intimate that her essential nature will come out at last, and emphasize that her sexual attraction to husbands and chumps alike is staged. However, Farrimond ultimately argues that the neo-femme's bisexuality produces a liberating discussion on non-fixed identity. The author posits that cultural "erasure of bisexuality as a valid identity" is analogous to the cultural desire to render stable the female Other, particularly in terms of her relationship to men (144). More problematically interpreted, the modern bisexual femme fatale adopts open sexuality to heighten her appeal to men. This suggests that sexual orientation is yet another garment to be donned and discarded in the complex performance of female identity.

While defining and delimiting forms of female identity and sexuality is a major theme in noir, certain films avoid its most evident methods. In David Lynch's experimental noir *Mulholland Drive* (2001), for example, the bisexuality of the femme is not associated with her ambitions. A starlet leaves the scene of a car accident with

amnesia and meets up with an aspiring actress, newly arrived in Hollywood. Their relationship quickly develops from compassion to passion, and, on one side, to love. This unequal homosexual relationship is an impediment to the heterosexual romance the starlet is cultivating with a high-profile film director. However, after announcing their engagement, she kisses a new girlfriend in her fiancé's presence without reservation. Bisexuality was not conducive to her lucrative heterosexual coupling, but neither does that coupling supplant her other sexual interests. The fluidity of female sexuality elsewhere forced to condense into genuine heterosexuality and exhibitionist lesbian acts is, in Lynch's work, allowed simultaneous existence.

Lynch typically skewers the formal conventions of film so thoroughly that even as he is offering up stereotypes, the significance behind the stereotypes has been radically altered. Frida Beckman considers Lynch's refusal to provide narrative coherency as particularly transformative for the femme fatale: "The disciplining of female sexuality as narrative climax" in typical noir is perpetually deferred (33). Beckman charges that critical attempts to recuperate teleological meaning from Lynch's films reverse the director's progress both in terms of narrative and female representation. His films' political potential lies in their very refusal to align with the narrative paradigm and culminate with the reinstallation of the status quo.

Lynch successfully frees noir from some of its strongest bonds, such as the revelation of Truth, the return of diurnal law, and the punishment or domestication of the femme. And yet the femme fatale still appears constrained to pre-decided fate. Lynch's technique of showing simultaneous or circular realities can not free the femme fatale from her performance. Indeed, a circular narrative may even underscore the inescapable

nature of the femme fatale script. While the woman in question may believe her enactment of the femme fatale affords her agency, the inflexible characteristics of the role inevitably determine her outcome.

The Hollywood setting of *Mulholland Drive* intensifies its commentary on identity performance. The amnesiac starlet takes her name from a poster advertising Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*. Gilda, a pseudo-femme whose characterization reveals the inauthenticity of all femmes, provides the lost woman with temporary identity. She does not adopt the character name of Gilda, but the “real” name, Rita. Rita Hayworth’s personal history as Margarita Carmen Cansino, a Spanish-American girl wholly transformed by the Hollywood star system, interjects this choice with irony (“Rita”). The identity of “Rita Hayworth” is a performance on par with any of her acting roles.

Rita adopts her new identity while gazing upon herself in a mirror in which the poster is also reflected. She does not directly face her femme fatale predecessor, but instead engages with both the poster and her own reflection as two objects of her female gaze. The performativity of the femme, along with the stock features that appear in her every rendition, affirms that the femme fatale act is learned by example. No single femme fatale invented the persona; she copies an already existing cultural archetype. The female gaze discussed in the previous chapter takes on new significance in the era of neo-noir, given audience’s postmodern literacy with the conventions of fiction.

Over time, the femme fatale figure has increasingly come to represent postmodern understandings of performed femininity. However, the femme’s many identities are neither fluid nor indicative of an internal, authentic self. Instead, the femme moves through a series of static identities, prefabricated by a consumer-sensitive market and the

iconography of Hollywood. The femme has been popularly and critically conflated with feminism through the same process as “Play it again, Sam” has become a part of *Casablanca*’s script. Even as she is valued for prompting certain salient discussions on female identity, the figure’s attendant features of acquisitiveness, inauthenticity, and amorality must be interrogated.

In the era of neo-noir and erotic thrillers, women’s social stature experienced rapid escalation. Though the femme’s sometimes-victorious criminality in these films represents women’s rising power, their female identities are restricted to a set of regressive, patriarchally scripted acts. The limitations of the intra-female binary (mother/femme fatale) is inadequately remedied in the subsequent noir cycle by adding more stock characters to women’s list of possible selves. But for the neo-noirs of neo-conservative America, two female identities must still suffice. At the close of *Basic Instinct*, Nick and Catherine appear as an established couple, whose relationship Nick is steering toward patriarchal authentication by outlining their future raising “rugrats” and living “happily ever after.” Catherine harbors the vengeance that the femme recurrently suggests is women’s only other option to domestication: her trusty ice pick awaits use beneath their near-conjugal bed.

## CHAPTER IV

### ARE YOU A JACKIE OR A MARILYN? COMMODIFIED FEMALE TYPES AND THE POSTFEMINIST FATALE IN *GONE GIRL*

*You're the King, baby, I'm your Queen / Find out what you want, be that girl for a month  
/ Wait, the worst is yet to come... / 'Cause darling I'm a nightmare dressed like a  
daydream.*

Taylor Swift, "Blank Space"

*Feminism has not only transformed the cultural landscape but, as we shall see later, has  
become the very model of morality for our time.*

Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*

The femme fatale, an archetype of both literature and film, has, in twenty-first-century culture, traversed the bounds of fiction to become a widely-emulated model for lived female identity. Given the media-saturated quality of postmodern life, even the claim that a boundary separates life and fiction may be outdated. The permeability of any divide, if one yet exists, has resulted in a contemporary characterization of both femininity and feminism as dependent on superficial performance. The feminist persona as represented by the girl power anthems of Taylor Swift and Beyoncé, social media politics, and recent derivations of film noir, all propagate an understanding of feminism as vengeful, violent, and highly sexualized. The resemblance of this breed of feminism to the classic femme fatale evidences the latter's status as a mainstream postfeminist icon.

The easily digestible brand of feminism touted by popular culture supports female vanity and violence, regressive (though seemingly transgressive) characteristics that are synonymous with the femme fatale. In her self-parodic music video “Blank Space,” Taylor Swift embraces popular opinion of her as a man-killer and offers a typical femme fatale performance. She portrays herself as an extremely entitled, easily enraged woman who adopts a male plaything and eventually kills him with his own golf clubs. Femme fatale imagery and behavior of this kind proliferate in film, television, and music. Though these industries work to conflate the femme fatale persona with anti-patriarchal sentiment, her deployment generally holds little political weight. Her significance is instead restricted to identity performance. The ubiquity of the femme fatale in popular culture raises questions as to the status of female identity in a modern commercial environment in which selfhood has become the contentious product of fiction and fashion.

The contemporary femme fatale aligns both in time and ideology with the recent, pop culture derivation of feminism. In *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-noir Cinema*, Samantha Lindop points out that around the same time as the femme fatale reappeared on screens in her neo-noir guise, postfeminism emerged as a concept.<sup>1</sup> While feminism aims to give voice to the silenced and power to the subjugated, postfeminism eschews genuine sociopolitical aims and instead “promotes the individualistic, consumer driven rhetoric of neoliberalism” and “begins and ends with the media, popular culture,

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<sup>1</sup> Lindop’s conception of the femme fatale as a model for the neo-liberal postfeminist subject draws largely on the gender and media work of Rosalind Gill, whose advertising analyses feature in Chapter III. The present study continues Lindop’s ruminations, but pursues the femme’s superficial transgressions into her societal reverberations, whereas Lindop directs her critique of the stagnancy of critical readings of the femme into examining the figure’s underemphasized variations: the *homme fatal* and the *fille fatale*.

and advertising” (11). Lindop draws a meaningful parallel between the female subject as constructed by capitalist, neoliberal ideology and the femme fatale, “who has always been an active, calculating character” in the individualistic manner the capitalist market demands (14). The femme fatale embodies the postfeminist call for women to “self-manage and self-discipline” in pursuit of a commercially successful identity (15). Ironically, the femme fatale is typically pursued by men who wish to discover and check her behavioral aberrations, but no one could be as adept at policing female behavior as the femme herself.

The proclivity of femmes fatales to self-manage and derive power through their performances of identity appears along the continuum from Lydia Gwilt to Catherine Tramell. The identity implications of all previous femme fatale narratives find postmodern expression in Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl*. Amy Dunne is the quintessential femme fatale, not because she sweeps batlike down deserted alleys, smoking cigarette and smoking gun in tow, but because she masterfully constructs a multitude of employable identities. The true talent of the femme and the ultimate import of her characterization surpass the motifs of her sensational or noir environments. The femme is self-aware of the constructedness of identity and controls her own in pursuit of power. After staging her own abduction/murder, Amy watches from a distance as her straying husband attempts to defend himself from the accusations of both the law and the media. After a lifetime of serially adopting identities, she transfers the onus of performance onto the heretofore exempt neoliberal subject: the self-confident and successful male.

*Gone Girl* represents a summation of the established femme fatale narrative in terms of performativity and also in terms of genre and market. Those forms of media in

which the femme fatale has commonly appeared – mass-produced, sensational, marketed for profit – pointedly pursue audience identification. The nineteenth-century novels that feature villainous female characters were published as multiple volumes, appearing in periodicals over the course of months or circulating in lending libraries. These distribution methods aimed to maximize the number of readers and intensify suspenseful content. The modern film industry too strategizes to protract audience engagement and augment profit by capitalizing on the success of a novel or series. The modern media franchise operates on many of the same principles as nineteenth-century publishing. Incremental publication and transmedia adaptation extend audience experience and encourage association.

The enveloping experience of film, its unique capacity to fill the senses of the viewer and orchestrate emotion, aims to recreate the sensory experiences of life but ends in exceeding the possibilities of reality. The notion that fiction's example usurps the lived experience, as though fiction were the original and life its palimpsest, is central to the *Gone Girl* narrative. Quoted at length in Chapter I, Amy's husband Nick Dunne decries the pervasion of fiction into life. Poignantly underscoring his testimony on the inescapable reach of fiction, Hollywood quickly adapted Flynn's *New York Times* best-selling novel into a star-studded blockbuster.<sup>2</sup> In spite of the narrative's self-conscious recognition of fiction's interference with authenticity, the *Gone Girl* franchise takes part in the distribution of rote characterization. The elongated contact forged with audiences by triple decker novels and Hollywood super franchises alike results in intensified

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<sup>2</sup> Because of the cohesiveness of the novel and the film (Flynn also wrote the screenplay), this chapter will draw on both versions.

identification, a process through which popular media both ensures loyalty and offers behavioral models. This process proves uniquely responsible for the propagation of female types, of which the femme fatale is both a particular example and an indicator of the overarching performative mode.

*Gone Girl*, both as a narrative and a consumer product, effectively showcases the insidious advancement of fiction into lived experience. In order to appeal to audiences, fictional characters and situations must be recognizable, “life-like.” In order for real life to be felt as fully as fiction, it must be molded into fictional tropes. In order to provide catharsis, fiction must be crafted in imitation of life, which has since been crafted in imitation of fiction. This process obstructs any clear understanding of which constitutes the original, and which the derivation. In a brilliant investigation of the gothic fiction heritage behind contemporary accounts of true crime, Nicola Nixon finds that the banality and chaotic non-narrative of the lives of serial killers are reconfigured into literature by their interviewers, biographers, and even at times their lawyers. “The ‘real’ becomes inadequate and the ‘literary solutions’ become crucial,” Nixon affirms, going on to describe the actual criminal as “an inhuman reflection of a fully humanized fiction” (223, 225). Such a fictional heritage is behind Amy’s characterization, as well as her crime.

In intertextual terms, Amy’s fictional heritage is, of course, the femme fatale. In several, surprisingly specific ways, she resembles scheming women from sensational literature through to neo-noir. Shared traits include diary or fiction writing, violent tactics, and methods of placating men. However, Amy is not in pursuit of enfranchisement in the same way as her fatale predecessors. Wealthy, educated, already

enshrined in New York society, Amy strategizes as a femme fatale because manipulating identity best utilizes her talents – talents common amongst women educated by fictional role models and held to a standard of extreme self-management. While Victorian femmes lack her resources, and therefore their motives are more pragmatic, they too find that performativity satisfyingly exercises the affective skills demanded of women while frustrating the assumption that women are as they appear. Lydia Gwilt of Wilkie Collins' *Armadale*, an exemplary femme fatale text of the 1860s referenced in Chapter I, previews many of Amy's feelings and practices.

Lydia Gwilt seeks self-determination and a comfortable life, but there are no legal avenues available to Lydia to pursue them. She harnesses the powers left to her as a woman and an object of the gaze by deploying feminine wiles and forging an alternate route to success. However, the wealthy man she might marry is intolerably stupid, and she chooses instead to marry his half-brother, who is poor but admirable. Like Amy, after marrying and putting aside her darker impulses, Lydia finds the confines and loneliness of marriage stultifying because it checks her ever-multiplying production of identity. She writes in her diary, "I think I shall look back through these pages, and live my life over again when I was plotting and planning, and finding a new excitement to occupy me every new hour of the day" (483). Lydia rereads her personal account of performances as she would a beloved novel.

When female power issues from performative control, the impetus to conceal and calculate interferes with authenticity at the deepest levels of the psyche. To varying degrees, the interiority recorded in both Lydia's and Amy's diaries are as calculated as their public personas. Juxtaposing the records of the two women illustrates how the

demands of performance have intensified over time. Lydia's diary is shown to be almost wholly authentic, full of temperamental vacillations between euphoria and self-loathing. Performative moments only at times jar her honest outpour. A century and half later, the demands of performativity have become so pervasive that, in Amy's diary, it is truth that momentarily disrupts pure invention.

An intervening femme fatale employs an overtly fictional play on personal journaling with a similar aim to both reveal and conceal. In *Basic Instinct*, examined in Chapter III, Catherine Tramell authors mystery novels whose ostensibly fictional plots resemble her real-life crimes. The genius of Catherine's novels is that they both incriminate her and offer an alibi. As she tells her panel of interrogators, "I'd have to be pretty stupid to write a book about a killing and then kill him the way I described in my book. I'd be announcing myself as the killer." For Amy, the objective of her diary (a fictional work on par with one of Catherine's novels) is to announce her husband as her killer.<sup>3</sup> She produces seven years' worth of entries, using and discarding various pens, cross-referencing her memories, real and invented, with old day planners and world history. She leaves behind a record of emotional and physical abuse that ends with what Nick calls the "convenient" statement, "This man may kill me."

The pronounced fabrication of Amy's diary entries points to the falsity of her entire lived experience. Like the novel's his and hers chapters, "truth" in the film is profoundly synonymous with "perspective." An individual crafts personal truth through the same irresistible process by which all members of postmodern, media-saturated

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<sup>3</sup> The commonalities between *Basic Instinct* and *Gone Girl* include murder method. Amy too slashes a man's throat during sexual climax, though with a box cutter rather than an ice pick. Tellingly, Janet Maslin's review of *Gone Girl* begins by describing the novel as "ice-pick-sharp" (n.p.).

society fabricate feelings and memories: with a sophisticated taste for narrative. As Nick mourns, the second-hand experience is always better.

Another key fictional heritage informing Amy's identity is embedded in the text. From her earliest days, Amy's real life has been informed by a parallel, fictional one. Her psychologist parents, curiously unaware of the potentially damaging effects of their enterprise, write a series of children's books based on their daughter. Amy's various pursuits and stages of maturation are idealized and perfected in book form. Whatever Amy does, Amazing Amy does better. Each book ends with a multiple-choice quiz to hammer home the volume's behavioral lessons. This practice presages Amy's future career (after receiving her own psychology degree from Harvard): penning personality quizzes for women's magazines. A), B), and C) options pepper her first person narrative. Even more disturbingly, the quizzes have correct answers, the attendant suggestion being that for women there is never a possibility of acting outside of a pre-decided script. Not only do Amy's multiple choices underscore the static nature of imposed female types, but they offer "literary solutions" to the "problem" of life's non-narrative.

Amy's crime too derives from narrative's example. The components of her scheme are culled directly from true crime entertainment. The film depicts her taking notes from garish paperbacks and true crime TV shows, studiously turning her head between page and screen. Glamorized representations of crime provide her with an instructional template. Her actions are so magnificently orchestrated, so planned, so teleologically gratifying because they are based on fiction. Unlike the rash and unreasonable acts of real crime, her movements adhere to narrative laws. Amy, whose

very being is forecasted by fiction, is habituated to the perfection available through following its example.

Despite the diversity of Amy's acts and her ingenuity in portraying them, all possible roles add up to a finite number and none are original. Their formulations develop from the market-sensitive, psychologically informed work of the media, which packages and sells various female archetypes to receptive female audiences. The many incarnations of Amy are culled from a cultural fund of flat female types. Though Amy's acknowledgment of the instability of identity seems to align with postmodernist views (such as Butler's on gender performance), Amy selects identities based on their potential utility rather than their potential authenticity. Her knowledge of performativity does not bring her closer to a personal truth but perpetually supplies her with performances to master. Indeed, her roster of possible selves undermines the very notion of authenticity.

While Amy circulates through numerous personas, she ultimately finds that all such stock female types (be it "Brainy Ironic Girl" or "Boho Babe") are variations of the "Cool Girl" (318). The Cool Girl, who is both one of the boys and "above all hot," prioritizes masculine social codes and sexual desire while suppressing such reviled female traits as challenging male authority, disagreeing, holding expectations for a male significant other's behavior, and disliking anal sex (300). In an invective against the Cool Girl widely discussed in pop culture journalism, Amy charges that it is the one female type all women aim to be and all men essentially want. Amy lays blame on women who, rather than assemble an identity intended for greater return than landing a mate, "colluded in our degradation! Pretty soon Cool Girl became the standard girl" (301). Amy does not acknowledge that her master plan to stage her own murder and let her husband be

prosecuted for the crime reduces to the pursuit of a man. Rather than direct her immense talents toward professional success, she strategizes first to punish him for his marital indiscretions and then to reaffirm their marital bond.

Amy's role-switching capabilities are extraordinary, but more because of her ultimate dedication to them than because her employment of fiction in crafting identity is innovative. Emily Johansen articulates this idea by positing that the eerie, gothic feel of *Gone Girl* arises from its very normalcy. She contends that "while readers might *want* to see Amy as both perpetrator of transgressive actions and possessor of an abnormal personality, Flynn goes to great pains to reiterate how Amy's actions follow the logic of normal neoliberal subject formation" (Johansen 42). Johansen further claims that the gothic qualities of Amy's story (the everyday criminality and perversion of ideals which critics also peg as noir) derive from her conformity to the status quo, rather than her disruption of it.

If a performative, postfeminist female identity is the status quo, then the academic tendency to read such characters as transgressive must come under critique. While Lindop finds the major weakness of feminist film studies today to be a reluctance to engage with the newest films and television shows, instead rearticulating the feminist stance vis-à-vis canonic works, there is a simultaneous and equally problematic disinclination to engage with the modern social climate, instead reaffirming the traditional strength of oppressive systems. This stagnancy in academic arguments continues to validate certain feminist points without qualifying their currency. Most relevant to the femme fatale's performativity is Mulvey's point that men injuriously enforce women's to-be-looked-at-ness.

Mulvey attributes the visual objectification of women to systemically male-dominated filmmaking. However, the supposed suppression arising from being viewed does not take the hyper-visibility of modern culture into account. While men are largely responsible for filmic representations of dangerous women, increasingly women promulgate the femme fatale narrative in a more democratic sphere. Social media revolve around personal beauty and identity marketing. Having online “visibility,” amassing “followers,” and garnering a high number of views directly equate to success. And the voyeuristic, narcissistic, multi-authored internet world is, as Susan Faludi notes, largely generated by women. The author of *Backlash* defended feminism from masculine cultural aggressors disguised as noir filmmakers twenty years earlier, but today finds that feminism is endangered from within. In her 2013 article “Facebook Feminism, Like It or Not,” Faludi declares, “Nearly 60 percent of the people who do the daily labor on Facebook – maintaining their pages, posting their images, tagging their friends, driving the traffic – are female” (43). The many online arenas for asserting and curating identity are primarily utilized by women. Faludi further states that “in the postindustrial economy, feminism has been retooled as a vehicle for expression of the self, a ‘self’ as marketable consumer object, valued by how many times it’s been bought – or, in our electronic age, how many times it’s been clicked on” (42). Far from Mulvey’s theory that to be gazed upon is to be disempowered, commanding the attention of the gaze represents the height of contemporary female power.

The femme fatale both portends and takes part in this trend of hyper-visibility and performance. Amy’s obsessive need to be viewed even prompts her to invent voyeurs. Her school friend Hilary Handy (the proverbial sidekick) was pleasing to Amy so long as

she fulfilled the gazing function. When Hilary began to command some attention herself, Amy retaliated by planting evidence of Hilary's stalking her. She convinced Hilary to dye her hair a matching shade of blonde and then to declare to Amy's mother (under the pretext of a practical joke) that she was the "new Amy" (Flynn 110). Finally, Amy broke her own arm in order to simulate the jealous stalker's revenge. A past boyfriend whose attention strayed came to be similarly punished. The postfeminist subject obsessively defines her significance through the attention of the gaze, both male and female.

*Gone Girl* represents a culmination of the contemporary conundrum of gendered identity through its focus on the traditional couple. Marriage, as the central liaison from which all social bonds emerge, reveals the pathological potential of acculturated identity requirements. Amy's tactics advise women to act as eternal victims, wrest power through criminal, nocturnal means, and tyrannize men for their failures to live up to the standard of fiction. Nick, the marital partner without money, family pride, or the upper hand (in effect, the new age wife), is silenced from expressing his dissatisfaction or his own sense of victimization. He keeps records of Amy's slights and punishments in a shoebox that his sister names his "little box of hate." The shoe brand – New Balance – labels the reversed state of gender relations.

Nick oscillates between competing feelings of dependence on and bitterness toward women. An unloving, misogynistic father, unhinged by dementia, represents the broken and tyrannical patriarchy Nick reviles. Simultaneously, he is disgusted by women's expectations for men's subservience. When Nick's twin sister Margo lectures him before an important television appearance – "Remember to play up the doofus husband, Nick. 'I was an idiot. I was a fuck up. Everything was my fault' " – he replies

with some hostility, “So, what men are supposed to do in general.” The performance training team, consisting of Nick’s sister and his superstar lawyer, hits him with red jelly beans when he fails to appear sufficiently hangdog. Margo fires a jelly bean at Nick when he makes this last comment, but Nick catches it in his mouth. The film playfully confirms the veracity of Nick’s sentiment.

Amy’s greatest victory lies in compelling her husband to perform for the gaze as women do. Nick complains, not without admiration, “She stage-managed me.” When the search for Amazing Amy becomes national news, Nick’s language, appearance, and behaviors come under public scrutiny. His boyish candor and Bible Belt compulsion for politeness work against him. In order to assuage public opinion (as his razzle-dazzle lawyer reminds him, a jury will be amassed from people who follow the news), Nick must learn new roles. His privileged position as a successful, handsome, educated, upper-middle-class white male once equated to an archaic exemption from performative demands. His entrance into media attention signals his initiation into postmodern visual identity.

Despite Nick’s increasing agility with performance, women’s greater familiarity with managing the gaze and their correspondingly more adept use of both traditional and new media continually threaten his public image. The film repeatedly portrays women’s media use as calculating and injurious, from the female daytime talk show host who incessantly analyses Nick’s behavior, to the tanned and manicured fortysomething Shawna Kelly who snaps an incriminating selfie with him at the Find Amazing Amy headquarters. Forced to become self-analytical and thus feminine in regard to his image, he anxiously demands that Shawna delete the photo or at least not “share” it – a verb

utterly dominated by its social media significance. Public upbraiding generated from these sources prompts Nick to defensively announce at Amy's candlelight vigil, "I may not behave for the cameras," a statement worded "I may not always *perform* for the cameras [emphasis added]" in the final shooting script. Before taking the damning photo, Shawna's cell phone is already in front-facing camera mode. She waves her hands during their conversation, rendering Nick in Dutch angles in the reflective screen. The controlling, deciding "male" gaze which transforms subjects into objects is, in *Gone Girl*, resoundingly no longer wielded by men.

There are only two female characters who do not use media against Nick, one of whom is his initially obedient mistress, twenty-three-year-old Andie. When Nick quizzes her as to whether she has mentioned him on her Facebook, she exclaims, "Facebook! ... I'm not stupid." Andie, aware that published identities are vulnerable to criticism, nevertheless later admits their affair to the press and reveals her ability to perform for the gaze. By appearing in virginal, schoolgirl garb, she casts Nick in the co-starring role of predatory teacher.

The other woman unassociated with media, Margo, maintains her divergent stance, but her separation from "normal" female behavior appears isolating. Her crude, tomboy mannerisms align her developmentally with her brother, with whom she shares her only demonstrated relationship. Margo evinces her derogatory attitude toward women who would damage her brother by labeling Amy a "bitch," Andie a "super-twat," and by sporting a t-shirt that reads "Protect Your Nuts." While disapproving of women's manipulations, Margo does not fail to recognize the power of controlling the gaze. She is the first to alert Nick to the necessity of modulating his visible behavior. On only the

second day after Amy's disappearance she instructs Nick, "You've been up all night. You want to look like you've been up all night."

As part of the voyeuristic power shift between male and female, husband and wife, Amy makes herself invisible. Hiding out in the Ozarks, slowly gaining weight, her hair dyed a mousy brown, Amy finds herself unscrutinized for the first time. She carries a handkerchief to wipe her fingerprints and to give off a "vague impression" of Blanche DuBois, another woman who ceased to be looked at with age (375). This performative gesture is largely lost on her few backwoods companions, her only remaining audience. Amy moves into anonymity and assumes the position of the viewer. She obsessively watches the story of her own murder unfold on television. The film depicts her multiple times glassy-eyed before the news, her unreserved consumption of the media equated with her mindless consumption of junk food. Amy ultimately buys into the performance Nick generates. She begins to plan for their reunion once Nick's on-screen performance aligns with her desires for his identity.

When Amy can no longer fund her anonymous lifestyle, she seeks the aid of former beau and enduring admirer, Desi Collings. The succor she anticipated, however, quickly becomes stifling control. In the outside world, Nick is caught in the media's newly female gaze. In her sequestered state, Amy is caught in Desi's traditional male gaze. Her subjugation repeats the past in a narrow sense because he was a former boyfriend and more globally because it revitalizes the traditional power dynamic of the gaze as described by Mulvey.

Desi's surveillance brings the concept of the male gaze to maximum expression. A plethora of cameras constantly monitor the many rooms, windows, and entrances of his

high-tech lake house. He seeks to know and control Amy. The entire lake house vignette is replete with references to the ultimate importance of female appearance. “The sooner you look like yourself, the sooner you’ll feel like yourself,” Desi assures Amy, before leaving her with the somewhat menacing remark, “I’m looking forward to my reunion with Amy Elliot.” His statement suggests that she is not even present until she conforms to his visual expectations, and simultaneously strips her of her married name. The control over Amy that his gaze seeks is confounded first by her own deviation from his visual expectations and second by the nominal possession of another man, “Dunne.”

Desi attempts to control Amy by rendering her hyper-visible – she responds with her most triumphant of identity performances. First she fulfils Desi’s desires for her identity by returning to her blonde, lean, polished “self.” Once his gaze is satisfied with her performance, she turns her attention to the surveillance cameras. One day as he departs, she dips the front edge of her nightie in a glass of red wine. Tying a ribbon around one ankle, she lopes toward one of the glass doors ceaselessly monitored by unblinking cameras. She hammers against the glass, clasp her bleeding front in horror. Her performance of victimization is flawless. Later, when being questioned by the police, she plaintively requests that they find the tapes. The recordings will both corroborate her story and give her performance the credit it deserves.

Flynn herself applauds Amy’s performative acumen. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Flynn admits briefly worrying that her work would be taken as anti-feminist, before arriving at the conclusion that “women shouldn’t be expected to only play nurturing, kind caretakers” (Buckley). In direct refutation of that unilateral female type, Amy “knows every trope there is. She’s a storyteller, she’s a studier, and she has

absolutely no compunction about using the female victim role, using the femme fatale role.” Flynn, like many other creators and critics, insists that female multiplicity is the radical solution to restrictive female norms.<sup>4</sup> And yet, as Flynn’s creation so astutely demonstrates, having a wardrobe of potential selves merely provides for a greater array of restrictive norms.

Amy is not so much interested in altering the cultural systems that produce regulative female types as she is in mastering their deployment. Her cynical awareness of female tropes makes her identity performance a parody, but, as is the case for any drag show or temporary carnival, bouts of parody do not have lasting effect on the status quo. Her final desire is not to drastically reimagine her life and free herself from her unfaithful, subpar husband, but to better structure their fictional coupledness so that her imitation of life will never be ruptured again. With the unhappy couple reunited before the eyes of the nation, Amy insists to Nick, “I need you to do your part,” by which she means, “play your part.” Her directive is both a crowning statement as to the lived fiction that creates “reality” and the “self,” and an utterly normal comment. These are not deranged words issuing from an eccentric criminal, but an everyday idiom whose significance often goes unprobed. Amy’s beliefs and behaviors are not abnormal; she merely brings their implications to crescendo. The self-regulating performances so

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<sup>4</sup> The NPR article “The ‘Girl’ in the Title: More Than a Marketing Trend” proposes that the preponderance of novel titles containing the word “girl” (*Gone Girl*, *Girl on the Train*, *Girl in the Dark*, *Girls on Fire*) is due to the word’s status as nouveau shorthand for explorations of universal female themes. However, another marketing tactic may be at work. The titling trend serves to relay to potential female readers that this book offers yet another transgressive female type primed for emulation. The failure of commercial transgression to truly transgress also figures in the fraught word choice. “Girl” is diminutive, rife with connotations of controllability and sexual exploitation.

associated with the femme fatale are commonplace in the contemporary reality of curated female identity.

*Gone Girl*'s interrogation of female identity performances ultimately forces recognition of their prevalence in contemporary life. The resemblance of Amy's practices to real world female values is visible in the particular identity constructions of celebrities who are popular amongst women. In a 2014 BuzzFeed article, Anne Helen Petersen identifies actress and pop culture icon Jennifer Lawrence as a fully performative, pseudo-transgressive female type and the pinnacle expression of Flynn's Cool Girl. Much like Amy, Lawrence is neither responsible for the cultural impetus to perform nor for the invention of her performed type. Instead, Petersen finds Lawrence to be merely the most recent and fully realized iteration in a lengthy history of female celebrity Cool Girls whose identity performances are tailored for the comfort and interest of men and the adoring identification of other women.<sup>5</sup>

The Cool Girl is demarcated not only by her womanly perfection but also by her boyish imperfection. By adapting stereotypically masculine behaviors (bawdy humor, sexual availability, an absence of emotional excess), women allow themselves to be fetishized and thus assimilated into male culture. While transgressive vis-à-vis traditional femininity, a reworked but equally performative female identity such as the Cool Girl bears only superficial signs of noncompliance. All prescriptive identities are ultimately conducive to normative gender roles because they continue to demand women's affective

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<sup>5</sup> Petersen points to Jane Fonda as a foregoing Cool Girl who lost her status when she disclosed uncomfortable political opinions. "The Cool Girl had gone rogue," Petersen states, "and the world soured on her accordingly" (n.p.). The non-ideal qualities of Lawrence, in contrast, only superficially diverge from inherited feminine codes of behavior.

labor. Akane Kanai finds that models of female behavior such as Lawrence actively “determine normative femininity in a postfeminist regulatory environment” (232). The performance of female identity includes both overt fiction and quotidian behavior management, a breadth which implies that postfeminist strictures on women’s conduct never cease.

Like all Cool Girls and femmes fatales, Amy’s genius lies in her consummate dedication to managing her performed identity. Unlike most femmes, she accomplishes her ends by undertaking the only role consistently left unplayed: the mother. Amy becomes pregnant with Nick’s child in order to ensure his cooperation.<sup>6</sup> Since the femme fatale’s body promotes death, not life, Amy’s pregnancy occurs not from reproductive intercourse but a somewhat diabolical plan involving Nick’s frozen semen sample. The viewer’s revulsion to the notion of the femme fatale conceiving life finds diegetic expression in the reaction of Margo, who mourns the impending birth as if it were an impending death. In the novel, Nick anticipates his role as father will be to “unhook, unlatch, debarb, undo everything” Amy does (551). And yet, despite the dread of both Margo and Nick, and the audience’s initial reaction of horror, Amy’s pregnancy opens up the possibility of the family unit returning to its conventional structure and strength. Amy’s carnivalesque perversion of normalcy may swing back into normative territory with the birth of a child and the reification of the patriarchal family (in the novel, the

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<sup>6</sup> The incongruence of Amy’s fatal maternity recalls another noir femme whose pregnancy is portrayed as unnatural. Alex Forrest of *Fatal Attraction* claims to be pregnant with Dan Gallagher’s child and, like Amy, hopes to use the pregnancy to leverage a life with her chosen mate. Alex’s claim is later ratified by her obstetrician, and yet the film maintains skepticism about the validity of her pregnancy. Despite the femme’s maturation as a fictional character and a feminist model, she consistently betrays her confinement to archetype. While she is imbued with feminist significance, she retains telling vestiges of her regressive characterization: biblically barren and deserving of a punitive death.

fetus' sex is revealed to be male). Indeed, carnival's final gesture is to bring new life to the status quo. Here, Bakhtin's arresting image of the pregnant hag quite literally illustrates the conception of carnival as "a pregnant death, a death that gives birth" to the normative, extra-carnival life. (25).

While the Cool Girl's apparent suggestion is non-threat (coalescence with patriarchal codes) and the femme fatale's apparent suggestion is ultimate threat (subversion of patriarchal codes), the figures elide in their shared pseudo-feminism. Since her Victorian issuance, the fictional femme fatale has been used as pop culture shorthand for a particularly marketable breed of feminism. Amy's proposed suicide method elucidates the femme fatale's erroneous conflation of narcissistic will with feminist principles. She reads her marital situation as indicative of larger masculine domination and her revenge accordingly aims to comment on women's historically limited options. For her death, she muses in voiceover, "I'll go out on the ocean with a handful of pills and a couple of stones. If they find my body, they'll know that Nick dumped his beloved like garbage, and she floated down past all the other abused, unwanted, inconvenient women." The film translates the novel's imagery into the oneiric visual of Amy's white corpse drifting through blue green waters, past blankly staring fish and ribbons of seaweed. Her suicide method forcibly recalls that of Virginia Woolf. While Woolf's death was due in large part to worsening mental illness, it has also often been understood as a final, resounding protest against women's disempowerment. Amy pays homage to both the feminist figure of Woolf and the surrounding critical consensus on her suicide's larger significance. Amy's very identity similarly arises from both the archetypal figure

of the femme fatale and the critical feminist tradition that has decided on the figure's political implications.

In the postfeminist fatale's truncation and glamorization of feminism's true precepts, what critics traditionally admired about the femme have been lost. Her oblique suggestion of female multiplicity and social dissidence inspired their endorsement, but the translation from their critical work back into fiction (and social reality) failed to retain the femme fatale's nuance, flat-lining instead into a representation of feminism as consumerist, parodic, and sadomasochistic. If, as Terry Eagleton claims in this chapter's epigraph, feminism serves as the modern model for ethics, then audiences must develop cognizance and critical sophistication to safeguard political ideology from pop culture's dubious translations and, from there, its reabsorption back into lived experience.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION: THE HOMME / FEMME DIALECTIC

*Such a disclosure of the secret beneath the mask would leave intact the power of fascination exerted by the mask itself.*

Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry*

In the opening scene of the meta-titled *Femme Fatale* (2002) Laure Ash (Rebecca Romijn-Stamos) attentively watches a French-dubbed version of the classic noir *Double Indemnity*. The arrangement of the scene neatly establishes two essential factors of the titular femme fatale: behavioral modeling and critical perspective. Laure draws inspiration from the supreme fatale performance of Phyllis Dietrichson shortly before embarking on her own criminal performance, similarly marked by the adopting and shedding of identity. The French dubbing of *Double Indemnity* references the perspective of French critics, the first commentators to value and analyze the transgressive figures represented in noir and, in so doing, inaugurate their political significance. Laure's identity forms from classic film noir heritage, sampled within the film's diegesis by the presence of *Double Indemnity*, alongside an external but nonetheless acknowledged critical tradition. Like *Final Analysis*, one of *Femme Fatale*'s most interesting features is how it makes visible the concealed critical ancestry of the neo-noir femme fatale. The evolved femme takes shape through the composite construction of original creation and critical reception, the latter of which is no longer the exclusive purview of academics.

Audiences' conversancy with film and film theory leads to their reading the femme fatale as redolent of feminism if not explicitly feminist. This conversancy is largely due to the postmodern democratization of scholarship: the increasing acceptability of popular culture as a focus for academic analysis has facilitated the cursory familiarity of general audiences with academic thought. In this process, mainstream films, which tend to more or less covertly support conservative ideology, respond to postmodern academia's unambiguous support of transgression, a support that stems from the assumption that transgression must promote progress.

Pop culture feminism's subsequent fixation on transgression, a proclivity exceptionally evident in the popularity of the femme fatale, contains its own conservative blockades. Because of its essentially destructive nature, transgression must be finite. Parodic, offensive, violent methods can trouble complacent norms but true change requires constructivity. The prolongation of transgression or of carnival has the paradoxical effect of prolonging the very systems it purports to demolish: it must continually supply itself with edifices to tear down.

The existence of traditionally oppressive structures against which to stage transgression is becoming more and more illusory. In the academic trend of assailing such oppression, Terry Eagleton identifies the same retroactive politics that characterize the femme fatale, declaring that

postmodernism seems at times to behave as though the classical bourgeoisie is alive and well, and thus finds itself living in the past. It spends much of its time assailing absolute truth, objectivity, timeless moral values, scientific inquiry and a belief in historical progress. It calls into question the autonomy of the individual,

inflexible social and sexual norms, and the belief that there are firm foundations to the world. Since all of these values belong to a bourgeois world on the wane, this is rather like firing off irascible letters to the press about the horse-riding Huns or marauding Carthaginians who have taken over the Home Counties. (17)

Anachronistic revolt as Eagleton describes it is worse than ineffectual; it synthetically provides the sensation of radical change while, in fact, rebuilding obstructions to change. Overcoming oppression can never be accomplished through fetishizing oppression.

A purportedly transgressive feminism that promotes, perhaps cheekily, with irony, the violent subjugation of men both fetishizes hierarchy and undermines the ethical structure of its founding philosophy. This brand of feminism proves extant in both the overtly fictional femme fatale as well as in the personae of her creators. The “vengeful, violent, highly sexualized” feminism that Chapter IV notes in the music of Taylor Swift, Beyoncé, and their peers, pervades the identities of the celebrities themselves. Both Swift and Beyoncé are not only singer/songwriters uniquely capable of disseminating political opinions through art, but monolithic business women. Their star statuses fully include product, personality, and political ideology. The lack of separation between the celebrity and the individual renders identity fully and unambiguously performative. That their identities (so often held up as role models, worthy of imitation) comprehend a fatale feminism facilitates its export to the masses.

The commercial cachet of these female artists’ renditions of feminism have proven so powerful that to disagree with their dogma is a neo-liberal sin, punishable by social media censure. In a 2016 blog post unpopular enough to necessitate the publishing of a self-defense two days later, bell hooks takes issue with the problematic feminism of

Beyoncé's album *Lemonade*. Famed for its simultaneous themes of police violence, black oppression, and marital revenge, Beyoncé's visual album intertwines political and personal issues, rendering them as inseparable as her composite celebrity/self. The album, charges hooks, "glamorizes a world of gendered cultural paradox and contradiction," insisting that Beyoncé's "construction of feminism cannot be trusted. Her vision of feminism does not call for an end to patriarchal domination" (n.p.). The feminism advanced by the glamorous vengeance of the celebrity femme fatale is, as hooks states, "pure fantasy":

Contrary to misguided notions of gender equality, women do not and will not seize power and create self-love and self-esteem through violent acts. Female violence is no more liberatory than male violence. And when violence is made to look sexy and eroticized... it does not serve to undercut the prevailing cultural sentiment that it is acceptable to use violence to reinforce domination. (n.p.)

This thesis has operated on the assumption that culturally constructed gender norms and relations are predicated on opposition. Having moved incrementally forward in time to arrive at the political symbolism of the contemporary femme fatale, returning at this point to the philosophical principles that informed my earliest thinking will serve to validate my conception of the figure as facilitating the maintenance of these norms. Hegel's master-slave dialectic, a theoretical narrative describing the encounter between two self-conscious beings, elucidates the power struggle between subject and object, and provides for another, deeper understanding of the paradoxical nature of the femme. Hegel's intuitions have been previously and fruitfully appropriated for feminist theory by Simone de Beauvoir, whose rearticulation renders the ideas even more applicable.

In order to draw a clear comparison between the developing relationship between the master and the slave and that of male and female in society, the master will be given the pronoun “he” and the slave the pronoun “she.” Two self-conscious beings first meeting grapple with the fact that the self is Other to the Other. A struggle ensues to assert the self as subject and the Other as object. Proving superior selfhood requires the victor in this struggle, the master (subject), to force the slave (object) to live in service to his desires. However, during the course of enslaving and subjugating another, the master becomes himself enslaved. While the slave is independent insofar as she is responsible for her own care and sense of identity, the master is dependent on the slave to provide that service that not only supports his existence but also defines their hierarchical relationship and ratifies his selfhood.

Importantly, both Hegel and his French successors, Sartre and Beauvoir, find the struggle for absolute subjecthood against the Other’s absolute objecthood futile, as a socialized human being is necessarily both subject and object. Having a sense of one’s status as object is conducive to social functioning. And since it is only through the mediation of the Other that the self arrives at full consciousness, being an object is a prerequisite to being a subject. As Hegel expresses it, “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged” (111). The Other is responsible for imbuing the self with identity because it sees the subject back to itself. Narcissism and voyeurism are thus synonymous because the latter always asks, “What does the Other signify about me?” It becomes apparent that the self-objectification and narcissism that have appeared to be the particular bailiwick of

postmodern culture are original to all social interaction. Performing for the gaze of another assists the unformed identity's transformation into a subject.

Ultimately, the dialectic reveals how the femme's fixation on revenge and hierarchical inversion interrupts progress toward equality – which we can now define as simultaneous subjecthood and objecthood. This ideal state of duality is deferred by the slave's desire to subjugate the master, which results in re-entrenchment in her own subjugation. Therefore the femme fatale does not represent female emancipation and the transgression of hierarchy, but rather the return to female enslavement. As the primary maneuver of the dialectic shows, the true slave is the one whose selfhood depends on the subjugation of another.

The femme destroys the potentially egalitarian relationship between herself and her male accomplice by insisting that his use-value, his status as an object who can invigorate her own subjecthood, trumps his interiority. Though the femme fatale's primary skill is the manipulation of her objectified identity, the desired outcome of her performances is absolute subjecthood. This is evidenced when Bree Daniels (Jane Fonda) in the neo-noir *Klute* (1971) insists, "What I would really like to be is faceless and bodiless and I would be left alone." The lack of a physical body would wholly preclude objectification. Or how, in *Body Heat*, Matty Walker's ambition "To be rich" is noticeably not part of the familiar dyad ending "and famous." Her paradise is anonymity. As discussed in Chapter III, Matty, the only cinematic femme fatale ever shown in the aftermath of success, appears at last un-gazed upon and effectively alone.

Femininity as modeled by the femme fatale is the embrace of objecthood as a method of one day usurping the master/subject. The relationship between femme fatale

and her “chump” distills the exchange of power, of subjecthood and objecthood, that continually refreshes the gender binary. The theories directly or implicitly employed thus far in explicating the femme fatale – Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, Kristeva’s abject, Butler’s gender performance, as well as Hegel’s master-slave dialectic – have been useful because they all deal with the symbiosis of opposition, in short, with the encounter between self and Other. In all these it is what the Other reveals to and about the self that is important. Hence the femme fatale’s status as a foil for the eternal feminine.

In addition to these atemporal theoretical frameworks, the viewpoint on the femme taken in this study derives from her historical context. The modern femme fatale is largely a product of Victorian moral hypocrisy. Emerging simultaneous with the expansion of the reading public and its taste for thrills, the Victorian femme fatale peoples sensational novels, penny dreadfuls, Newgate novels, and all manner of infamous, crime-filled literature.<sup>1</sup> While women’s rights were debated with gravity and tedium in the public realm, the private realm had other outlets for women’s revolutionary sentiments. Experiencing the femme fatale’s transgressions offered women the same placation and empty sense of enfranchisement as the other new female pastime, shopping.

Public fascination with the beautiful and debauched was not particular to England; the femme moved easily from British drawing rooms to American urban apartments to become the double-crossing dame of pulp fiction. From there, a mere rewrite from dime novel to screenplay brought the femme fatale to the big screen. If film is the modern pinnacle of entertainment, then even as it swallows up its alternatives, it

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<sup>1</sup> Excepting the decadent fin-de-siècle poetry that obsessed over the ghastly femme fatale, much of the nineteenth-century writing featuring femmes was resoundingly not part of high culture. The authors and publishers of such seedy works responded to a vibrant commercial interest in the scandalous and shocking.

evidences its previous equivalents. While the codes of British Victorian society no longer factored into the femme's characterization, film Production Codes emulated Victorian constraints. Her sexuality, perversion, and brutality are present in the earliest noirs, but from the 1930s to '60s, industry restrictions demanded that untoward material be obfuscated and that the baddies never triumph. The femme's depiction of female transgression, already beginning to feel obsolete due to her dependency on men in an American reality of increasingly nontraditional gender relations, was granted prolonged relevancy by her filmic repression. With the dismantling of Production Codes at the end of the 1960s, neo-noir reworked the femme through the composite influence of new creative freedom and critical input.

Despite filmmakers' freedom to celebrate transgression, the 1970s and early '80s contain a cycle of noir noticeably devoid of "true" femmes fatales. The apparently or accusedly deadly women of *Klute*, *Chinatown* (1974), and *Blood Simple* (1984) are merely victims seeking respite. Both their male opposites and trope-savvy audiences initially assume these women to be femmes, an assumption bolstered by their sometimes playing into stereotype. Bree Daniels in *Klute* imitates the femme by depending on her performances of identity and sexuality in order to make a living. She controls and manipulates her male clients' predictable desires. Bree declares that she is the "best actress and the best fuck in the world," a statement that reveals the femme fatale's conflation of identity with desirability (the female object's use-value). Simultaneous with the earliest critical claims that the femme deploys transgression only as a means to enfranchisement, *Klute* showcases how women seeking independence are erroneously

cast as fatale, sometimes by themselves. Like Gilda, Bree finds that the emotional labor of performing for the gaze outweighs its rewards.

Beginning in the latter half of the 1980s, femmes fatales return to their classic intensity – dedicated to performing for the gaze and thoroughly ingrained in a hierarchical system of values. Whereas the counterculture impetus behind films like *Klute* and *Chinatown* distrust patriarchal wealth and power, and therefore undermine the femme's pursuit of patriarchal success, neo-conservative noirs reinvest in the desirability of that lifestyle. Nonetheless, the neo-conservative femme continues to interact with criticism's awareness of identity performance as well as with contemporary gender politics. These interactions often result in regressive stances. Films like *Fatal Attraction*, *Disclosure*, and, of course, the later *Gone Girl*, explore hot topic gender issues (sexual harassment, exploitation, rape) with an eye toward illustrating their use as a set-up, a conspiratorial deployment of victimhood as a power play. Such narratives imply that, for better or worse, female power comes through institutional shortcuts unknowingly built into an oppressive culture: claiming victimhood (extreme objectification) and demanding restitution.

Throughout her Victorinoir evolution, the femme tenaciously pursues wealth and prestige – two things historically denied to women and available, provisionally, through upwardly mobile marriage. The femme fatale's redeployment of objecthood provides her access to the self-deciding power of the subject. Thus in sensational novels, the femme fatale pursues landed, aristocratic gentlemen as the gatekeepers to that other life of wealth, independence, and respect. Later, in film noir, the femme fatale tends to begin her narrative already ensconced in marital wealth, essentially picking up the story where

Lady Audley left off. While the relative comfort of the upper middle class married life safeguards against the Victorian femme's greatest fear – isolated poverty – the noir femme takes part in the American dream of self-fulfillment. To not be in control of one's own finances, to have one's identity yoked to an unloved husband, to depend on a man less intelligent, less determined, and less imaginative, incites the femme to action. And even then, when the subsequent postmodern femme fatale has independent stature, inherited gender relations continue to poison the noir couple. The dialectic between the femme fatale and her partner endlessly replays the power struggle between the master and the slave. This struggle demands that the Other transform the self's objecthood into subjecthood, even as such a demand saps the self of autonomy. As modern objecthood requires the outside authentication of a viewing subject, it takes on the ultimate subjugation, dependency, which once plagued the subject himself.

Performativity, a marker of objectification redolent of the femme fatale, is no longer unique to the femme, to film, or even to femininity. The scopophilia and self-display encouraged by traditional, new, and social media equates success and even personal worth with one's ability to attract and control the gaze. Rosalind Gill finds that the ubiquity of politicized, auto-erotic representations of the self in media “represents a shift from an external judging male gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze” (90). The femme fatale, though not responsible for this seismic shift, embodies those postfeminist principles that take transgression and appearance as sufficient surrogate for creation and authenticity. While it is true that self-consciousness and self-realization exist in being acknowledged by an Other, the internalization of one's objecthood results in the damaging belief that political ethics and identity are the products of performance alone.

Visual knowledge will always be superficial and vulnerable to fraud. In order for the exciting energy endemic to the femme fatale to serve female audiences, rather than collude in their duping, her archetype must be valued more as a method of appraisal and less as an icon whose appearance of political worth is taken at face value.

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