

**BEYOND BACKLASH**  
**THE FEMME FATALE IN**  
**CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CINEMA**

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# Abstract

This thesis is the first comparative reading of the femme fatale in contemporary American cinema, and makes a significant contribution to a field that has previously limited its focus to film noir of the 1940s and the neo noirs of the 1980s and 1990s. To date, critical examinations of the femme fatale figure in contemporary cinema have centred on issues of post-second wave backlash, and on a very narrow range of films, most notably *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Disclosure* (1994), and *The Last Seduction* (1994), (Kate Stables, 1998; Yvonne Tasker, 1998; Helen Hanson, 2007). This project builds upon this work by taking a thematic approach which allows for a reading of a wider range of film texts which have not yet received much critical investigation in terms of the deadly beautiful woman. Through looking at films from period drama, teen cinema, neo-noir and science fiction film, I consider the implications that the resurgence of this provocative figure across a multitude of cinematic genres has for our understanding of contemporary cultural anxiety about women, and argue that a renewed examination of the femme fatale opens up new avenues of discourse between theorisations of cinematic archetypes and feminist theory. This thesis furthers the work of Mary Ann Doane (1991), E. Ann Kaplan (rev. ed. 1998), and Julie Grossman (2009) which sought to interrogate and question the implications of American cinema's fascination with the femme fatale in noir texts, by investigating the ways in which the figure brings into focus questions of sexual agency, femininity and power outside of those generic parameters. Significantly I consider how the widening of the critical lens through which the femme fatale is viewed allows new patterns, tensions and anxieties to be traced across a variety of popular genres and modes of production from the Hollywood blockbuster to smaller independent films, to chart thematic tendencies, such as the bisexual femme fatale, the hybrid femme fatale, and the dead femme fatale. In particular, I provide a unique critical assessment of the position of the femme fatale figure in contemporary cinema, and in doing so interrogate the idea of the femme fatale's sexual mystery, and the myriad ways in which this trait foregrounds issues about sexual fidelity and safety, and both encourages and critiques a patriarchal sense of entitlement to complete knowledge about women's bodies, intentions and desires. In addressing the ways in which the femme fatale figure operates across cinematic genres and themes in ways which reveal the limits of femme fatale criticism as it currently stands, this study identifies the femme fatale's ability to move across and between genres, in ways which complicate and disrupt contemporary understandings of femininity and film. By exploring the occurrence of femme fatale figures in films not exclusively concerned with anxiety deriving from the increased economic opportunities for women following second wave feminism, this study offers ways of viewing the beautiful duplicitous woman which move beyond backlash. The thesis is comprised of four chapters. The first is an account of the femme fatale in the retro noir film, and interrogates the tensions between the nostalgic impulses of the retro noir genre and the more complex gender politics centred on the films' re-presentation of the femme fatale figure. In the second I consider the new teen femme fatale films as both teen updates of the 'mature' femme fatale narrative in the burgeoning genre of teen cinema, and as more complex explorations of contemporary anxieties about young femininity. The third chapter interrogates the significance of the frequent cross-genre pairings of female bisexuality with the femme fatale figure, and considers the potential of such figures for feminist meaning beyond patriarchal pornographic fantasy. Finally, chapter four engages with science fiction cinema, and specifically with the figure of the femme fatale whose body is not entirely human, and considers its ramifications for feminist theorisations of the body, agency and femininity.

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# Introduction

The femme fatale holds a vexed but significant position in the history of film criticism, as well as in wider discourses about evil and femininity. Such figures are difficult to define, occupy a complex position in relation to genre and historical context, are highly ambivalent in terms of their validity as feminist icons, and yet offer some of the most potent images of female power and agency in mainstream cinema. Despite the complexity of the femme fatale, and the wealth of critical work on the cinematic bad girl, these discourses cluster around relatively narrow texts and historical periods, namely the 1940s and 1950s, and the neo-noir erotic thrillers of the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Examinations of the contemporary femme fatale in particular focus on a small range of films, such as the unofficial ‘Michael Douglas vs. the deranged career woman’ trilogy of *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Basic Instinct* (1992), and *Disclosure* (1994), and similar neo-noir films which follow the misfortunes of men taken in and dominated by sexually aggressive women. Such criticism, I argue, tends to reach similar and sometimes repetitive conclusions about male anxiety and antifeminist backlash. In this thesis, I have two critical aims. One is to re-evaluate the femme fatale’s presence in the familiar genre of neo-noir, both by using theoretical frameworks other than the backlash model, as in my discussion of bisexuality in Chapter Three, and by exploring a subgenre of neo-noir in which the femme fatale remains under-considered as in my analysis of retro noir Chapter One. The other is to interrogate the femme fatale’s representation in different, non-noir genres, such as the teen film in Chapter Two, and science fiction in Chapter Four, in order to account for her

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<sup>1</sup> The issue of film noir’s revival in the post classical period is a complex one, and while noirish films have certainly appeared in every decade since the demise of the studio system, it was not until the 1980s that such texts began to emerge in significant numbers. This proliferation coincided with a renewed fascination with the femme fatale within neo-noir films, so that femme fatale criticism has developed a strong sense of a split between the 1940s and 1950s, and the 1980s onwards. For the purposes of this thesis, I term noir films of the former period ‘classical film noir’, and of the latter period ‘neo-noir’. Neo-noir in particular encompasses a large number of subgenres, and often, as with much contemporary cinema, overlaps with multiple other genres. For a substantial exploration of the postclassical period and film noir, see Richard Martin, *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls: The Legacy of Film Noir in Contemporary Cinema*, (Lanham: Scarecrow, 1999).

presence in a broader range of film texts. In doing so, I provide a discussion of the ways in which contemporary American cinema functions to complicate cinematic genre and its stock characters, and the implications of this for a gendered representation of power and agency.<sup>2</sup> By drawing on existing femme fatale criticism and expanding the critical gaze to include other genres and theoretical perspectives, this thesis provides the first extended interrogation of the femme fatale's position in contemporary American cinema which moves beyond discourses of neo-noir and notions of backlash.

### **She's So Unusual: Defining the Femme Fatale**

In this introduction, I map the landscape of femme fatale criticism by examining issues of definition and genre and interrogating and problematising the dominant readings of the femme fatale within film studies. I then introduce the significant features and connections between femme fatale and contemporary feminism that underpin this thesis. The femme fatale is a difficult and slippery figure, and the terms of her definition are constantly shifting with each new attempt to define the category. Numerous attempts have been made at definition, but a consensus is rarely reached. As Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe argue in the introduction to their recent edited collection on the figure, '[t]he *femme fatale* is thus read simultaneously as both entrenched cultural stereotype and yet never fully known: she is always beyond definition', adding that '[t]he *femme fatale* is a category as durable, malleable, and resistant to definition as *noir* itself: both terms inevitably evoke more than describe.'<sup>3</sup> The term is used as a name for a huge range of commercial settings, from t-shirt slogans and the titles

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<sup>2</sup> While the femme fatale figure is by no means a specifically American character type, in this thesis I focus on American cinema. Whether a femme fatale appears in a noir film or not, I am keen to identify American film noir as a central influence on the construction of the contemporary femme fatale. By examining contemporary American cinema, it is possible to explore the evolution of the character in a way that would not be possible in a project of this size with a transnational focus.

<sup>3</sup> Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe, 'Cherchez La Femme' in *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts*, ed. by Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), pp.1-8 (p.1, p.3). Emphasis in the original.



of fashion magazine editorial spreads – recent spreads in German Vogue and Allure are just two amongst many<sup>4</sup> – to Britney Spears’ most recent album title, several lingerie brands and shops, and a huge range of books from illness memoirs to fitness and self-defence guides.<sup>5</sup> This extraordinarily diverse usage speaks to the range of ‘femme fatale’, and to its flexibility as an evocative rather than descriptive term. ‘Femme fatale’ is understood and defined by limits and characteristics that are so blurred and critically contested, that applying it at all can be a tentative and uncertain process.<sup>6</sup> While it may be difficult to pin down exactly what the words ‘femme fatale’ mean, the term occurs and reoccurs in both critical discourse and popular culture with a powerful obstinacy, and it is my contention that the category evokes a reasonably specific set of behaviours and classic performances, a particular iconography and sexual frisson.

Given her association with mystery and unreadability, scholarship on the femme fatale has inevitably involved a strong emphasis on definition. Much of the work done involves a process of sweeping away the ambiguity surrounding the femme fatale as a critical category, just as it works to emphasise the importance of mystery and uncertainty for the femme fatale as a cinematic character. Linda Ruth Williams argues that this process occurs in accounts of women in film noir in general, and that this critical tendency is indebted to the famously difficult task of defining classical era film noir, the cycle of films in which most work concerning the femme fatale has occurred. She notes that

Though many of these critiques concentrate on producing psychoanalytic or socially informed analyses, they often cannot resist the impulse to taxonomise *noir* women, a trait embedded in wider *noir* theory. Indeed, for a genre renowned for its ambiguity, *film noir* seems to invite excesses of categorisation –

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<sup>4</sup> Patrick Demarchelier’s ‘Femme Fatale’ for *Vogue Germany August 2009*, <<http://www.thephotographylink.com/archives/1768>> [accessed 4th June 2011] and *Allure Editorial Femme Fatale, September 2008*, <<http://www.myfdb.com/editorials/4159-allure-editorial-femme-fatale-september-2008>> [accessed 4th June 2011].

<sup>5</sup> Britney Spears, *Femme Fatale* (Jive Records, 2011). For examples of the use of the term in medical memoirs and physical fitness literature, see Miki Magnino-Rabig, *Femme Fatale: Breast Cancer, a Woman’s Story* (New York: Crossroads, 2002) and Pavel Tsatsouline, *From Russia with Tough Love: A Kettlebell Workout for a Femme Fatale* (St. Paul, Dragon Door, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> I place the words ‘femme fatale’ in inverted commas only when referring explicitly to the term itself.

perhaps critical morphology is one way of shoring up the anxiety of generic (and gender) diffuseness: pin it down to a list or it will dissolve into unknowability.<sup>7</sup>

This tendency is indicative of a wider cultural and critical desire to classify complex forms of femininity. Men in film noir narratives are confounded and troubled by the failure of many noir women to conform to normative female roles, and so attempt to investigate and define the mystery they perceive these women to be hiding, and the process of theorising the femme fatale is often no different. As I will illustrate below, critical accounts of the figure which are either explicitly feminist or heavily informed by feminist readings of film noir emphasise the process of definition in their critical interrogations of the femme fatale, and in doing so ironically fall into the same patterns of so many fictional noir protagonists that preceded them.

Discussions of the figure frequently take the form of lists of characteristics, as in this definition of the femme fatale's effects by Yvonne Tasker:

First, her seductive sexuality. Second, the power and strength (over men) that this sexuality generates for the *femme fatale*. Third, the deceptions, disguises and confusion that surrounds her, producing an ambiguous figure for both the audience and the hero. Fourth, as a consequence the sense of woman as 'enigma', typically located within an investigative narrative structure which seeks to find out the 'truth' amidst the deception.<sup>8</sup>

This quantification of the femme fatale's attributes and powers is typical of critical accounts of such figures, and while not all critics employ numerical lists, an adding up of attributes is a common theme. For example, Andrew Dickos states that '[t]hree things motivate the *femme fatale*: a lust for exciting sex, a desire for wealth and the power it brings, and a need to control every thing and everyone around her.'<sup>9</sup> While such exercises can be useful means of identifying generic tendencies and patterns around the representation of women, they also speak to the various anxieties that the mysterious woman provokes. The list offers a means of

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<sup>7</sup> Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p.98. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>8</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p.120. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Dickos, *Street With No Name: A History of the Classic American Film Noir* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), p.162. Emphasis in the original.

categorising that which resists easy categorisation and a way of pinning down the femme fatale to a list of easily identifiable attributes. Such lists are also implicitly exhaustive, and therefore suggest that the limits of the femme fatale can be easily defined.

Similarly, some critics have chosen a strategy of elimination, of explaining what the femme fatale is not, in order to hint at what she is. For example, Kate Stables, in a discussion of the 'psycho-femme' in films featuring dangerous obsessive women such as *Single White Female* (1992) and *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (1992), argues that '[s]ex is part of the psycho-femme armoury, but they are defined primarily by their psychosis – they may be women fatal to men, but they are not *femmes fatales*.'<sup>10</sup> This approach requires viewers to see the femme fatale by seeing her negative. However, while the femme fatale may be defined by outlining what she is not, Stables' approach is a flexible one, relying on the emphasis of a particular characteristic rather than a strict set of rules. While characters who are defined primarily by their psychosis may not, according to Stables, be read as femme fatales, that does not mean that femme fatales are not psychotic, merely that this should not be their defining characteristic. The terms by which the femme fatale is understood, in this case, become demonstrably more elastic.

Another key strategy in the process of definition is to identify the femme fatale's most important characteristic. Elisabeth Bronfen argues that '[d]uplicity thus emerges as her most seminal value, insofar as she is not simply willing to delude anyone in order to get the money and the freedom she is after, but because she will never show her true intentions.'<sup>11</sup> This argument posits the femme fatale as mendacious and mysterious above all other characteristics, and I discuss the significance of the focus on mystery later in the introduction.

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<sup>10</sup> Kate Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing the *Femme Fatale* in 90s Cinema' in *Women in Film Noir: New Edition*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp.164-82 (p.165). Emphasis in the original.

<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen, 'Femme Fatale: Negotiations of Tragic Desire', *New Literary History*, 35.1 (2004), 103-16 (p.106).

By contrast, Julie Grossman foregrounds the femme fatale's ambition, explicitly privileging it above her sexuality:

[m]ost "femmes fatales" are sexual, but that's not their main appeal – if it were, *Sunset Boulevard's* Norma Desmond wouldn't be the central figure in film noir that she is. It is the leading female's commitment to fulfilling her own desires, whatever they may be (sexual, capitalist, maternal), at any cost, that makes her the cynosure, the compelling point of interest for men and women.<sup>12</sup>

Although these two arguments are clearly linked in terms of a focus on the femme fatale's obstinacy and sense of purpose, they each present different aspects of the figure as being the most significant. While Bronfen highlights the importance of deception in the femme fatale's manifestation, Grossman is more concerned with her self-interest and ambition. What these two examples illustrate – and they are but two of many such accounts which emphasise some characteristics over others – is that the process of definition is a complex one, which inevitably involves the erasure of some aspects in favour of others. These efforts towards definition, whether through quantification, the focus on the 'most significant' traits, or the explanation of what is not a femme fatale, indicate that while the femme fatale is not a fixed entity, this lack of clear classification is the cause of a wider critical anxiety resulting in the impulse toward definition.

However, despite the problematic aspects of attempts to define the femme fatale, some definition *is* necessary to place some limits on the term, while at the same time acknowledging its inherent flexibility. If the femme fatale is not defined at all, then some dubious critical choices can be made. In her book *Dames in the Driver's Seat: Rereading Film Noir* (2005), Jans B. Wager identifies all noir women as either femme fatales, or femmes attrapées (trapped women), positing 'the femme attrapée as trapped by the patriarchy and the femme fatale as doomed by her resistance to it.'<sup>13</sup> Although this distinction is an important one, and one I will return to later in this introduction, the distinction means that all noir women who

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<sup>12</sup> Julie Grossman, *Ready For Her Close-Up: Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Jans B. Wager, *Dames in the Driver's Seat: Rereading Film Noir* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), p.4. Wager first used these terms in her earlier *Dangerous Dames: Women and Representation in Film Noir and the Weimar Street Film* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999).

do not submit to the patriarchy are therefore femme fatales, which leads Wager to claim both *Jackie Brown*'s eponymous heroine (1997), and *Fargo*'s Marge Gunderson (1996), as femme fatales, which, despite the flexibility of the term, seems an unsupported stretch. 'Femme fatale' may be a slippery category, but all categories must be assigned limits so as not to be rendered meaningless.

Given the complexity of the term, a move toward definition which does not place a restrictive emphasis on rigid definitions and limits is therefore necessary. In her account of the use of noir style in *The Matrix* (1999), Stacy Gillis suggests that 'we should understand the *femme fatale* not as archetype, but as a constellation of tropes and characteristics emerging from concerns about women and power.'<sup>14</sup> Rather than viewing the femme fatale as either a quantifiable and clearly delineated entity, or as an entirely vague and meaningless term, for the purposes of this thesis I employ Gillis's terminology to understand the femme fatale as a constellation of meanings, a set of characteristics which may present more clearly in some characters than in others. In his canonical essay 'Notes on Film Noir', Paul Schrader asks, '[h]ow many *noir* elements does it take to make *film noir noir*?'<sup>15</sup> While this question may suggest a collapse into meaninglessness, for me it points to a way in which the femme fatale can be similarly defined and not defined. In the same way that film noir, as a critical rather than industrial category, may be defined by an accumulation of various visual and narrative characteristics, some of which may be more present at times than others, so the femme fatale can be seen as comprised of a cluster of possibilities, which slide in and out of focus, depending on the text in question. Various aspects – a sexuality that is aggressive or threatening; ambition to improve her circumstances; uncertain morality or amorality; duplicity; a danger of death by association; persuasiveness; normative and highly constructed physical

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<sup>14</sup> Stacy Gillis, 'Cyber Noir: Cyberspace, (Post)Feminism and the *Femme Fatale*', in *The Matrix Trilogy: Cyberpunk Reloaded* (London: Wallflower, 2005), pp.74-85 (p.84). Emphasis in the original.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Schrader, 'Notes on Film Noir' in *The Film Noir Reader*, ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), pp.53-63 (p.54). Emphasis in the original.

beauty – all hover around the term ‘femme fatale’, with some being more prominent than others according to the needs of the specific film.

At this point it is necessary to explain my position in relation to the term ‘femme fatale’ as a category. In recent years, feminist scholars have sought to complicate the term, with some critics dismissing it entirely. Some have claimed that, while femme fatales are an important factor in film noir, their presence has been exaggerated. Dickos suggests that ‘[t]he noir woman is rarely a bedrock of domestic virtue, but the alternative role as *femme fatale* has also been overemphasised’, suggesting instead that the majority of women in film noir are merely ‘striking out against the fate of their conventional social roles.’<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Hanson argues that most noir women are not femme fatales, contrary to popular opinion, suggesting that ‘the *femme fatale* has cast an imaginative shadow over the period, occluding and obscuring female roles that fit neither within the “vice” or “virtue” polarity of sexuality.’<sup>17</sup> Grossman takes this idea further, and the erosion of the category is the purpose behind her entire study. She uses quotation marks around the term throughout her book, and states that, ‘[t]his study seeks to wear away at the category of the “femme fatale” figure in order to elicit a more nuanced and sympathetic reading of the women too easily branded as “femmes fatales” not only in film criticism but also in popular cultural commentary on sexualized and/or highly intelligent and competent women.’<sup>18</sup> Grossman’s endeavour is a fascinating one, as it posits that film noir is about real women, and that the femme fatale is not a real woman, and therefore ‘femme fatale’ is not an appropriate term.<sup>19</sup> She argues that in this way, film noir is actively feminist in presenting the difficulties of women’s attempts to thrive in patriarchy, but

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<sup>16</sup> Dickos, p.xiv. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>17</sup> Helen Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p.4. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>18</sup> Grossman, p.1.

<sup>19</sup> As the term ‘real women’ has become such a loaded term in popular feminist and media discourse in recent years, particularly in terms of femininity and body shape, I should emphasise that here I am referring to ‘real women’ as complex, realistic, nuanced characters, as opposed to two dimensional fantasy figures. I am not interested in furthering the notion that, for example, very thin women are in some way not ‘real’.

that noir's women cannot be seen as sympathetic until the term 'femme fatale' is dispensed with. Grossman suggests that 'the "femme fatale"' is constructed around several characters [*Out of the Past's* (1947) Kathie Moffatt (Jane Greer), *Double Indemnity's* (1944) Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), and *The Maltese Falcon's* (1941) Brigid O'Shaughnessy (Mary Astor)] who then define and [...] prescribe the role.<sup>20</sup> As Grossman notes, very few of the women in classical era noir fit the model of the sexually aggressive, deceptive, ultimately deadly femme fatale, so that the term 'femme fatale' is admittedly assigned almost arbitrarily to noir women by virtue of their being less than perfect and in film noir. Although Grossman's reading is compelling, my argument is not concerned with questions of the authenticity of women in classic film noir as femme fatales. Instead, here it is far more productive for my purposes of reading contemporary American cinema to think about the femme fatale as an idea, a particular myth that has evolved from a few specific performances, which has, via a series of pastiche characters and images, crystallised as an overdetermined definition of women in noir.<sup>21</sup>

Despite numerous critical accounts which aim to complicate and rehabilitate female characters termed femme fatales, I contend at this point in the twenty-first century and for the purposes of this study of contemporary cinema, it does not matter how good, bad, or otherwise the classic noir femme fatales really were. Johnny Farrell and the other hardboiled heroes may have lost sleep over the antics of *Gilda* (1946) and her classic noir sisters, and questions of the characterisation of such figures are certainly pertinent to discussions of cinema of the 1940s and 1950s. However, in the contemporary moment, what remains of the

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<sup>20</sup> Grossman, p.22.

<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most obvious example of such pastiche femme fatales is Jessica Rabbit in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), whose physical appearance is famously an amalgamation of the famous body parts of noir actresses, and who is voiced by Kathleen Turner, an actress who rose to fame in a neo-noir femme fatale role in *Body Heat* (1981). Interestingly, despite her extraordinary femme fatale-by-numbers appearance and characterisation, Jessica is ultimately revealed to be innocent, and famously declares, 'I'm not bad, I'm just drawn that way', indicating that even the most cartoonish of cinematic femme fatales demonstrates a complex connection between noir aesthetics and characterisation.

classic noir femme fatale is a particular image of feminine sexuality, a specific aesthetic style, marked with a sense of danger, duplicity, and modernity. The femme fatale of contemporary cinema must be read as a postmodern accumulation of iconography and performances, of key words, textures, and images. In this thesis, I approach the femme fatale as stemming, absolutely, from classic era film noir, but in such a way that this connection has fragmented, distorted, been misremembered and redeveloped. This is not to say that contemporary femme fatales are merely empty pastiche, indeed, they speak to a far wider range of concerns than did their classic noir ancestors. Instead, I demonstrate some of the ways in which a consideration of a wide range of contemporary cinema allows the figure of the femme fatale, her role, representation, and potential, to be opened up for new feminist readings, and assessed afresh.

### **Beyond Noir: Gender, Genre, and the Femme Fatale**

As the frequent references to film noir in the various definitions outlined above attest, the femme fatale in cinema is intrinsically linked with noir. Hanson and O’Rawe argue that ‘[i]ndeed, the link between the *femme* and *noir* can be read in many ways as a tautological one: if a film has a *femme fatale*, it is a *film noir*, and in order to qualify as a *noir*, the *femme* is indispensable.’<sup>22</sup> The assumption of this tautological relationship recurs throughout critical work on the femme fatale, so that the presence of a femme fatale denotes noir, and any woman in noir who is not a clearly delineated good girl can be read as a femme fatale. Particularly in terms of the more blurry and genre bending category of neo-noir, the presence of a beautiful, manipulative and deadly woman has been read as functioning as a marker of noir. Hanson argues that

as one of the key generic representations of *film noir*’s image, within its critical constructions at least, the redeployment of this figure as a referential icon in *neo-noir*’s “memorialisation” of its cinematic past condenses some key questions about the interrelationship between gender and genre, as well as their historical and socio-cultural shifts.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Hanson and O’Rawe, p.2. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>23</sup> Hanson, p.167. Emphasis in the original.



This use of an already uncertain figure to consolidate a film's position in an uncertain genre points to the co-dependent relationship between the femme fatale and noir. Critical accounts have used the evolution of one to describe the evolution of the other, suggesting that noir and the femme fatale are inextricably connected, that without the femme fatale, any certainty about noir begins to waver, and vice versa. In charting the progression of the cinematic femme fatale, Philippa Gates exemplifies this logic by arguing that '[t]he *femme fatale* [...] accompanied *noir*'s departure from the screen; *noir*'s return in the 1980s also saw the return of the lethal siren as a projection of masculine crisis and anxiety.<sup>24</sup> Although the 1940s and 1950s, and 1980s onwards did see particularly high points in terms of the numbers of femme fatale type women in noir and neo-noir, Gates' inflexible impulse to link noir and the femme fatale so directly erases the huge numbers of films in the 1960s and 1970s which employed noir aesthetics and plots, while showing decidedly less interest in the deadly women of classic noir.<sup>25</sup>

Just as the absence of a femme fatale does not prevent a film from being noir, so too her presence does not automatically award a film noir status. Very little work has been done in this area, with the most explicit statement to this effect coming from Steven Neale in a brief discussion of the femme fatale within film noir, when he states that '*femmes fatales* were by no means restricted to noir.'<sup>26</sup> Although Neale mentions a few studio-era texts that also employed

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<sup>24</sup> Philippa Gates, *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p.96. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>25</sup> For example, see *Psycho* (1960), *Point Blank* (1967), *The Long Goodbye* (1973) and *Chinatown* (1974). This is not to say that noir texts had no interest in the femme fatale figure at this time – *Farewell, My Lovely* (1975) certainly makes use of a deadly femme in Helen Grayle – rather that the two are not so tightly bound together as some might suggest.

<sup>26</sup> Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.163. Emphasis in the original. Julianne Pidduck also makes this connection in 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme: (Dis)Figuring Feminism, Family, Irony, Violence', *CineAction*, 38 (1995), 64-72. It should also be noted that cinematic femme fatale criticism tends to ignore the presence of femme fatale characters in other narrative and visual forms, such as detective fiction, sensation fiction, American naturalism, and fin-de-siècle art and advertising, as well as the body of scholarly work on the femme fatale in these genres. Given the number of omissions made in favour of a tight focus on noir in cinematic femme fatale criticism it is beyond the scope of this thesis to take all these areas into account, and instead I focus on expanding the field by drawing significant connections with areas of cinema and theory that have been previously neglected in femme fatale criticism.

femme fatale figures, he does not elaborate on the implications of this, for studies both of genre and of the femme fatale. Instead, the vast majority of femme fatale criticism engages with classical era film noir, neo-noir, or both, but rarely explores the possibilities of the figure outside these limits.<sup>27</sup> Miranda Sherwin briefly refers to ‘the cinematic *femme fatale* genre’ in her work on the psychotic femme fatale texts of the 1980s and 1990s, but again, does not elaborate on this, and the films to which she appears to assign this title are drawn from the cycle of erotic noir thrillers about dangerous sex and deadly women – *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Basic Instinct*, and *Body of Evidence* (1993) – suggesting a subcategory of neo-noir, rather than a genre which exists beyond and separately from noir.<sup>28</sup> Sherwin’s phrase, ‘femme fatale genre’, however, does suggest that there may be ways of reading the femme fatale which are not tied specifically to film noir and limited to films which fall into that category.

Just as Sherwin offers the possibility of a femme fatale genre which is distinct from noir, while using examples from noir, Stables too proposes a way of seeing both the femme fatale, and the genre(s) she inhabits, as complicating noir in the course of her assessment of neo-noir and its highly sexual women. She suggests that ‘[w]hereas the traditional noir *femme fatale* can be located with film noir within the classical Hollywood genres system, the 90s *femme fatale* inhabits a postmodern or post-classical cinema which has undergone a series of transformations.’<sup>29</sup> For Stables to expand this observation to its natural conclusions beyond the limits of noir would be outside the remit of the piece which appears in the revised and updated *Women in Film Noir* collection, but her comment touches on an important factor in

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<sup>27</sup> This situation is slowly beginning to change, as evidenced by Hanson and O’Rawe’s collection which includes several essays on the femme fatale in a range of national contexts, including Chinese, British, Italian, Spanish and Mexican cinema, but there remains a need to widen the field within contemporary American cinema.

<sup>28</sup> Miranda Sherwin, ‘Deconstructing the Male: Masochism, Female Spectatorship, and the Femme Fatale in *Fatal Attraction*, *Body of Evidence*, and *Basic Instinct*’, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 35.4 (2008), 174-82 (p.174). Emphasis in the original.

<sup>29</sup> Stables, p.165. Emphasis in the original.

assessing the relationship between the femme fatale and genre.<sup>30</sup> Although film noir did not exist within industry categories in the studio era, Stables' observation about the shifts from classical to neo-noir are important. In contemporary American film, genres overlap and shift, and take generic tropes with them in these mutations and cross-pollinations. Although, as Neale points out, femme fatale types appeared in a range of generic forms in classical Hollywood, the range and representation of the femme fatale has expanded significantly as genres begin to bleed into one another, and increasing numbers of subgenres and offshoots appear. However, despite this, cinematic femme fatale criticism has focused primarily on a very narrow range of texts which fall quite clearly into the neo-noir category. It is one of the projects of this thesis to expand the range of femme fatales which have been given critical attention beyond noir, both neo and classical, and to interrogate their appearances in other generic forms, specifically teen cinema, in Chapter Two, and science fiction, in Chapter Four. By moving beyond noir, it is possible to interrogate the wider feminist implications of the femme fatale's representation in contemporary cinema.

### **In Her Own Time: Historicising the Femme Fatale**

Critical accounts of the femme fatale have necessarily involved various efforts to historicise the figure. As in Stables' assessment, described above, the cinematic femme fatale has been attached to two particular points in Hollywood history: the 1940s and 1950s, and the resurgence beginning in the 1980s and continuing today. Critics of the classical era femme fatale frequently attribute her presence in wartime and post war cinema to anxieties surrounding women's shifting societal roles in this period. Foster Hirsch notes that

During World War II, when many men were away from their homes and workplaces, women enjoyed unaccustomed prominence; postwar readjustments repositioned women within the domestic sphere. One of the classic noir's ideological projects was to criticize female dominance and to "assist" in

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<sup>30</sup> This seminal collection, first published in 1978 to redress the focus on noir and masculinity in the existing critical discourse, was revised in the 1990s and republished in 1998 to reflect new critical perspectives and more recent neo-noir texts.

returning women and men to their traditional antebellum roles. Like many aspects of Hollywood filmmaking, noir's misogyny functioned as a kind of containment: beware, this is what happens with iron-willed women seize power over men.<sup>31</sup>

This assessment is typical of many attempts to historicise the classical noir femme fatale. In revisiting claims that the Second World War was instrumental in empowering women, such accounts present the femme fatal as a totem of the threat that active, non-domestic women were imagined to pose to society in general, and to white masculinity in particular in the 1940s and 1950s. Hirsch in particular identifies the femme fatale, and the demonisation of active women that she represents, according to his argument, as a misogynist tendency. By contrast, Grossman argues that noir is actually highly sympathetic to these women, suggesting that they can be seen as 'femmes modernes', modern women with modern problems and modern attempts to solve them.<sup>32</sup> These two approaches are oppositional in terms of their views of film noir's misogyny or otherwise, but they do appear to agree that the classical femme fatale is a product of her time, and indicative of women's positions in the postwar period.

However, the femme fatale is a figure who extends far beyond the specificities of the 1940s and 1950s. Elizabeth Cowie, in presenting a psychoanalytically informed approach to the femme fatale, is not convinced by this kind of historical positioning. She argues that '[w]hat must be explained is the continuing fascination with this fantasy [of the femme fatale] long after the historical period [post-Second World War] that is supposed to justify it.'<sup>33</sup> While Cowie's exploration of the femme fatale's continued fascination for film audiences and scholars focuses on the figure as an ahistorical projection, a reading which I will unpack and problematise in more detail later in my introduction, her question is an important one, as the femme fatale as a figure is not one which is specific to the postwar period. There are two

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<sup>31</sup> Foster Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo Noir* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1999), p.7.

<sup>32</sup> Grossman, p.3.

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Cowie, 'Film Noir and Women' in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. by Joan Copjec (London and New York: Verso, 1993), pp.121-65 (p.123).

dominant readings of the femme fatale's continued cinematic presence, as articulated by Tasker:

In what senses might contemporary versions of this "archetype" be said to have a *historical specificity*? Is this simply part of an empty reference to a critically venerated cinematic past on the part of status-hungry film-makers? Or is the articulation of powerful female sexuality in the context of 1970s representation-conscious feminism (and of post-feminism) of a different order?<sup>34</sup>

The first of these, that the femme fatale functions as a way for films to point to their own noirishness, echoes Hanson and O'Rawe's discussion of the tautological relationship between film noir and the femme fatale, and arguably has some credence given the privileged position of film noir as an important part of cinematic history. However, Tasker's second point, that the new wave of femme fatales in cinema since the 1970s might be connected with concerns and discourses surrounding feminism, is the one given most attention by critics of the femme fatale in contemporary film.

This reading is one which focuses on the social context of America in the wake of the gains made by second wave feminism, and a return of similar gender anxieties to those of the postwar period. Martin suggests that "[t]he hyperbolic return to the screen of the femme fatale and her gradual metamorphosis throughout the eighties and nineties simultaneously suggests an interesting degree of sexual anxiety in the male protagonist, and a rearticulation of misogynist fears that were manifested in the post-war years of forties film noir."<sup>35</sup> This reading implies that the issues foregrounded by the femme fatale's presence in classical noir returned following the 1970s, directly echoing those of the earlier era, and manifested in much the same way. Just as gender roles shifted following the Second World War, the influence of feminism altered the roles available to women, and allowed them to move more clearly into the public sphere. This point of view is echoed by Hanson, who suggests that "[n]eo-noir thrillers in which the neo-*femme fatale* takes centre stage as narrative antagonist, sexual performer, and sexual threat reveal cultural ambivalences towards female sexual choice

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<sup>34</sup> Tasker, p.122. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>35</sup> Martin, pp.92-93.

through “backlash” discourses that arise around the sexually liberated woman.<sup>36</sup> Drawing on Susan Faludi’s theorisation of the backlash against women’s increased visibility and power in the 1980s, Hanson’s argument is representative of the vast majority of criticism of the femme fatale in contemporary cinema.<sup>37</sup> The resurgence of the femme fatale in the cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, the argument goes, is indicative of a political climate which was hostile to women in the wake of feminist gains in various spheres of influence. Women are presented as a threat to business, to the family, as sexually dangerous, and as suffering from their public roles. These studies limit themselves to a very narrow range of films: namely *Fatal Attraction*, *Basic Instinct* and *Disclosure*, as discussed above, as well as similar texts such as *Body Heat*, *Black Widow* (1987), *Body of Evidence*, *Romeo is Bleeding* (1993), and *The Last Seduction* (1994), amongst other related titles.

While this approach has led to a large amount of valuable scholarship, accounts of the contemporary femme fatale as a neo-noir product of anti-feminist backlash make up the vast majority of work on the role and representation of the femme fatale in contemporary cinema, leaving an enormous amount of femme fatales who fall outside the generic boundaries of the neo-noir erotic thriller unconsidered. Another consequence of this clustering around a core set of neo-noir films is that those films which have received considerable attention have only been interrogated in terms of the backlash narrative, leaving much to be addressed. While covering all of these unexplored avenues of enquiry is far beyond the scope of this project, I break fresh ground in looking at a new selection of films in terms of their treatment of the femme fatale, as well as re-addressing some of the better covered films from different angles, by focusing on the unexplored territory of the teenager in film and science fiction, as well as the more familiar genres of retro-noir and neo-noir. Tasker argues that in its treatment of the femme fatale, ‘new *film noir* addresses contemporary culture in its own appropriate paranoid

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<sup>36</sup> Hanson, p.152.

<sup>37</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Vintage, 1992). Faludi interrogates *Fatal Attraction* as an example of this cultural response to feminism (pp.140-70).

fashion. It is then both ahistorical and precisely of its time.<sup>38</sup> In this thesis, I explore some of the ways in which representations of the contemporary femme fatale beyond noir and beyond backlash speak both to age-old archetypes and to their specific historical context, to work through a variety of questions about femininity.

### **Anxious Idols: Critical Readings of the Femme Fatale**

The representation and implications of the femme fatale has been theorised within feminist film criticism in three key ways. First, the femme fatale has been read as a fantasy, or projection, of male anxiety about femininity. Second, and this reading often overlaps with the first, the femme fatale has been posited as a feminist icon, an inspirational myth of feminine agency. Finally, more recent scholarship has sought to abandon both the psychoanalytically informed projection reading, and the notion of the femme fatale as a symbol of female power, but to propose instead that such figures reflect the real struggles of complex modern women, and that the narration of those struggles is potentially a site of feminist meaning in itself, without resorting to two-dimensional articulations of feminist power. An apparently throwaway line in an episode of *Angel* (2002) echoes these debates, and neatly illustrates one of the key questions in critical discourse surrounding the femme fatale. The eponymous hero engages Lilah, a lawyer in league with dark forces, in conversation. Lilah is hard, professionally ruthless, and very glamorous. Angel asks her, ‘don’t you ever get tired of the whole femme fatale act? [...] How about just once you talk to me like a person?’<sup>39</sup> This line, in which Angel assumes that the categories of femme fatale and ‘a person’ are mutually exclusive, and in which he privileges the latter as more authentic, having declared the former to be an act, poses

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<sup>38</sup> Tasker, p.135.

<sup>39</sup> *Angel*, ‘Sleep Tight’, S03, Ep. 16 (2002).

the key question implicit in the competing readings of the femme fatale: can a femme fatale also be a person? Or must it inevitably involve some degree of fantasy or acting?<sup>40</sup>

Much of work on the femme fatale within feminist film criticism is informed by psychoanalytic theory and questions of the gaze. It is within this context that the notion of the femme fatale as a projection of male anxiety about women arises, and around which many of the debates around the femme fatale's usefulness for feminism gather. In response to Hirsch's attempts to historicise the femme fatale, Cowie argues that 'Hirsch attempts here to attach this image to a little bit of reality, but this very attempt only confirms its actual status – as fantasy. While he appeals to a social reality which gives rise to the fantasies, I would like to emphasise their *psychical* reality.'<sup>41</sup> It is this interrogation of the figure of the femme fatale in classic film noir in terms of their position as image or fantasy that makes up much of the body of femme fatale criticism. Countless critical works refer to the femme fatale in terms of fantasy, fetish, image, symptom, and projection, and many expand on this position in some detail. Janey Place's seminal essay 'Women in Film Noir' (1978) provides an argument that the femme fatale exists solely as a part of the male psyche. For Place, this figure is derived from the noir hero's dark side, a distorted part of his personality. She argues that '[t]he sexual, dangerous woman lives in this darkness, and she is the psychological expression of his own internal fears of sexuality, and his need to control and repress it.'<sup>42</sup> In this reading, the femme fatale is not a 'solid' character in her own right, but instead is a fantasy, and a part of the noir hero himself. Mary Ann Doane also takes on the notion of the femme fatale as a projection of

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<sup>40</sup> Notions of performance as being 'an act', the performance of the film star or actor, and Butlerian understandings of gender and the performative are necessarily tangled up in relation to the femme fatale, given the figure's position as a deceiver whose characterisation so frequently relies on a stylised performance from the actor and the use of heavily sexualised feminine wiles. In this thesis, unless referring explicitly to an actor's performance, the terms 'performance' and 'performative' refer to this imbricated meaning, and more specifically to the articulations of dangerous femininity that manifest most clearly at the aesthetic level in the form of costume, gesture, and the focus on skin and a sexualised cinematic gaze. The femme fatale is a figure who is inevitably surrounded by the performative nature of acting, deception, and gendered appearance.

<sup>41</sup> Cowie, p.123. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>42</sup> Janey Place, 'Women in Film Noir' in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1978) pp.35-67 (p.41).



male anxiety, arguing that such figures are therefore ‘not the subject of feminism, but a symptom of male fears about feminism.’<sup>43</sup> While the projection reading makes sense in the context of both psychoanalytic theory and of the male-dominated American film industry, there is something rather unnerving about its ability to strip away feminist meaning from one of the few truly powerful and prolific female figures in cinema.<sup>44</sup> Such an assessment risks placing limits on the femme fatale’s potential and shutting down the possibility of resistant readings. The notion of the femme fatale as nothing but a projection of male anxiety does not account for the pleasure that female audiences can gain from watching such figures, nor does it leave space for the femme fatale to be read as a more complex response to the cultural and historical context in which she appears.

Although Doane’s work presents the femme fatale as a figure which can be read through a feminist lens, rather than viewed as an important figure for feminism, as I indicate above, there is some overlap between other projection readings and an understanding of the femme fatale as an icon of feminism. While Place clearly presents the femme fatale as a projection of male anxiety about women, she also suggests that such figures are significant. While she maintains that the fantasy does not present the female viewer with positive role models, later in her essay, she argues that, unlike the weak and incapable heroines of ‘A’ films of the period, ‘in film noir, it is clear that men need to control women’s sexuality in order not to be destroyed by it. The dark woman of film noir had something her innocent sister lacked: access to her own sexuality (and thus to men’s) and the power this access unlocked.’<sup>45</sup> While

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<sup>43</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), p.2-3.

<sup>44</sup> Other critical accounts of the femme fatale take this projection reading still further, and devote their attentions solely to the effects that dangerous women have on male characters. For example, despite the title of James Maxfield’s *The Fatal Woman: Sources of Male Anxiety in American Film Noir 1941-1991* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), he is far less interested in the representation of what he terms ‘fatal female’ characters than he is in exploring the negative effects that their (often innocent and unknowing actions) have on male protagonists.

<sup>45</sup> Place, p.36.

the specific parameters that Place puts on her claim may be somewhat inaccurate,<sup>46</sup> her model is still a valuable one, as the active women of the thrillers, melodramas and detective films that have subsequently been termed 'noir' do offer a sense of sexual agency and potential. Unlike Doane, Place sees the femme fatales as a potential focus for resistant reading, so that although their power may be a product of male anxiety, these films still offer a showcase for that power. The fact that women's agency might be perceived as threatening suggests that these images of dangerous women might be reclaimed as positive feminist representations. Similarly, Dickos argues that 'fierce sexuality identified with the female image reinforces the misogyny behind the male construction of such a dangerous woman who clearly threatens the power of her male rivals. And these men are clearly rivals in a tango of power, since their apprehension of the *femme fatale* stems from a position of assumed dominance.'<sup>47</sup> Although Dickos does identify the femme fatale as a male construction, he also notes that the way she is constructed allows her a certain strength, even equality. Despite his argument that her representation is a misogynist reaction, he also describes the status of the femme fatale as a rival to the hero's assumed dominance, implying a possibility of agency and autonomous strength in this character; she is a patriarchal construction, but she is constructed in such a way that it is possible to see her as owning her power. Again, these critical accounts suggest that it is possible to read against the grain and find feminist meaning, even if the focus of that is herself a fantasy.

Critical work of this kind has positioned the femme fatale as a powerful emblem for feminism, one which provides pleasure for female viewers so often deprived of potent icons of femininity in cinema, both in the 1940s and in the contemporary period. As Hanson notes

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<sup>46</sup> Place's distinction between 'A' pictures and film noir, in which the latter offers important potential for vibrant roles for women, while the former can only provide weak victim roles, is not entirely accurate. The group of films that have retrospectively been termed 'film noir' is dominated by 'A' pictures such as *The Big Sleep* (1946) and *Sunset Boulevard*, as is the critical discourse on noir, although several 'B' films are also often included in noir filmographies, including *Detour* (1945) and *Gun Crazy* (1950).

<sup>47</sup> Dickos, p.145. Emphasis in the original.

of the significance of such scholarship, '[t]his work was important in forming an image of the *femme fatale* as sexually, and generically, transgressive: a female figure refusing to be defined by the socio-cultural norms of femininity, or contained by the male-addressed, generic operations of *film noir* narratives in which her fatality resulted in her ultimate destruction.'<sup>48</sup> Rather than blankly condemning the representation of women as terrifying and dangerous, the critical interventions made by Place and other scholars read the *femme fatale* as a potential site of power, despite her roots in male fantasy. Interestingly, for some, that potential is rooted specifically in the *femme fatale*'s sexuality. Tasker notes that the *femme fatale*'s appeal for feminism lies in the figure's dangerous sexuality, and in the power that sexuality provides, as such figures draw 'on a tradition of representation in which women are mysteriously seductive but evil, in which "woman" is defined not only by her sexuality but also by the power that this generates.'<sup>49</sup> So while the *femme fatale* may form part of a fabricated mythology about women's deadly sexuality, for many critics, it is this sexuality which offers the strongest source of pleasure in re-reading the *femme fatale*.

However, this focus on sexuality is not unproblematic. While the *femme fatale* is undoubtedly a powerful figure, that this power is rooted in sexuality makes her an ambivalent figure for a feminist reading. If such figures are to be read as hyperbolic symbols of feminist agency, then attributing the source of her power exclusively to her sexual appeal and ability to manipulate complicates this reading, and brings to mind Germaine Greer's contention that '[t]o deny a woman's sexuality is certainly to oppress her but to portray her as nothing but a sexual being is equally to oppress her.'<sup>50</sup> The valorisation of a two-dimensional figure whose sole power lies in her sexuality does not seem a particularly positive move forward for feminism, not least because of what or who is left behind in the push to celebrate the *femme fatale*'s sexuality. The vast majority of cinematic *femme fatales* are white, or presented as

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<sup>48</sup> Hanson, p.xv. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>49</sup> Tasker, p.120.

<sup>50</sup> Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman* (London: Doubleday, 1999), p.319.

white. While the femme fatale may be presented as adjacent to exotic otherness as in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948), and, with her mysterious and indecipherable femininity, frequently comes to stand in for a range of anxieties about racial mixing and passing, these texts still valorise whiteness as a key element in sexual allure.<sup>51</sup> Although reductive representations of the hypersexual woman of colour – particularly in the case of African American jezebel and Hot Latina stereotypes – intersect with the femme fatale’s typical characterisation as sexually aggressive and desirable, these representations rarely employ the same discourses of deception, mystery and deadliness that are used in femme fatale narratives.<sup>52</sup> By the same note, femme fatales are exclusively under forty, and conform to normative standards of beauty and body type. It is in this context, then, that the cracks begin to show in the celebration of the femme fatale as a feminist icon within film criticism from the 1970s to the contemporary period.<sup>53</sup> Her power derives from her ability to meet patriarchal standards, standards which the majority of women are unable to meet themselves, and so, although the femme fatale’s personal power may be great, the extent to which that power may be adopted by her female viewers is limited. This focus on reclaiming the psychoanalytically informed projection of male anxiety as a symbol of feminine power and agency, then, is not without its limits.

However, more recent developments in criticism of the femme fatale may suggest a more nuanced reading of these figures, which allows their actions to be read as feminist, without the unquestioning postfeminist celebration of her power in sexuality. Bronfen

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<sup>51</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between race and gender in classic era film noir, see E. Ann Kaplan, “The “Dark Continent” of Film Noir: Race, Displacement and Metaphor in Tourneur’s *Cat People* (1942) and Welles’ *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948)” in *Women in Film Noir: New Edition*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998) pp.183-201. Aisha D. Bastiaans provides an example of the ways in which the femme fatale’s mystery is tied to race in more recent cinema in her chapter ‘Detecting Difference in *Devil in a Blue Dress*: The Mulatta Figure, Noir, and the Cinematic Reification of Race’, in *Mixed Race Hollywood*, ed. by Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas (New York and London: New York University Press, 2008), pp.223-47.

<sup>52</sup> *Out of Time* (2003) is one notable exception.

<sup>53</sup> It should, of course, be acknowledged that feminism is neither a monolithic nor a static entity, and that feminist approaches to issues of intersectionality have developed and been more clearly foregrounded in recent years. However, these developments occur alongside the influence of feminisms which focus on individual choice, sexual explicitness and particular kinds of feminine performance which intersect with many of the problematic aspects of the valorisation of the femme fatale. I explore these shifts, differences, and the impact of postfeminist culture on the femme fatale’s perceived potential later in the Introduction.

suggests that readings of the femme fatale as a projection of male anxiety themselves echo the male noir protagonist's response to the femme fatale:

For they too find themselves caught in a complex series of turnings away, of covering over, not of the eyes, but of understanding, when in reducing her to a symptom or a catchphrase they read the *femme fatale* either as an embodiment of threat or as a textual enigma and, in so doing, avoid actually seeing her as separate not only from the fantasies of the *noir* hero, but also from any critical preconceptions informing one's reading of a given text.<sup>54</sup>

This interpretation allows the femme fatale to be seen for what she is like based on a reading of what she actually *does*, rather than what she represents, as a distinct entity rather than as a projection. This argument is a theoretical move which endows the femme fatale not only with more agency of her own, but also with a greater level of flexibility. When she ceases to be the product of someone else's fantasy, or an icon of femininity to be revered and aspired to, the possibility that she might be seen as more than just a sexual being opens up. However, while Bronfen suggests that the femme fatale must be separated from critical preconceptions, I contend that such preconceptions must coexist with a focus on the specifics of the femme fatale's representation, rather than on assumptions based on the term. The constellation of meanings surrounding the term 'femme fatale' still hovers over these characters, but these meanings are accompanied by a simultaneous direct assessment of the character in question rooted in the particulars of the text. Similarly, Wager's distinction between the femme fatale and femme attrapée is designed to see these characters not as projections, but as real women positioned within a patriarchal structure: 'with both terms, *femme attrapée* and *femme fatale*, the goal is to focus attention on the female character, on her survival through acquiescence in the requirements of the patriarchy, or on her destruction through resistance.'<sup>55</sup> While she attempts to disrupt simplistic readings of noir women, Wager's dualistic model still risks the same binary account of female representation that have long troubled feminist critics. However, while this distinction may present a simplified version of the choices available to women

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<sup>54</sup> Bronfen, 'Femme Fatale', p.114. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>55</sup> Wager, *Dames in the Driver's Seat*, p.20. Emphasis in the original.

within the constraints of the patriarchy, it nevertheless offers a useful way of reading the femme fatale as a cultural response to women's lived experiences, and suggests a more nuanced method for thinking about what the femme fatale may mean for feminism.

Grossman's recent work also proposes this focus on noir women as real women. She argues that 'contrary to popular culture and film criticism's insistence that the deadly seductress figure defines American film noir, most noir movies suggest that women are forced into performing the role of "femme fatale" to escape social traps.'<sup>56</sup> Grossman's project is different from those of Wager and Bronfen, in that she aims to erode the category of femme fatale entirely, suggesting that it causes women to be demonised or celebrated in very simple terms, and ignores the nuances of the representation of noir women. I will explore this argument in more detail later in the Introduction, but while I do not seek to eradicate the term, her reading is still a useful one in terms of seeing the femme fatale as a more complex figure. While Grossman's reading, as well as those of Bronfen and Wager, does risk ignoring the visual excesses and hyperbolic performances of the femme fatale in favour of seeing her as a realistic and sympathetic character, they also offer a way of seeing her beyond feminist adulation or dismissal. If the femme fatale is read as a three-dimensional character, contending with the struggles of women in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, then issues surrounding her power in sexuality also become less problematic. Rather than seeing the femme fatale as a role model for female empowerment through sexual performance, she can instead be seen as taking one of the very few options available to her within patriarchal structures to improve her circumstances. In this thesis, I argue that just as the femme fatale can be read as a sinister projection of male anxiety about women, she must also be read as indicative of a female and feminist response to those anxieties, as both the spectre of fear, and its living, responsive, source.

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<sup>56</sup> Grossman, p.93.

## Who's that Girl?: Politics of Narrative and Epistemology

I am now going to consider two significant factors around which scholarly work on the femme fatale has clustered: questions of narrative and epistemology. Studies of femme fatale characters in both classic and neo-noir have frequently focused on the significance of narrative, and narrative conclusions in particular, for determining the feminist meaning of the figure. The dominant argument, which recurs throughout the existing discourses in femme fatale criticism, is that although the classic noir femme fatale was invariably contained through death, incarceration, and occasionally normative romance at the end of the films, these endings do not count when it comes to seeing the femme fatale as a powerful figure of feminine agency. For example, Stella Bruzzi argues that 'such a strong image of women cannot be cancelled out by a conventionalised ending.'<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Wager notes that, 'I have never been able to read the inevitable containment of the femme fatale in the final minutes of every classic film noir as entirely convincing. The energy and enthusiasm that powerful female characters had for achieving their goals provided so much pleasure that part of me always ignored the ending.'<sup>58</sup> This sentiment follows Place's suggestion that the femme fatale leaves behind 'a remarkably potent image of woman', and that it is this image, rather than her 'inevitable demise' which is the most significant aspect of the femme fatale's representation.<sup>59</sup> This echoes numerous other similar assertions of selective memory in femme fatale criticism which place emphasis on the femme fatale's actions rather than her destruction, and which nods to the requirements of the Production Code that criminality should not be seen to go

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<sup>57</sup> Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1997), p.126.

<sup>58</sup> Wager, *Dames in the Driver's Seat*, p.112.

<sup>59</sup> Place, p.36.

unpunished.<sup>60</sup> Tasker views such practices as ‘an exploration of the possible contradictions between narrative and visual style’.<sup>61</sup> Such reflexive reading practices open up ways in which the femme fatale’s power can be considered beyond her narrative conclusions.

With the Production Code long gone by the time of the full-scale re-emergence of the femme fatale in the 1980s, however, neo-noir filmmakers were able to bypass the noir trope of the punished femme fatale. As Stables argues, ‘[p]otentially the most fascinating new feature of the *femme fatale* is her ability to *avoid textual suppression*, to win on her own terms.’<sup>62</sup> Contemporary films in which the femme fatale ‘gets away with it’ may therefore appear to eliminate the need for this reading method of privileging her embodiment of powerful femininity over her tragic ending in order to find feminist meaning. However, Tasker’s foregrounding of the *contradictions* between narrative conclusion and visual style suggest that this critical practice can be usefully employed to interrogate possible contradictions between an apparently positive ending and the representation of femininity within the film as a whole. If the representation of a strong woman can overpower the impact of her ultimate demise, how important is visual style in a narrative with an apparently feminist conclusion? The increasing ability of the new femme fatale to get away with her crimes is a significant aspect in the femme fatale’s evolution, but it does not guarantee a nuanced feminist representation. Just as it is possible to read the femme fatale who is punished for her crimes as an exciting embodiment of female agency, it is equally possible that the femme fatale who gets away with it only offers a shallow and limited degree of empowerment.

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<sup>60</sup> The Production Code placed limits on acceptable content in Hollywood cinema and was in place from 1930 until 1967. While filmmakers began to disregard the film production code in the late 1950s, its strictures were carefully followed at the time when the majority of canonical noir films were produced. Of particular significance to the femme fatale’s representation is the first General Principle of the Production Code, that ‘[n]o picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin.’ This provision ensured that the femme fatale’s bad behaviour was always punished. See *The Production Code of the Motion Picture Industry (1930-1967)*, <[http://productioncode.dhwritings.com/multipleframes\\_productioncode.php](http://productioncode.dhwritings.com/multipleframes_productioncode.php)> [accessed 6<sup>th</sup> June 2011].

<sup>61</sup> Tasker, p.120.

<sup>62</sup> Stables, p.171. Emphasis in the original.



Much critical debate about the femme fatale who ‘gets away with it’ has focussed on the ‘saleability’ of this particular version of femininity. Drawing on the notion of the pleasurable agency implicit in the punished femme fatale, Williams argues that the femme fatale continues to exist in contemporary cinema because

she is a handy genre trope which has continued to sell – the covert pleasures women have found in the 1940s punished *femme fatale* have mutated into the overt saleability of the 1990s get-away-with-it version. The 1990s good-bad girl is what happens to the *femme fatale* when she gets bored with demonization, when she wants to come in from the cold but still get the hots, appealing to a wider audience base and avoiding the moral dichotomies of classic *noir*.<sup>63</sup>

This shift from the punished femme fatale of the 1940s and 1950s, to the ‘saleable’ victorious version in contemporary cinema, invites an assessment of the importance of visual style and characterisation in films where narrative conclusion already encourages pleasure. Just as Place points to the ways in which visual style can contradict narrative conclusion in classic noir, so too may the appearance of a pleasurable, saleable ending in which the femme fatale gets away with it be undermined by earlier cinematic practices. Hanson also notes that ‘the emphasis on female sexuality and the move in films of the 1980s and 1990s to “package” forms of female agency as commodities suggests that the renewals and reworkings of the *femme fatale* figure in the neo-noir thriller is still an area requiring feminist attention.’<sup>64</sup> This packaging of the unpunished femme fatale as a kind of postfeminist girl power figure is an important one, and one which I will explore in more detail in Chapter Two when I address the figure of the teenage femme fatale.

Another key area of discourse around the figure of the femme fatale which is pertinent to this thesis concerns questions of epistemology. Part of the link between the femme fatale and the desire to attain knowledge derives from of the femme fatale’s connections with noir and its narratives of detection. As Christine Gledhill argues, ‘[f]requently [in film noir], the female figure exists as a crucial figure within the dangerous

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<sup>63</sup> Linda Ruth Williams, p.122. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>64</sup> Hanson, p.171.

criminal world which the hero struggles with in the course of his investigation, and as often as not constitutes the central problem in the unravelling of truth. Woman becomes the object of the hero's investigation.<sup>65</sup> This positioning of the femme fatale as the object of investigation in noir narratives certainly goes some way towards explaining the overwhelming air of mystery surrounding the figure. However, if this was the full extent of the matter, then all femme fatale narratives would end with a clear explanation of the femme fatale's motives and methods, thus clearing up any uncertainty. Rather, the sense that the femme fatale is a mystery persists even after the crime has been solved and her deception revealed. It has been argued that the femme fatale would be the object of examination regardless of any criminal activity or formal investigation. Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo reference Gledhill's point as they write that 'the crime in film noir is just a pretext, then, for the detective's investigation into the sexuality of the femme fatale.'<sup>66</sup> This argument states what Gledhill implies: that the femme fatale, as a mysterious figure in a mystery narrative, is not merely something to be unravelled like every other ambiguity, but is the focus and purpose of that narrative, filtered through the ostensibly central criminal mystery. The investigation of the woman is the primary objective, which suggests that the femme fatale and the epistemological urge would be tied together whether she appears in a crime film or not, thus providing another key reason that the femme fatale's presence beyond noir should be examined.

This reading of the femme fatale persists throughout femme fatale criticism. As Hanson and O'Rawe note, '[t]he sense of mystery, of a concealed identity always just beyond the surface, is common in critical discourses of the femme fatale', and a semantic field of mystery and unknowability hovers over critical accounts of such figures.<sup>67</sup> Doane provides an extensive interrogation of the femme fatale's intrinsic mystery when she argues that 'her most

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<sup>65</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'Klute 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism' in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1978) pp.6-22 (p.15).

<sup>66</sup> Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo, *Noir Anxiety* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p.242.

<sup>67</sup> Hanson and O'Rawe, p.1.

striking characteristic, perhaps, is that she is never what she seems to be,' that films featuring the femme fatale 'are transforming the threat of woman into a secret, something that must be aggressively revealed.'<sup>68</sup> According to Doane, the mystery of the femme fatale is not merely threatening; it must be addressed by investigation, by forcibly breaking through the mystery and revealing the truth. The femme fatale, in Doane's argument, is perpetually ambiguous, always concealing something, and inviting questions about the connections between femininity and secrecy, women and concealment. The femme fatale becomes a text, and both noir protagonists and critics have attempted to treat her as legible in order to fully comprehend the threat of the mysterious woman.

The connection between the femme fatale and the epistemological impulse is crucial to this thesis. While the femme fatale's mystery has been interrogated throughout feminist discourse on the figure, there has been little attention paid to the manifestation of this trope in more recent films: all of the analyses described above are concerned with classical era film noir. While Stables' essay does provide some discussion of knowledge and the femme fatale in neo-noir, there is, I argue, much more to the femme fatale's mysterious appearances in contemporary cinema.<sup>69</sup> While throughout contemporary cinema, female characters are frequently presented in terms of heteronormative objectification, the femme fatale serves a particularly useful purpose for feminist inquiry by highlighting the frequently epistemological gaze turned on beautiful female characters who undermine or subvert the codes of behaviour – passive, submissive, quiet – for conventionally attractive women in mainstream cinema. While Laura Mulvey suggests that women in Hollywood cinema 'are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*', I contend that the femme fatale is presented not merely

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<sup>68</sup> Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p.1.

<sup>69</sup> Stables, pp.178-79.

as to-be-looked-at, but as to-be-solved.<sup>70</sup> The films to which this thesis pays close attention seem particularly concerned with the inscrutability of the femme fatale, and this manifests in complex and often unexpected ways. In particular, I focus on questions of sexual identity in Chapter Three and of the connection between the physical investigation of the body and the desire to understand the femme fatale's mysteries in the case of films where the femme fatale's body literally, rather than metaphorically, contains a secret in Chapter Four.

### **Sex and the Feminist Girl: The Femme Fatale and Contemporary (Post)Feminism<sup>71</sup>**

Much of the significant work on the cinematic femme fatale is informed specifically by second wave feminism and the emerging field of feminist film theory of the late 1970s, or, in the case of more recent accounts, by the notion of an anti-feminist backlash during the early 1990s. It is part of the project of this thesis to update these understandings of the femme fatale by exploring the position that the figure occupies within the developments in (post)feminist politics of the last twenty years. The femme fatale, particularly in the more recent incarnations in which she gets away with her crimes, would seem to provide the ideal figurehead for feminist and postfeminist cultures since the early 1990s. The femme fatale, as a woman who controls every situation she is in, is sexually demanding, and delights in a highly performative sexualised femininity with little or no regard for the societal constraints that are placed upon a woman's choices, would seem to embody a particular cluster of highly visible contemporary feminisms and postfeminisms.<sup>72</sup> The question of empowerment through means which would

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<sup>70</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16.3 (1975), 6-18 (p.11). Emphasis in the original.

<sup>71</sup> My use of brackets in the term (post)feminism is intended to indicate the slippage between some areas of postfeminist and third wave feminist cultures and rhetorics, as explored in more detail below. At other times, I refer more singly to postfeminism, or to feminism, as, despite the overlap between the two, I believe that these two terms need to also be considered separately.

<sup>72</sup> The distinction between postfeminism and third wave feminism is not always clear, and a great deal of slippage does appear to exist between the two categories, especially in the area of the role of female sexual aggression and performance as strategies for empowerment. However, postfeminism can be designated as apolitical, while feminism is marked by a clear sense of political awareness and engagement (for example, the lairy activities of the Ladettes of the 1990s as opposed to the equally sexually overt writing in BUST magazine.

be read within second wave feminism as signs of compliance with patriarchal norms – more specifically, the deployment of a labour-intensive feminine appearance and sexualised performances aimed at men – has been a highly contested area of discourse for feminism in recent years, and it is this contestation which makes the femme fatale such a significant figure for understanding powerful women in popular culture beyond notions of backlash.

The idea that power for the modern woman is rooted in her strategic deployment of an engagement with her sexuality is one which particularly characterises certain strands of both third wave feminism and postfeminist rhetoric. As Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young note, ‘defenders of “girlie feminism” view femininity and sexuality as empowering. Many postfeminists seek to reclaim and refashion their sexuality, to unsettle traditional images of feminine virtue by substituting an image of themselves as “lustful feminists”.’<sup>73</sup> This image of the empowered modern woman, reclaiming the trappings of feminine heterosexuality that had previously been spurned by second wave feminists, is a powerful one within (post)feminist culture. It is an image heavily informed by discourses of choice and individual liberty that frequently characterise much contemporary rhetoric surrounding women and power, and suggests that in a postfeminist society, women are able and entitled to use their bodies however they like, but typically in normative sexual displays and performances, to gain power and success. This notion of female empowerment through these means is, of course, fraught with problems, contradictions and erasures, not least because of the difficulty of identifying

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While the former does not directly engage with feminist criticism and theory, the latter does so specifically and proudly). Despite this though, given the presence of marketing strategies which hijack feminist rhetoric to sell products, and the ways in which feminist thought has permeated contemporary culture and language, this distinction is not such an easy one to make, and is a contentious topic within feminist theory. For a useful summary of these debates, see Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp.81-82. While I believe that the apolitical/political divide is an important one, these terms should here be read as distinct but overlapping categories.

<sup>73</sup> Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, ‘Introduction: Chick Flicks and Chick Culture’ in *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*, ed. by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2007), pp.1-25 (p.5). The term ‘lustful feminists’ is taken from Debbie Stoller’s essay ‘Sex and the Thinking Girl’ in *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order*, ed. by Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), pp.75-84 (p.84). Ferriss and Young’s use of ‘postfeminists’ is here complicated by Stoller’s full address to ‘[l]ustful feminists of the third wave’.

any choice made by a woman within patriarchal culture as entirely free from the constraints and demands of that culture. The proponents of the idea that a free choice does exist has been termed 'choiceoisie' by Elspeth Probyn, and in more popular discourses is scornfully referred to as 'I choose my choice feminism', and 'empowerfulment' on the feminist blogosphere.<sup>74</sup> While choice has always been a central tenet of feminist politics and activism, the choices on offer in postfeminist texts frequently revolve around the reclamation of traditional women's roles in ways which imply that the work of feminism has already been achieved. Similarly, as Probyn's term 'choiceoisie' suggests, such postfeminist choices are frequently limited to middle class, white, Western women, despite the tendency to frame these choices as universal. These debates about choice and feminism raise important questions about the nature of sexualised power for women, and the control they can truly exert over that power from within a patriarchal society, and as such are crucial to a discussion of the femme fatale in contemporary cinema.

Also relevant here is the notion that 'empowered' postfeminist images are 'hollow'. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra note that 'scholars, popular critics, and mass audience often report a "hollow quality" at the heart of many postfeminist media texts', and this accusation is one frequently levelled at representations of female power in postfeminist texts.<sup>75</sup> This notion of the postfeminist heroine as embodying a hollow version of empowerment echoes the ways in which the femme fatale of both classical noir and contemporary cinema has been theorised within film studies, suggesting an important symmetry between the representation of the femme fatale and postfeminist empowerment. Doane famously asserts that '[h]er power is of

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<sup>74</sup> Elspeth Probyn, 'Choosing Choice: Images of Sexuality and 'Choiceoisie' in Popular Culture' in *Negotiating at the Margins: The Gendered Discourses of Power and Resistance*, ed. by Sue Fisher and Kathy Davis (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993). The term 'I choose my choice' originates from Charlotte's protests that she has the right to choose to leave her job to stay at home full-time in *Sex and the City*; 'Time and Punishment', S04, Ep7. 'Empowerfulment' was coined on the blog 'I Blame the Patriarchy'. For a full account of the term, see 'Sports, Corsetry and the Empowerful Woman', *I Blame the Patriarchy*, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2006 <<http://blog.iblamethepatriarchy.com/2006/08/26/sports-and-corsetry/>> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> May 2011].

<sup>75</sup> Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 'In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Studies', *Cinema Journal*, 44.2 (2005), 107-10 (p.107).

a peculiar sort insofar as it is usually not subject to her conscious will, hence appearing to blur the opposition between passivity and activity. She is an ambivalent figure because she is not the subject of power but its *carrier* (the connotations of disease are appropriate here.)<sup>76</sup> This construction of the femme fatale as a carrier of power is an important one, and I will return to it in Chapter Four in my discussion of the hybrid femme fatale and possession narratives, but what is most significant here is Doane's model of the femme fatale as a kind of empty vessel who embodies power without any genuine subjectivity. Doane's version of the classic noir femme fatale can in this context be read as a precursor to the hollow postfeminist heroine, who, while she appears to be a powerful and agentic subject, is actually a vacant shell onto which notions about female power can be projected.

Similar claims have been made of more recent femme fatale figures, such as Stables' assertion that '[w]hile she is fabricated from (and speaks to) a set of current and often conflicting discourses around "woman", she signals nothing but sex',<sup>77</sup> and B. Ruby Rich's contention that 'so happy are audiences to find movies in which women chew up the scenery and trap the wimpy men that no one seems to have noticed that they're utterly lacking in subjectivity. After all, they usually get away with it in the end.'<sup>78</sup> These two arguments suggest that the contemporary femme fatale, despite her seemingly complex origins and claims for agency, has no meaning beyond sex – Stables' use of 'sex' should be read in highly heteronormative terms – and that her agency is nothing but empty posturing on the part of the key performers and filmmakers. The femme fatale, then, if read in these terms, offers a highly appropriate icon for postfeminist discourses of empowerment. While she may appear to offer a powerful image of feminine power, that power is ultimately hollow and based on a series of highly limited and limiting choices about sexual performance and feminine display. However, despite this apparent similarity between feminist discourses about postfeminist

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<sup>76</sup> Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p.2. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>77</sup> Stables, pp.178-79.

<sup>78</sup> B. Ruby Rich, 'Dumb Lugs and Femmes Fatales' *Sight and Sound*, 5.11 (1995), 6-11 (p.9).

representations of female power and some sections of femme fatale criticism, I contend that the problematic aspects and apparent postfeminist hollowness of the femme fatale's contemporary incarnations cannot entirely undermine the pleasures and possibilities of this figure. While the intersections between postfeminist discourses of choice and empowerment are certainly significant to an understanding of the feminist meaning of the femme fatale in contemporary cinema, I will show that the femme fatale cannot be entirely disregarded as merely another example of the manifestation of postfeminist rhetoric in popular culture.

As my mapping of the critical landscape surrounding the femme fatale suggests, the figure is a highly ambivalent one for feminist critics, and I believe that it is important to maintain this ambivalence while at the same time giving serious consideration to the feminist meaning of the femme fatale. I do not wish to replicate the gushing adoration of some less rigorous accounts of the femme fatale's meaning. However, neither am I convinced by work which completely refuses the femme fatale as a figure of feminist power. Numerous critics have observed that part of the femme fatale's interest and power lies in the impossibility of fixing a concrete meaning upon her. Bronfen notes that, '[w]ithin feminist film criticism, the *femme fatale* has thus emerged as a fundamentally unstable figure. Not only will she not allow herself to be dominated by the men who fall for her charms, but also the meaning she assumes in any given text refuses to be fixed.'<sup>79</sup> It is this instability that renders the femme fatale such an interesting and difficult prospect for feminist criticism. However, I contend that this is also the factor that offers the most productive way of reading the femme fatale of contemporary film. As Stables argues, '[w]hile postmodern cinema expresses and reproduces dominant ideologies, its polysemic nature allows films to accommodate and privilege radically opposing discourses at the same time', and this is precisely the dynamic which occurs

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<sup>79</sup> Bronfen, 'Femme Fatale', p.113. Emphasis in the original.



throughout the texts explored in this thesis.<sup>80</sup> Patriarchal norms are shored up and undermined simultaneously, female mystery is both exposed and concealed, and opposing and multiple meanings exist concurrently. This pervading sense of contradiction and double implication has been noted by feminist critics of contemporary popular culture, but the anxieties generated by this dynamic have not fully been addressed.<sup>81</sup>

In her theorisation of postfeminism as a term with multiple meanings, Genz argues that '[i]t is neither a simple rebirth of feminism nor a straightforward abortion (excuse the imagery) but a complex resignification that harbours within itself the threat of backlash as well as the potential for innovation.'<sup>82</sup> This rhetoric of heterogeneous resignification suggests a way in which the contemporary femme fatale might productively be viewed. The femme fatale may well signify male anxiety, backlash, and misogyny, but she equally offers female agency, a complex account of women's challenges within patriarchal culture, and excessive and pleasurable sexuality. It is by moving beyond the canonical backlash texts that these intricacies can be explored and unravelled. However, acknowledging the tensions of meaning in the femme fatale's representation is key. Stables continues her assessment of the femme fatale of neo-noir by noting that a film like *Basic Instinct* can be read simultaneously as a text of backlash and a lesbian power fantasy, and observes that '[w]e may ask ourselves whether there is any longer a need to piece together a recuperative reading around the *femme fatale*, when the text can be experienced in these multiple fashions.'<sup>83</sup> This sentiment is problematic in that it disregards the discomfort and disorientation caused by the conflicting meaning and double

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<sup>80</sup> Stables, p.166. While not all contemporary cinema is necessarily postmodern, contemporary Hollywood inevitably produces multi-authored texts with contradictory meanings created both by its many component parts and by its broad audiences.

<sup>81</sup> See, for example, Tasker and Negra's contention that '[t]o some extent, the problem postfeminism poses for scholars interested in engaging with contemporary gender culture resides precisely in its characteristic double address'. Tasker and Negra, 'In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Studies', p.108.

<sup>82</sup> Genz, *Postfemininities in Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.24. While I am not convinced that 'postfeminism' is the best term for the complex tangle of meaning that Genz explores – the term is too synonymous with reactionary or apolitical anti-feminist thinking – the model that she describes is a useful one.

<sup>83</sup> Stables, p.166. Emphasis in the original.

address of the contemporary femme fatale. The femme fatale and the postfeminist media culture in which she exists still present a vexed relationship for feminist critics, and the conflicting meanings do need to be addressed rather than disregarded as they do not sit comfortably next to one another, particularly for a feminist viewer. In this thesis, by working through the ways in which these contradictory addresses and double meanings manifest, I address these tensions directly, in order to fully articulate and interrogate the complexities of female power as represented in contemporary cinema.

While the pleasures and possible empowerment offered by the femme fatale are certainly problematic, they cannot be entirely dismissed. The femme fatale in contemporary cinema, then, stands in for a much wider sense of helplessness surrounding images of women and power in contemporary culture. There is always the possibility that even the most exciting and progressive images of feminine power may be co-opted by the patriarchal gaze, just as it is possible to read popular images of heteronormative feminine sexual performance with a resistant eye and to find feminist potentials and pleasures therein, and this tension is highlighted by my readings of the films throughout this thesis. The femme fatale, then, is an important figure for a feminist understanding of contemporary popular culture because of the way in which her complex relationship with patriarchal and feminist understandings of female power forces to the surface broader, frequently unspoken concerns about cinematic representation of women. That the femme fatale can be read both in terms of conservative backlash and feminist empowerment speaks directly to the inherent contradictions in the limited range of representations of female power currently available in contemporary American cinema.

This thesis is structured thematically in order to best highlight some key areas of interest for femme fatale criticism, and to open up several potent areas of scholarship. Chapter One offers a reading of the femme fatale in retro-noir films; that is, films that

explicitly model their visual style and narrative on classic film noir. This consideration of *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995), *Mulholland Falls* (1996), *L.A. Confidential* (1997), and *The Black Dahlia* (2006) interrogates the tensions between the nostalgic impulses of the retro noir genre and the more complex gender politics centred on the films' re-presentation of the femme fatale figure. Chapter Two moves on to consider the emergence of teenage femme fatales since 1990, reading *Wild Things* (1998), *Mini's First Time* (1998), *Cruel Intentions* (1999), and *Pretty Persuasion* (2007) as both teen updates of the 'mature' femme fatale narrative in the cultural environment of contemporary teen cinema, and as a more complex consideration of anxieties about modern girlhood. Chapter Three returns to more familiar critical territory, and explores the frequent occurrences of the femme fatale who behaves bisexually through a consideration of *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Bound* (1996), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), and *Femme Fatale* (2002). In reading these films, however, I depart from the more conventional backlash readings to consider these sexually and morally complex characters in comparison with recent theorisations of female bisexual identity. Finally, Chapter Four interrogates the figure of the femme fatale whose body is not entirely human. By reading narratives of mutation and alien infection such as *Species* (1995), *Alien Resurrection* (1997), *The Faculty* (1998), and *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), in the light of cyberfeminist theory and critical work on horror and the body, I interrogate the implications of the seductive woman whose body hides a monstrous secret.

The femme fatale occupies a precarious yet highly visible space in contemporary cinema. From scifi alien women to teenage bad girls, filmmakers continue to draw repeatedly on the notion of the sexy deadly woman in ways which traverse boundaries of genre and narrative. In some films she only takes up a tiny amount of screen time, and in others she is the protagonist and driving force of the action. Either way, the femme fatale refuses to go away as her cinematic presence extends far beyond the post-war period that has been so frequently cited as the catalyst for the deadly noir woman's appearance, and such figures seem

to be more numerous than ever, particularly in the light of critical arguments which aim to disprove the mythology of the femme fatale's ubiquitous presence in 1940s film noir. In this thesis I chart the articulations of the femme fatale in American cinema of the past twenty years, and contend that, despite her problematic relationship with feminism, she offers a vital means for reading the connections between mainstream cinema and representations of female agency.

# Chapter One

## Spectres in the Dark: Retro Noir Femme Fatales

This chapter focuses on one subgenre of neo-noir in order to investigate the apparent absence of the femme fatale from a cinematic form which, in its remaking and revision of the classic noir film in its original setting, might be presumed to also replicate the trope of the deadly noir woman. In this chapter I focus on four examples of the retro noir genre, first looking at *L.A. Confidential* and *Devil in a Blue Dress* as films in which the femme fatale initially appears present but is then dismantled and domesticated, before concluding with a discussion of *The Black Dahlia* and *Mulholland Falls*, and considering the ways in which the spectre of the Elizabeth Short murder allows the female corpse to be seen as a femme fatale, in a way which similarly undermines the image of the classic noir femme fatale. In these films, I suggest, there exists a tension between the retro noir imperative to highlight the social injustices – in particular systemic racism, police corruption, and class inequality – of the mid-century urban America, and a more conservative representation of femininity and agency, which results in the femme fatale functioning as a spectral presence within the narratives.

### **Out of the Past: Nostalgia, Gender, and the Retro Noir Film**

The 1990s saw the blossoming of retro noir, a subgenre of contemporary cinema that can also be referred to as period noir or costume noir, in which the femme fatale is presented in a peculiarly tentative way. These terms refer to a series of films which return to the noir settings of 1940s and 1950s urban America, employing period mis-en-scene to create versions of the classic noir environment in which to stage noir stories of detectives, dangerous women, and

corruption. Although the retro noir film extends back as far as *Chinatown*,<sup>1</sup> the 1990s and 2000s saw a more intensive proliferation of these period crime texts. As I will outline in what follows, although the subgenre has its origins in the mid-1970s, with occasional texts appearing every few years, the relative glut of these films from the 1990s onwards is rooted in a reaction against the highly conservative nostalgic cinema of the late 1970s and 1980s. The four films that form the focus of the discussion in this chapter are retro noir films in which the figure of the femme fatale is at its most prominent and complex, but represent just a few examples of a much bigger genre.<sup>2</sup> These films form part of a larger interest in the classic noir period within recent and contemporary noir films, which can be seen in the series of remakes of classic noir films of the 1980s and 1990s,<sup>3</sup> the use of visuals from classic noir texts in new noir films with contemporary settings,<sup>4</sup> and in the frequent use of 1940s and 1950s aesthetics in neo-noir films set in the future or in the dystopian present.<sup>5</sup> Even when contemporary noirs are not set in the past, they often revisit the period to pay homage to its visual style.

Retro noir films are also embedded in a much broader cross-genre interest in revisiting the long 1950s, the period between the end of the Second World War and the assassination of JFK.<sup>6</sup> Films set during this period extend back to the early 1970s and include *The Last Picture*

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<sup>1</sup> *Chinatown* was quickly followed by the adaptation of *Farewell, My Lovely*, which employed the period setting of its source text, but few other noir films in the 1970s and 1980s took a similar look back.

<sup>2</sup> Other examples include *Where the Truth Lies* (2005), *Hollywoodland* (2006), *Loneley Hearts* (2006), *Miller's Crossing* (1990), and *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), all of which offer ambiguous treatments of gender, but in this chapter I am focussing specifically on films in which the femme fatale is most clearly represented.

<sup>3</sup> For example, *D.O.A.* (1988), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), *Against All Odds* (the 1984 remake of *Out of the Past*), *Night and the City* (1992) and *Diabolique* (1996) are all updated versions of classic noir films which retain occasional references to mid-century noir costume and style, most notably in the opening and closing scenes of *D.O.A.*, and in Sharon Stone's detailed 1950s styling in *Diabolique*. Each of these texts engage with their 1940s and 1950s roots, predominantly via visual references to the styles of the period, but remain very clearly set at a time contemporary to their production.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the opening scene of *Femme Fatale* features a scene from *Double Indemnity* and Rita in *Mulholland Drive* decides on her new name after seeing the poster for *Gilda*.

<sup>5</sup> For example, *Blade Runner* (1982), *Strange Days* (1995), *Dark City* (1998), the *Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003), and *Sin City* (2005).

<sup>6</sup> Despite their obsession with luxurious period detail, the styling of these texts frequently slips between 1940s and early 1960s fashions, and often falls into a style that could loosely be termed 'vintage', which is indicative of the nostalgic, often vague relationship these films have with their chosen period. It is this uncertainty of period which situates these texts as part of 'fiftiesness', rather than in the 1950s. Here I am using Christine Sprengler's useful distinction between the '1950s' to denote the actual decade between 1950 and 1959, and 'The Fifties', which she describes as a 'mythic, nostalgic construct', adding that 'it is worth noting that the

*Show* (1971), *American Graffiti* (1973), *Grease* (1978), *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986), the *Back to the Future* trilogy (1985-1990), and *Dead Poets' Society* (1989), and more recently *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003), *The Majestic* (2001), *Pearl Harbour* (2001), *Pleasantville* (1998), *Far From Heaven* (2002), *The Hours* (2002), and *Down With Love* (2003). While these texts take in a broad range of genres and narratives, their focus is very similar, often rooted in a fascination with the small town or the suburban, the domestic, and the white middle classes, and typically is characterised by a richly textured visual style which dwells on period design and costume. Many of these texts, and particularly the earlier examples, have been of scholarly interest because of their perceived nostalgia for a more innocent and uncomplicated time, and their attempts to revisit and glorify the period to suit conservative ideologies. In particular, Fredric Jameson's 1983 essay 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' explored the role of nostalgia for the 1950s in shoring up conservative ideals and desires.<sup>7</sup> In his discussion of *Far From Heaven*, Todd McGowan argues that '[t]he 1950s occupies a privileged place in our contemporary cultural imagination. It serves, especially for conservative thinkers, as a prelapsarian site upon which contemporary subjects can project all their nostalgic yearnings for social stability and strong authority.'<sup>8</sup> While McGowan's discussion of *Far From Heaven* troublingly locates the nostalgic site of the whitewashed and conservative Fifties as a romantic setting for oppressed bodies, the quotation above serves as an excellent summary of the positioning of early retro films within critical discourse. The period, as represented in the majority of suburban nostalgia films listed above, offers a glimpse at a less complex society in which anxieties surrounding race, class and gender, amongst other things, are not permitted to surface. Roberta Garrett

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Fifties typically extends to 1963 and Kennedy's assassination which signalled, for many, the end of an era.' Christine Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia: Popluxes, Props and Technicolor Aesthetics in Contemporary American Film* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009), p.39 and p.64n.

<sup>7</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster, (New York: New Press, 1998), pp.111-125.

<sup>8</sup> Todd McGowan, 'Relocating our Fantasy of the 1950s: The Politics of Fantasy in *Far From Heaven*' in *The Cinema of Todd Haynes: All that Heaven Allows*, ed. by James Morrison (London and New York: Wallflower, 2007), pp.114-21 (p.114).

argues that the more recent retro films perform rather more interrogatory approaches to the mid-twentieth century, suggesting that ‘the relatively rapid shift from the conservative idealisation of past gender roles in 1980s portrayals of the period to the obsessive concern with issues of race, class and gender manifested in more recent cinematic depictions of fiftiesness.’<sup>9</sup> While the conservative nostalgia film did not disappear at the end of the 1980s – indeed, many of the more recent texts mentioned above may be seen as continuing this theme – it is significant that retro noir began to gain momentum in the period immediately after the height of idealistic 1950s nostalgia. This post-Reaganite climate of cinematic critique and reinvestigation of the past is arguably responsible for the rise of the retro noir film in recent years in which the image of 1950s America as a nostalgic fantasy of white middle class heteronormativity is interrogated and disrupted.<sup>10</sup> In this chapter I discuss the representation of the femme fatale in the context of retro noir film’s potential for the rewriting of previous representations, both in terms of the classic noir texts themselves, and as a response to the idealised 1950s of the nostalgia cinema of the 1980s. Does the return to the past allow for a rewriting of conservative values surrounding gender, or a recreation of – and attempt to return to – them? And to what extent does the reimagining of the femme fatale constitute an attempt to complicate earlier cinematic tropes?

In comparison to other types of films set in the past, and to other forms of neo-noir, the retro noir film cycle has received relatively little critical attention, especially in relation to gender. While debates surrounding British ‘heritage’ costume dramas, and the aforementioned Fifties nostalgia films of the 1980s have flourished, the retro noir remains unexplored.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Roberta Garrett, *Postmodern Chick Flicks: The Return of the Woman’s Film* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.191.

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting here that retro noirs were rare in the 1980s and tended towards parodic comedy rather than drama and political comment, as in *Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid* (1982) and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*. While these films allow for a knowing pastiche of the narrative conventions of the classical noir film, they do not permit more nuanced critique of the period, and instead focus on a lighter, and arguably entirely nostalgic, glance at the period.

<sup>11</sup> Selected examples of heritage-film criticism include Cairns Craig, ‘Rooms Without a View’, *Sight and Sound*, 1/2 (1991), 10-13, Andrew Higson’s work since the early 1990s, culminating in the monograph *English*



Susannah Radstone correctly notes that discussions of gender difference and nostalgia ‘are markedly absent’ from Jamesonian discourses on Fifties nostalgia and film, and while work by Radstone, Vera Dika, Sprengler and Garrett has done much to redress the balance within their broader discussions of gender politics, genre, and nostalgia films, these studies tend at best to register the existence of the retro noir film before moving on to other texts.<sup>12</sup> Wager does offer a more sustained consideration of the political implications of the retro noir, but only considers two texts, *L.A. Confidential* and *Mulholland Falls*, in any detail, and her readings are tied to a particularly rigid dichotomous framework, wherein retro noir films are inherently conservative and neo-noir is progressive in terms of the representation of race, gender and class.<sup>13</sup> I contend that this is not the case, and that, while the nostalgic glance of the retro noir film does involve conservative gender representations, there exists a possibility for some aspects of the texts to be recouped for feminist meaning. The retro noir film, in its period recreation of the noir plot, provides a vital space for a consideration of the femme fatale in contemporary cinema because of its retelling of old stories about power and gender. The way contemporary culture adapts fictions of the past functions as what Dika describes as ‘a shifting double exposure’ which says as much about present cultural mores and ideologies as it does about those of the past.<sup>14</sup> It is in this double exposure that the representation of classical noir women can be reconsidered.

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*Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama Since 1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), *British Historical Cinema: The History, Heritage and Costume Film*, ed. by Claire Monk and Amy Sergeant (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), and *Janespotting and Beyond: British Heritage Retrovisions Since the Mid-1990s*, ed. by Eckart Voigts-Virchow (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Susannah Radstone, *The Sexual Politics of Time: Confession, Nostalgia, Memory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p.17; Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Cinema: The Uses of Nostalgia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.220; Sprengler, p.42; and, Garrett, pp.155-188.

<sup>13</sup> Wager, *Dames in the Driver's Seat*, p.16.

<sup>14</sup> Dika, p.138. Ann Davies makes a similar point about the femme fatale in retro noir – although her main argument is about Spanish cinema – when she notes that ‘[a]t any rate, the retro *noir* offers us the possibility of perceiving the *femme fatale* at both the levels [Kate] Stables outlines: the *fatale* is simultaneously a woman of the 1940s and of the 1990s.’ Ann Davies, ‘The *Femme Fatale* of Spanish Retro-*Noir*: The Recuperation of a Repressed Voice’ in *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts*, ed. by Helen Hanson and Catherine O’Rawe (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010) pp.145-156 (p.148). Emphasis in the original.

It should be noted at this point that the retro noir films discussed in this chapter are not exact recreations of the style, sound and narrative of the mix of detective pictures, thrillers and melodramas which make up the canon of classic noir pictures. Most obviously, they are all in colour, unlike the majority of classic noir films, and although orange and sepia filters are often used to create a warm vintage appearance, the films' surface textures are crisp and free from grains and scratches. The length and angle of shots is generally very different from the 1940s and 1950s noir style, and the scores are grandly orchestral, jazz-inflected, and epic, rather than punchy and dramatic.<sup>15</sup> Much of the films are shot on location, rather than on sets – while location shooting of the city at night played a crucial part in some classic noir films, particularly in the 1950s, many of the canonical noir texts were shot mostly or entirely on sets – and the widespread use of daytime location shooting in retro noir creates an entirely different tone in which the city takes on a more open, extended feel, as opposed to the often claustrophobic atmosphere of the classic noir films. Dika argues of Jameson's examples of nostalgia films, most notably *American Graffiti* and *Body Heat*, that '[t]hese nostalgia films, however, are distinctive from earlier genre practice because their use of generic convention is often partial, and in many cases fragmentary.'<sup>16</sup> This point extends throughout the range of film texts which are not only set in the past, but which also revisit past cultural forms, albeit to varying extents.<sup>17</sup>

The films discussed in this chapter therefore do not provide exact remakes of classic film noir. Instead they display a palpable interest in the long 1950s in terms of their attention

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, *L.A. Confidential's* repeated use of long shots featuring the suburbs of Los Angeles and other outdoor settings, as well as the sweeping, rather mournful score and luxurious attention to period detail, as compared with *Double Indemnity's* treatment of the same city which is far less preoccupied with the cityscape, and employs a much more frenetic and urgent score.

<sup>16</sup> Dika, pp.10-11.

<sup>17</sup> For example, see *Death Proof* (2007), in which the film surface initially appears as scratched and damaged as a 1970s grindhouse slasher. These imperfections eventually vanish from the film as signals of contemporary culture such as mobile phones gradually appear and contradict both the film's vintage texture and style, and the cast's 1970s retro clothes, hairstyles and cars. *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994) provides another example, as the 1958 setting jars with the 1930s screwball plot, and Jennifer Jason Leigh's accompanying performance as a fast-talking dame.

to period details in costume, hair styles, makeup, furnishings, cars, and what outdoor locations used to look like, to the extent that James Naremore, in a discussion of *Miller's Crossing*, suggests that such films take these nostalgic visuals as their core material so that they are really ‘“about” smoking a cigarette in the dark while sitting next to a black telephone, with oriental rugs spread over hardwood floors and gauzy curtains wafting in the night breeze. Perhaps most of all it is “about” the glamour of men’s hats.’<sup>18</sup> While the mis-en-scene of these films evokes mid-century glamour, they are not purely about unquestioning and comfortable nostalgia for times past. Instead, the tensions between historical accuracy and contemporary film making techniques are symptomatic of a much greater tension between current values and the past. In a discussion of the different versions of the 1950s aesthetic found in retro films, Sprengler describes a ‘lounge’ style which is inspired by a Ratpack Hollywood glamour that occupies a liminal space between the stylish and the squalid. Her examples of retro texts featuring this style are *L.A. Confidential*, *Hollywoodland*, *Where the Truth Lies*, and ‘Are You Now or Have You Ever Been’ (2000), an episode of *Angel* set in 1950s Los Angeles. In addition to this, both *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994) and *Fringe* (2008-) employ similar visual strategies in episodes which pastiche hardboiled detective fiction.<sup>19</sup> She argues that ‘[m]any of the props central to Lounge appear in the “Hollywood Fifties”, a noirish version of urban America that uses silver screen glamour to cloak the anxieties, fears and bigotry lurking just beneath the surface.’<sup>20</sup> It is this friction between reverence for the past and revulsion at its dark secrets that allows for an exciting potential for a feminist line of enquiry into the retro noir film. This preoccupation with the tension between Hollywood glamour and its murky underside would suggest that the retro noir film may provide a site for the questioning of

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<sup>18</sup> James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), p.215.

<sup>19</sup> *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, ‘The Big Goodbye’, S01, Ep.11 (1988), and *Fringe*, ‘Brown Betty’, S02, Ep.20 (2010)

<sup>20</sup> Sprengler, p.42.

gender politics, a retelling of archetypal narratives about evil women and hard boiled detectives through a critical contemporary lens.

The retro noir film is fixated with an impulse to depict what both the original noir films could not, and what the nostalgia films of the 1980s would not. In a response to the censorial production environments of classic noir texts, and the normative middle class whiteness of the nostalgic texts, retro noir aims to showcase the grit and corruption of noir, with the focus on bringing their racist and classist undercurrents to the surface. Scott Higgins argues of *Far From Heaven* that the '[f]ilm promises to show us what the 1950s viewers were not allowed to see', and the same is true of retro noir films that show the darker layers of violent corruption, racism, homophobia and misogyny which the already dark surfaces of classic noir texts disguised.<sup>21</sup> These films also function as part of a reaction to the perceived conservatism and naivety of earlier celebrations of Fifties nostalgia. Using *Grease* as an example, Dika describes the way that such films constructed a clean and tension free version of a period of intense social and racial tension and unrest, suggesting that '[t]his noncontentious use of ethnicity in *Grease* aids in the construction of utopia. The rough edges from a 1950s past have been smoothed over and a new, simpler past has been reconstructed.'<sup>22</sup> This sanitised version of history in the context of what is known about social inequality at the time is responsible for what Sprengler sees as a widespread mistrust of Fifties nostalgia, arguing that 'the distaste many have for the Fifties has much to do with the way in which it has eclipsed the 1950s, obstructing the details and events that comprised, for some historians, one of the most representative decades in U.S. history.'<sup>23</sup> The retro noir films tap into this distaste by attempting to display the real mean streets of the urban 1950s, to present a more accurate version of the cultural climate of the time. However, as with all art, cinema is

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<sup>21</sup> Scott Higgins, 'Orange and Blue, Desire and Loss: The Colour Score in *Far From Heaven*' in *The Cinema of Todd Haynes*, pp.101-13 (p.104).

<sup>22</sup> Dika, p.132.

<sup>23</sup> Sprengler, p.41.

not an objective medium that can present the truths of the past, and so these retro noir films must be seen as alternate stories to Fifties nostalgia, which both react to and are products of those films that came before them.

The term 'retrovision' was coined by Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter and Imelda Whelehan to describe such alternate versions of history, who state that

"Time perception", we are told, is strictly contingent on the perceiver's social position and lived experience. Declaring one version of history true, from this perspective, is a strategic ploy to create a subversive countermyth about the past. We came up with the word "retrovision" to describe how some recent films and novels construct such countermyths.<sup>24</sup>

Retro noir films function in this way as retrovisions in that their efforts to retell old stories 'as they really were' serve not to simply rewrite history from the point of view of a different set of good guys, but to potentially undermine all previous and present versions of the story by constructing new countermyths, which themselves may be disrupted.<sup>25</sup> I contend that it is this potential for disruption of previous narratives of noir and of Fifties nostalgia that places the retro noir film in a precarious position for a feminist reading. If the retro noir film at once delights in and disrupts Fifties nostalgia, and deconstructs the very noir stories that they retell, where does this leave the femme fatale? Might one of the most enduring powerful figures of femininity be watered down on her home turf? Or could the disruptive potential of the noir retrovision allow for a complex retelling of her story which moves beyond gold diggers and spider women who live by night?

The retro noir films certainly depart from the femme fatale plots of many classic noir films as they, as well as those neo-noirs which borrow retro aesthetics discussed above, are notable for their absence of obvious or clear-cut evil and duplicitous femme fatale figures.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Deborah Cartmell and I.Q. Hunter, 'Introduction: Retrovisions: Historical Makeovers in Film and Literature', in *Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction*, ed. by Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter, and Imelda Whelehan (London: Pluto Press, 2001), pp.1-7 (pp.1-2).

<sup>25</sup> For an example of this in the context of Fifties nostalgia-busting, see Dika's discussion of the Marlboro Man anti-smoking campaign, Dika, pp.12-13.

<sup>26</sup> One explanation for this could be that the retro noir films seem to follow similar themes to the noirs of the 1970s which were similarly devoid of femme fatale figures. As Gates contends, 'in the 1970s, *noir* seemed less concerned with independent and predatory women, and more with political corruption and social malaise.'

This seems particularly unusual as the most famous of non-retro neo-noirs – and the majority of films discussed in the rest of this thesis – foreground the femme fatale figure, making her the centre of the narrative. As Garrett argues, ‘[a]lthough it is difficult to draw clear distinctions between classical and neo-*noir*, one element that does tend to characterise the difference between *noir* and neo-*noir* is the latter’s prioritisation of the deathly desire narrative and the significance of the figure of the *femme fatale* at the expense of other “noirish” features.’<sup>27</sup> The retro noir’s departure from the contemporary noir convention of the ‘impossible to miss’ femme fatale is significant given not only the interest of the retro films in the retelling of noir narratives in their original settings, but also the potential of the retrovision to disrupt past mythologies. The femme fatale’s apparent absence from retro noir films is a provocative issue for a feminist critique of the contemporary femme fatale, and in this chapter I will consider its implications.

However, while the femme fatale is not always obvious in the retro noir film, she is never entirely absent. While Garrett’s reading of neo-noir films with contemporary settings views the femme fatale as one of the few remaining noirish aspects, the barrage of noir features in the retro noir film seem to summon the femme fatale along with them to complete the picture. So every woman with a cigarette and a raised eyebrow is potentially a femme fatale, until the narrative disproves the viewer’s theory. The spectre of the femme fatale flits in and out of view in the retro noir: evoked, toyed with, and hidden again. The femme fatale features as a ghost in retro noir films, and it is both her figurative and literal ghostliness that I explore in this chapter. The remainder of the chapter is divided into two sections: the first discusses *L.A. Confidential* and *Devil in a Blue Dress*, films in which female characters appear to

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(p.96). Retro noir, as I have noted above, displays a similar concern with issues of institutional corruption and wrongdoing, and in its barely present femme fatales also echoes the tendencies of those earlier films. This is not to say that the noir of the 1970s and neo-noir of the 1990s and 2000s display the same gender politics and anxieties, rather that their common interest in broader, masculinised social issues necessitates a less pronounced focus on the dangers posed by women.

<sup>27</sup> Garrett, p.160. Emphasis in the original.

be classic femme fatales before being revealed as something else at the end of the film as the spectre of the femme fatale fades. The second considers *Mulholland Falls* and *The Black Dahlia* films in which the femme fatale is dead from the beginning of the narrative, yet in death gains a powerful hold over men elaborated through memory flashback scenes and flickering home movie images.

### **The Femme Fatale Who Wasn't There: Retro Noir's Pastiche Ghosts**

Although, as I have begun to outline above, the femme fatale is not obviously present in the retro noir film, she is by no means entirely absent. In what follows I explore the political implications of representations of the femme fatale in two films, *L.A. Confidential* and *Devil in a Blue Dress*, both of which toy with the idea of an easily recognisable 1940s style femme fatale in the construction of their respective lead female characters, before systematically dismantling the figure of the deadly sexually powerful woman again in a way that suggests such a figure never existed in the first place. In *L.A. Confidential*, three detectives – Bud White (Russell Crowe), Ed Exley (Guy Pearce) and Jack Vincennes (Kevin Spacey) – work their way through a complex plot involving police corruption, prostitution, sleazy journalists, blackmail and violence. Over the course of their investigations, Bud falls for Lynn Bracken (Kim Basinger) who works as a Veronica Lake impersonator for a service specialising in prostitutes who look like movie stars. When he discovers that Lynn has slept with Ed, his rival, Bud attacks her, but ultimately teams up with Ed to uncover the corruption, and, having been injured in the climactic gunfight, returns to Lynn and they drive off together to start a new life in Arizona. *Devil in a Blue Dress* follows East Rawlins (Denzel Washington) through a similarly complex narrative in which he is hired to track down a missing woman, Daphne Monet (Jennifer Beals). As the fiancée of Todd Carter (Terry Kinney), a young mayoral candidate, Daphne has become embroiled in a bitterly fought election campaign involving corruption

and murder. Eventually, it is revealed that Daphne is of mixed race, a secret that might end her fiancé's career if revealed, and this, along with Daphne's efforts to redress the situation, put her in mortal danger. Easy rescues Daphne, but the secret of her racial heritage is revealed to Todd's family, who pay her to leave town, which, dejected, she does.

The films do not seek to reproduce classic femme fatale type characters under the assumption that there is an original, essential, or basic femme fatale that exists in classic noir films, but rather work with the understanding that the noirish femme fatale has crystallised in the popular imaginary from an amalgamation of stereotypes, pastiches, classic noir performances and visual symbols such as long wavy hair and cigarettes, since the 1940s. Garrett argues that postmodern cinema's playful borrowing from previous genres operates under a paradoxical belief that the original genre tropes were fixed and stable:

The critical evaluation of a film's post-modernist credentials (primarily through its knowing inclusion of prior cinematic references) tends to carry with it certain assumptions concerning the stability of classical Hollywood genres and the universal recognition of their constituent parts which are very much at odds with recent academic approaches to classical drama production.<sup>28</sup>

However, in their treatment of the femme fatale, these noir retrovisions do in fact acknowledge the instability of the visual and narrative codes surrounding women in film noir by presenting perfect femme fatale stereotypes only to dismantle them. Wager argues that '[t]he pastiche femme fatales of the retro-noir have little or no ability to drive the narrative.'<sup>29</sup> Contrary to this, I suggest that concrete femme fatales, powerful or otherwise, were never present in the films in the first place. Instead, the films summon forth the *idea* of the femme fatale using well-worn visual iconography projected onto the bodies of much less provocative and dangerous female characters in order to dismiss the idea of the femme fatale entirely.

Lynn and Daphne are presented as femme fatale types before the films even begin, as their untrustworthiness is made clear through promotional materials. The most widely disseminated of promotional images for *L.A. Confidential* features Lynn in the foreground,

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<sup>28</sup> Garrett, p.157.

<sup>29</sup> Wager, *Dames in the Driver's Seat*, p.6.

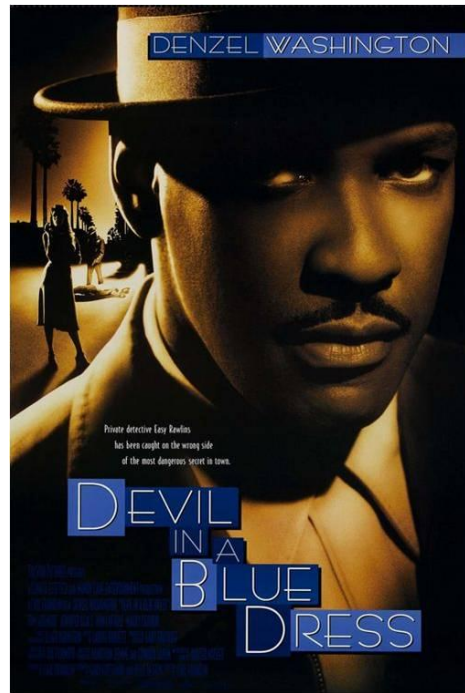


taking up the entire left side of the image, in a white dress with prominent cleavage, long wavy blonde hair worn in a Veronica Lake peek-a-boo style, red lipstick, and a sultry expression (see figure 1.1). The tagline reads ‘Everything Is Suspect... Everyone Is For Sale... And Nothing Is What It Seems...’. On the right side of the image are far smaller images of the film’s three detective figures: Jack Vincennes, Ed Exley, and Bud White, in diminishing order of size in front of a smoggy LA sunset over the Hollywood sign. While the scaling of this image certainly has much to do with the size of the stars at the time of the film’s release –Basinger and Spacey were bankable commodities, while Pearce and Crowe were unknowns – the effect of the foregrounding of this sexy and powerful image of Lynn next to the tag lines is to present her as a femme fatale: untrustworthy, gold-digging, deceptive. Similarly, Daphne is presented as a femme fatale from the title onwards. The phrase ‘Devil in a Blue Dress’ not only aligns evil with femininity, but does so in the noirish context provided by the hard-boiled title. The most widely disseminated poster for *Devil* is stylistically very similar to that of *L.A. Confidential* with its murky Los Angeles backdrop and yellowish brown tints, but this time it is the hero, Easy Rawlins, whose head and shoulders take up the majority of space, while Daphne is much smaller in a full body shot behind him (see figure 1.2). Again, this positioning has much to do with star value, as Beales, while by no means an unknown, did not match the stardom of Washington in 1995. Yet despite her background positioning on the poster, Daphne is still presented as a femme fatale type. She is mostly in shadow, and is lit in a way that highlights her long wavy hair, cocked hip, long legs, and cigarette. She is also clearly wearing a 1940s style dress, which suggests a possible connection with the devil of the title. The shadow cast upon her suggests a mysterious and potentially deceptive character, and its concealment of her skin and hair colour foreshadows the ultimate revelation that she is of mixed race. She is positioned in front of two unidentifiable men, one standing up and pointing a gun at the other who is lying on the ground. While the images of Daphne and the

men are presumably as separate as those of Daphne and Easy in the composite poster, her casual cigarette-wielding stance with her back to such violence suggests the kind of impassive relationship with death and criminality found in the femme fatales of *Double Indemnity* and *Out of the Past*.



**Figure 1.1: Promotional Poster for L.A. Confidential (1997).**



**Figure 1.2: Promotional Poster for Devil in a Blue Dress (1995).**

This suggestion that Lynn and Daphne are femme fatales continues in their initial onscreen presentation. This occurs through their framing, styling, and performance as they flirt deliberately and dangerously with the heroes. At Bud's first meeting with Lynn near the beginning of the film, she walks through the door of the liquor store where he is waiting to be served, and has her back to him, her head hidden by the large black and white hood of a cape (see figure 1.3). Hearing only her voice, he is immediately intrigued, and walks around her to see her face. This positions her as mysterious, a secret for the detective to uncover, as in classic noir narratives.<sup>113</sup> When he wishes her a merry Christmas, she replies 'merry Christmas

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<sup>113</sup> Lynn's nun-like cloak is by no means antithetical to her positioning as a classic noir femme fatale. This costume most obviously recalls the wimple-like headdress worn by Jane Greer in *Out of the Past* (1947) after

to you, Officer’, adding, when he reacts sheepishly to her having observed so quickly that he is a plain clothes policeman, that ‘it’s practically stamped on your forehead’. Throughout the scene, Lynn behaves coolly but politely, leaving Bud with the feeling that she knows all about him, while she remains a mystery. Following this exchange, Bud sees Sue Lefferts, the Rita Hayworth lookalike, with a bandage over her nose. Lynn’s insistence that ‘it’s not what you think’ is performed so



**Figure 1.3: *L.A. Confidential* (1997).  
Costuming conceals Lynn’s face.**

calmly that it transforms the cliché of the battered woman’s denial into a further statement that women cannot be read so easily, which effectively intensifies her mystery and further aligns her with the figure of the femme fatale. Their noir detective/femme fatale relationship is then consolidated in their next scene together in which they verbally spar, sticking to what Manohla Dargis describes as ‘a script they’ve likely uttered a thousand times before, with an attitude borrowed from Ladd and Lake, Bogart and Bacall.’<sup>114</sup> By drawing on these familiar styles of dialogue, Lynn and Bud are clearly aligned with equally familiar character tropes, which positions Lynn clearly in the role of classic noir femme fatale.

Daphne’s first scene in *Devil* occurs over half an hour into the film, and she performs the caricature of the femme fatale even more intensely than Lynn. Having summoned Easy to her hotel room in the middle of the night, he, and the viewer, first see her in a full length shot, standing in the middle of a luxurious hotel room, accompanied by a sultry jazz soundtrack. She is casually smoking a cigarette and has long wavy brown hair pulled into a 1940s style.

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her double crossing has been revealed. Bruzzi outlines some of the anachronistic and counterintuitive costumes worn by 1940s femme fatales (pp. 126-27).

<sup>114</sup> Manohla Dargis, *L.A. Confidential* (London: BFI, 2003), p 64.

Her long blue robe – she only wears dresses in varying shades of mid-blue throughout the film – aligns her with the Devil of the title, and the exposed length of her leg as she sits down hints at seduction and sin (see figure 1.4). The dialogue between the two characters is, like the second encounter between Lynn and Bud, fast flowing and loaded with the kind of sexual innuendo that so often occurs between the femme fatale and PI in classic noir. In particular,



**Figure 1.4: *Devil in A Blue Dress* (1995). Costuming highlights Daphne’s sexual allure.**

Easy’s question, ‘and what do you prefer to use as your weapon’, and Daphne’s response, ‘why don’t you search me and find out?’, recall the ‘speeding’ dialogue between Walter and Phyllis in *Double Indemnity*. While

reflecting classic noir dialogue, these lines also echo the contrived and brief seduction scenes of contemporary pornography, but they are delivered with a reserve that echoes the Production Code-era treatment of such material in classic noir films, with plenty of physical distance between the characters, and a minimum of overt lust, making the encounter both frosty and sexually charged. Daphne and Lynn are presented via codes of performance, visual style, and extratextual information with the deliberate intention that they be read as femme fatales in the classical Hollywood mode. Naremore argues that ‘[o]ur collective memory of noir style probably has less to do with a camera technique than with a kind of visual iconography’, a collection of imagery made up of lighting, hairdos, clothes and performance styles.<sup>115</sup> These films rely on this iconography to allow the audience to identify Daphne and

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<sup>115</sup> Naremore, p. 168.

Lynn as femme fatales early in the narrative. The femme fatale is arguably identifiable initially not because of her deadly and deceptive behaviour, but because of her visual coding.

The process of positioning Lynn and Daphne as femme fatales is enabled by their positioning within the noir detective narrative as pieces of the mystery puzzle, as evidence to be considered. Because of this positioning the viewer is required to judge and interpret the meaning of their appearances, and so their being read as femme fatale types becomes still more inevitable. As Bastiaans argues of *Devil*, 'Easy's character is *developed* through subjective techniques, whereas Daphne's character is *discerned* through an investigatory mode of perception.'<sup>116</sup> Daphne requires investigation, to be unpacked and understood within the detective story as her identity and body form an essential part of the mystery in which Easy is embroiled, a mystery that is described on the poster as 'the most dangerous secret in town.' Similarly, Lynn forms part of the investigation for the detectives in *L.A. Confidential*. While they are active, mobile in cars, searching for clues, Lynn spends most of her screen time in her own house, a static object for examination. This combination of the presentation of Lynn and Daphne's visual coding as classic era femme fatales with the investigatory detective narrative sets them up to be read and encourages the viewers to play detective themselves and identify these women as bad news before they have exhibited any of the duplicitous or deadly behaviour of the femme fatale. This not only speaks to the highly aesthetic presence of the femme fatale, and the overdetermined nature of her visual markers, but also suggests that, while the femme fatale may be a highly complex figure who embodies a range of concurrent competing meanings as my introduction to this thesis indicates, the *idea* of the femme fatale so far as it is presented and understood in contemporary visual culture is actually very simple.

Costume plays an important part in the identification of the femme fatale, and the retro noir film provides the opportunity to revisit the costumes that constructed the classic

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<sup>116</sup> Bastiaans, p.233. Emphasis in the original.

noir femme fatale characters.<sup>117</sup> Dika suggests that ‘what it significant is not just that the nostalgia film returns to old stories, but also that they return to old film genres, and to those genres’ imagistic and narrative signifying systems.’<sup>118</sup> Lynn and Daphne can be identified as femme fatales because they conform to the systems we have come to associate with classic film noir. They look the part and appear within the correct period and tonal settings. Jane Gaines notes that ‘[i]n popular discourse there is often no distinction between a woman and her attire. She *is* what she wears.’<sup>119</sup> This formulation that costume, including hair and makeup, indicates all that needs to be known about women is relied upon in the retro noir film to present women as femme fatales using little more than a slick of red lipstick, and a flash of leg from under a sophisticated 1940s ensemble.<sup>120</sup> This is not to say, however, that these films are simply using costume as lazy shorthand for the femme fatale in order to render their films more authentically noirish. Their characterisation is certainly more complex than the model of ineffectual pastiche femme fatale that Wager outlines in her analysis of the retro noir. Rather, I contend that these films are relying on the common use of the aforementioned iconography – in fashion, advertising, cinema and television – as a way of indicating the deadly woman, in order that they may then undertake a disruption of that assumption. As mentioned above, the women in these films are not actually femme fatales in that they are not evil or deadly. Lynn is revealed to be a woman who just wants to go back to Arizona and open a dress shop, which she ultimately does, accompanied by Bud, who, it is implied, now

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<sup>117</sup> This is as opposed to other recent noir films which merely refer to earlier costumes as a form of shorthand for femme fatale. See, for example, Rachel’s costumes in *Blade Runner* and Persephone’s latex versions of 1940s styles in *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions* (both 2003).

<sup>118</sup> Dika, p.10.

<sup>119</sup> Jane Gaines, ‘Introduction: Fabricating the Female Body’, in *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body*, ed. by Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp.1-27 (p.1). Emphasis in the original.

<sup>120</sup> While *L.A. Confidential* is set during the 1950s, almost all of Lynn’s costumes reflect film costumes of the 1940s. The film departs from James Ellroy’s novel by placing far greater emphasis on Lynn as a Veronica Lake impersonator. In Ellroy’s book, Lynn leaves Patchett’s studio to open a dress shop, and returns to her original dark hair colour fairly early in the novel, in Hanson’s film there are more scenes of her at work in 1940s fashions, which indicates a deliberate desire for Lynn to be read as a femme fatale. For more on Lynn’s role as a version of Veronica Lake, see Dargis.

requires her services as a nurse. Daphne does have a secret, but her deception is one of self preservation as the revelation of her racial identity jeopardises her romantic future and Todd Carter's career. Having been rejected by her high powered white fiancé, she is heartbroken and leaves town.<sup>121</sup> In both films, the idea of the classic noir femme fatale is conjured up through the costuming and performances of these characters, only to be disrupted and contradicted as the narrative progresses. Sarah Street argues that '[f]ilm costumes can exceed the demands of plot or historical accuracy, conveying a sophisticated address which can be said to constitute a "language" of its own, offering an alternative discourse from that suggested by the "preferred" reading.'<sup>122</sup> I would extend this to argue that Lynn and Daphne's costumes are supplemented by performance and staging to develop an alternative discourse in which these women are femme fatales, despite the language of costume being contradicted by narratives in which they are well-intentioned, wholesome women. While Street's argument seems to imply a form of unintentional friction between plot and costume, in *L.A. Confidential* and *Devil in a Blue Dress* the friction created does not run evenly throughout the films, but instead shifts with each new costume change and each new revelation about the character's actions and identity.

The language of costume is disrupted by the plot's insistence that these women are not femme fatales, and the costumes arguably change accordingly, both in meaning and literally. In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Daphne's initial representation as a cool and confident femme fatale changes once the nature of her secret is revealed. When she appears at Easy's house in the middle of the night, she wears her blue dress with composure and poise, not a hair out of place. However, as Easy forces her to reveal that her brother is black, and that she has a

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<sup>121</sup> This dynamic of the aesthetic femme fatale type who turns out to be an innocent woman with problems beyond her control also occurs in *Chinatown* as well as in the character of Verna in *Miller's Crossing*, who Erica Rowell describes as providing 'a sort of Smurfette role, badly masking the homosexuality of the other characters.' Erica Rowell, *The Brothers Grim: The Films and Fiction of the Coen Brothers* (Lanham, Toronto, and Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2007), p.86. The comedy retro noirs of the 1980s invoke the image of the femme fatale in the female lead while ultimately developing her character as a romantic heroine.

<sup>122</sup> Sarah Street, *Costume and Cinema: Dress Codes in Popular Film* (London: Wallflower, 2001), p.6.

Creole mother, she becomes increasingly more dishevelled and tragic, making desperate claims about the solidity of her relationship with her white fiancé. From this point on, although her dress does not change, its meaning changes with the revelations about her racial heritage. She is kidnapped by DeWitt Albright (Tom Sizemore), and is glimpsed sobbing in fear and screaming in terror at their insults and threats of torture. She kicks her legs at her kidnappers, which forces up her dress to reveal her stockings and suspenders, but the meaning of her exposed legs is very different from the earlier scene, and denotes vulnerable femininity which contrasts sharply with her previous control over her appearance. The sight of her stockings too acts in contrast to her former appearances, as in this prone position the accoutrements of feminine seduction appear tawdry and tragic.

Once rescued, she attempts to reconstruct her earlier image, applying makeup to her bruised face in Easy's car as she calmly explains that she and Carter will be able to sort things out and get married. Easy's voiceover explains that Carter's family had given Daphne £30,000 to leave town, adding that 'she was still convinced though that her negro blood didn't matter now that Terrell couldn't use it to keep the man she wanted to marry out of the mayor's race. She was in love and couldn't see for dreaming', as Daphne is seen arguing with Carter in the distance. This voiceover is sympathetic to her plight, but its world-weary tone suggests that Daphne is naive for believing that she could aspire to be something she is not. Daphne does not speak onscreen after this point, and instead Easy's voiceover explains that she then told him the story of her life, revealing that she is really Ruby Hanks from Lake Charles, Louisiana, who only wanted a place to fit in. Bastiaans argues that once Daphne's race is exposed 'her hitherto intriguing sexuality loses all its power, and Daphne's representational mode switches from femme fatale to tragic mulatto', adding that by the end of the film, the blue dress and glamorous name, 'the very qualities that have heretofore made Daphne more of a noir trope



than a developed character have become ridiculous.<sup>123</sup> While Daphne's clothes do not change, what they mean has shifted enormously as both her physical appearance and the femme fatale aura about her become dishevelled, and she moves from being a beautiful mystery to being viewed by the pitying voiceover as making a tragic and ludicrous attempt at glamour.

*L.A. Confidential* disarms Lynn's femme fatale appearance in a very different way. She too moves from the status of potential threat to victim as it is revealed that she takes orders

from Pierce Patchett (David Strathairn), her pimp, which leads to her being beaten by Bud. In this scene she is styled very differently from her previous satin Veronica Lake outfits. Here her hair



**Figure 1.5: *L.A. Confidential* (1997).  
Muted markers of victimhood.**

is pulled back from her face, she wears no obvious makeup, and a plain blouse, and the lighting is very grey and muted (see figure 1.5). This effect is repeated at the police station where she is held under the name 'Joan Smith' to protect her from assassins as she wears neutral coloured trousers, coat, and matching beret over her hair. Her bruised face is plainly visible, and while she makes a wry reference to Ed Exley's matching bruises, he is in an active position of power as the detective, while she must wait and play the good-natured victim. However, her role changes again at the end of the film, as she says goodbye to Ed before taking the injured Bud to Arizona with her. In this scene she is seen in the sunlight for the first time, and accompanying changes are made to her appearance. The Veronica Lake hair has been cut and styled into a shorter, frothier Marilyn-esque affair, and she wears a yellow

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<sup>123</sup> Bastiaans, p.237, p.238.



**Figure 1.6: *L.A. Confidential* (1997).  
The updated Lynn appears in the sunshine.**

cotton sundress in a full skirted 1950s style (see figure 1.6). She jokes that ‘some men get the world, other get ex-hookers and a trip to Arizona.’ This shift from femme fatale to domesticated cheesecake blonde via victim of

domestic violence offers an alternate version of Daphne’s trajectory. For both women, their victimhood indicates that the role of femme fatale was a naive and untenable one, but while *Devil in a Blue Dress’s* treatment of the tragic mulatta archetype left Daphne with nowhere she could fit in, no role to fill happily, Lynn finally finds a bright and optimistic future as a model of 1950s femininity in the position of dress shop owner and as Bud’s partner and nurse.<sup>124</sup>

Both of these films evoke the femme fatale through costume, performance and setting, before banishing her with contradictory plots and shifts in visual iconography. In films which provide retrovisions of the material of classic noir films, this must be viewed in terms of its ramifications for gender politics. The femme fatale is such a staple of the film noir tropes that to remind viewers of her presence and power before shutting it down again has important consequences for an understanding of the femme fatale’s position in contemporary cinema. This pattern has two potential consequences which I am going to interrogate in detail: either this disruption of the femme fatale character can function as a progressive move, a

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<sup>124</sup> This shift from femme fatale to victim to saviour of man also occurs in *The Black Dahlia*. Like Daphne and Lynn, the character of Kay Lake is set up as a femme fatale from the first mention of her noir-star surname and her initial presentation as an icy blonde with a cigarette in her hand and a penchant for good looking men with their shirts off. However, she too is ultimately revealed to be a victim, this time because of the torture she suffered at the hands of a man who carved his initials into her body. Like Lynn, she is predominantly presented in her own home, which domesticates her, and ultimately she too finds her role providing the comfort needed by a damaged man.

lending of complexity to a character type that has frequently been viewed critically as a stereotype projected by male anxieties about women's sexuality, or it is a conservative manoeuvre, designed to disarm and retroactively eradicate one of the most potent images of female power of the twentieth century.

Williams suggests that Lynn's ending in *L.A. Confidential* might be seen as a corrective to the punishment of femme fatales in classic noir when she notes that

[h]ere, in an era and a genre where sexuality is no longer automatically punished, Lynn can be rewarded with the "happy ending" of a long-term relationship with a damaged cop (Russell Crowe) and the promise of a future outside the sex industry. The triumphantly sexualised, usually surviving *femme fatale* I discuss above may be legion in contemporary cinema, but so is her more sympathetic screen sister, the good-bad girl.<sup>125</sup>

This reading connects the presence of the good-bad girl, the woman who is not a femme fatale, with the absence of patriarchal punishment for women who transgress boundaries of gendered decorum. I would go further, and argue that such representations actively disrupt the idea of the femme fatale by demonstrating the idea of the evil women collapses when confronted with the pressures placed upon women's lived existence. The first, more positive reading I indicated above is supported by the retro noir films' efforts, as outlined towards the start of this chapter, to rewrite both the classic noir and the Fifties nostalgia films in a way that shows mid-century urban America in a more realistic light, to expose the endemic racism and corruption and class inequality that did not often surface as issues in those earlier texts. In the same way, the femme fatales who are not femme fatales can be seen to present and then open up a potentially restrictive demonstration of the evils of feminine sexuality. The femme fatale may, in this reading, be rescued from a fate of being walking virgin/whore dichotomies, at once desirable and dangerous, and given more complex, rounded characterisations sympathetic to the lived experiences of American women in the 1940s and 1950s. By summoning the spectre of the femme fatale and then revealing her to be absent, the

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<sup>125</sup> Linda Ruth Williams, p.115. Emphasis in the original.

characters of Lynn and Daphne defy our initial reading; they are not what we presume them to be.

In their shutting down of the femme fatale archetype, these texts also display a sensitivity to the double bind faced by oppressed groups – that they are at once systematically subjugated and blamed for the troubles of the society that subjugates them. Both Lynn and Daphne are demonstrably at the whim of much larger and more powerful male-dominated structures of government, police, and organised crime. Lynn's attempts to succeed in Hollywood have failed and led her to an unhappy career as a high class call girl who poses for sex blackmail pictures with unwitting clients at the demands of her pimp, and who is not permitted to choose her own clothes and hair style. While she plays a role in the climate of corruption that Bud, Ed and Jack seek to expose, it is a minor and unwilling one, and the real power belongs to rich businessmen and money grubbing police chiefs and district attorneys. Similarly, Daphne has a secret, but the danger in the film comes not from her but from paedophilic mayoral candidates and endemic racism. This interest in grand and corrupt systems that go all the way to the top is a result of the retro noir's interest in exposing past wrongdoings, but this focus also has the effect of placing the blame for society's ills on the shoulders of the privileged, rather than on old conservative punching bags such as uppity women, people of colour, the unemployed, and immigrants. In these texts, the beautiful and sexually appealing woman offers far less of a threat to the individual protagonist and to society at large than do corrupt regimes and systemic inequality.

However, evoking a classic image of female power only to dismantle it is not without its political implications. The deadly and often psychotic femme fatale of non-retro neo-noir films serves as a source of pleasure for female audiences as well as an emblem of post-second-wave backlash. As Garrett notes, 'the neo-*noir* invites female audiences to revel in the sheer nastiness of the *femme fatale*', and the retro noir's absence of such images, and the refusal of the

femme fatale archetype closes off the opportunity for the pleasures of deadly female power for female audiences.<sup>126</sup> As I argue above, Lynn and Daphne are revealed not to be threats to patriarchal systems of control, but rather are subjugated by them, and while this does demonstrate a sympathetic approach to the position of women within such systems, it also removes the agency that their initial presentation as femme fatales provides. The promise of tough and dangerous femininity which the extratextual information offered in the form of posters, tag lines and titles is completely contained, explained away, and revealed to be ridiculous. The femme fatale role is shown to be a rather pathetic and untenable performance for both characters, who instead are domesticated, albeit in very different ways, in their final scenes. Bastiaans argues that ‘blackness domesticates Daphne. From being continually described as “somethin’ else” (in the dual sense of being physically attractive and different), Daphne has come to be described as any black migrant would be described. Daphne’s blackness functions alternately as a sign of the unknown and exotic and as a sign of the utterly known and familiar.’<sup>127</sup> Easy does not sleep with Daphne during the film, but all of the sexual tension of their earlier scenes together has disappeared by this last episode. In marked contrast to the poise, glamour, and sexual frisson of her first scene in the hotel room, Daphne leaves Easy’s car a tragic and unremarkable figure. Heartbroken and silent, she walks dejectedly into a shabby looking house in the stark daylight. While Bastiaans points out that the knowledge of her blackness marks her as ordinary, a known and uninspiring quantity, I would argue that this process of domestication is consolidated by the revelation of her class, as indicated by both her real name, Ruby Hanks, and her brother’s unkempt and externally shabby house.

Lynn is domesticated in a different way in her final scene. The changes in her appearance do not indicate the same type of downfall; she is still presented as a desirable

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<sup>126</sup> Garrett, p.166. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>127</sup> Bastiaans, p.238.

figure. However, the shift from 1940s to 1950s styling echoes shifts in the representation of women in films of that period. In her discussion of the evolution of the femme fatale between these decades, Erin Finley argues that '[i]ndeed, there has been a visible metamorphosis here from dark to light, both in the tones of the femme fatale films and in the looks of the actresses. The archetypal fatal woman was becoming less and less threatening during the fifties'.<sup>128</sup> While Finley's assertions that the gold-digging characters played by Marilyn Monroe in films like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) are 1950s versions of the femme fatale may not be entirely convincing, her observations about the parallel shifts in style and power are valuable, and echo Molly Haskell's argument that in 1950s cinema, '[t]he bad-girl is whitewashed, or blown into some pneumatic technicolor parody of herself.'<sup>129</sup> The transformation of Lynn follows this pattern as its updating of her from a 1940s throwback to a modern woman in contemporary dress follows a trajectory of dark to light, indoor to outdoor, old fashioned to modern, prostitute to small (feminine) business owner and care provider, in a move from a big corrupt city to a small town where the girls 'need a little glamour'. Lynn becomes a model of modern domesticity, and her comfort in the role reinforces the idea that the femme fatale position she previously held was neither appropriate nor sustainable for her.<sup>130</sup>

While Lynn grows visibly lighter and goes back to her home town dressed like a pretty modern housewife, Daphne becomes figuratively darker, and disappears as a tragic mulatta who tried on a role that did not suit her and failed. Both of these transformations shift the potential femme fatale into a new role as a different, and crucially more containable, stereotype of femininity by discrediting the deadly sexy woman archetype. As outlined in the

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<sup>128</sup> Erin Finley, 'One of these Days these Boots are Gonna Walk All Over You: An Examination of the Femme Fatale's Evolution', in *Beauty and the Abject: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. by Leslie Boldt-Irons, Corrado Federici and Ernesto Virgulti (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), pp.211-23 (p.218).

<sup>129</sup> Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987), p.230.

<sup>130</sup> This transition stands in stark contrast to other contemporary texts which criticise and mock the ideal of the Fifties housewife, for example the remake of *The Stepford Wives* (2004), and *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999), both of which use a camp approach to disrupt the figure as an ideal feminine identity.

introduction to this research, one of the major debates in feminist film criticism of the femme fatale, particularly in Production Code-era noirs, has been the question of the tense relationship between the femme fatale's powerful onscreen presence and her ultimate destruction. The prevalent point of view is that the femme fatale's ultimate containment in classical era film noir is cancelled out by the power of her performance and vivacity for the rest of the film. However, these retrovisual films work very differently from the classic noir model which provided spectacular showcases for the femme fatale's evil, cunning and sex appeal before finally punishing her for her sins. While classic noir audiences could revel in the femme fatale's poise and sexual confidence while conveniently forgetting her tragic end, the retro noir's treatment of the femme fatale is much more insidious, and discredits the idea of the femme fatale, by undermining the images they have themselves conjured up to declare that the strong and sexy bad girl never existed in the first place. This, I suggest, functions as an attempt to disrupt the feminist potential of the femme fatale, creating a vision of beautiful femininity which promises danger and agency that it is ultimately unable to deliver. While the films may exhibit some sympathy towards women's lack of access to power in their retrovisual versions of the 1940s and 1950s, their rewriting of women's roles in noir actually functions as a greater hindrance to a representation of women as active agents, relegating them to sidelined stereotypes while the difficult work of negotiating the corrupt mean streets of urban America falls to the male protagonists.

These retrovisions interrogate the failings of the decades that have been so often glorified in nostalgic and conservative retellings of the past. However McGowan argues that such films also often fail in that task, noting that '[t]hough all these films take pains to criticise the restricted nature of the 1950s, they nonetheless invest themselves in the very fantasy that renders the era appealing to contemporary subjects – the heavy-handedness of authority figures. As a result, the act of attacking the fantasy ends up underwriting it and increasing its

power.<sup>131</sup> The playing up of violent systems of power can, therefore, obscure any potential for a feminist retrovisual approach to the femme fatale of classic noir, and instead make the battle against authority figures an affair for men only. In her discussion of the Fifties nostalgia films of the 1980s, Radstone argues that such films use the return to cinemas of American mid-century boyhood for purposes of nostalgia, and that '[i]n doing so, they raise questions about the relationship between cinema memory, cinema history and the cinematic construction of male subjectivity.'<sup>132</sup> Although the retro noir films provide a more critical frame for viewing the past, the notion of a nostalgic return to the past to construct cinemas of optimistic masculinity is still relevant to this discussion. The pushing out of the femme fatale from what was otherwise – and some would argue entirely – a genre concerned with issues of masculinity and modernity, of one man's attempts to make some sense of the anxieties and confusion surrounding him, suggests a reactionary desire to contain any suggestion of female power, and to rewrite the noir film as a world of masculine success over masculine anxiety through the lens of contemporary class and racial politics.

The spectral presence of the femme fatale in the retro noir film offers the potential for sympathetic reconsideration of the position of women in urban America at the time of the classic noir film, as well as the more disturbing eradication of one of cinema's most powerful and enduring images of femininity from her original setting. The writing out of the femme fatale while preserving her ghost can be viewed as a tangled mixture of pro-woman consideration and a renewal of the very anxiety that the femme fatale inspired in the noir heroes of the mid-twentieth century. However, given the disarming, containing, and undermining strategies employed within these films, and the trajectory from a powerful female archetype to a containable and domesticated stereotype that both films follow for their potential femme fatales, it is difficult to read these films in anything other than the terms of

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<sup>131</sup> McGowan, p.114.

<sup>132</sup> Radstone, p.181.



patriarchal backlash and anxiety. In remaking classic film noir, *Devil in a Blue Dress* and *L.A. Confidential* address some of the problematic erasures of the earlier form, but in remaking the femme fatale, these films shut down a potentially rich historical reference for female power and agency.

### **Dead Girls on Film: The Corpse as Femme Fatale**

I will now move on to explore another kind of spectral femme fatale in retro noir film. In *Mulholland Falls* and *The Black Dahlia*, their dangerous women are dead from the outset of the narratives, and the films concern the investigation of their murder, while the detectives become more obsessed with the dead women. *Mulholland Falls* follows a special four man squad of Los Angeles police detectives who routinely break the law in order to crack down on organised crime. When they begin to investigate the murder of Allison Pond (Jennifer Connelly), it emerges that Max (Nick Nolte), the lead detective, had previously had an affair with the victim. Over the course of the investigation, Max becomes increasingly fixated on Allison, and the detectives realise that she had been killed by the military because she had filmed evidence of dubious practices in nuclear weapons testing. Max's partner and best friend (Chazz Palminteri) is killed as they attempt to evade the military, and Max's wife (Melanie Griffith) is sent a movie reel with evidence of his affair, and she leaves him. *The Black Dahlia* is also concerned with a murder investigation – based, as explained below, on real events – that of Elizabeth Short (Mia Kirshner). Two detectives, Bucky (Josh Hartnett) and Lee (Aaron Eckhart), work on the case, but Lee becomes obsessed with the victim. However, before they can solve the case, he is murdered. Bucky picks up both the case and Lee's obsession, and begins affairs with Lee's girlfriend Kay (Scarlett Johansson) and Madeline (Hilary Swank), a woman who apparently resembles the victim. It is revealed that Madeline and her rich,

eccentric family were responsible for both murders, and Bucky finally shoots Madeline before returning to Kay.

Just as the retro noir films I analyse above are haunted by past interpretations of the femme fatale, Hollywood cinema, and particularly retro noir, is compulsively drawn and re-drawn to the juncture of sex and death embodied by one woman in particular. In January 1947, the mutilated body of Elizabeth Short, an unemployed waitress, was discovered in a vacant lot in Los Angeles. The case became known as the Black Dahlia murder, the most infamous unsolved homicide in American history. The case has been reported, retold and reinvestigated hundreds of times in popular media, from true crime journalism, books and television features, to dramatised and fictionalised accounts in fiction, film and television. It is not the purpose of my argument to attempt to identify any sense of the real events of her death. The Black Dahlia case is now so deeply immersed in layers of contradictory Hollywood mythology, conspiracy theories, reinterpretations of the evidence, and contested accounts of the case, that such a project would be impossible.<sup>133</sup> Instead, it is more productive to consider Short in terms of her cultural presence, as a form of spectral myth that permeates contemporary understandings of classical Hollywood, and informs the ways in which women in the retro noir film are represented.

That retro noir in particular is drawn towards the Black Dahlia case owes much to the ways in which the mythology surrounding Short and her death are closely tied to classic era film noir. The name ‘the Black Dahlia’ is derived from a noir text, the Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake vehicle *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), and although it remains unclear whether Short first received the nickname from friends while alive, or via newspaper headlines related to her

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<sup>133</sup> There is much debate and disagreement amongst Black Dahlia writers about whether Short wanted to be a Hollywood actress, whether she was a prostitute, whether she was pregnant at the time of her death, the validity and interpretation of the crime scene photography and autopsy reports, the source of her nickname, and even whether she actually wore the all-black wardrobe that supposedly prompted the name. A range of potential perpetrators have been named, but never conclusively proven to be Short’s killers, thus further adding to the dense jumble of mythology and conspiracy surrounding the Black Dahlia murder.

murder, the connection between Short and the murky, sexually charged world represented in the noir films of the period is consolidated in the epithet.<sup>134</sup> Further to this, many retellings of Short's life position her as an aspiring actress and glamour girl, with some accounts going so far as to align her with other tragic figures of old Hollywood. For example, the tagline for *The Devil's Muse* (2007), a low budget crime film concerned with copycat killings on the sixtieth anniversary of the Short murder, reads 'Hollywood Murders Women'. Similarly, in the Black Dahlia Murder segment of KABC News' *Historic LA* series (1990) – a retelling of the case which particularly foregrounds the tragic starlet angle – Mary Humphrey, a Dahlia case critic who claims to be a childhood friend of the victim, argues that Short was friends with the young Marilyn Monroe. This tendency is echoed by Laurie Jacobson who, in her tabloid-style book on Hollywood scandals, notes that 'Betty Short became a symbol for all the pretty girls from all the small towns who came to Hollywood with big dreams.'<sup>135</sup> Although the evidence for Short's Hollywood dreams and studio connections is scant, what these two retellings of the Dahlia case exemplify is a tendency to position her as part of a wider narrative of Hollywood in the 1940s: one in which beautiful young women with big aspirations met tragic ends. Short's appearance too shores up this image, her style of dress, dyed black hair and makeup, or at least what survives of it in the form of photographs and descriptions, echoes the dark glamour of classic noir spider women (see figures 1.7 and 1.8). Finally, the date and location of her murder – Los Angeles, 1947 – offers an ideal geographical and temporal location for later texts to cast a dark but nostalgic glance back at the combination of beautiful women, death, American cinema, and the mid-century urban landscape offered up in film noir and apparently crystallised in the Black Dahlia case.

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<sup>134</sup> Given its connection with film noir, it is perhaps inevitable that the reverberations of Short's murder can be felt in the crime thrillers in the aftermath of her death. In *Sunset Boulevard*, one of the main characters is jokingly accused of being the Black Dahlia killer, and Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia* (1953) is often cited as an attempt to cash in on the ongoing press surrounding the murder.

<sup>135</sup> Laurie Jacobson, *Dishing Hollywood: The Real Scoop on Hollywood's Notorious Scandals* (Nashville: Cumberland House, 2003) p.95.



**Figure 1.7: Elizabeth Short (c. 1946).**



**Figure 1.8: Ann Savage in a publicity shot for *Detour***

While the fictional afterlife of Short's murder occasionally takes in contemporary crime film and fiction, most notably in the copycat narratives of *Ulli Lommel's Black Dahlia* (2006) and Linda La Plante's novel, *Red Dahlia* (2006), later filmed for ITV as *Above Suspicion: The Red Dahlia* (2010), it is in the retro noir subgenre that the Black Dahlia case is most keenly and frequently revisited. Elizabeth Short has appeared in explicit and implicit forms in the retro noir film, arguably beginning with *True Confessions* (1981), which employs a fictionalised version of Short's murder as the catalyst for a political thriller set in 1940s California. Whether through direct references to or fictionalised versions of the case, or more oblique gestures toward her appearance, life story and murder, the Black Dahlia maintains a persistent presence in the contemporary retro noir film. In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Easy refers to Daphne, a mysterious woman in peril in 1940s Los Angeles, as 'Dahlia' four times over the course of the narrative. In the early 1950s of *L.A. Confidential*, Susan Lefferts' mother does not recognise the corpse of her murdered daughter – a girl who wanted to be a movie star but slid into prostitution – because of her dyed red hair. In the 1940s flashbacks in *Hollywoodland*, Leonore, the ambitious and morally ambiguous girlfriend of a dead television star, looks strikingly like Short in a black period dress and dark curly hair. Then there are the retro noir films in which the narrative revolves around a beautiful dead girl. In the 1950s setting of *Where the Truth Lies*,

a ruthless but beautiful hotel maid is found murdered, and the narrative is concerned with an unravelling of the corruption and guilt surrounding those involved. In the early stages of *Mulholland Falls*, set in early 1950s Los Angeles, the body of a beautiful brunette is found in such a broken state that one crime scene operative remarks that ‘we couldn’t even pick her up’, and the plot develops around the cover-up that necessitated her murder.<sup>136</sup> Finally, in the most obvious Hollywood revisiting of Short’s mythology in recent years, *The Black Dahlia* offers a fictionalised account of the case, in which the identity of the killer is ultimately discovered and hushed up by the detective hero.

While crime films are filled with the murders of beautiful women, I contend that the LA retro noir film is particularly haunted by Short, whether explicitly or in a more abstract fashion. The return to mid-century Los Angeles is a return in which nostalgia for the golden age of Hollywood is marred by the awareness of an alternative historical narrative of violence, scandal, and the subjugation of vulnerable women, all of which are crystallised and retold in the cultural aftermath of the Black Dahlia murder. And while it may seem that this haunting is about women as victims rather than femme fatales, these films present their female murder victims in much more complex ways which, as I will argue, frame the beautiful corpse as threatening, sexually appealing, and able to take on a life outside the physical object of the dead body. The murder of young women has treacherous and far reaching consequences in the LA retro noir film, and the woman as corpse becomes more dangerous than the woman alive.

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<sup>136</sup> *Mulholland Falls* has a further connection with the Dahlia case. Its star, Nick Nolte, is a close friend of James Ellroy, a renowned author and famous dahlia obsessive, as chronicled in his memoir, *My Dark Places* (1996) and the crime novel *The Black Dahlia* (1987), on which the 2006 film was based. Notably, Nolte makes an appearance in the documentary *Feast of Death* (2001), in which Ellroy discusses the Black Dahlia case with LAPD detectives over dinner.

Although the female corpse might imply the ultimate in passivity, these retro noir films offer a more intricate relationship between death, female agency, and narratives of investigation. In *The Black Dahlia* and *Mulholland Falls*, there exists a complex tension between notions of the corpse and the feminine as passive, and the ways in which the dead woman becomes more dangerous, and operates as a femme fatale from beyond the grave. Deborah Jermyn argues that '[r]ather than remaining at the level of absence or being merely the ultimate passive female, the female victim's corpse paradoxically can become a powerful figure, by creating an uncomfortable and critical *subtext*, which undermines or suggests different concerns to that of the *dominant text*'.<sup>137</sup> Jermyn contends that the presence of the female murder victim creates an active subtextual force in contemporary film, and in the following section I would like to expand upon her notion of the active corpse as subtext, to argue that in these retro noir films, the dead woman's presence and danger moves from a subtextual level to that of the dominant text. Dead women provide a constant and active influence over the narratives of these films, refuse to truly die, and dictate the course of the action. Jermyn describes the murdered woman as 'another story trying to be told, lingering, should we look there, beneath the surface of the dominant text.'<sup>138</sup> However, in these films, the dead woman, and the attempts of those left alive to address her refusal to remain silent, *is* the story.

In both *Mulholland Falls* and *The Black Dahlia*, the women are dead for the entirety of the films' narratives, and are seen alive only in flashback and in police evidence in the form of photographs and, significantly, black and white film footage. Both Alison Pond in *Mulholland Falls* and Elizabeth Short in *The Black Dahlia* are presented as infinitely more dangerous dead than alive. In both cases the investigation of their deaths triggers a deadly chain of events, in

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<sup>137</sup> Deborah Jermyn, 'You Can't Keep a Dead Woman Down: The Female Corpse and Textual Disruption in Contemporary Hollywood', in *Images of the Corpse: From the Renaissance to Cyberspace*, ed. by Elizabeth Klaver (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), pp. 153-168 (p. 156). Emphasis in the original.

<sup>138</sup> Jermyn, p. 157.

which political scandals and family secrets are unearthed, and the lead detective(s) become dangerously obsessed with the dead woman. However, in these films, the wider political and legal implications of the revelations that follow the women's deaths are played down and hushed up, while the personal impact on the detectives is tremendous. It is for this reason that Alison Pond and Elizabeth Short as dead women can be seen as femme fatale characters. Despite the attention paid in the films to the grotesque state of the women's bodies after their murders, in both cases, the dead woman carries with her an aura of sexual mystery which captivates and threatens to destroy the detectives. Although *The Black Dahlia* arguably features another live and kicking femme fatale in Madeline, she only enters the life of Dwight, the detective, because of her striking resemblance to Elizabeth Short, and argues that 'that sad dead bitch [referring to Short], that's all you have', suggesting that Dwight's ultimate tragedy is the obsession with an unobtainable object which destroys his friendships and leads him into a dangerous relationship with Madeline. Although Short may be a 'sad dead bitch', as the object of obsession she moves beyond the passive to become an active, and specifically feminine and sexual force in Dwight's life. Even in *Mulholland Falls*, in which Max, the lead detective, has a pre-existing sexual relationship with the victim, it is only after Alison's death that their affair begins to impact upon his home life, as his adultery is revealed, his wife leaves him, and his best friend and partner is killed in his relentless quest to seek justice for Alison.<sup>139</sup>

Like most of the films discussed in this thesis, these films about beautiful women are constructed around the tension between the female body as passive object and as deadly threat to the male protagonist. However, this tension is amplified in these films by the fact of the beautiful woman's body being a dead one. Both films foreground the transformation of the murder victim from gorgeous living woman to spectacularly abject corpse by emphasising the destruction wrought upon the body, both at the site at which the body is discovered, and

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<sup>139</sup> Similarly, in *Where the Truth Lies*, the dead girl at the centre of the narrative only becomes dangerous and indeed significant, after she has been killed. Although she makes threats of blackmail before she dies, this suggestion of the femme fatale pales in comparison to the impact she will ultimately have as a result of her death.

during the police autopsy, as well as playing up the physical beauty of the woman through flashback, and in visual evidence such as movie clips and photographs. In doing so these retro noir films employ both the contemporary and historical methods of depicting the dead body, blending current style with the ways in which corpses, especially corpses of beautiful women, were represented during the classic noir period and earlier. Jermyn argues that in their fascination with forensic technique, contemporary visual cultures ‘undo the once popular vision of beautiful repose’.<sup>140</sup> However, as a result of their nostalgia for the period they represent, *Mulholland Falls* and *The Black Dahlia* demonstrate an amalgamation of styles in which the beautiful dead woman is both gorgeous and heavenly, and grotesque and corporeal.

The female corpse occupies a highly volatile space in contemporary culture, being at once passive and active, and object both of visceral horror and sexual fetish. Elizabeth Klaver argues that ‘we are reluctant, or perhaps powerless, to withdraw being and agency from a *dead person*’, adding that in Western culture we attempt to reassign subjecthood to the corpse at the point of autopsy by, for example, referring to the process of autopsy as a sort of violation.<sup>141</sup> Klaver’s point is indicative of some of the tensions surrounding the recently deceased, but notably fails to address the question of gender. The female corpse is a complex cultural object in terms of agency because it is a point at which the fragile control a woman has over her own body in patriarchal culture can be comprehensively denied, so while Klaver’s argument about the agency of the corpse is a useful one, particularly for my discussion of the femme fatale, a figure whose agency is already in question, it is important that questions of gendered power relations are not neglected. In contrast to Klaver’s universalising statement, Jermyn argues

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<sup>140</sup> Jermyn, p.154. While Jermyn is referring to gothic thrillers such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Copycat* (1995), the fascination with forensic detail extends to television, with the investigative medical drama of *House*, police procedurals such as the *CSI* and *Law and Order* franchises, and the serial killer-crime lab series *Dexter*. Despite the possibility that a focus on the mangled and dissected body might imply a move away from the presentation of the tragedy of the beautiful female victim found in earlier narratives, this new forensic representation remains highly gendered and sexualised, for example, the series *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* is specifically dedicated to sexual crimes, predominantly against young white women.

<sup>141</sup> Elizabeth Klaver, *Sites of Autopsy in Contemporary Culture* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2005), p.80 and p.19. Emphasis in the original.



more specifically that the female murder victim is particularly disturbing not just because her body bears the marks of sexualised violence, but that '[s]he is also resonant as an image that seems to stand, at a wider level, for the misogyny of our culture, a culture where women seem to be routinely made to feel threatened, vulnerable, or victimised in some way [...] she resonates as the final outcome of everyday misogyny.'<sup>142</sup> So if the body of the female murder victim functions as a means of raising the spectre of misogynistic violence, what does this mean for these retro noir films in which the woman only becomes a femme fatale after death? Although it could be argued that the dead woman's newly acquired agency offers a way of fighting both the misogyny that killed her and the cinematic tendency to represent women as nothing more than tragic victims of circumstance, it is, as with all of the complex reiterations of the femme fatale explored in this thesis, impossible to ignore the negative cultural weight of the connection between the sexually potent woman and death embodied by the femme fatale.

Just as is the case in so many of the other films discussed later in this thesis, the femme fatale in these films is presented as a secret to be unveiled, an object to be interpreted, a mystery to be solved. Bronfen argues of the female corpse in the history of art and literature:

The solution of her death is a form of documenting both of these unknowns [femininity and death]. The dead woman, embodying a secret, harbours a truth others want and since the dead body is feminine, with death and femininity metonymies of each other, the condensation of the two allows one and the same gesture to uncover a stable, determinate answer for this double enigma.<sup>143</sup>

Where both death and femininity function as abstract mysteries to be solved, the physical artefact of the female murder victim's corpse offers an object that can be investigated in order to solve both mysteries, and the most literal means of investigating this artefact is through the process of autopsy. In the case of the retro noir films, the autopsy offers the chance to try to pin down, examine, and diagnose the dead woman who refuses to truly die. Both *The Black*

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<sup>142</sup> Jermyn, p.154.

<sup>143</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p.293.

*Dahlia* and *Mulholland Falls* employ autopsy report scenes as central to the early stages of investigation, and both films stage these scenes in similar ways which foreground the act of looking at the female corpse for clues, and the reporting of the evidence it offers to the investigating detectives. In both scenes, what occurs is not the autopsy itself, but the coroner's verbal report to the detectives. However, in both cases the scenes occur with the coroner, his staff, and a small army of police detectives standing around the corpse on its metal shelf (see figure 1.9).<sup>144</sup> In these scenes of autopsy, the corpse is both central and extraneous. There is no narrative necessity for the corpse to be present,<sup>145</sup> and indeed, the corpse is presented under sheets in the case of *Mulholland Falls* and in shadow or mostly out of shot in *The Black Dahlia*, and the visual focus is overwhelmingly on the bodies of the male police staff, and yet the corpse forms the centre of their physical gathering, and their verbal discussion. This contradictory presentation of the corpse allows the female murder victim to be thoroughly dissected in the dialogue and account of the autopsy, while preventing her brutalised body from interjecting too much into the scene, becoming too present, too disturbing, too active.



**Figure 1.9: *The Black Dahlia* (2006). The gaze of the detectives overshadows the corpse.**

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<sup>144</sup> By autopsy here I mean both the act of cutting into the body, and Klaver's interpretation which posits the act of looking at the surface of the body as a form of autopsy. See Klaver, *Sites of Autopsy*, p. 58.

<sup>145</sup> Although the scene in *Mulholland Falls* culminates in the discovery of a piece of radioactive glass in Alison's foot, the camera still remains on the detectives rather than the corpse, and narratively speaking this clue could have been disclosed just as easily through the coroner's report.

In these scenes, the coroner presents his findings, and the wounds of the dead woman are described rather than seen. What has happened to Alison Pond and Elizabeth Short is listed, categorised and dwelled upon, but while we see brief hints at their actual bodies, they remain hazy, uninvestigated by the camera. This allows the investigation of the corpse's secrets to be both literal – the physical presence of the body in the mortuary setting acts as a reminder of the physical opening up of the dead woman – and entirely in the control of the investigating detectives. This method of investigation allows for an interrogation of the dead woman's body which guarantees that the beautiful female corpse is emphatically rendered passive. Ludmilla Jordana connects the medical examination of women with a process of unveiling that is specifically gendered. She argues that '[w]e can imagine women being "unveiled" in a way that men cannot be. Also suitable for unveiling are plaques, statues, indeed prized possessions or items of special public commemoration. Unveiling women is an idea that remains acceptable, since it fulfils masculine desire allied with fantasies of ownership and display.'<sup>146</sup> This medical procedure of the unveiling of women is one which allows the female body to become a static object, a precious possession which can be visually interrogated, and in the autopsy room report scenes of *The Black Dahlia* and *Mulholland Falls* this process occurs without the audience being required to dwell on images of trauma, what Jermyn points to as reminders of misogynistic violence. This work has been done for us, and is now being reported back, which allows the dead women to be located in the past tense, and therefore categorically removed from any sense of agency.

However, despite this apparent insistence on the female corpse's lack of an active presence in the plot present of the film, as suggested above, this imperative works in tension with a concurrent presentation of the dead woman as acting from beyond the grave. The detectives in these films cannot help but become enthralled with Alison Pond and Elizabeth

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<sup>146</sup> Ludmilla Jordana, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine Between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) p. 96.

Short, and their constant presence is not merely as facts to be assessed in the investigation of their deaths, but as captivating, sexually coded spectres upon which the detective apparently has no option but to fixate.<sup>147</sup> This sense that the dead women are present, and acting as a threat to the lives of the lead detectives, is made most apparent in both films' use of the found movie reels as evidence. In both films, the dead women appear, as if from beyond the grave, in several black and white movie reels, which reveal important details about their murders, but also, more significantly, provide captivating, often sexually explicit moving images of the dead women. These movie reels are discovered in the course of the investigation, and then watched repeatedly by the detectives in ways which at once encompass a legitimate review of clues pertaining to the cases, the epistemological gaze which attempts to undercover the more abstract mysteries of the femme fatale, and the personal, pornographic, obsessive gaze of the male investigating detective. What is significant about the use of the found movie reel in both of these films is that it employs the gothic trope of the return of the dead woman in a way which engages with questions of authenticity, nostalgia for 40s and 50s cinema, female representation and the male gaze.

In both *The Black Dahlia* and *Mulholland Falls*, women exert influence after death, echoing a pattern common in both gothic literature and classical Hollywood cinema.<sup>148</sup> However, while in those earlier texts women returned from the grave in the form of portraits, memories, doubles, ghosts, vampires and other supernatural bodies, in these more recent

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<sup>147</sup> A similar retro style movie reel motif occurs in the retro noir of *Hollywoodland*. However, in the case of that film, the subject of the movie reels is a successful male television star, and while the investigating detective does become obsessed with the moving images, it is an obsession which is tied up more with concerns about masculinity, fatherhood and heteronormativity than with sexual fixation. And where the obsessive gaze of the detectives in *Mulholland Falls* and *The Black Dahlia* causes their personal and professional lives to degenerate, the obsessive gaze of *Hollywoodland* spurs the detective to become a better father and improve himself. While the figure of the beautiful, seductive dead woman on screen has only the power to captivate and destroy, the figure of the troubled, hypermasculine dead man has the power to inspire and improve.

<sup>148</sup> Much of Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body* is taken up with the various forms these returns from death take, while Jermyn describes such returns from the grave as 'the female foil', and cites *Rebecca* (1940), *Laura* (1944), *Gaslight* (1944), and *Phantom Lady* (1944) as examples (p.154). Similarly, Tania Modleski notes the prevalence of the woman who 'exerts influence from beyond the grave', with *Rebecca*, *Vertigo* (1958), and *Psycho* (1960) acting as her main examples. Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (New York and London: Methuen, 1988), p.1.

articulations of the trope, the dead woman manifests most clearly in the form of the black and white movie reel. Although Alison and Elizabeth are dead throughout the plot duration of the films, they each return as living, black and white doubles of themselves on grainy flickering film reels. These reels, and the ways in which Alison and Elizabeth are presented in them allows, I argue, for a view of the returned dead woman as safe and stable. Much attention is paid to their details of their period fashions – complex undergarments, halterneck swimsuits, cat-eye sunglasses, carefully coiffed hair, and perfectly pencilled eyebrows – in the movie reels, and it is on these aspects of the dead women that *Mulholland Falls* and *The Black Dahlia* dwell (see figures 1.10 and 1.11). The result of this is an avoidance of the physical markers of violence – Jermyn’s female corpse – in favour of these glamorous apolitical images of period femininity. This strategy arguably denies the dead woman the power to speak from beyond the grave, and instead casts them simply as beautiful and tragic glamour girls, rather than indications of a misogynistic culture of violence against women.



**Figure 1.10: *Mulholland Falls* (1996).  
1950s glamour and voyeurism.**



**Figure 1.11: *The Black Dahlia* (2006).  
Period details and sexual performance.**

Additionally, this choice of medium for the uncannily gothic return of the dead woman to haunt the surviving detectives is connected with the fascination with the tragic feminine figure of the mid-century Hollywood wannabe so clearly encapsulated in the Black Dahlia mythology. While Alison Pond does not explicitly mention a desire for a career in

pictures, the movie reels of her present her as both a glamorous poolside bathing beauty – with a resemblance to some of the few surviving photographs of Elizabeth Short – and as an unwitting porn star in bed with powerful men, which combine to create an echo of the tragic starlet archetype: beautiful, full of charisma and potential, used up by men, dead before her time. Similarly, the Elizabeth Short reels in *The Black Dahlia* are a mixture of audition tapes for studios of dubious reputation in which she is alternately delicate, coquettish, desperate, naive and worldly wise, as well as a pornographic film in which she is drugged and full of despair. That the films themselves are in black and white and textured to give them the appearance of authentic film reels from the period combines with these multifarious impressions of Alison and Elizabeth to emphasise the historical specificity of the tragic starlet archetype. They are designed to provide a sense of authenticity to the evidence in the movie reels for the purposes of the detective narrative as well as to the period setting of the films, while at the same time they must also be read as recreations rather than authentic articles.

Both Jennifer Connelly and Mia Kirshner – Alison Pond and Elizabeth Short respectively – were familiar faces at the point of the films’ release, and their positioning in the



**Figure 1.12: *The Black Dahlia* (2006).  
Crisp lines and period details.**

‘vintage’ movie reels means that it is impossible to completely accept the authenticity of the black and white film stock (see figures 1.12 and 1.13)<sup>149</sup>. In addition to this, the texture of the film itself further complicates the issue of the films’ authenticity. Sprengler argues of

<sup>149</sup> Connelly had major roles in a range of films including *Labyrinth* (1986) and the neo-noir film *The Hot Spot* (1990) before *Mulholland Falls*, while Kirshner starred in the major Showtime drama *The L Word* (2004-2009) as well as making repeat appearances in *24* (2001-2010) prior to the release of *The Black Dahlia*. While Connelly was and remains a far bigger star than Kirshner, they both appeared in a variety of popular film and television texts prior to their performances in these films.

the new, period style footage which is contrasted with 1950s images in the opening credits of *L.A. Confidential* that '[t]hey are crisp, clean, and lack the marks of past representational technologies – the graininess of 16mm or the amateurish jerkiness of home movies. As such, the film's reality



**1.13: *Mulholland Falls* (1996). A contemporary star face with period texture.**

becomes privileged as somehow more authentic, more “real” than the extant documentary sequences here foregrounded as representations and as false, nostalgic images.<sup>150</sup> Sprengler’s assessment of the opening images is useful in discussing the relationship between the newly created black and white movie reels and the glossier colour images of the films that frame them. The contrast between the texture, length of shot, camera positioning, colour scale, and aspect ratio of the movie reels and the framing films echoes the opening sequence of *L.A. Confidential* in that there is a willingness to explore the difference between modern cinema and that of mid-century Hollywood. However, the movie reel images of *The Black Dahlia* and *Mulholland Falls* arguably function as a reminder that none of this is real, that the pastness present in both the framing films and the dead femme fatale movie reels is a created one: modern actresses pretend to be tragically failed screen goddesses from a bygone age, and this in turn forces a questioning of the authenticity of the retro noir femme fatale.

The Veronica Lake who appears in a flickering movie reel in Lynn Bracken’s house in *L.A. Confidential* was dead at the time of the film’s making, and was well past her prime years of stardom at the time of the film’s setting, which functions as a reminder that the flickering

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<sup>150</sup> Sprengler, p.80.

black and white images in the dark are the only place that the femme fatale exists, briefly, to be played over and over again. A version of these images can be performed by Lynn Bracken, but, as I argue above, she cannot play the role of femme fatale to the full because she exists in colour and, at least diegetically, outside the pages of a film script. And I contend that a similar scenario is playing out and taken further in *The Black Dahlia* and *Mulholland Falls*, as the women in the films are beautiful, mysterious, and perfectly encapsulate the mixture of vulnerability and sexual magnetism that captivates the watching detectives. Elizabeth Short and Alison Pond are already dead at the time of the movie reels' screenings, which, like the Veronica Lake film, points to their pastness, to the fleetingness and ultimate unsustainability of the femme fatale image.

This sense of the femme fatale as a crystallised image is at the same time complicated further by the knowledge of the movie reels' lack of authenticity on more than one level. It is hard to tell at what points the characters, Alison and Elizabeth, are playing parts for the diegetic cameras. Elizabeth's audition tapes seem to veer between the performative and the confessional, and it is never entirely clear where the line is drawn, while Alison's position as the mistress of powerful men and amateur porn actress in her clips also blurs the distinction between desire and performance. It is a trait of the cinematic femme fatale figure that it is impossible to tell what she really thinks or wants, but on a deeper level, the knowledge that the movie reels themselves are new, that the women who appear within them are contemporary actresses, and that the physical appearance of the films themselves is not a product of the quirks and glitches of period equipment, but has been carefully manufactured to replicate those idiosyncrasies, means that the very nature of that which is crystallised in a few frames of a film, the figure of the beautiful femme fatale in black and white, must be questioned. The movie reels suggest that the femme fatale is an image, a stereotype, a series of frames captured on film, and therefore something which is already gone. These recreated retro



style images are an overt acknowledgement of the femme fatale, and the cinematic version of the erotics of death that she represents, as an entirely artificial icon, one which cannot really be remade except by revisiting old images and attempting – and failing – to recreate them. While the visual quoting of classic femme fatale images in films like *L.A. Confidential* and *Femme Fatale* goes some way to demonstrating the ways in which the femme fatale figure is one which has crystallised from a combination of classic performances, and the repeat viewing of those performances, as well as pastiches, and the use of femme fatale imagery in fashion campaigns and advertising, the recreated movie reels actually imply that the femme fatale was never there in the first place.

However, the implicit questioning of the femme fatale archetype that these movie clips represent does not mean that the films' overall presentation of the retro noir femme fatale figure is a progressive one. Alison Pond and Elizabeth Short both die off screen, and the main action of both films begins with the investigation of their murders. Their presence on screen is effectively reduced to the brief views of their corpses, a few scant flashbacks from the point of view of the investigating detective in *Mulholland Falls* and the accomplice to Short's murder in *The Black Dahlia*, and the movie clips. This decision can be seen as an attempt to contain the threat of the femme fatale, not only by having her killed at the start of the films – a notable departure from the classic noir films which often subdued the femme fatale's potency by killing her at the film's denouement – which, as I argue above, limits her presence to the past tense, but also by having her existence in the film reduced to a series of flickering black and white images. Both films revolve around the murder of their beautiful women, but neither attempts to tell the story from their point of view, or even from the point of view of those closest to them. I have already suggested that the mixture of a contemporary visceral and forensic approach to death with the more romantic vagaries of the classical period

speak to the films' positions as retro noirs, but it is also important to consider the political implications of such a decision.

As I have indicated above, the figure of the dismembered and disintegrating corpse is both summoned and sidelined by the cinematography in both films, and this desire to emphasise the deadness of the beautiful woman while replacing clear images of the object of death – the dead body – with the more glamorous images from black and white movie reels suggests a tension in the representation of dead, and, more specifically, murdered women. This tension is one which is embroiled with the notion, outlined by Jermyn, that the female murder victim is a reminder of societal misogyny. The decision to present the femme fatale as not only dead, but prettily so, captured in the often pornographic period glamour of the movie reels, suggests a disturbing attempt to erode the spectre of violence against women which the female corpse offers, and to instead replace it with the glamorous mystique that is inherent in moving black and white images of beautiful women performing for the cameras and for the male gaze. The presence of the movie reels after the deaths of Alison Pond and Elizabeth Short is presented as poignant and tragic, but the preference given to the movie reel footage above images of brutalised bodies implies an attempt to contain yet another threat of the beautiful seductive woman: the way that her ultimate powerlessness in the face of systemic misogyny casts a sinister light on the society that surrounds her, and in particular, the men who fixate upon and desire her.

Ultimately, however, the use of the movie reels in these films is indicative of the battle to contain the uncontrollable visual force of the femme fatale. Their presentation is riddled with tensions and contradictions. The images appear safe, are nothing more than celluloid traces of embodied femininity, yet they become the objects of pathological fixation for vulnerable male detectives, who cannot help but stare at them in the dark. Even though the fact that the women on the movie reels are dead might appear to deactivate their power,

paradoxically their presumed stability – the reels are watched repeatedly, and are the same every time – actually work to destabilise their power, to make them femme fatales as the detectives become obsessed with the beautiful corpse reanimated. The movie clip allows the dead girl to become a femme fatale, to move beyond the point of abject corpse, and to speak to and captivate the detective. Their heroines are hamming it up for the camera, and often seem to be in control of their own images, yet are also representative of the tragic figure of the Hollywood wannabe, used and exploited for a chance in the spotlight, to the extent that it is often difficult to tell what is a performance and what is not.

## **Conclusion**

While critics have argued that the retro noir film is inherently conservative and focused predominantly on issues of societal corruption and the representation of an authentic long 1950s which is in many ways darker than classic era noir, I contend that this is only part of the complex engagement with gender in general, and the femme fatale more specifically in these films. Although the femme fatale is a figure initially notable by her surprising absence, *L.A. Confidential*, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, *Mulholland Falls* and *The Black Dahlia* do not bypass such characters completely, but instead present them as flickering spectres of their classical noir incarnations. Chiefly identifiable by their visual iconography, they then fail to meet the expected behaviour of the femme fatale, either through their ultimate ordinariness and domestication, or via their position as dead body and object of police investigation. In this chapter I have suggested that there are two ways of reading these narrative turns. Firstly, it might be argued that the retro noir film offers a path beyond the limits of the femme fatale, and suggested that as either tragic corpses or ordinary women they offer the possibility of representing female experience which is not contained by the simplistic idea of the evil seductress. However, this model relies on the idea that the femme fatale was only ever an evil

seductress in the first place, that the complexities identified in the introduction to this thesis do not exist. The alternative reading is that these texts summon up the figure of the femme fatale, one of the most potent images of female agency in cinematic history, only to contain her power in an overtly misogynist narrative strategy. Despite the first possibility of reading the films from an optimistic feminist perspective, this second insidious strategy makes such a reading a troubling project. Ultimately, while the domesticated femme fatales may offer the potential to move beyond the predominantly sexual power of the *idea* of a femme fatale, it is very difficult to raise too much feminist enthusiasm for a femme fatale who is always already the prettified victim of a brutal murder from the outset of the films.

Retro noir, with its femme fatales who are absent by virtue of their inherent domesticity and ordinariness, or their mortality, engages with the figure of the femme fatale on a purely surface level. They summon the image of the beautiful deadly woman via a system of representation constructed from previous performances, images, and visual styles, yet, despite their generic impulse to disrupt narratives of nostalgia with questions of social justice, suggest that the alignment of agency and feminine sexuality is ultimately an impossible one. Representations of dead girls and ordinary girls as femme fatales may be seen as an attempt to shift the meaning of the classic noir trope, but this shift is predominantly a conservative one, and the dead girl films in particular offer very little possibility for the dead femme fatale's subjectivity to be taken into account. It is, these films suggest, impractical, impossible, and ultimately very dangerous for women to occupy positions of sexual power, and so this power is contained, explained away, and in the most disturbing cases, killed off before the film has even begun.

# Chapter Two

## Postfeminist Fatales: Teenage Bad Girls

This chapter is concerned with the development of a new figure in cinema, that of the teenage girl as femme fatale. Such characters appear most frequently in noirish dark comedies and erotic thrillers, films which are not made for and marketed towards a teenage audience. Instead, the teenage femme fatale stands in for the intricate anxieties, concerns, and projections of meaning surrounding teenage femininity and sexuality in the 1990s and 2000s, and offers an often contradictory space for those issues to be emphasised, problematised and explored. In discussing *Wild Things* and *Mini's First Time* I consider the ways in which the teenage bad girl's representation can echo contemporary postfeminist notions of power and sexuality and shore up the sentiment that sexual display and performance can function as empowering strategies in their own right. I then move on to discuss *Cruel Intentions* and *Pretty Persuasion* in order to consider the ways in which the teenage femme fatale might be read as a counter to such arguments when she appears in films which present the lived experiences of young women within postfeminist culture as altogether more challenging and complex. In both sets of films, I argue, the teenage femme fatale is a problematic figure who enacts rhetoric of postfeminist empowerment through sexual performance. However, the first pair articulate the potential for slippage between the politics of postfeminist sexuality and empowerment, and patriarchal recuperation, while the second pairing of films offer more nuanced treatments of the teenage girl by considering not only the impact she has on her surroundings, but the way she is affected and shaped by those surroundings. Rather than a two-dimensional view of the badly behaved teenage girl as loathsome, desirable, or embodying a simplistically drawn form of female empowerment, these films instead interrogate the complex climate of sexual double standards and the commodification of young female bodies

which the main characters negotiate in order to gain some semblance of control over their own pleasures, relationships and futures.

### **Girls on Top: Genre, Gender, and Contemporary Girlhood**

Unlike the films of the previous chapter, these texts which represent teenage bad girls do not fall easily into a generic category or subcategory. Rather, I have chosen to address them together because they fall into a wider pattern of films which engage with the teenage girl as femme fatale, and which has been gaining momentum since the early 1990s. Teenage femme fatales appear in a range of films, including science fiction horror, as in *The Faculty* and *Teeth* (2007), the former of which I will discuss in Chapter Four, the erotic thriller, as in the *Poison Ivy* films (1992, 1996, 1997, 2008) and *Wild Things*, the teen drama, as in *Cruel Intentions* and *New Best Friend* (2002), as well as darkly comic indie films like *Brick* (2005), *Pretty Persuasion* and *Mini's First Time*.<sup>1</sup> What these texts have in common though is their focus on the figure of the (conventionally attractive, white, Western) teenage girl as sexually manipulative, seductive, and dangerous both to older men and to her peers. While the range of teenage femme fatales is vast, these four films offer the clearest engagement with postfeminist culture and 'girls in crisis' rhetoric which hover over the femme fatale's contemporary teenage incarnations.

It is worth noting that the four films that are the focus of this chapter are predominantly not films made for teenage girls. Instead, they are erotic thrillers and what can be loosely titled indie films.<sup>2</sup> The one significant exception is *Cruel Intentions*, a film that was

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<sup>1</sup> These categories are not exhaustive, and there exists a certain amount of generic flexibility among them. For example, *The Faculty* also contains elements of the slasher film and the high school film, *Mini's First Time* can be read both as an ironic indie film and as an erotic thriller, while *Wild Things* might also be viewed as neo-noir, or as a dark comedy.

<sup>2</sup> Williams defines the erotic thriller as 'noirish stories of sexual intrigue incorporating some form of criminality or duplicity, often as the flimsy framework for on-screen softcore sex' (Linda Ruth Williams, p.1. Emphasis in the original). The 'indie film' is harder to define. As Geoff King has argued, 'the "independence" or American independent cinema, or exactly what kind of production qualifies for the term, is constantly under question', noting that the independence of cinema can be judged on the basis of a number of intersecting categories, '(1) their industrial location, (2) the kinds of formal/aesthetic strategies they adopt, (3) their relationship to the broader social, cultural, political or ideological landscape.' Geoff King, *American Independent*

clearly marketed and received as a teen film, as it followed the *Clueless* (1995) tradition of the teen update of a literary classic, starred an ensemble cast popular with teenagers, and won a 1999 Teen Choice Award for ‘Choice Drama’, and 2000 MTV movie awards for ‘Best Kiss’ and ‘Best Actress’ for Sarah Michelle Gellar.<sup>3</sup> However, despite these teen credentials, *Cruel Intentions* arguably retains a simultaneous appeal for the erotic thriller market, as the salacious attention given to the infamous kiss between two of the female stars and the two sequels which effectively rehash the plot with greater emphasis on sex scenes would suggest. Similarly, while *Wild Things* features Neve Campbell, who at the time of the film’s release was best known for her work in the *Scream* films (1996-2000), the teen witchcraft film *The Craft* (1996), and the teen television drama *Party of Five* (1994-2000), the film’s various tag lines – ‘They’re dying to play with you’, ‘They can turn you on or turn on you’ and ‘Be Wild. Be Wicked. Beware.’ – and the huge interest that its faux-lesbian pool scenes and teenage threesomes attracted, would suggest that the film was marketed at and enthusiastically received by adult males. So while teenage girls may watch these films, that they are not the primary target audience demonstrates a bypassing of the teenage girl even in the films which seem to represent her. As Timothy Shary notes in his study of youth in contemporary cinema, ‘[o]ne of the telling dilemmas of youth films since cinema began is that while they address young people they are not produced by young people [...] Thus, screen images of youth have always been traditionally filtered through adult perspectives’, so that teenagers do not play a role in the creation of their own representations.<sup>4</sup> What the generic categories, methods of

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*Cinema* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005) p.1, p.2. For the purposes of this thesis, the indie film can be seen as a genre on the fringes of Hollywood productions, often financed and/or marketed by major studios, but retaining a quirky, often unpolished aesthetic and narrative sensibility.

<sup>3</sup> *Cruel Intentions*’ cast included Sarah Michelle Gellar, star of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Scream 2* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (both 1997), Joshua Jackson of *Dawson’s Creek* (1998-2003), and Ryan Phillippe, who also starred in *I Know What You Did Last Summer*. Co-stars Selma Blair, Reese Witherspoon and Tara Reid all went on to star in numerous teen films and television programmes.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) p.2. It is also important to note that teenage characters in Hollywood cinema are predominantly played by actors several years older than their characters, so that teenage girls are absent from the entire production of their onscreen representations.

production, and implicit target audiences of these films suggest is that the teenage femme fatale is a figure designed to say something about, rather than specifically to, teenage girls.

The past two decades have seen a significant increase in the number of cultural texts concerned with girls and unprecedented numbers of films, television series, and music for and about girls began to emerge during the 1990s. Marnina Gonick notes that, '[s]ince the early 1990s, the popular media, popular literature, television, film, academic conferences, and special issues of feminist journals have been participants in an incredible proliferation of images, texts, and discourses around girls and girlhood in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries.'<sup>5</sup> This proliferation can be partially accounted for by the increased awareness of girls as a profitable group of consumers during this period,<sup>6</sup> but, as I have indicated above, not all representations of teenage girls appear in texts marketed towards that group, and so the figure of the teenage girl in popular culture must also be seen as a site of concern and fascination, and as a saleable product in herself.<sup>7</sup> In this chapter I discuss the figure of the teenage femme fatale in relation to the positioning of young femininity at the intersection of these questions of anxiety, objectification and desire. Does the teenage femme fatale provide a rebellious alternative to conceptions of teenage girls as vulnerable and passive, and how much depth do these representations offer? How far do images of tough, deadly girls who employ their sexuality as a means to fulfil their ambitions replicate postfeminist notions of sex as empowerment? And to what extent can these films go beyond this rhetoric to investigate the lived experiences of girls growing up with postfeminist culture?

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<sup>5</sup> Marnina Gonick, 'Between "Girl Power" and "Reviving Ophelia": Constituting the Neoliberal Girl Subject', *NWSA Journal* 18.2 (2006), 1-23 (p.1)

<sup>6</sup> Meenakshi Gigi Durham explores this interest in teenage girls as a demographic for whom texts and products are produced in 'The Girling of America: Critical Reflections on Gender in Popular Communication', *Popular Communication* 1.1 (2003), 23-31.

<sup>7</sup> This perspective is supported by the wealth of scholarly and popular studies about girls which form the growing field of girls' studies. As Sharon R. Mazzarella and Norma Pecora argue in their comprehensive account of the field, 'the 1990s ushered in a deluge of high-profile studies of adolescent girls' development', and that academic studies of girls 'took on a new sense of urgency during the 1990s'. Sharon R. Mazzarella and Norma Pecora, 'Revisiting Girls' Studies: Girls Creating Sites for Connection and Action', *Journal of Children and Media* 1.2 (2007), 105-25 (p.105).



In the few substantial accounts of teenagers in cinema from within film and popular cultural studies, there exists an uncertainty around genre and definition. Steve Bailey and James Hay take pains to make their avoidance of questions of genre explicit by noting that they are ‘not interested in establishing a definition of the teen film’.<sup>8</sup> Sarah Hentges prefers to group films which focus on girls together, noting that this grouping ‘cuts across the teen film genre as well as a number of subgenres like makeover films, horror films, and family films’, while Catherine Driscoll makes a distinction between subcultural ‘youth films’, which are concerned with sex and violence, and more commercial ‘teen films’ which are about conformity.<sup>9</sup> Shary’s research is concerned with the ‘youth film’, which ‘is based on the ages of the films’ characters’, a definition which bases generic limits on the content rather than the target audience.<sup>10</sup> It is this last method of enquiry that I will be following in my interrogation of the teenage femme fatale in this chapter, as, while there are clear differences of style and content between films clearly marketed towards teenagers and those which are not, I am interested in discussing the ways in which concerns about teenage girls’ sexuality have been filtered through the figure of the femme fatale, rather than in assessing the impact that these representations might have on their target audiences.

The representation of teenage characters in recent film has received surprisingly little critical attention within film scholarship given the huge number of films featuring teenage characters that have emerged since the 1980s. While numerous sociology projects have been

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<sup>8</sup> Steve Bailey and James Hay, ‘Cinema and the Premise of Youth: Teen Films and their Sites in the 1980s and 1990s’ in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. by Steve Neale (London: British Film Institute, 2002), pp.218-35 (p.218). By contrast, Roz Kaveney has a very specific and rather arbitrary definition of what does and does not constitute teen cinema which is explained in detail at the beginning of her book. According to Kaveney, teen cinema must necessarily be ‘a creative response to the 1980s John Hughes films and to a lesser extent other films that appeared at the roughly the same time’, and therefore excludes all other films, even if they about and marketed at teenagers. Roz Kaveney, *Teen Dreams: Reading Teen Film and Television from Heathers to Veronica Mars* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), p.3, pp.3-10.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Hentges, *Pictures of Girlhood: Modern Female Adolescence on Film* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), p.xi. Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p.217.

<sup>10</sup> Shary, *Generation Multiplex*, p.11. Jon Lewis takes a similar approach in arguing that teen films are films featuring, rather than necessarily consumed by, teenagers, and is more concerned with the contents of the text as a means of determining genre, rather than ‘industry intent or [...] target audiences’. Jon Lewis, *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p.2.

undertaken to investigate the content of representations of teenage characters, these tend toward the study of the frequency with which certain behaviours and environments occur in films about teenagers, rather than analysis of the ways in which the films make their meaning, and what the politics of these representations might be.<sup>11</sup> Teen cinema has also been the subject of several non-academic texts which provide often nostalgic descriptions of teen films.<sup>12</sup> However, to date there exists very little substantial critical work on the teenage bad girl, and none which makes an explicit connection between the dangers of the seductive teenage girl and the figure of the femme fatale.<sup>13</sup> In this chapter I expand the existing discourse by providing a reading of four key texts which assesses the relationship between the femme fatale, the teenage girl, postfeminist culture, and anxiety about contemporary female adolescence.

This chapter explores the evolution and role of the teenage femme fatale, a cinematic figure that first emerged in the early 90s. Teenage girls did appear in classic-era film noir, but did not operate as femme fatales. Instead, when teenage or less mature young women did appear in classic noir, their existence often served to illustrate the wickedness of the femme fatale, who was typically played by an actress in her twenties or thirties, through their own demure goodness. So, *Double Indemnity*'s teenage Lola (Jean Heather) functions as a wide-eyed brunette innocent to compare with the conniving, bottle-blond Phyllis Dietrichson,<sup>14</sup> *Murder*

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Susannah R. Stern, 'Self-Absorbed, Dangerous, and Disengaged: What Popular Films Tell Us About Teenagers', *Mass Communication and Society*, 8.1 (2005), 23-38. and Sarah M. Coyne, Mark Callister and Tom Robinson, 'Yes, Another Teen Movie: Three Decades of Physical Violence in Films Aimed at Adolescents', *Journal of Children and Media* 4.4 (2010), 387-401.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Jonathan Bernstein, *Pretty In Pink: The Golden Age of Teen Movies* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997) and Kaveney, *Teen Dreams*.

<sup>13</sup> The one significant example of extensive writing about teenage bad girls is *Sugar, Spice and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood*, ed. by Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), which, while offering an extensive variety of chapters exploring girls on film, also contains several significant pieces that interrogate teenage girls' relationships with violence, crime, and bad behaviour. Within this collection, Kristen Hatch's 'Fille Fatale: Regulating Images of Adolescent Girls, 1962-1996', pp.163-82, offers an insightful look at issues of adolescent girls' sexuality in relation to concerns about paedophilia, but does not make a connection with the adult femme fatale.

<sup>14</sup> It has been noted that the film adaptation took great pains to ensure that the teenage girl remain uncorrupted in the film, altering James M. Cain's original novel so that rather than embarking on an affair with

*My Sweet's* (1944) Ann Grayle (Anne Shirley) is the unquestionably honest contrast to her villainous stepmother Helen (Claire Trevor), and *Out of the Past's* Ann Miller (Virginia Huston) is gentle and forgiving, and lives with her suburban parents, in contrast to Kathie Moffat, who we meet in a Mexican bar, and who is cruel and duplicitous. Teenage girls and young women were not exclusively cast as good and virginal in classic-era noir; indeed, *The Big Sleep's* Carmen Sternwood (Martha Vickers) narrowly escapes a pornography scandal, and Mildred Pierce's (1945) teenage daughter Veda (Ann Blyth) is just as cruel and single-minded as her older counterparts. However, while Dickos describes Veda as an 'emerging *femme fatale*', the crucial word here is 'emerging', as, unlike the older women, she is impetuous, childish, and crucially lacking in the practiced sexual wiles and awareness of the affects of her sexuality of a Phyllis Dietrichson or a Kathie Moffat.<sup>15</sup> Teenage girls were also present in the noirish texts of the 1970s, but, as I noted in the previous chapter, the noir films of this period showed little sustained interest in women, and these teen characters still functioned as innocent victims, as in *Chinatown*, or innocent victims in the guise of Veda Pierce-esque teenage runaways, as in *Night Moves* (1975). It was only in the 1990s that teenage girls on screen became fully fledged *femme fatales*, with the traditional arsenal of an evil scheming mind, cruel single-mindedness of purpose, and sexual allure at their fingertips.

In one of the only critical acknowledgements of this significant new incarnation of the *femme fatale*, Shary notes that

“Evil women” whose power arises from their sexuality and intelligence have been popular since at least the 1940s emergence of *femmes fatales* in films noir, and seemed to find a resurgence in the last generation as a reaction to women gaining professional power [...] The fact that teen films have recently been demonstrating the supposedly corruptive effects of female intelligence and sexuality suggests that this tradition is shifting its concerns (and fascinations) to a younger generation of women.<sup>16</sup>

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Walter Neff, the man who killed her father, Lola is kept at a non-sexual distance from him. See Megan E. Abbott, *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir* (New York: Palgrave, 2002) p.148.

<sup>15</sup> Dickos, p.160. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>16</sup> Timothy Shary, “The Nerdy Girl and Her Beautiful Sister in *Sugar and Spice and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood* ed. by Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), pp.235-54 (p.249-50). Lisa Coulthard does include teenage girls in her list of recent film and television texts which depict violent women, but does not make any distinction between the young *femme fatales* of *Poison*

As Shary suggests, the teenage femme fatale has emerged from the 1980s noir revival which took the form of femme fatale-centred erotic thrillers such as *Body Heat*, *Black Widow*, and *Fatal Attraction*. This resurgence coincided with what Driscoll has termed ‘a hypersuccessful genre’ of teen films in the 1980s, exemplified by John Hughes’ *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Pretty in Pink* (1986), Amy Heckerling’s *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), and Michael Lehman’s *Heathers* (1988).<sup>17</sup> This cinematic climate is arguably what caused director Katt Shea to be, in her words, ‘hired by New Line Cinema to come up with a teenage *Fatal Attraction*’, resulting in *Poison Ivy*, the first major teen femme fatale film.<sup>18</sup> However, while Shary’s comment may identify a new development in representations of the femme fatale in recent years, his assessment implies that the tropes which have signified the adult femme fatale in previous periods of cinema, as mapped in the Introduction, has simply been replicated onto the body of a younger woman, and that these conventions should be read in the same way, and assigned the same meanings when ‘shifted’ to the teenage girl. In this chapter I argue that, contrary to these assumptions, the films in which teenage femme fatales appear do not offer a singular version of the femme fatale as a teenager, but rather present scheming, violent, and deadly girls in a wide variety of guises and contexts as characters who have their own specific characteristics, peculiarities and contradictions which reflect the complex and problematic ways in which the bodies, minds, sexualities and agencies of teenage girls are understood in Western culture and represented in popular cinema at the turn of the twenty first century.

As I have indicated, the beginnings of the teenage femme fatale can be traced to the erotic thrillers of early nineties such as *Poison Ivy* and *The Crush*, which feature teenage girls as Lolita figures, babysitters, daughters of landlords, and the daughter’s schoolfriends in

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*Ivy* and *The Crush* (1993) and the adult characters of *Basic Instinct* and *The Last Seduction*. Lisa Coulthard, ‘Killing Bill: Rethinking Feminism and Film Violence’ in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. by Yvonne Tasker and Dianne Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp.153-75 (p.168).

<sup>17</sup> Driscoll, p.216.

<sup>18</sup> From an interview with Linda Ruth Williams, p.392.

scenarios designed to place older men in proximity to devious and nubile teenage girls who first seduce them, then wreak havoc on their lives.<sup>19</sup> These films tend to portray the teenage femme fatale as a conniving, deadly, and selfish Lolita – often with an Electra-tinged desire for father figures, as well as money and excitement – while her hapless male targets are revealed as powerless to her abundant charms. Julie Burchill describes a type of cinematic girl who first emerged in the early 1960s:

the girl who arouses sexually and is therefore bad. Her badness is given extra clout by the fact that she is *illegal*: if she is under eighteen, a man can be ruined by falling victim to her vamping, he can lose everything. She is bad yet the law is on her side; she is a nymphet, and indicative of an age where youth is both feared and worshipped.<sup>20</sup>

While the figures Burchill describe are of an earlier period in cinematic history, the analysis can be usefully applied to the dynamics of young sexuality and the adult male in these films from the early 1990s. The girl and her sexuality are unequivocally presented as dangerous, and her illegality plays an important part in that danger, yet the anxiety in these films is for the grown man who may fall victim to her sexuality and ‘lose everything’, and not for the underage girl who may be, at least in the eyes of the law, raped by an adult.

This dynamic is one which follows a trend in Hollywood film identified in Hatch’s account of the changes in representations of female adolescence on film, who notes a shift in attention between concerns arising in the 1970s about what effect the adult male gaze could have on girls and those which appear in the 1990s in which the adult male can be seen as under threat from images of young femininity. Comparing the media controversies surrounding 1978’s *Pretty Baby* and Adrian Lyne’s 1997 adaptation of *Lolita*, Hatch notes that,

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<sup>19</sup> These films employ similar narrative strategies to the journalistic accounts of a 1992 case in which 17-year-old Amy Fisher confronted and shot Mary Jo Buttafuoco, the wife of Joey Buttafuoco, with whom Amy was having an affair. In the extensive tabloid coverage that followed – most of which emphasized the spicy details of the affair and the young woman’s past involvement in the sex industry – Fisher was dubbed the ‘Long Island Lolita’. As Elizabeth Wurtzel notes, ‘the Amy Fisher story is about an attempt to focus on one girl’s special effects and pretend that no storyline preceded it. And there’s a lot of that going around these days’. Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women* (London: Quartet Books, 1999), p. 94. While the Amy Fisher case, and the media frenzy surrounding it, did not initiate the cycle, the particular way it was reported speaks to the same concerns of the films that were released at this time: the combination of sexuality, criminality, and teenage femininity is interpreted together in a way that stereotypes the young female killer, and thus emphasizes the teenage girl’s seductive danger, while playing down any concern for her personal wellbeing.

<sup>20</sup> Julie Burchill, *Girls on Film* (New York: Pantheon, 1986) p. 130. Emphasis in the original.

[i]f in *Pretty Baby*, the girl was understood to be vulnerable to the male gaze, central to the controversy surrounding Lyne's film was the perception of the adult male as vulnerable to the onslaught of erotic images of girls in popular culture. The danger of the film was explicitly visual [...] Her image poses a danger to viewers.<sup>21</sup>

The Lolita femme fatale films of the early 1990s arguably reflect this shift, as the sexualised youthful body is presented to the adult male in the films, and the prolonged focus by the camera on these bodies, together with the lack of sympathy for the femme fatale, suggest that the audience is invited to sympathise with the adult males' desire and vulnerability. The femme fatale in these films remains a two-dimensional figure who functions as the object of desire, while her motivations go unquestioned and the threat she poses to the family and adult masculinity is neutralized through death or incarceration.

This trend continues throughout the nineties, with films like *Wicked* (1998), *Devil in the Flesh* (1998), *Teacher's Pet* (2000), and *Swimfan* (2002) presenting the teenage femme fatale as an unexamined sociopath who will stop at nothing to get what she wants, and whose primary appeal for the men she desires is that she is underage and therefore forbidden. However, while the focus on the fireworks and threat of girls behaving badly remains a staple of the teen femme fatale narrative, some texts have moved away from the straightforward demonization of the bad girl's bad behaviour as a result of increased interest in the behaviour of teenage girls in popular and academic writing. This shift arguably occurs in response to the rhetoric surrounding girlhood: the increased visibility of popular girl-centric feminisms such as Riot Grrl, and Girlie feminism, as well as the postfeminist articulations of Girl Power and narratives in which girls can find empowerment through commodity consumption and sexual display, and the 'girls in crisis' literary phenomenon of the 1990s exemplified by Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* (1994), and which I will discuss in more detail later in the chapter.<sup>22</sup> I am therefore concerned with several recent examples of the genre which engage directly with

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<sup>21</sup> Hatch, p.177.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994).

these girls in crisis media narratives, and with postfeminist discourses of youth, sexuality, femininity, and power.

While I outline the relevance of these debates to contemporary femme fatale characters in the introduction to this thesis, some further elaboration on the specific importance of postfeminist culture and rhetoric to representations of teenage girls in particular is necessary at this point. In films which follow the Lolita femme fatale narratives of the early 1990s, the focus moves more directly toward the teenage femme fatale herself, and the characterisation of this figure becomes more complex. Rather than focusing exclusively on the damage she causes to adult men, and the ways in which her power can be halted, films of the late 1990s and early 2000s frequently employ the teenage femme fatale as a protagonist, or at least as a central figure who is not a clear cut and unsympathetic figure of evil and destruction in the same way as the Lolita-inspired characters. These more recent films vary in narrative: while some celebrate the victory of the femme fatale and the success of her schemes, as in *Mini's First Time* and *Wild Things*, others punish her duplicity while simultaneously exhibiting sympathy for the predicament of ambitious young women in a culture of sexual double standards, as in *Cruel Intentions* and *Pretty Persuasion*. The evolution of the teenage femme fatale takes place in the context of an increased interest from both the popular media and academic study in the images of women finding empowerment in sexual manipulation evoked by the term 'postfeminism'. In recent years, much critical attention has been focused on the figure of the postfeminist 'bad girl,' a figure that Sarah Gamble identifies as 'the Spice Girls, Madonna, and [the presenters of] *The Girlie Show*: women dressing like bimbos yet claiming male privileges and attitudes.'<sup>23</sup> This highly visual form of sexuality - push up bras, thongs, and overt sexual assertiveness - frequently carries with it the claim of being empowering and rebellious. However, as Rebecca Munford notes, 'many feminist critics have

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<sup>23</sup> Sarah Gamble, 'Postfeminism', in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. by Sarah Gamble (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp.36-46 (p.36).

been quick to position “girl power” and its “bad girl” icons as a form of popularised postfeminism – a depoliticised product of “backlash” rhetoric;<sup>24</sup> while Greer describes a ‘depressingly durable’ cultural phenomenon of “‘girls behaving badly’ and “‘girls on top’”. Though the career of the individual bad girl is likely to be a brief succession of episodes of chaotic drinking, casual sex, venereal infection and unwanted pregnancy’,<sup>25</sup> implying that the figure of the empowered ‘bad girl’ and her apparent victories for femininity provide a site for concern and interrogation rather than celebration. It is within the context of this tension between the notion of the empowered sexy bad girl and feminist critiques of such postfeminist iconography that films such as the four considered here are positioned.

Girls and girliness play significant roles in postfeminist cultures. As Tasker and Negra note,

some of the highest-profile postfeminist franchises have centralized girls and girlhood, fusing empowerment rhetoric with traditionalist identity paradigms [...] Moreover, the ‘girling’ of femininity itself is evident in both the celebration of the young woman as a marker of postfeminist liberation and the continuing tendency to either explicitly term or simply treat women of a variety of ages as girls.<sup>26</sup>

In this model, both adult women and teenage girls can gain power by appropriating girlish accoutrements and terminology and combining these with a highly performative sexuality, so that both sexiness and girliness are posited as a means to greater assertions of female subjectivity.<sup>27</sup> However, such strategies typically sidestep questions of the limits and legitimacy of the power of sexualised girlhood. While a sexualised performance of normative female adolescence is presented as the ultimate in female empowerment, the scope of this model is extremely narrow, as it is limited entirely to the external and the physical, and can therefore

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<sup>24</sup> Rebecca Munford, “‘Wake Up and Smell the Lipgloss’”: Gender, Generation and the (A)politics of Girl Power’, in *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, ed. by Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp.266-79 (p.142).

<sup>25</sup> Greer, p.310.

<sup>26</sup> Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, ‘Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture’, in *Interrogating Postfeminism*, ed. by Tasker and Negra, pp.1-25 (p.18).

<sup>27</sup> It is important to note that this strategy of reclaiming girlhood has taken many forms beyond mainstream media and including explicitly feminist projects. For more on this see Munford. However, within mainstream consumer culture, the figure of the sexualised teenage girl is repeatedly held up as an unexamined icon of female empowerment.



only be undertaken by women who meet specific normative bodily standards: white, young, feminine, able bodied, and slim with a conventionally proportioned body and face. Even within these limits, only uniform heteronormative sexuality – and I include same-sex interactions which are performed specifically for the male gaze in this term – is acceptable within this model, and no space is left for women’s individual desires and responses, let alone their fears and uncertainties. Similarly, this emphasis on sexual performance also evades engagement with the non-sexual personalities, problems, experiences, and inner lives of girls and young women. The limits of sexualised girlhood as a means of empowerment within Western patriarchal culture are striking.

Further, this rhetoric of the empowering quality of sexualised girlhood does not account for the much more complex and contradictory treatment of teenage girls and their sexuality in Western culture by news media and popular cultural texts. Several critics have noted that depictions of the teenage girl offer dualistic representations in which she is seen as both desirable and repellent, and this factor certainly complicates the postfeminist valorisation of sexualised girlhood as an empowering role. Ilana Nash evokes the Madonna/whore dichotomy in arguing that recent representations of girlhood are

overlaid with older expressions of misogyny [...] a polarization of women’s options between approved chastity and obedience, and a seductive sexuality that is simultaneously shunned and avidly consumed [...] Standing at the crossroads between childhood and womanhood, the teen girl faces Janus-like in both directions, a liminal figure who combines two identities that incite pleasure and anxiety in the adult male.<sup>28</sup>

Images of adolescent sexuality, then, are still problematic as emblems of female power, even when they meet with the strictures set out above. Driscoll expands on this binary representation by describing ‘the patriarchal capitalist coding of feminine adolescence as desirable commodity and undesirable identity’.<sup>29</sup> The teenage girl as represented in popular culture is only powerful as an object of desire – and this extends to the purchasing of girlhood

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<sup>28</sup> Ilana Nash, *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), p.3.

<sup>29</sup> Driscoll, p.130

and girlishness within adult women's consumer practices – whereas her life and experiences are undesirable due to that very objectification, alongside her marginalisation, perceived passivity and lack of actual power. The teenage girl in popular culture, therefore, is not unproblematically powerful. Instead she is objectified and judged at an exclusively surface level, and rarely assessed beyond the physical.<sup>30</sup>

Contemporary representations of girlhood, including the films discussed in this chapter, rely on what Kerry Mallan and Sharyn Pearce describe as a 'concept of the youthful body as a site of cultural inscription and objectification'.<sup>31</sup> In presenting teenage girls as variously violent, cruel, vulnerable, sexually available, sexually dangerous, fiercely intelligent and tragically neglected by parents and authority figures, these films provide youthful female bodies as spaces upon which the concern, desire, and anxiety directed toward girls by popular media in the last twenty years is written. In their representations of sexy bad girls these films would appear to replicate Driscoll's formulation. That the teen femme fatales featured in this study conform, like their older counterparts, to feminine norms of beauty, body shape and whiteness also supports this argument.<sup>32</sup> However, while these characters can be read as damaging representations of youthful femininity, and some of these films certainly maintain a commitment to postfeminist rhetoric of empowerment, in this chapter I argue against a simplistic reading of the teenage femme fatale, and interrogate the complexities of these representations. The combination of postfeminist influences and girls in crisis rhetoric alongside the weight of meaning that accompanies the figure of the femme fatale arguably

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<sup>30</sup> Shary notes that representations of teenage girls engage exclusively with the surface level in their empowerment narratives, suggesting that 'many films appear to be offering empowering messages for girls when ultimately they still minimize the power of knowledge and emphasise the power of beauty.' Shary, 'The Nerdly Girl', p.236. Similarly, Rachel Moseley's examination of the teen witch in contemporary popular culture emphasises the way that the use of sparkle as a recurring aesthetic practice speaks specifically to the superficial nature of postfeminist adolescent power. 'Glamorous Witchcraft: Gender and Magic in Teen Film and Television', *Screen*, 43.4 (2000), 403-22 (pp.408-09).

<sup>31</sup> Kerry Mallan and Sharyn Pearce, 'Introduction' in *Youth Cultures: Texts, Images, Identities* ed. by Kerry Mallan and Sharyn Pearce (Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2003), pp.ix-xix (p.xiv).

<sup>32</sup> Despite Nikki Reed's ethnically diverse heritage, her character Mini is coded as white in *Mini's First Time* (2006).

leads to complicated, often problematic, representations of adolescent girls which cannot be simply celebrated or condemned.

### **Getting Away With It: Postfeminism and the Victorious Girl**

Postfeminist culture has a particular investment in the valorisation of the sexual performances of the beautiful, white, thin teenage girl, and here I discuss *Wild Things* and *Mini's First Time*, and their representations of characters in which a postfeminist bad girl figure intersects with the femme fatale of classic film noir, as sexually available 'slutty' girls in thick makeup and tight tops employ their feminine wiles for deception, betrayal and murder. Unlike the classic noir femme fatale, who, as Dickos notes, 'must inevitably die – or, at the very least, be mortally injured or be arrested for her crimes,' the female leads in these two films 'get away with' crimes against highly unsympathetic and mostly male characters.<sup>33</sup> This apparently progressive departure, which offers a valorisation of the femme fatale's power lacking from the classic noir narrative conclusion, becomes problematic with the intervention of the proclaimed empowerment of the 'bad girl,' an empowerment which is arguably undermined by inherently patriarchal iconography and style.

*Mini's First Time* follows its titular protagonist (Nikki Reed) as she seeks and achieves 'firsts' – exciting and unusual experiences for her own entertainment – and in the process begins an affair with her stepfather, Martin (Alec Baldwin), conspires with him to kill her mother (Carrie-Ann Moss), and ultimately frames him for the murder before escaping without consequence. *Wild Things* offers a narrative in which the apparently naive Suzie (Neve Campbell) embarks on a complex con involving a sexual harassment suit at her school, in which she conspires with her teacher Sam (Matt Dillon), a fellow pupil Kelly (Denise Richards), and a cop, Ray (Kevin Bacon), before it is ultimately revealed that she has conned

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<sup>33</sup> Dickos, p.162.

them all, and killed most of them either directly or indirectly, before escaping with the money. In discussing these films and their relationship with postfeminism, I explore the significance of the teenage femme fatale as protagonist and victor, before complicating this through an interrogation of the failures of postfeminist rhetoric in conjunction with the femme fatale. I argue that these girls can only retain power if they work alone as these narratives privilege the image of the lone girl as victor and work to undermine any semblance of female friendship and solidarity. In these films the femme fatale's power is reliant on her superiority to the other girls and women around them. Additionally, I discuss the limits of power that, in these texts, is derived solely from sexual performance.

In the Introduction, I outlined the critical discourses that have developed around the femme fatale and narrative closure, and the ways in which feminist film critics have attempted to account for the femme fatale's pleasure and power for female audiences despite her inevitable death or narrative containment and the apparently conservative meaning of these endings. This tension between the femme fatale as an icon of female agency and as a punished wrongdoer is nevertheless a cause for concern for many critics. As Place notes, classic film noir's representation of women 'does not present us with role models who defy their fate and triumph over it.'<sup>34</sup> However, the valorisation of the femme fatale's victory in films like *Wild Things* and *Mini's First Time* would appear to rectify this pattern and remove this problematic element. The teenage femme fatale has emerged unscathed in other contemporary films, but while the fatal and manipulative teenage girls in films like *Brick* and *Heartbreakers* (2001) survive as victors either as proof of the sympathetic (male) protagonist's powerlessness, or are redeemed through conventional (heterosexual) romance and the rejection of previously transgressive behaviour, Suzie and Mini end their films by driving or walking away from the

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<sup>34</sup> Place, p.35. Haskell goes further in suggesting that the women of classic noir do not even have a fate which hangs in the balance, when she argues that '[i]n the bad-girl films like *Gilda* and *Out of the Past*, it is the man who is being corrupted, his soul which is in jeopardy. Women are not fit to be the battleground for Lucifer and the angels; they are something already decided, simple, of a piece.' Haskell, p.207.

camera and from their crimes, implying that they *have* triumphantly and unrepentantly defied their fates. Unlike classic noir, these films appear to offer a genuine celebration of the bad girl, in whom youth, intellect, and sexual agency combine to create central characters who end their narratives without punishment, remorse or redemption in a way that encourages the audience to gain pleasure from their murderous victories.

In *Mini's First Time*, the status of the femme fatale as powerful and appealing is emphasised throughout. With her domination of the film's title, narrative and voiceover, Mini immediately claims the position of protagonist, while male characters are sidelined and presented in unflattering lights. Patriarchal desire is mocked from the outset, as an early scene shows Mike, Mini's neighbour, and another middle-aged man gawping helplessly at a group of scantily-clad teenage girls dancing at Mini's party. This shot posits the adult male gaze as pathetic, impotent and clichéd, an effect which is compounded as Mini's voiceover describes Mike as 'the guy my Mom screws whenever the batteries run out'. The choice of words here is significant as, in referencing her mother's vibrator, Mini points to a problematic object for contemporary feminism. The vibrator is at once a means of sexual pleasure separate from power dynamics of heteronormative sexual relationships and yet another commodification of women's sexuality, another product that women 'need'.<sup>35</sup> This line situates Mini as a protagonist firmly within postfeminist culture, as someone who is aware of the accoutrements of contemporary sexual activity, and is comfortable enough to mention them casually. Mini, then, is presented as a confident young woman with a modern attitude to sex, who occupies

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<sup>35</sup> For a detailed interrogation of this tension, see Martha McCaughey and Christina French, 'Women's Sex-Toy Parties: Technology, Orgasm, and Commodification', *Sexuality & Culture*, 5.3 (2001), 77-96. The postfeminist politics of the vibrator are further complicated by the role of *Sex and the City*, a programme that has frequently been accused of promoting capitalism under the label of feminism, in popularizing pink, rabbit-style vibrators. See *Sex and the City*, 'The Turtle and the Hare', S01, Ep.9, (1998).

the centre of the narrative, and is both aware of and contemptuous of the male attention that she and other young women like her attract.

This representation of Mini is developed and consolidated throughout the film via her relationships and interactions with older men. When Mini embarks on her first night as an escort, a close-up shot of Mini's face reveals an expression of confusion, boredom, and uncharacteristic uncertainty (see figure 2.1). It turns out that this is not a reaction to the services she was expected to perform as an escort, but rather because 'my first night as a call-girl was a serious let down. The guy said I looked so much like his niece he just started whimpering and praying for forgiveness.' The camera then tilts down to reveal a kneeling,



**Figure 2.1: *Mini's First Time* (2007).  
Confusion and uncertainty.**

sobbing, fez-wearing man in his fifties with a ruddy face, clutching a bible in one hand and Mini's waist in the other. The camera tilts up again to show Mini's disdain as she tries half-heartedly to shake him off as though he is something

unpleasant stuck to her shoe. As in the case of her manipulation of Mike, of whom Mini remarks, 'I'm amazed the anticipation of pulling off a mother-daughter double dip didn't give him a stroke right there,' and her stepfather Martin, whose type, according to the escort agency, is 'young', Mini occupies a position of power over these 'sleazy old man' figures precisely because of the feminine teenage body that is so objectified and fetishised in contemporary popular culture. And, in line with postfeminist arguments about the empowering potential of being the object of desire, the film suggests that Mini's power does not simply derive from being desired, idolised, and put on a pedestal, but from Mini's ability

to seek and manipulate that desire, before leaving these patriarchal figures languishing in jail or hospital.

By contrast, in *Wild Things*, Suzie is initially portrayed as weak and stupid, but this representation is later redressed through the narrative conclusion and a sequence of flashbacks which reveal that she has outwitted the older men who desire and underestimate her. In this film, Suzie cons and murders Sam and Ray, her male partners in crime, who, as school guidance counsellor and police detective respectively, represent corrupt symbols of patriarchal authority. Until the film's dénouement, she manipulates their preconceptions about young working class femininity by adopting a persona of drug-addled, sexually available 'swamp trash,' and, as Hentges argues, 'plays the roles of both slut and victim as part of her master plan. She plays these roles because they are roles expected of her; she sees this and uses it to her advantage.'<sup>36</sup> Like Mini, Suzie is able to use her position as a desirable commodity to outwit less intelligent older men who only see her in sexual terms. The film's ending reveals that Suzie is actually a genius, a revelation which is made immediately before a shot of Sam's dead body floating in the sea fades to show Suzie confidently sailing the yacht across the open water as the credits begin. This ending effectively separates Suzie from the persona she had previously adopted and negates any apparent weakness demonstrated earlier in the film, something that is confirmed by a series of flashbacks during the closing credits. These brief scenes include Suzie's cool blackmailing of Sam, and another in which Sam is trying to pull Suzie's teeth out as evidence of her murder, but, in frustration at his ineptitude and squeamishness, she grabs the pliers and does the job herself. By returning to a past where Suzie appeared powerless, and exposing this representation as fallacious, this flashback sequence reclaims Suzie's strength and control in a way which appears to eliminate

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<sup>36</sup> Hentges, p.204.

contradictions between narrative conclusion and her characterisation within the main body of the film, securing another victory for the sexually available teenage girl.

However, these representations of valorised bad girls are nevertheless problematic. In these films, although this victory means the triumph of young femininity over male representatives of patriarchal control, the agency required to secure success is represented at the expense of other female characters and female solidarity. Tasker argues that ‘the *femme fatale* is almost by definition opposed to other female characters,’ and despite their celebration rather than vilification of the *femme fatale*, *Mini’s First Time* and *Wild Things* have much in common with the classic noir *femme fatale* in this respect, again suggesting that these postfeminist teenage *femme fatale* figures are less progressive than they might initially seem.<sup>37</sup> Instead, they encourage the tendency to categorise girls and women into binary positions, to compare them with each other, to set them against each other, so that there is no space for the empowerment of girls as a group, but only as exceptional individuals. Where the vilified *femme fatale* is frequently positioned at the ‘bad’ end of a virgin/whore dichotomy, in these films the celebrated *femme fatale* is granted greater power as a result of her favourable comparison to another character. Mary Celeste Kearney suggests that in representations of girls in film, female friendship and solidarity is vital, and that ‘there is a strong need for girls to place boys on the side (if not out of sight) in order to develop independent, confident, and assertive identities.’<sup>38</sup> This privileging of female friendship sets girls together not only against the sexism and unequal balances of power they may experience in their relationships with boys, but also against the kinds of false empowerment by which only one girl can come out on top. In these films, however, the postfeminist teenage *femme fatale* can only succeed alone having pushed other girls and women down in order to rise up. Both Suzie and Mini enjoy their ultimate victories as solitary figures in empty landscapes – Suzie on the open water, and

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<sup>37</sup> Tasker, p.139. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>38</sup> Mary Celeste Kearney, ‘Girlfriends and Girl Power: Female Adolescence in Contemporary U.S. Cinema’, in *Sugar and Spice*, pp.125-42 (p.138).



Mini on an empty road in the desert. While these figures may seem to exploit the cultural tendency to underestimate and objectify teenage girls, their victories are not victories of feminist solidarity.

In *Wild Things*, Suzie's power and agency are emphasised by her contrast with Kelly, her only female partner in crime. In the film's infamous sex scene between Suzie, Kelly and Ray, it is Kelly who provides most of the focus for Sam's, and the camera's, gaze. On the first

viewing, Suzie's half-participation in the scene arguably makes her appear weak and uncomfortable compared with her sexually confident partners in crime. However, in the



**Figure 2.2: *Wild Things* (1998).  
Suzie (left) retains some distance from the action.**

context of the film's final revelations, her position on

the periphery affords her a greater sense of agency than is initially apparent. In this scene she often occupies a higher physical position, and this distance from the other characters can be read as a more aloof attitude toward the situation (see figure 2.2). Suzie wears a relatively demure black vest and trousers, whereas close-ups on Kelly's pleated skirt, white blouse and ankle socks add up to a fetishised approximation of a school uniform. Where the camera keeps Suzie at a distance, Kelly's breasts, lips, and thong are objectified in close-up. Although the film initially portrays Kelly as rich and sexually confident, she is ultimately revealed by Sam to be 'an angry, sexually confused girl who threatened the lives of at least two people [...] one of them was her mother.' She is represented through an entirely sexually exploitative lens throughout, as her various body parts are repeatedly fetishised, and she frequently, and often

inexplicably, appears in only her underwear or bikini. While the film's representation of Kelly's body leaves little to the viewer's imagination, with the one exception of a shot of Suzie's back, the film's femme fatale is always clothed, implying a respect for this character that is not granted to Kelly.

Similarly, although the film's final flashbacks emphasise Suzie's strength, this strength is derived at least in part from their contrast with Kelly's weakness. Where Suzie is blackmailing Sam and pulling out her own teeth with pliers, it is finally revealed that Kelly was murdered by Ray, and she is shown screaming and running around a room wearing only a bra on her top half. Here, Suzie's strength and control are reinforced, just as Kelly's bra-clad victim status is emphasised. The suggestion here seems to be that, unlike Kelly, this teen femme fatale is able to use sex to get exactly what she wants, as Kelly's weakness functions as proof of Suzie's strength. In these films, as with oppositional femininities in classic noir, for one version of femininity to be valorised, another must be scornfully demonised, and here these oppositions are concentrated around the issue of control. While Kelly and Suzie are both presented as bad girls in their sexual promiscuity, drinking, drug use, and other criminal behaviour, only Suzie is shown to be in control of these behaviours. She, unlike Kelly, is able to flirt with and take advantage of the bad girl persona without letting it consume her.

In *Mini's First Time*, Mini's agency is emphasised by contrast with her mother, whose indiscriminate promiscuity, alcoholism, drug abuse, and negligent parenting are presented as deeply unattractive in a series of scenes throughout the film



**Figure 2.3: *Mini's First Time* (2007).  
Maternal excess.**

which depict her failure to wipe all of the cocaine off her nose, drinking morning margaritas, slurring her words, and passed out in a bathrobe next to a variety of pills and alcohol (see figure 2.3). Similarly, these exploits, together with a catalogue of failed attempts to use a horizontal position on the casting couch to become an actress meet with contempt and disdain from her daughter who describes her as ‘a lush’ who ‘reek[s] of menthols and cheap scotch.’ By contrast, Mini’s image while engaging in bad behaviour is orderly and contained. Though she drinks similar cocktails to her mother, she never appears drunk, but rather is presented as enjoying herself (see figure 2.4). At one point, Mini explicitly compares herself with her mother, declaring that ‘I’m not her, and I can assure you I won’t end up passed out in some



**Figure 2.4: *Mini’s First Time* (2007). Youthful exuberance.**

greaseball’s fuck pad with my panties round my ankles... unless I choose to.’ In this direct comparison, Mini’s agency is demonstrated by emphasising her mother’s lack of agency. Like Suzie,

Mini is in control of, is able to choose, her bad girl behaviours, whereas her mother is not. As I outlined in the Introduction, such postfeminist questions of choice and control resonate particularly strongly with the femme fatale, a figure whose choices about her sexual display and performance lead her to control the narrative trajectory and to get what she wants. What these films suggest is that the empowered postfeminist girl must not only make the correct choices about her sexuality, but that the power that these choices offer must be validated with reference to girls and women who are unable to control their own choices and behaviours,

thus creating an opposition between the successful and desirable bad girl and the out-of-control bad girl which leaves little room for female solidarity.

*Mini's First Time* does, however, offer one scene of female friendship. In the school corridor a boy makes a crude sexual joke about Mini's friend Kayla. When Mini stands up for her, the boy says 'Yo Mini, why don't you use that mouth for something useful and suck my dick?', at which point Mini starts grappling with the boy's trousers, causing him to panic. She drops to her knees and responds, 'I wanna suck your dick, you said I could. Come on baby, take it out!' before he runs away and all his friends laugh. Mini gives Kayla the belt as a trophy, and the two walk triumphantly away. Mini is presented as having complete control over the situation, as she reverses sexual harassment, exposing it as empty bravado. By comically playing the role of the sexually available 'slut', Mini subverts dominant teen cinema narratives, in which the position of slut is completely incompatible with female friendship.<sup>39</sup> In this scene, Mini as slut appears to operate from a site of knowledge which propels, rather than destroying, female power and solidarity. However, while this scene emphasises the importance of female friendship, it too is not unproblematic. Firstly, Mini's ability to reverse the dynamics of sexual harassment does not take into account the real threat of physical assault that women may face should they take such direct action, particularly when outnumbered by a large group of men. Sexual power is presented as easily reversed, if only young women were willing to just play along and stand up for themselves. This lack of acknowledgement of the more complex dynamics of patriarchal power affirms Mini as a postfeminist femme fatale, a girl who can simply choose to take power back through excessive sexual performance. Secondly, this display of friendship is an isolated incident within the rest of the narrative. Mini's acquisition of 'firsts' is undertaken alone, and Kayla's other notable appearance in the film occurs during Mini's valedictorian speech. Mini's speech is presented to

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<sup>39</sup> See for example, *Cruel Intentions* and *Pretty Persuasion* (to be discussed later in this chapter), as well as other teen films such as *Mean Girls* (2004) and *The Craft*.

the film's audience as yet another act of cunning two-facedness, in which she fools the audience at the graduation into believing she is a noble and sincere person. During this scene, Kayla is seen sobbing with pride and emotion at Mini's 'brave' words, in a shot which clearly places Kayla as just another sucker, taken in by Mini's performance, and ultimately leaving little space for a genuine friendship between equals in a move which once again isolates the femme fatale. The school corridor scene described above also highlights one of the key problematics with the nature of feminine teenage agency in these two films. Although Mini's 'slutty' behaviour is shown to be a powerful tool for agency, it also appears to be the only weapon she has. Despite these films' depiction and celebration of young femininity as powerful, this power is frequently reliant on a limited and limiting sexuality, and I will now explore the implications of this reliance in more detail.

*Mini's First Time's* premise is constructed in such a way as to allow the narrative to centre exclusively on a conventionally 'hot' teenage girl's exotic sexualised search for new experiences, as illustrated in a line in which she muses over the nature of her next challenge: 'after popping out of a cake [naked], I knew I had to top it, but it was tough. Skydiving? Bungee jumping? Please, it's more dangerous getting on the freeway every day'. At this point she decides to join an escort service, 'just to see what would happen'. Unlike the extreme sports she dismisses as too tame, the first times she does undertake are predominantly sexual in nature.<sup>40</sup> Mini's list of 'firsts' evokes the quantification of 'must-have' sexual achievements found in contemporary women's glossy magazines such as *More* magazine's 'position of the week' feature, and *Cosmopolitan's* regular numbered list features such as '75 Crazy-Hot Sex Moves', '5 Very Hot Things To Do With Ice' and '7 Bad-Girl Bedroom Moves You *Must*

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<sup>40</sup> Mini's list of firsts include jumping naked out of a cake, becoming a sex worker, seducing a virgin, appearing on a raunchy tv show, dressing in a variety of fantasy outfits including a French maid, a nurse, and a schoolgirl, being interrogated by a detective while dressed in a Marilyn Monroe costume and Perspex-heeled platform shoes more often associated with strippers, and seducing her stepfather.

Master'.<sup>41</sup> Mini's narrative also echoes an increasing trend of allegedly empowering sexual exhibitionism amongst American teenage girls outlined by Ariel Levy, which includes girls posting videos of themselves simulating and performing fellatio, as well as a game called 'slut on the bus,' in which the player who testifies to the widest variety of sexual experience 'wins'. Levy notes that 'these are not stories about girls getting what they want sexually, they are stories about girls gaining acclaim socially, for which their sexuality is a tool. While it would be "weird" for a teen girl to pursue sexual gratification, it is crucial that she seem sexy – raunchy, willing, wild.'<sup>42</sup> Mini's cataloguing of her sexual experiences echoes the way in which young feminine sexuality is presented in glossy magazines and Levy's illustration of real life teenage experience, and arguably emphasises the centrality of the re-presentation, re-telling, and remembering of sexual experience, rather than the experience itself, to notions of empowered sexuality.

This very public 'ticking off' of a checklist of sexual experiences, examples of what Levy describes as a 'notch-in-the belt experience to accumulate', may be presented in *Mini's First Time*, and in popular culture in general, as a way for young women to become empowered, to gain control over their own sexuality, and more importantly, their own image, but is arguably yet another way in which the teenage girl, and her power, are seen only in sexual terms.<sup>43</sup> As Levy points out, the image of the 'slutty' teenage girl is one that is required to be sexy but never sexual, and Mini's character arguably fits this model. Despite her delight at acquiring these firsts, this delight lies only in the acquisition of a new experience which depends on the response of another (male) witness or participant, rather than on a complex

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<sup>41</sup> Jennifer Benjamin, '75 Crazy-Hot Sex Moves' *Cosmopolitan* <<http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/sex/hot-sex-moves>> [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> September 2010], Lesley Rotchford, '5 Very Hot Things To Do With Ice' *Cosmopolitan* <<http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/sex/5-hot-things-ice>> [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> September 2010], and Colleen Rush '7 Bad-Girl Bedroom Tricks You Must Master' *Cosmopolitan* <<http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/sex/420935>> [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> September 2010]

<sup>42</sup> Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, (London: Pocket Books, 2006), pp.145-46.

<sup>43</sup> Levy, p.194.

and pleasurable sexuality of her own. This is highlighted during Mini's one flicker of vulnerability in which, during an argument, Martin asks if she has ever been in a relationship before. She looks uncomfortable before saying, as though admitting defeat, 'congratulations. You're my first.' The nature of this exchange, and the contrast with her delight at deviant or sexual firsts could be read in terms of an older man imposing heteronormative convention onto a liberated young girl, but instead it briefly foregrounds the restrictive nature of her 'bad girl' persona. The postfeminist teenage femme fatale's power, rooted in her ability to manipulate an appealingly 'fresh', willing, and youthful sexuality, becomes a power that restricts the teenage girl to the role of sexual performer, in which the complexities and pleasures of personally experienced sexuality, as opposed to publically required sexual performance, are denied to her.

Mini's position as protagonist becomes briefly less stable when she appears on Mike's trashy dating show, and announces to a national audience that she has slept with another contestant's virginal fiancé, an act which effectively destroys the couple's relationship. When faced with Martin's horrified reaction, she argues, 'he was a virgin! How could I say no?' The implication, that this escapade constituted another first for Mini, combined with the framing of her persona within a television screen, foregrounds the difficulties with the identification of the 'slutty' bad girl as a site of young feminine power. In assessing this scene it is useful to employ Munford's discussion of 'the dangers of colonisation and recirculation' in the creation of 'bad girls' in popular culture, in which phenomena like the Spice Girls, and their media-friendly and highly saleable championing of 'girl power', 'highlight the dangerous slippage between feminist agency and patriarchal recuperation.'<sup>44</sup> While Mini's first times may be undertaken in a spirit of personal choice and self-representation, this scene demonstrates the fine line between the self-possessed Mini whose promiscuity and sexual agency made her

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<sup>44</sup> Munford, p.148-49.

powerful, and the media representation of the 'slut' who occupies the 'bad' end of a restrictive Madonna/whore binary, and whose conventional 'sexiness' and sexual availability render her yet another objectified image of femininity. *Mini's First Time* presents a version of what Imelda Whelehan has outlined as a core myth of postfeminist ideology, 'the sense that we inhabit a world which already offers us a range of ready choices and where we can play at sexy vamp with no ill-effect because we are "in control" of the look we create.'<sup>45</sup> This argument highlights one of the key complexities of the representation of Mini as 'in control.' Although she does appear to control and create her 'hot bad girl' persona in order to gain power from it, this power is reliant on the assumption that the role of sexual performer is a valid source of agency. While this persona may permit her victory over patriarchal figures in the narrative's conclusion, this victory depends on a visual style which insists that Mini's *only* power is her ability to be sexy.

Similarly Suzie's sexuality is presented as the core source of her power. In his discussion of *Wild Things*, Shary argues that Suzie 'shrewdly employs her sexuality, as she enacts a pseudo-lesbian attraction to Kelly and disarms Sam with her ultimate lack of interest in him.'<sup>46</sup> However, the idea that these scenes formed part of Suzie's masterplan is not articulated within the body of the film itself, and must instead be inserted by the viewer in retrospect. Similarly, while it is eventually revealed that Suzie has an IQ of over 200, Shary's point still implies that her chief weapon is her ability to be sexually appealing. This, therefore, is not a femme fatale who has triumphed over the fate of the teenage girl to be seen as a desirable commodity. Despite the explicit emphasis on her cleverness, this intelligence is presented as secondary to her sexual wiles, without which her brilliant plan would not be successful. Once again, the limits of postfeminist empowerment are clear. While intelligence might be needed to exploit the societal fetishisation of teenage femininity, it is first necessary

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<sup>45</sup> Imelda Whelehan, *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism* (London: The Women's Press, 2000), p.178

<sup>46</sup> Shary, 'The Nerdly Girl', p.246.



to embody the precise kind of teenage femininity that is fetishised. Like *Mini's First Time*, then, representations of female intelligence and victory mask the limited nature of the power available to young women in postfeminist culture. Empowerment through sexuality is celebrated, but the costs of such empowerment are not accounted for.

Further, even the representation of Suzie's sexuality is not presented as unproblematically empowered. While her stupidity, Sam's masculinity, and Ray's respectability are all exploded by the film's final flashbacks, her participation in the film's various erotic set pieces - clichéd pornographic fantasies involving schoolgirls, older men, threesomes, and lesbian catfight sex scenes – are not disrupted in the same way.<sup>47</sup> Thus, there is no space in the film's finale for Suzie's sexual agency to assert itself above and beyond the various set pieces in which she has wetly panted her way through a pseudo-lesbian seduction, kissed Kelly in her fantasy schoolgirl outfit at the request of their teacher, and poured champagne over writhing naked torsos. Significantly, all of these scenes are explicitly staged for the gaze of the adult male. Even the scene featuring only Suzie and Kelly as participants is observed and recorded by Ray who, with his camera at the ready, is clearly framed as the male voyeur who conveniently stumbles across the pornographic fantasy of teenage lesbians naked in the pool. Suzie may ultimately be shown to be tougher, brighter, and more deadly than Sam and Ray, but the film's narrative allows her involvement in these patriarchal fantasies to be preserved, locked away from her final, formidable incarnation. Linda Williams famously compares the sexual acts of pornography to the numbers in film musicals, and this model is a useful one for assessing the role of sex scenes in a noirish erotic thriller like *Wild Things*.<sup>48</sup> While these numbers exist outside the narrative of the text, and carry their own meaning, they also

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<sup>47</sup> Significantly, it is these aspects of the film which are most frequently discussed in reviews, and reproduced in youtube.com clips. While the film may gesture towards postfeminist empowerment, cultural memory of the film focuses on those scenes in which Suzie appears as a less challenging image of teenage sexual availability.

<sup>48</sup> Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 130-34.

function as a way of resolving conflicts arising in the narrative. Suzie's sex scenes can be read as resolving the conflicts of the narrative in which Suzie is a 'difficult' and intelligent femme fatale, and instead present their own narrative where she is forever the stupid and sexually available dupe. Whilst the effect of Suzie's participation in these sex scenes is to an extent reduced by the later revelations about her plan and her genius, the film's refusal to restore her agency and cunning to these scenes in flashback allows these set-pieces to crystallise, and, just as the confining of Mini's power to sexual desirability restricts her to the position of sexual performer, the image of Suzie as object of desire for the male gaze is not disrupted.

These contemporary representations of the femme fatale do not punish or vilify feminine agency in the same way as the conclusions to classic noir, but, as I outline in the Introduction, Rich argues of these apparently positive endings, 'so happy are audiences to find movies in which women chew up the scenery and trap the wimpy men that no one seems to have noticed that they're utterly lacking in subjectivity. After all, they usually get away with it in the end.'<sup>49</sup> While Rich does not explicitly point to the postfeminist nature of the victorious femme fatales in the films she addresses, the dynamic she observes is certainly present in films where the teenage femme fatale is victorious. I would not be as quick as Rich to lay the blame for the ignorance of the hollowness of these representations at the feet of audiences. The wealth of scholarship on female audiences' complex relationship with conservative representations of women supports a more optimistic view of the ways that women negotiate film texts and their meanings. However, these films do offer a message of empowerment for young women that is undermined by the limited nature of that empowerment. They present the victorious femme fatale as synonymous with the outright celebration of feminine agency, regardless of problematic characterisation.

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<sup>49</sup> Rich, p.9.

In these films, the femme fatale is permitted to 'get away with' deviant criminality, but this criminality is rooted entirely in inherently patriarchal codes of behaviour, predicated on the assumption that the only means of control available to young women is rooted in sexual performance. The femme fatale's victory, then, serves as an endorsement of this assumption. Munford's description of 'the dangerous slippage between feminist agency and patriarchal recuperation' articulates the way in which apparently agentic representations of femininity can be disrupted by visual style which effectively re-enacts patriarchal fantasies and stereotypes in the name of empowerment, a danger that is arguably consolidated in combinations of postfeminist bad girl and femme fatale in *Wild Things* and *Mini's First Time*.<sup>50</sup> In these films, narrative conclusions in which 'getting away with it' is treated as code for a celebration of young feminine agency and intelligence in the form of the 'bad girl' are consistently undermined by an unquestioning representation of the teenage girl in purely sexualised terms: as sexual performer, as sexy rather than sexual, and by a narrative which promotes this identity as a genuine source of power. Despite their celebrated victories, Suzie and Mini are still unable to truly defy their fates in narratives which unequivocally require them to be sexually available within the confines of the patriarchal gaze.

### **Bad Girls Don't Cry?: Desire, Punishment, and Girls in Crisis**

Alongside the postfeminist, girl power-influenced model of teenage femme fatale in the late 1990s, there emerged another interpretation, which offers more productive and complex possibilities for a feminist reading of the teen femme fatale's evolution over the past two decades, and it is this figure that I will focus on for the remainder of this chapter. Both *Cruel Intentions* and *Pretty Persuasion* present versions of teenage femme fatale which make her a more central and sympathetic character than their Lolita femme fatale predecessors, and do not

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<sup>50</sup> Munford, p.148-49.

follow the same postfeminist line as the girl power films discussed above. In these two films, the politics, pleasures and problematics of the teenage femme fatale bleed into one another, creating representations of teenage agency and sexuality which are neither clear-cut condemnations nor unexamined celebrations, and as such, I argue, expand the depth and breadth of the femme fatale type. These films instead articulate the type of concern expressed by Whelehan about postfeminist sexiness as empowering, and acknowledge the difficult balancing acts and negotiations of social mores involved in the teenage girl's power-in-sexuality. These films do not pointedly condemn and vilify these characters, but instead ask questions about agency, sexuality and social acceptance, leaving space for a sympathetic reading of the plight of the teenage femme fatale despite the final downfall she is given by both narratives.

*Cruel Intentions* follows Kathryn (Sarah Michelle Gellar) and Sebastian (Ryan Phillippe), wealthy, promiscuous, and cruel Manhattanite step-siblings, as they make a bet that Sebastian cannot seduce Annette (Reese Witherspoon), who has sworn to remain a virgin until marriage, while Kathryn plots the destruction of her romantic rival Cecille (Selma Blair). Ultimately, Sebastian falls in love with Annette, and is killed in a car accident, while Kathryn's conniving is exposed before the whole school, leaving her humiliated and friendless. *Pretty Persuasion*, like *Wild Things*, also follows a false sexual harassment suit – the teenage femme fatale represents a specific and highly contemporary threat to the adult male in these films – in which Kimberly (Evan Rachel Wood) and her friends accuse a teacher (Ron Livingston) in order to gain enough publicity to become famous. However, it emerges that Kimberly's real plan was to destroy her best friend Brittany's (Elizabeth Harnois) reputation as punishment for stealing her boyfriend Troy (Stark Sands), and Kimberly, like Kathryn, ends the film friendless and in tears. In this section, I explore the films' complex representations of the teen femme fatale's engagement with her own sexuality, before moving on to a discussion of the ways in which

the films explore the role of the teenage girl within postfeminist culture, taking into account her strategies and struggles to survive within a patriarchal environment.

The relationship between the teen femme fatale and sex in these films is far more complex than in the victorious postfeminist narratives discussed above and the Lolita-inspired erotic thrillers of the last two decades. In both *Pretty Persuasion* and *Cruel Intentions*, their respective femme fatales are presented as having a highly performative relationship with sex in scenes which would appear to offer a continuation of the 1940s femme fatale's relationship with sex described by Chris Straayer: 'Her sexuality *per se* was passive, limited to its allure. Although narratively she manoeuvred the male protagonist with her sexuality, the specifically sexual pleasure it served belonged to the male.'<sup>51</sup> However, where *Pretty Persuasion* and *Cruel Intentions* depart from this conventional model of the femme fatale, and from the other teenage femme fatale films discussed in this chapter, is in their refusal to present such a one-sided and clear-cut representation of sex and the femme fatale's sexuality. The films do not focus entirely on the pleasures of the male recipient of the femme fatale's sexual attentions as in classic noir, nor do they emphasise her sexual threat, or laud her empowerment through sexual performance. Instead they are able to suggest a more complex dynamic existing between the femme fatale's use of sexuality for non-sexual gain, the postfeminist culture which presents such employment of sexual wiles as empowering, and the teenage girl's own sexual desires.<sup>52</sup>

The films are replete with scenes of sexual manipulation and sexualised performance, but these are countered by others in which the teenage femme fatale does claim her sexuality

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<sup>51</sup> Chris Straayer, 'Femme Fatale or Lesbian Femme: Bound in Sexual *Différance*' in *Women in Film Noir: New Edition*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998) pp. 151-63 (pp. 152-53). Emphasis in the original.

<sup>52</sup> This is not to say that the femme fatale with sexual desires of her own exists only in a teenage incarnation. The deadly women of *Basic Instinct*, *The Last Seduction* and other frequently discussed neo-noirs of the 1980s and 1990s would attest to the strong presence of personal female desire existing alongside the femme fatale character in recent years. However, where female sexual desire is presented in such films as aggressive, dangerous and unnatural, these teen femme fatales operate within entirely different frameworks which instead allow for a more complex interpretation of female sexuality and ambition.

for herself, and for its own sake, complicating a reading of Kimberly and Kathryn's use of their sexuality as purely a means to success in other areas of life. In *Cruel Intentions*, an infuriated Kathryn argues with her stepbrother Sebastian about the sexual double standard which prevents her from exercising her sexuality publically:

It's alright for guys like you and Court to fuck everyone, but when I do it I get dumped for innocent little twits like Cecile. God forbid I exude confidence and enjoy sex. Do you think I relish the fact that I have to act like Mary Sunshine 24/7 so I can be considered a lady? I'm the Marsha fucking Brady of the Upper East Side, and sometimes I want to kill myself.

Kathryn not only makes explicit the intensity of pressures on young women to conform to societal ideals of feminine virtue, but also makes claims on the very enjoyment of her sexuality that the scenes of sexual manipulation which occur throughout the film would seem to deny her. Unlike, for example, Mini's gleeful and highly public performance of her sexuality in *Mini's First Time*, Kathryn is aware of and affected by the social stigma attached to women's sexuality. In this film, sexual performance designed to seduce and manipulate men may be a way of getting what you want, but it must exist in secret, along with more personal expressions of female desire.

In the light of Kathryn's actions throughout the rest of the film, and particularly her apparently constant use of sex as a means to gaining power, the points she makes in this scene might be dismissed as a peculiar anomaly. Certainly, Brigine E. Humbert suggests this, arguing that

if Sebastian enjoys his reputation as a seducer while Kathryn does her best to appear virtuous, it seems that this opposition lies less in a difference imposed by gender as in [the original novel] – although Kathryn alludes to this – than in the different natures of their ambitions: he is happy just being the 'bad apple' whereas she worries about securing her position as student body president.<sup>53</sup>

Humbert's dismissal of Kathryn's dissatisfaction with the constraints of her femininity belies the significance of this speech to understanding the intricate weaving of gender, societal

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<sup>53</sup> Brigine E. Humbert, 'Cruel Intentions: Adaptations, Teenage Movie or Remake', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 30.4 (2002), 279-86 (pp. 281-82).

expectations, personal desires and power in this film.<sup>54</sup> This argument that the difference between Kathryn and Sebastian's public behaviours is not reflective of gender politics overlooks the fact that, while Kathryn *does* worry about preserving her position as president, this is arguably because that position allows her to live the decadent sexual lifestyle she desires – the lifestyle that Sebastian can enjoy unencumbered by public rejection and shame – behind a smokescreen of modest and appropriate feminine behaviour. Kathryn's ambitions are different out of necessity; she uses sex as a tool to retain or improve her public persona in order that she can enjoy private sexual adventures. Sex for Kathryn in this film is not about binary oppositions of male pleasure and female success, but a complex interweaving of her own desires, both sexual and material, and the erotic manipulation she employs to realise these desires.

Similarly in one of the earliest sex scenes in *Pretty Persuasion*, Kimberly is the enthusiastic recipient of oral sex. The camera shoots her from above as she lies on the bed (see figure 2.5) and is shown to be completely absorbed by the moment. Not only is her partner completely absent

from the frame, but when she has reached orgasm, Kimberly herself looks down at him as though she had forgotten he was there at all. She is positioned to the right of the frame so



**Figure 2.5: *Pretty Persuasion* (2005). Oral sex for one.**

that the empty space where her partner should be is occupied only by her jeans and his dental

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<sup>54</sup> Shary offers a similar reading of the meaning of the different treatment of Kathryn and Sebastian's sexual behaviour in the film when he argues that they are both punished at the end of the film for their cavalier attitudes to sex. Shary, *Generation Multiplex*, p.236. By contrast, I contend that while Sebastian is reformed at the time of his death, and redeemed by it, Kathryn's punishment allows her no such redemption. Instead, she emerges very clearly as the villain.

retainer. The scene, and the framing of her desire, is reserved solely for her pleasure, with only the smallest ironic trace of her partner's presence. She then leaves without returning the favour, leaving him to complain that she has cheated him again as his belt droops sadly from his partially unfastened jeans. This scene complicates the notion of the femme fatale's sexuality as exclusively a means to a lucrative end, as Kimberly's relationship with this particular partner is one which she entertains solely for her own sexual pleasure – he is of no other use to her. Although Kimberly's relationship with sex is frequently framed as one in which she performs oral sex on other people in order to achieve her ambitions, and from which she does not seem to gain any personal enjoyment, this scene disrupts not only the notion of the femme fatale as the provider of erotic possibilities, but of the teenage girl as someone who does not or should not pursue her own sexual desires.

In her exploration of contemporary American teenage girls' negotiations of sexuality, Levy notes that her interviews with young people foreground a highly performative element to young female sexuality, arguing that 'these are not stories about girls getting what they want sexually, they are stories about girls gaining acclaim socially, for which their sexuality is a tool.'<sup>55</sup> *Pretty Persuasion* and *Cruel Intentions* do present this dynamic in their cinematic fables of teenage girlhood by characterising Kimberly and Kathryn as girls who use sexual performance to achieve their ambitions, but they also complicate it by permitting desire, and the agency to act upon that desire. As in so many femme fatale narratives, there is an assumption of the relationship between female sexuality and manipulation. However, in these teen incarnations the lines between the femme fatale's use of and enjoyment of her sexuality are blurred. These characters are assigned sexual activity not only as a way of getting what they desire, but as an expression of desire in itself. Most significantly, rather than following the inherently problematic postfeminist model of *Wild Things* and *Mini's First Time*, these two films and their

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<sup>55</sup> Levy, pp.145-46.



new teen femme fatale figures demonstrate the complexities of trying to live as a teenage girl in an environment which insists that girls' only power is their sexuality, and yet judges and vilifies them for publically utilising it. While these films are neither explicitly or exclusively feminist, their strategy for exploring this situation is one which is directly aligned with the 'pro-woman' line articulated by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards in their *Manifesta* for twenty-first-century feminism. With reference to second wave discourse they argue that

Therefore women weren't passively brainwashed by the patriarchy into marrying or looking as pretty as possible; they were actively making the best choice they could, given the circumstances of sexism [...] the point of a pro-woman line is to acknowledge the barriers around which women must manoeuvre rather than to blame the women themselves.<sup>56</sup>

This line of argument acknowledges the strategies that women employ to negotiate the numerous barriers around them and reframe them as expressions of agency rather than passivity. Within this model, actions of women which may be read as implicitly anti-feminist – heteronormative coupling, wearing high heels and makeup, and most significantly for the purposes of my argument, playing up to patriarchal expectations of women by using sex to get what you want – can instead be viewed as survival strategies for functioning within systems which make demands on how women look and behave.

Unlike the teen femme fatale films I discuss above, *Pretty Persuasion* and *Cruel Intentions* actively uncover the usually invisible networks of constraints within which the contemporary teenage girl must function, and in these narratives represent strategies employed in order to succeed within those systems. Kearney notes that contemporary girls are in a unique position of risk because of their increasingly early physical maturation and the cultural fetishisation of their bodies, and argues that modern girls develop strategies to cope with these problems:

Moreover, as the bodies of female youth are signifying maturity at younger and younger ages, girls are required to become street-wise long before their mothers were. Forced to recognize the power imbalances that structure our society, girls must learn and practice the strategies that will help them survive in an environment that is often hostile to both females and the young.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000) pp.95-96.

<sup>57</sup> Kearney, p.129.

In this context, the actions of Kimberly and Kathryn can be read as hyperbolic versions of these defensive mechanisms and survival strategies. While the femme fatale's actions may not themselves be intrinsically feminist or progressive – and to claim otherwise would be to revert to reductionist girl power rhetoric – what takes these films beyond the images of postfeminist sexy bad girl or the evil Lolita is the illumination of this patriarchal context, and the agency the teen femme fatale exhibits in her attempts to negotiate it. In their re-visioning of the teenage femme fatale, these films begin to unravel simplistic postfeminist connections between sex and power, and offer explorations of the lived practicalities of the teenage girl for whom sex is a form of both pleasure and precarious power. The teenage femme fatale is presented as existing in a double bind: the societal objectification of her body allows her to use sex to get what she wants; however, this same society also demonises girls who are too available, too sexual, too promiscuous, and this impacts heavily on the extent to which she can explore her own personal sexual desires. Both films unpack the immense contradictions in the public reception of her sexuality that the teenage femme fatale must face by illustrating some of the double standards and confusion surrounding her actions.

In *Pretty Persuasion*, this is foregrounded by an incident in which rumours of her engaging in anal sex with a boy from school cause her boyfriend Troy to break up with her. As Troy recounts the break-up, he begins by saying 'I was over at Kimberly's house one night and she came out of the bathroom and started doing this nasty little dance'. It is key that



**Figure 2.6: *Pretty Persuasion* (2007).  
Kimberly dances for Troy.**



**Figure 2.7: *Pretty Persuasion* (2007). Mr.  
Anderson watches his wife dance.**

Kimberly's dance echoes the dance that the wife of her teacher (Selma Blair) performs for her husband in the role of a schoolgirl earlier in the film (see figures 2.6 and 2.7). What Mr Anderson finds alluring and attractive in his wife's performance of the sexy schoolgirl, Troy finds repellent in the apparently genuine expression of desire from a girl with a bad reputation – Troy, significantly, is the only partner that Kimberly seems to care about – suggesting that standards of appropriate sexuality for women vary enormously based on the public perception of the woman's sexual experience and identity. To return to Whelehan's comments on the problematics of public sexual performance, the film implies that women are indeed not 'in control' of the look they create, and that power is removed as soon as their performance falls under the attentions of the male gaze, and can be derided, fetishised, dismissed or valorised by the men who view it.

The scene continues as Troy confronts Kimberly with the line, 'Warren Prescott told me what he did to you', and his phrasing is significant in highlighting another sexual double standard. Warren is presented as the active party in the relationship, as Troy attributes the incident to his ability to 'do' anal sex to Kimberly, yet she is the one taken to task for the event.<sup>58</sup> Kimberly attempts to rescue the situation by saying 'If you're good I'll let you go where Warren went', to which Troy replies 'no, that is not cool Kimberly, I don't take some loser's sloppy seconds, alright? And I don't want to be with some dirty little whore.' Troy's words in this scene and Kimberly's shocked reaction highlight an important dynamic in the films. Kimberly knows that sexual availability is the best way to get what she wants, as evidenced by earlier scenes, and yet this sexual history marks her as a whore who is of no value to the only partner that she is interested in romantically. While Kimberly may be active in choosing her partners and in consenting to sex with them, under the heteronormative

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<sup>58</sup> By contrast, *Cruel Intentions* frames anal sex as Kathryn's trump card when it comes to sexual manipulation. She gets Sebastian to agree to a bet by promising that if he wins, 'you can put it anywhere'. However, that this negotiation takes place behind closed doors, and Kathryn's speech denouncing the double standard that requires her to keep her sexual exploits to herself, as well as her ultimate public humiliation, all point to the consequences if this promise ever became more widely known.

patriarchal gaze embodied by Troy, sexual activity will always be seen in patriarchal culture as something ‘done to her’ by someone else, but that she must nevertheless be held accountable for.<sup>59</sup> This scene echoes Driscoll’s description of ‘the patriarchal capitalist coding of feminine adolescence as desirable commodity and undesirable identity’, as something to be chewed up and spat out again.<sup>60</sup> Kimberly knows that sexual availability is the best way to get what she wants, as evidenced by frequent scenes in which she exploits this very idea, and yet the sexual history she accumulates in doing so marks her as undesirable to partners she is interested in romantically, and ultimately leads everyone she knows to reject her. The sexually available girl may seem alluring but she is also appalling, and so her attempts to gain agency by sexual actions are both facilitated and vilified by the patriarchal society in which she aims to succeed.

Following Kathryn’s speech about the sexual double standard, this dynamic is further explored in *Cruel Intentions*, when, in contrast to the many incidents of glorified male promiscuity in the film, Kathryn suggests to Cecile that she ought to sleep with as many people as possible because ‘practice makes perfect’. Cecile responds, ‘but that would make me a slut, wouldn’t it?’ and Kathryn tells her that ‘everybody does it; it’s just that nobody talks about it’. This contrast makes it clear that



**Figure 2.8: *Cruel Intentions* (1999).  
Kathryn’s demure attire.**

women who wish to behave promiscuously must do so discreetly or be branded as sluts, implying that, to return to the dichotomous models of teenage femininity discussed at the start of this chapter, the teenage girl has two options in defining her own image: virgin or

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<sup>59</sup> A similar discourse persists in popular accounts of rape, in which young women are seen to have ‘got themselves raped’ by wearing ‘suggestive’ clothing, drinking alcohol, or being in dangerous places alone.

<sup>60</sup> Driscoll, p.130.

whore. In an early scene, Kathryn's strategy of balancing the two is demonstrated visually as Cecille and her mother leave her apartment. Her false smile instantly drops and she unbuttons her demure jacket, to reveal the much more revealing outfit that she prefers to wear in private, before delicately snorting cocaine from inside her customised rosary (see figures 2.8 and 2.9). This scene demonstrates a clear transition between these two images, and conveys the disjointedness of Kathryn's identity as a result of balancing these dichotomous positions. Kathryn's desire for exciting and varied sexual experience must be hidden behind a veneer of virginal innocence, which she paradoxically maintains by using her sexuality as leverage, leading to a multi-layered sexual persona in which her sexuality never seems to function as



Figure 2.9: *Cruel Intentions* (1999).  
Kathryn's off-duty wardrobe.

solely for the purposes of personal pleasure or as a means to achieve her ambitions. Just as in *Pretty Persuasion*, this confusion of sexual purpose is what ultimately causes her downfall. Sebastian's secret diary is revealed to everyone at her school, and tellingly,

in the journal entry which condemns Kathryn's behaviour, alongside 'liar', 'alcoholic', and 'coke problem,' is the word 'promiscuous'. Kathryn is judged and vilified for her sexual history, a history that is tied to both her ambition and her pursuit of pleasure within the context of a society which finds the sexually available girl desirable and distasteful.

As in the two films discussed earlier in this chapter, both Kathryn and Kimberly end their narratives alone. However, unlike those victorious endings, the aloneness of Kathryn and Kimberly is presented as a deeply unhappy circumstance as both girls end their films standing alone with tears streaming down their faces. The postfeminist teen femme fatale, then, is ultimately and necessarily alone. Her behaviours and strategies are not compatible with female

solidarity and friendship, but where *Wild Things* and *Mini's First Time* posit this as a positive situation, *Cruel Intentions* and *Pretty Persuasion* suggest that this is the inevitable consequence of the strategies that young women may have to employ to achieve their ambitions in postfeminist culture. Rather than simply reinforcing Driscoll's model of the patriarchal coding of female adolescence, I argue that the narratives of these films can be read in a different way: that while they may be participating in the perpetuation of this coding, they are, unlike the postfeminist femme fatales, unveiling and questioning some of the mechanics behind the lived experience of teenage girls. If the only power available to young women is their sexuality, and if that sexuality is temporarily sexy but ultimately unacceptable, what happens to ambitious young women, and how do they attempt to reconcile these tensions?

This questioning approach arguably derives from the emergence of these films in the immediate aftermath of the 'girls in crisis' phenomenon of the 1990s, as exemplified by Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*,<sup>61</sup> and more recently with studies concerned with 'mean girls',<sup>62</sup> and discussions of Western teenagers and sex.<sup>63</sup> This deluge of books concerned with the development and wellbeing of teenage girls and young women contributed to an atmosphere of unease about and concern for female adolescents, and this concern can be clearly felt in both *Cruel Intentions* and *Pretty Persuasion*. What is hinted at briefly in the eponymous Mini's moment of vulnerability is made explicit throughout these films. The position of sexy, manipulative femme fatale comes with its own problems and dangers. In these film texts this concern exists in tension with other, more traditional Hollywood ideologies of idealised romantic coupling, and young white femininity and heteronormativity, which makes their

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<sup>61</sup> For further examples of 'girls in crisis' literature, see Peggy Orenstein, *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self Esteem, and the Confidence Gap* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) and Myra Sadker and David Miller Sadker, *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1994).

<sup>62</sup> For example, Rosalind Wiseman, *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Boyfriends, Gossip, and Other Realities of Adolescence* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003) James Gabarino, *See Jane Hit: Why Girls are Growing More Violent and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

<sup>63</sup> For example, chapter 5 of Levy, Jessica Valenti, *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession With Virginity is Hurting Young Women* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2009), and from the anti-feminist right, Carol Platt Liebau, *Prude: How the Sex-obsessed Culture Damages Girls (and America Too!)* (Nashville: Center Street, 2007).

position as progressive girl-centric texts a precarious one. As I have explained above, these films employ a tactic akin to the feminist pro-woman line through a clear presentation of their femme fatales' negotiations of patriarchal confinement; however, these texts also extend this by showing Kathryn and Kimberly to be 'in crisis' because of it. Away from the eyes of their inattentive parents – Kathryn's are absent entirely, and Kimberly's are unsupportive and deeply neglectful – both girls exhibit signs of eating disorders and (ab)use of drugs such as cocaine and prescription medication. That these pathological behaviours are typically seen as the domain of white Western youth, and of girls in particular in the case of eating disorders, speaks to the main point of the films. While these teenage femme fatales lie to, cheat and seduce everyone around them, they are not evil Lolitas, nor are they postfeminist heroines. Instead, they are girls suffering in environments where their bodies and actions are under constant scrutiny.

The presence of eating disorders in connection with the teen femme fatale's complex relationship with her position as a sexualised body is particularly telling. References to anorexia and bulimia imply attempts at maintaining a privileged slim body; after all, the problematic power that the teen femme fatale derives from sex is only available to a particular type of girl. Emily Fox-Kales suggests that both Hollywood cinema and popular culture more widely 'link social ease to the display of sexual sophistication', so that girls who have sexual knowledge are shown as being the most well adjusted and confident.<sup>64</sup> She then cites studies which demonstrate that in reality, the ever-increasing sexualisation of teenage girls leads to a variety of problems including depression and eating disorders. What *Pretty Persuasion* and *Cruel Intentions* show, then, is both the fiction of the sexualised teenage girl (Kimberly and Kathryn are both popular and seem socially confident) and the reality (they both display signs of disordered eating and have substance dependencies). This representation is further

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<sup>64</sup> Emily Fox-Kales, *Body Shots: Hollywood and the Culture of Eating Disorders* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), p. 134.

complicated by the popularly imagined connection between eating disorders and attempts at control of the body and by extension the self.<sup>65</sup> The presence of eating disorders connects the abstract concept of teenage femme fatales in crisis with more specific concerns: a desire for control over a body that cannot create its own meaning away from the male gaze, and a desire to remove ‘the social and sexual vulnerability involved in having a female body’ by disrupting sexualised curves, thus connecting the teenage girl’s sexualised body, the power it supposedly gives her, and her anxiety about that body and its cultural meaning.<sup>66</sup> In these films, having a desirable physicality functions not only as a potential means of power for the teenage girl, but also as a source of anxiety as it is a problematic power, a survival strategy rather than an empowering attribute, one that is beyond her control, and which acquires meaning that she cannot manipulate.

This approach, particularly in the cultural context of ‘girls in crisis’ sentiment, certainly leaves itself open to accusations of a paternalistic attitude to young female agency, of promoting a sense of danger in what has been described as ‘active girlhood becoming too active’.<sup>67</sup> They also, in their representations of Kathryn’s and Kimberly’s sexual manipulations, are open to similar accusations of pandering to the male gaze to those I have directed at *Wild Things* in particular. However, the films’ engagement with the pro-woman line moves the representation of teenage agency beyond impersonal hand-wringing, and into a more considered approach encompassing the effects of teenage femininity’s cultural positioning,

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<sup>65</sup> Baumgardner provides an example of such thinking, asking ‘[b]ut over whom or what does a woman exercise control in a male-dominated society? The anorexic, the cutter, the girl who burns herself – all are playing out master and slave’. See Jennifer Baumgardner, *Look Both Ways: Bisexual Politics* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007) p.116. These notions of control and self-loathing continue with Kathryn and Kimberly’s attempts to turn their virginal peers into ‘sluts’ like themselves in the hope that their friends will be rejected by society. These narratives form part of a broader trend of makeovers in contemporary teen cinema. While many teen films foreground the makeover as a means of attaining happiness and popularity, some, including *Mean Girls* and *The Craft* in addition to the films discussed here, employ negative, non-consensual makeovers as part of revenge narratives.

<sup>66</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edn. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p.179.

<sup>67</sup> Anoop Nayak, and Mary Jane Kehily, *Gender, Youth and Culture: Young Masculinities and Femininities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p.61.



and the strategies that young women employ in attempts to succeed within those parameters. Where this falls short though, is that unlike *Manifesta's* pro-woman approach, the new teen femme fatale films stop at these limits: while they may identify their plight, the representations of Kathryn and Kimberly do not suggest a clear way forward beyond the restrictive boundaries of the bad girl role.

## **Conclusion**

In contemporary Western culture, the teenage girl occupies a precarious position, particularly in relation to her sexuality. Postfeminist rhetoric insists that girliness and sexualised girlhood are key to women's empowerment, and so the teenage girl is valorised as an icon of women's liberation, while simultaneously being derided as a slut if she is sexually active. The teenage girl's power in these terms is extremely limited, and only available to a small subsection of young women who meet specific bodily ideals. In analysing *Wild Things* and *Mini's First Time*, I have argued that the femme fatale can function as a means of shoring up these postfeminist notions of empowerment. By presenting femme fatales who are able to exploit a highly performative sexuality in order to get what they want, these films support the idea that choice, control, and power over this overdetermined sexual image will lead to victorious success for teenage girls. In creating these narratives, the two films also engage with the highly individualistic nature of postfeminist reasoning. According to the films' finales, the girl who succeeds must succeed alone, and can only reach her goals by being better than other women. In these films, female friendship is sidelined in place of individual triumph. While *Cruel Intentions* and *Pretty Persuasion* engage with very similar debates and rhetoric, they do allow for a greater level of open critique of contemporary culture and the difficult social climate in which teenage girls must try to survive. These films appear in the wake of 'girls in crisis' literature, and amidst contemporary postfeminism, and are able to demonstrate the difficulty

in balancing performative sexuality with personal desire for girls in an environment where that personal desire must remain hidden. They also make some attempt to show the genuine damage that can be sustained in trying to follow a model of power which requires girls to work alone, perform a sexuality that does not reflect their desires and hides their true feelings. Once again, these girls end their films alone, but there is no triumph in this solitude. This second pair of films is by no account a faultless feminist response to contemporary postfeminist culture, and the texts are not without their problems. However, they do gesture towards a cinema in which the struggles of teenage femininity are more carefully and thoughtfully explored.

The femme fatale model, perhaps, can only go so far in dismantling the postfeminist ideal of power-in-sexiness, as the focus, no matter how carefully handled, inevitably centres on sex as power for women and girls. However, in their refusal to limit their depictions of teenage femininity to what Wurtzel terms the girls' special effects, these films expand the narrow parameters of the teen femme fatale narrative in which the sexy bad girl wreaks havoc and is valorised or punished for doing so without any examination of the effect of her actions on her own lived experience. These films refuse the two-dimensional presentation of teenage girls as hot and dangerous so common in recent film, and reject the damaging postfeminist rhetoric that views this presentation as a source of empowerment for young women, by beginning to unpick the complexities of what it is like to live within this dynamic. While these films do not necessarily suggest a way of disrupting the teenage girl's cultural objectification, they do demonstrate the active resistance and struggle undertaken from within this situation. The bad girl in crisis is active in creating her own destiny in the face of damaging double standards and cultural mores, and both profits by and suffers from the meaning attributed to her body.

# Chapter Three

## Bisexual Behaviour: Neo-Noir and the Femme Fatale

This chapter is concerned with the ways in which the recent proliferation of bisexually active femme fatale characters in cinema allows for a close examination of some of the anxieties, mythologies and fantasies surrounding bisexual women. With the increased levels of sexual explicitness in the femme fatale narratives of post-Code cinema have come a large number of texts in which the femme fatale engages in sexual activity with both men and women. In what follows, I explore the implications of this development, both for the politics of bisexual representation, and for contemporary feminism's fraught relationship with the femme fatale. In discussing *Basic Instinct* and *Bound*, I consider the ways in which the noir narrative allows for conventional myths about sexual behaviour and identity to be shored up, as well as the effects of the combination of the femme fatale's mystery with the perceived mystery of bisexual women. I then move on to consider the role of the fractured narrative in *Mulholland Drive* and *Femme Fatale* in disrupting some of the myths about bisexuality and women, and for providing a more complex and productive means of representation.

### **Sexual Deception: Bisexual Behaviour and Narrative Cinema**

One of the most clearly identifiable generic shifts in film noir from the classical period to the 1980s and 1990s is, as I note in the Introduction, the addition of sexually explicit material. Where the 1940s noirs used innuendo and visual symbolism to convey the femme fatale's sexual magnetism to bypass the requirements of the Production Code, the more recent films can afford to display the erotic excess that the earlier films could only imply. This shift has led to a significant intersection between the neo-noir film and the erotic thriller, as the femme fatale's sexual activities are showcased in a range of explicit crime films, from star-

studded studio productions like *Fatal Attraction* and *Body of Evidence* to straight-to-video offerings. This emphasis on explicit sexual content results in, as Stables argues, noir films in which the emphasis on the femme fatale's hypersexuality has its roots in the generic tropes of heterosexual pornography with its repertoire of 'sexual "numbers" [...] (which closely mimic the "menu" of sexual acts in pornographic films)'.<sup>1</sup> It is significant that, in mainstream pornography, this litany of sexual set-pieces frequently includes faux-lesbian scenarios, played out as a heterosexual male fantasy, and the tendency of contemporary femme fatale narratives to echo this structure often results in scenes in which the femme fatale engages in sexual activity with women. Indeed, of the many ways in which the figure of the femme fatale has been re-presented in Hollywood cinema since the noir revival began in the 1980s, the figure of the femme fatale who behaves bisexually is arguably the most pervasive.

Appearing in neo-noir, erotic thrillers, teen dramas, supernatural science fiction and horror and retro noir, the bisexually active femme fatale appears to be everywhere. Examples from the key texts in this thesis alone include *The Black Dahlia*, *Wild Things*, *Pretty Persuasion*, *Cruel Intentions*, and *Alien Resurrection*, and other significant instances of the bisexual behaviour of the femme fatale can be found in *Black Widow*, *The In Crowd* (2000), *When Will I Be Loved?* (2004) and *New Best Friend*. In this chapter, I return to some of the more frequently cited examples of the femme fatale in contemporary cinema in order to address this tendency, as while these films may already have accumulated a wealth of critical responses, the focus on bisexual activity in these texts and in representations of the femme fatale more generally has largely been critically ignored in favour of backlash narratives and questions about lesbian representation. The four films I address here are famous for their 'lesbian' sex scenes and characters.<sup>2</sup> By focusing on the narrative implications of bisexuality for these texts, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Stables, p.174.

<sup>2</sup> I place 'lesbian' in inverted commas here because, as I will discuss in more detail later, I am keen to question the tendency to read individual scenes and behaviours as synonymous with sexual orientation and identity.

ways in which narrative leads to constructions of bisexuality, I assess the relationship between the femme fatale and the cinematic representation of sexual behaviour and identity. First, I provide readings of *Basic Instinct* and *Bound* and interrogate the ways in which the femme fatale who behaves bisexually functions as a means of working through a set of anxieties about the legible sexual body. Then, I consider the role of the fractured narrative in *Femme Fatale* and *Mulholland Drive* in representing the femme fatale's bisexual behaviour, and the implications that this has for understanding the relationship between sexuality and narrative cinema.

In the context of the intersections with heterosexual pornography present in the representations of the contemporary femme fatale, the bisexual behaviour of such characters can be read as an effort to present the femme fatale as extra-sexy. She becomes the perfect fantasy figure in a culture where the conventionally attractive woman who behaves bisexually but is still predominantly more interested in men is the dream woman. Such representations can be found in pornographic film and photography, lad mags, reality television, and in Katy Perry's 'I Kissed a Girl' (2008), an ode to kissing other women while maintaining a steady boyfriend, which was a number one hit in pop charts throughout numerous Western countries. Cinematically the femme fatale's bisexual activity acts partly as an invitation to see her character as more sexually tempting because of this willingness to engage in titillating sexual display with women, while not shunning the attentions of men. However, unlike mainstream heterosexual pornography, the femme fatale's bisexual activity also implies duplicity, and it is this tension between sexual desirability and trust that is central to the bisexually active femme fatale's characterisation. While both pornographic characters and femme fatales who have sex with men and women are framed as hot chicks who will fuck anyone, the bisexually active pornographic character is pliant, has sex with women only when men are absent or in control of the action, and will always choose a man when given the option. By contrast, the femme fatale appears to choose the partner who will get her what she

wants, and, by using her charms on men and women alike, making everyone a potential victim. The femme fatale's bisexual activity is often presented in the form of a pathological nymphomania in which the femme fatale makes herself sexually available to everyone who can further her ambitions, but will never commit to anyone. This presentation aligns itself with stereotypes surrounding a bisexuality which Elizabeth Däumer describes as 'sexually undecided, uncommitted, and hence untrustworthy', and, employing the rhetoric of lesbian anxiety about bisexual women, as 'carry[ing] the taint of promiscuity, as if they were floundering, promiscuously and opportunistically, back and forth between people of either gender.'<sup>3</sup> The bisexually active femme fatale's representation draws on this popular understanding of bisexuality as flighty and untrustworthy in a way that works in tension with the sexual capital of the beautiful woman who publically sleeps with both men and women. While bisexual behaviour may render the femme fatale more appealing to the heterosexual male gaze, it also denotes her as potentially dangerous and untrustworthy.

It is not coincidental that Däumer's list of stereotypes could also apply to the heterosexually active femme fatale figure throughout cinematic history. Jennifer Moorman provides a still more extensive list, noting that '[b]isexuals have been described at different times and in different circles variously as traitors, as a menace, as a myth, as sexually indiscriminate and irresponsible, as hopelessly confused, as bottomless pits of desire with a lust unsated by man or woman alone.'<sup>4</sup> Again, most of these assumptions about real-life bisexual women can also be applied to cinematic femme fatales who do not engage in sexual activity with other women, which would suggest that the addition of such activity into the repertoire of femme fatale figures functions as an effective way of affirming the sense of their

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<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth D. Däumer, 'Extract from *Queer Ethics; or, the Challenge of Bisexuality to Lesbian Ethics* (1992)' in *Bisexuality: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Merl Storr (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp.152-61 (p.153 and pp.155-56).

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Moorman, "'Shades of Grey': Articulations of Bisexuality in *The L Word*" in *Televising Queer Women: A Reader*, ed. by Rebecca Beirne (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp.163-77 (p.165).

treacherous untrustworthiness, menace, excessive sexual appetites and lack of sexual responsibility. The femme fatale's bisexual activity, therefore, can be read as shorthand for both her duplicity and her sexual appeal. Her bisexual behaviour codes her pornographically, hypersexualises her, and therefore makes her more tempting to the unwitting male victim, while negative connotations of promiscuity and unfaithfulness attached to bisexually active women mark her as untrustworthy and dangerous.

Existing accounts of bisexuality in cinema are few and far between, and to date only comprise one book length study – Wayne M. Bryant's *Bisexual Characters in Film: From Anaïs to Zee* (1997), a thematic survey of bisexual figures in film history – and one edited collection on bisexual representation – Maria Pramaggiore and Donald E. Hall's *Re Presenting Bisexualities: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire* (1996), which features a significant section on film – both of which appeared nearly fifteen years ago, in the midst of the 1990s movement towards a theoretical approach to bisexuality in response to the burgeoning field of queer studies.<sup>5</sup> In addition to these texts, a chapter in Alexander Doty's *Flaming Classics* (2000) offers one of the few substantial accounts of bisexuality in classical Hollywood cinema, while a number of articles on bisexuality in film have appeared in the *Journal of Bisexuality*, and Marjorie B. Garber's *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* engages with film studies as part of a much larger study which takes in literature, popular culture, science and psychology.<sup>6</sup> However, despite this, the critical discourse on cinematic bisexuality remains underdeveloped, and, while accusations that on-screen representations of bisexual women tend to reinforce notions of the bisexual woman's treacherous promiscuity fly thick and fast within these debates, the figure of the femme fatale largely remains unaddressed. In this chapter, I extend

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<sup>5</sup> Wayne M. Bryant, *Bisexual Characters in Film: From Anaïs to Zee* (New York and London: Harrington Park Press, 1997) and *Re Presenting Bisexualities: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire* ed. by Donald E. Hall and Maria Pramaggiore (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996)

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), pp.131-54. For a useful summary of the *Journal of Bisexuality*'s film essays, as well as other scholarship in the field, see B. C. Roberts, 'Muddy Waters: Bisexuality in the Cinema', *Journal of Bisexuality*, 11.2 (2011) 329-45. Marjorie B. Garber, *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

existing debates by reading canonical neo-noir texts in relation to the ways in which bisexual femininity and the femme fatale act in dialogue in narrative cinema.

Within criticism of film noir itself, the dominant critical discourse about queer sexualities surrounds the representation of male queer characters in classical noir texts such as *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Big Sleep*, *Laura* (1944), and *Gilda*.<sup>7</sup> This work, while focusing on the more frequent and highly visible representations of male queerness as perverse and effeminate, also draws attention to the invariably butch female queer characters in, for example, *In a Lonely Place* (1950) and *Born to Kill* (1947).<sup>8</sup> Readings of female queer characters can also be found in analyses of the noir-adjacent aesthetics of gothic women's pictures such as *Rebecca* and *The Haunting* (1963).<sup>9</sup> In addition to this, queerness has also been used as a rhetorical framework for drawing out other marginalised identities and subject positions in film noir, as in Michael Davidson's work on the disabled body in film noir.<sup>10</sup> In the field of contemporary film noir, there has been a great deal of debate about the politics of films like *Basic Instinct* in terms of lesbian representation, as in Chris Holmlund's work on deadly dolls, Lynda Hart's study of violent lesbians in cinema, and Sara-Jane Finlay and Natalie Fenton's reading of sexual performance in the canonical psycho-bitch neo-noirs.<sup>11</sup> While arguments differ about the implications of these texts as lesbian representations, they rarely touch on the

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Dyer's work makes up the core of this work. See, for example, Richard Dyer, 'Homosexuality and Film Noir' *Jump Cut* 16 (1977), 18-21, Dyer, 'Postscript: Queers and Women in Film Noir' in *Women in Film Noir: New Edition*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998) pp.123-39, and Dyer, 'Queer Noir' in *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, ed. by Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2004) pp.84-104.

<sup>8</sup> Gwendolyn Audrey Foster provides a compelling reading of both male and female queer characters in her article 'Queer Aesthetics of Film Noir: *Born to Kill*' *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 28 (2011) 80-85.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Patricia White's work in *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp.61-93 and in 'Female Spectator, Lesbian Spectre: *The Haunting*' in *Women in Film Noir: New Edition*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998) pp.130-50.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Davidson, 'Phantom Limbs: Film Noir and the Disabled Body' in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 9.1 (2003), 57-77.

<sup>11</sup> Chris Holmlund, 'Cruisin' for a Bruisin': Hollywood's Deadly (Lesbian) Dolls', *Cinema Journal*, 34.1 (1994), 31-51, Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), and Sara-Jane Finlay and Natalie Fenton, "'If You've Got a Vagina and an Attitude, That's a Deadly Combination': Sex and Heterosexuality in *Basic Instinct*, *Body of Evidence* and *Disclosure*", *Sexualities* 8.1 (2005) 49-74 (p.68).



ways in which bisexuality is dealt with in neo-noir, despite the presence of characters, like Catherine Trammell in *Basic Instinct*, who have sex with both men and women. When mention is made of bisexuality, it tends to be dismissive, positing it as a watering down of lesbian representation, as in Holmlund's discussion of cinema featuring tough lesbian characters, in which she argues that such texts 'distance themselves from even the relatively safe space of metaphor, recoding the lesbians they portray as mirror-mother-men as "bisexuals" (*Basic Instinct's* ploy) or "just friends" (*Fried Green Tomatoes's* solution).'<sup>12</sup> This formulation of bisexual representations as a mainstream audience-friendly ploy which dilutes (and perhaps pollutes) lesbian representation is a common one, and one which insists on images of bisexual women as a means of pandering to a heteronormative gaze. For Holmlund, Catherine Trammell and her counterparts in other femme fatale narratives functions as a form of compromise, but in this chapter, I refute this model, and suggest that the bisexual femme fatale offers a more complex articulation of the ways in which femininity, knowledge and sexuality work together in contemporary cinema.

Before turning to the films themselves, I want to introduce and clarify the terminology used in this chapter. Firstly, I do not want to label any of the characters 'bisexual'. None of the femme fatale characters discussed here explicitly identify themselves as 'bisexual' – or 'lesbian', 'straight', or 'queer' for that matter, and this kind of labelling rarely occurs in cinema of any kind – and so it is necessary to employ a degree of caution in applying that descriptor to them even if they have sex with both men and women in the films. Terms describing sexual identity are often intensely personal as well as imbued with social and political meaning, and, as I will explain in greater detail later in this chapter, an individual's sexual behaviour is not necessarily a direct and complete translation of their desires and attractions, and so to term a character 'bisexual' based solely on her sexual activity with male and female characters would

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<sup>12</sup> Holmlund, p.95.

be simplistic and inaccurate. Aside from this, there are other problematics in using 'bisexual' to describe a sexual identity or orientation. The term itself has been one of the key sites of interrogation by theorists of bisexuality in recent years, as a term designed to indicate a form of desire different from the binary, and often reductive, positions of heterosexual and homosexual desire is arguably compromised by the inescapable connotations of dualistic split and of a simple combination of these two essential positions offered by the word itself. Carol Berenson explains that '[a]t the same time that the idea of bisexuality stands to challenge hegemonic dualistic thinking, the word itself embraces the binary', and 'bisexual' can be read in this way as colluding in the consolidation of binaries of gender, sex and even of the dualistic sexual object choice it appears to problematise, as it suggests a mid-point between or combination of heterosexuality and homosexuality.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Merl Storr argues that 'in certain contexts, [bisexuality] actually helped to *shore up* sexual and other categories, rather than dissolve them by, for example, acting as a conceptual "buffer zone" between categories', so that its progressive potential actually serves as a means of further reinforcement of binaries of desire.<sup>14</sup> I contend that the term 'bisexual' is also problematic insofar as many people who desire partners of more than one sex do not choose to identify as such, instead refusing labels altogether, making up new labels, preferring to identify as straight or homosexual, identifying as the less specific 'queer', or any of a range of further choices.<sup>15</sup> Despite the usefulness of 'queer' as an umbrella term for describing a wide variety of sexual behaviours, desires and identities – and of course, it can also be applied in conjunction with and alongside a range of other terms to define sexuality – I argue that to apply it to the femme fatale characters

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<sup>13</sup> Carol Berenson, 'What's in a Name?: Bisexual Women Define Their Terms', *Journal of Bisexuality*, 2.2/3 (2002), 9-21 (p.15).

<sup>14</sup> Merl Storr, 'Editor's Introduction', in *Bisexuality: A Critical Reader*, pp.1-12 (p.9). Emphasis in the original.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the naming strategies adopted by bisexual women, see Jo Bower, Maria Gurevich and Cynthia Mathieson, '(Con)Tested Identities: Bisexual Women Reorient Sexuality' *Journal of Bisexuality*, 2.2/3 (2002), 23-52, and Carol Berenson, 'What's in a Name?: Bisexual Women Define Their Terms', *Journal of Bisexuality*, 2.2/3 (2002), 9-21.

discussed in this chapter would have the effect of erasing the specificities of their stories. While the characters in this chapter do not identify specifically as ‘bisexual’, it is important to retain a term which describes their experiences without the erasure of personal experience which is connoted by ‘queer’.

Instead, in the interests of specificity, I will utilise the terminology of social scientists and sexologists, as discussed below, to define the femme fatale’s actions and claimed desires rather than to attempt to fix her sexual identity. This allows for a much more precise way of reading the femme fatale’s actions which do not collapse behaviour, identity, and desire. In her study of fluidity in women’s sexual preferences, Lisa M. Diamond distinguishes between ‘sexual orientation’ and ‘sexual identity’. She identifies sexual orientation as ‘a consistent, enduring pattern of sexual desire for individuals of the same sex, the other sex, or both sexes, regardless of whether this pattern of desire is manifested in sexual behaviour.’<sup>16</sup> In these terms, sexual orientation encapsulates the entirety of an individual’s sexual desires, whether past, present or future, and unaffected by sexual behaviour. Diamond then defines sexual identity as ‘a culturally organised conception of the self, usually “lesbian/gay,” “bisexual,” or “heterosexual”.’<sup>17</sup> Diamond continues: ‘[a]s with orientation, we cannot presume that these identities correspond to particular patterns of behaviour’, and this is significant in terms of the spectacular sexuality of these femme fatale characters, as the observation of a person’s behaviour is not equal to an insight into their sexual identity or orientation: it is impossible to understand the current and historical scope of someone’s desires and preferences through an examination of their sexual activity.<sup>18</sup>

This model of sexuality is useful as it allows for a distinction between behaviour and desire, a distinction which is crucial to an understanding of the purpose of the femme fatale

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<sup>16</sup> Lisa M. Diamond, *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women’s Love and Desire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), p.12.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

who seduces men and women. A description of these femme fatales as possessing bisexual identities, orientations, or both, as they do not declare those identities, and the construction of ambiguity around their desires in the films requires that their orientations are unclear, particularly given the femme fatale's historical propensity for claiming a desire that she never felt in order to get what she wants. Instead, I am employing both 'bisexually active', and 'bisexual behaviour' to refer specifically to the femme fatale's actions, rather than make generalising assumptions about her desire. The latter of these two terms is adapted from Christopher James' discussion of the invisibility of bisexuality in queer theory. James argues that '[t]he cornerstone of this definition of bisexuality is attraction, although behaviour and performative identity can also be implicated. As behaviour is often an indicator of bisexual attraction, persons who act upon these multiple attractions will be referred to here as behaviourally bisexual.'<sup>19</sup> While James' model is problematic in that it presumes an automatic link between attraction and behaviour which is interrogated by both the work of social scientists like Diamond, and by the femme fatale who acts on a claimed desire which may not actually exist, the notion of bisexual behaviour is an extremely useful one in describing the actions and sexual appearances of characters whose true desires cannot be identified, and who do not claim a specific sexual identity.

In using the terminology of social science to approach representations of the bisexually active femme fatale, this chapter does not, of course, seek to embark on an impossible and unproductive process of correctly labelling and identifying the sexuality of fictional characters. Rather, I employ these terms in order to highlight some of the complexities and anxieties raised by characters who themselves defy definition. As I suggest above, understandings of sexuality in mainstream Western culture are predicated on the notion that observation alone is the key to a full understanding of another person's sexuality –

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<sup>19</sup> Christopher James, 'Denying Complexity: The Dismissal and Appropriation of Bisexuality in Queer, Lesbian, and Gay Theory' in *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Anthology*, ed. by Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason (New York: New York University Press, 1996) pp.217-40 (p.218)

an idea that is of particular relevance to a discussion of the femme fatale, given the emphasis on the epistemological gaze I identify in the Introduction – and discourses around queer representation in cinema have been fraught with questions of visibility, knowledge and coherence from the outset. From Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* (1981) onwards, queer film criticism embarks on a constant process of excavation, searching out queer representations in film history, engaging in discussion about what does or does not count as gay subtext, and investigating the complexities of invisibility.<sup>20</sup> Sexuality is not easily representable within the confines of narrative cinema, no matter how frequent or explicit the sex scenes, and the frequency of bisexually active femme fatale characters in contemporary cinema speaks directly to the possibilities and frustrations of this failure of representation, particularly in terms of female sexuality.

In these films, bisexual behaviour and the femme fatale figure exist in a tangled relationship, each drawing on the others' historical and cultural association with hypersexuality and untrustworthiness, and the result of this complex mixture are narratives which are preoccupied with, as I explore above, issues of trust. In his reading of films featuring behaviourally bisexual characters, Jo Eadie argues that 'I am concerned therefore to distance myself from a reading of these figures in which it is bisexuality *itself* that provokes concern, hostility or horror. What makes these bisexuals dangerous is their place within other debates about limit and constraint, the cultural ambivalence around which they are obliged to bear.'<sup>21</sup> I agree that a theoretical response to bisexuality on film which merely points fingers at biphobia

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<sup>20</sup> Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981). For more examples of this, see Dyer's account of disagreeing with his students about which classical film noir texts could be read as featuring queer subtext in 'Queer Noir', p. 89, as well as Shameem Kabir's explanation of her search for lesbian representations in *Daughters of Desire: Lesbian Representations in Film* (London and Washington D.C.: Cassell, 1997), p.3, and Clare Whatling's anecdotal discussion of her enthusiasm for queer-identified texts which move beyond clear-cut representations in *Screen Dreams: Fantasising Lesbians in Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp.1-10. Further evidence of the ongoing emphasis on seeking out and identifying queer characters in film can be found in the huge number of lesbian and/or gay film guides available both online and in print form.

<sup>21</sup> Jo Eadie, "'That's Why She's Bisexual?': Contexts for Bisexual Visibility' in *The Bisexual Imaginary: Representation, Identity and Desire* ed. by Bi Academic Intervention (London: Cassell, 1997) pp.142-60 (p.143). Emphasis in the original.

and negative representation is not a productive one, and that the presence of bisexual behaviour in film can exist in order to say something about a different issue. However, instead of sidelining the representation of bisexual behaviour itself in cinema, and arguing that it is used strictly as a symbol of something larger and vaguer, it is vital to consider the symbolic effect of bisexual activity in conjunction with what the specific use of bisexuality to make those points might mean. Why bisexuality, rather than some other symbol of excess? What is implied about sexuality, and specifically female sexuality when bisexual activity and duplicity are aligned so clearly and in such an anxious manner in these films?

While bisexual activity functions in these films as a way to emphasise the excess, sexiness, and duplicity of the femme fatale, it also speaks to very specific anxieties about sexual behaviours and desires, and the identities that are assumed based on these attributes. Characters may be presented as behaving bisexually to enhance their femme fataleness, but they are also presented as femme fatales to address concerns about their bisexuality. In these films, bisexual activity in women and specifically in sexually attractive women *is* presented as a discreet cause for anxiety, and the inherently duplicitous nature of the femme fatale, and the consistent doubt surrounding her sexual desires functions as a way of foregrounding that anxiety. The femme fatale who sleeps with men and women provokes anxiety because, as discussed above, it provides clearly identified cause for doubts about her loyalties and motivations which are informed by the heteronormative belief in binary sexual desire, that one must be attracted to either men or women, and that there is no space for alternative desires. The narratives which imply that the bisexually active femme fatale is only truly attracted to one sex and is faking it with the other speak to a monosexist belief that underneath bisexual behaviour lies a more genuine monosexual orientation.

## **Sexual Detection: Visibility, Epistemology and Contamination**

In what follows, I interrogate the femme fatale who behaves bisexually in two neo-noir films, *Basic Instinct* and *Bound*. In doing so I consider the role of the noir narratives of detection and uncertainty in the representation of the bisexual woman, and employ the metaphor of the double agent to explore the femme fatale as a cultural response to a series of collapsing certainties about sexual desire, orientation and identity. I then analyse the films in terms of their relationship with the narratives of infection and disease that so frequently characterise discourses surrounding bisexual women in Western culture, before extending this topic to consider the connection between the femme fatale, the bisexual woman, and anxieties about political contamination and the patriarchal gaze. *Basic Instinct*, a much discussed erotic thriller at the centre of the neo-noir canon, follows the investigation of a violent, ice pick-related murder of a rock star by Nick (Michael Douglas), a homicide detective. In the course of his investigations, he meets Catherine Trammell (Sharon Stone), a beautiful, rich and highly intelligent psychologist and mystery writer Nick suspects of killing the victim, who was her boyfriend. Catherine is revealed to have a girlfriend, Roxy (Leilani Sarelle), and ultimately seduces Nick. While the blame for the murder is placed on a further female character, Beth (Jeanne Tripplehorn), the film ends in a state of ambiguity, as, although Nick and Catherine end the film as a couple, it is revealed in the final scenes that Catherine has an ice pick underneath her bed. *Bound* follows Corky (Gina Gershon), an explicitly gay woman who has just been released from prison and takes a job renovating an apartment. During this work, she meets Violet (Jennifer Tilly), a gangster's moll who lives in the apartment next door. The two begin a relationship, and together hatch a plan to rip off Caesar (Joe Pantoliano), Violet's boyfriend. Despite a series of setbacks, the plan ends in the death of Caesar and the acquisition of a lot of mafia money, and Violet and Corky drive off together in a brand new truck. In discussing these films and their representations of the bisexual activity of the femme

fatale, I explore the relationship between sexual performance, desire, and cinematic representation.

Bisexuality, I argue, forces into the foreground the idea that it is not always possible to tell the entirety of a person's desires based on their current sexual actions, and this is not a concept that is compatible with contemporary cultural formulations of sexual orientation.

Ruth Gibian outlines these formulations:

This notion of sexual stasis is reinforced by the fact that we as a culture define sexual orientation largely in terms of current sexual behaviour. We basically buy the notion not only that we are who we sleep with, but also that we are who we sleep with *today*. Lesbian communities accept and perpetuate this as much as the heterosexual world does. And what a narrow definition it is: it invalidates past actions, past feelings and present feelings [...] It [this mode of understanding sexuality] says "stay still so we can see who you are".<sup>22</sup>

Gibian's model of sexuality as understood primarily through a set of visible and immediate behaviours and partnerships is a useful one for a consideration of the relationship between sexuality and cinema. Narrative cinema relies upon the audience's tendency to interpret a limited range of images, and to translate those images into knowledge about characters' motivations, identities, lives and experiences. At the same time as these kinds of extrapolations are essential to the viewing experience, cinema also allows things to be hidden, to remain unsaid and unseen, and in doing so forges a complex relationship with sexuality when sexuality is understood to be interpretable via the visual. In what follows, I examine the relationship between knowledge, genre and sexuality which is forged when the femme fatale behaves bisexually. In the films discussed in this chapter, this anxiety that bisexual women are difficult to read, to get the true measure of, is projected onto the femme fatale, in a way that seems somehow inevitable for a figure whose sexuality is already uncertain and anxiety-provoking. The bisexually active femme fatale refuses to stay still in order that other characters in the film, and the film's audiences, can attempt to identify her sexual orientation –

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<sup>22</sup> Ruth Gibian, 'Refusing Certainty: Towards a Bisexuality of Wholeness' in *Closer To Home: Bisexuality and Feminism*, ed. by Elizabeth Reba Weise (Seattle: Seal Press, 1992) pp. 3-16 (p. 5). Emphasis in the original.



and the direction of her loyalties – according to monosexist presumptions about the correlation of sexual orientation with current sexual partner.

More so than her consistently heterosexual counterparts, the behaviourally bisexual femme fatale provokes confusion about what she really wants, and who she wants to screw (over).<sup>23</sup> Despite their tendency to structure their narratives around the ‘who does she really want?’ question of the bisexually active woman, the bisexually active femme fatale films of recent cinema also explore the possibility, and resulting anxiety attached to the idea, that this question is not as easy to answer as a monosexist society might hope or assume. The bisexually active femme fatale, then, presents a specific type of anxiety, both for the films’ characters, and for the viewer. While her bisexual activity codes her as extra-sexy, the films’ narratives are also structured around the question of her sexual loyalties, presenting her non-monosexuality as the potential source of danger. As I argue in the introduction to this thesis, the epistemological imperative is central to the representation of cinematic femme fatale figures, and so the femme fatale who behaves bisexually allows issues of sexuality to be foregrounded in the more general landscape of questions about the femme fatale’s motivations and desires. In *Basic Instinct* and *Bound*, I argue, the questions that swirl around the femme fatale’s bisexual activity are intimately related to narrative and anxieties about truth and sexual deception in the films. Questions of trust and deception in the bisexually active femme fatale narrative frequently hinge on her sexual orientation, and a sense that ‘solving’ the mystery of her desires – and crucially identifying the sex (and there can, it is implied, be only one) of her genuine object choices – is the key to discovering where her loyalties truly lie.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The desire to disrupt this connection between current sexual object choice and sexual identity is not unique to theoretical accounts of bisexuality within queer theory and gender studies. This mode of defining sexual identity is also problematised by Sherrie Inness and Michele Lloyd in their discussion of the assumption that lesbian butch identity is intrinsically linked to an attraction to femme women, when they argue that ‘[i]n the process of redefining the butch, we explode the myth that the butch is characterized by the object of her desire.’ Sherrie A. Inness and Michele E. Lloyd, ‘G.I. Joes in Barbie Land: Recontextualizing Butch in Twentieth Century Lesbian Culture’ in *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Anthology*, pp.9-34 (p.10).

<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting that the bisexually active woman most frequently occurs as a main character in mainstream Western cinema in femme fatale narratives, and in romantic comedies in which dramatic tension

Also important to note here is the way in which the femme fatale who sleeps with men and women parallels the sense that the femme fatale's opaque motivations will eventually be uncovered for what they really are, and the monosexist presumption that bisexually active women are sitting on a fence from which they will eventually come down on one side or the other to form a fixed identity. Meg Barker *et al* argue that '[n]either fictional nor news media tends to consider "bisexual" as a possible identity for people who are depicted as or attracted to, or engaging in relationships with, men and women.'<sup>25</sup> Examples that Barker points to include the notion of 'switching teams', exemplified by the treatment of Willow's sexual orientation in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, where she is presented as going from straight to gay over the course of the series, despite her history of romantic sexual relationships with male and female characters, as well as media descriptions of *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) as a 'gay Western' despite the bisexual behaviour of the main characters, and the gay identities attributed to married male politicians whose affairs with men are exposed in tabloids.<sup>26</sup> This erasure of bisexuality as a valid identity or orientation, and the sense that bisexual women are perched atop a fence, and bound to leap, eventually, to choose a side, is an active force in the films discussed here, where bisexual activity is presented as confusing, and masks more limited sexual desires and personal loyalties.

In *Basic Instinct*, the femme fatale's bisexual behaviour is directly connected with the noir hero's uncertainty about her motives and loyalty to him, as Catherine's past and present

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relies on who the bisexually active heroine will form a romantic union with at the end of the film (key examples include *Chasing Amy* (1997), *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2001), *Imagine Me and You* (2005), and *Goldfish Memory* (2003)). Both the romantic comedies and femme fatale films' generic tendencies denote a reading of the bisexually active woman's desires as an unknown quantity, whose personal sexual desires are used as a means of creating narrative uncertainty, and whose mystery will be revealed by the end of the film.

<sup>25</sup> Meg Barker, Helen Bowes-Catton, Alessandra Iantaffi, Angela Cassidy and Laurence Brewer, 'British Bisexuality: A Snapshot of Bisexual Representations and Identities in the United Kingdom', *Journal of Bisexuality*, 8.1 (2008), 141-62 (p.157).

<sup>26</sup> A more recent example of this would be the media discourse surrounding Lindsay Lohan's relationship with Samantha Ronson. When their relationship initially became public, press reports tended towards labelling Lohan as lesbian, despite her previous relationships with men and her refusal to discuss her sexual orientation or identity. Similarly, during periods of estrangement from Ronson, tabloid reaction tended to involve announcements that Lohan had turned back again, and was now straight. Again, it is not my intention to argue that these fictional characters and public figures are 'really' bisexual, but rather to demonstrate the frequent erasure of the possibility of bisexual or non-monosexual identities in both fictional texts and news media.

relationships with women cause Nick to doubt her trustworthiness. Hart suggests that Catherine's cold, uncaring reaction to her rock-star boyfriend's death and her heartbroken one at her female partner Roxy's demise, indicates that 'Catherine reserves her *real* love for women.'<sup>27</sup> This argument that Catherine is only emotionally attached to women makes her a threat to Nick's heteronormative vision of their relationship, and renders him vulnerable to her potentially murderous impulses. In line with the monosexual assumptions made about bisexual behaviour detailed above, the film insists that if Catherine's desire for women is real, rather than a spectacular play to the male gaze, then her trustworthiness for Nick comes into doubt. When Catherine informs him that he was nothing special in bed, he demands to know 'what about Roxy? Is she more fun?' This demolishes his bravado and belief that there is something special between them, and along with it, his trust of Catherine. Still more pointedly, the solution to the question of whether or not Beth, the film's other potential femme fatale, is a killer lies in the answer to Nick's question, 'still like girls, Beth?' If the answer is yes, then she must be dangerously obsessed with Catherine, which, according to a monosexual fence-sitting model, suggests that Beth is really a lesbian and a murderer. The bisexual activity of the femme fatale, then, can be seen as functioning as both a further arena for her betrayal, and an area for investigating the femme fatale's secrets, to discover her real desires, and to seek the source of her duplicity.

*Bound* also combines a connection between sexual orientation and duplicity with the mystery of the femme fatale in another narrative of fence-sitting in the characterisation of Violet. For both Corky, the lesbian protagonist, and Caesar, Violet's mafia husband, the question of Violet's sexual orientation is crucial to their ability to trust her. Violet is initially an untrustworthy figure because of her visual and narrative coding as femme fatale: her hair, makeup and costume offer a late-twentieth-century update on the styling of cinematic bad

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<sup>27</sup> Hart, p.129. Emphasis in the original.

girls of the 1940s and 1950s (see figure 3.1), and she is introduced as a beautiful, seductive and potentially untrustworthy adulteress. Alongside this though, she also falls under suspicion as a result of the ambiguity surrounding her sexuality. Straayer argues that

[f]rom the point of view of Corky, who is both suspicious of and attracted to Violet, the crucial question is whether Violet is a *femme fatale* or a lesbian femme. She certainly comes on to Corky with a sex-kitten voice, but, if she's a *femme fatale* she might seduce Corky into crime and then double-cross her. [...] In an important shift however, Corky faces the enigma not by scrutinising Violet's criminality, but rather by doubting her lesbian status.<sup>28</sup>

The shift identified by Straayer is indeed essential to understanding the connection between the femme fatale's sexual orientation and her trustworthiness. For Corky, Violet can be a femme fatale, or a lesbian femme, but not both. Violet makes claims of lesbian monosexuality, arguing that her relationship with Caesar and the other men who visit their apartment is

tantamount to prostitution, and Corky's doubt over these claims is intrinsically connected to the validity of Violet's other claims that she won't double-cross Corky by returning to Caesar. The



Figure 3.1: *Bound* (1996). Violet's retro styling.

spectre of bisexuality looms over the narrative with the implication that if Violet is lying and attracted to both men and women, or, in the rhetoric of lesbian anxiety about bisexual women is 'really straight' but confused or experimenting, there is a strong chance that she will side with Caesar.<sup>29</sup> Violet's bisexual activity is central to issues of trustworthiness, and emphasises

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<sup>28</sup> Straayer, pp.156-58. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>29</sup> For more on the historical and recent antipathy towards bisexual women in lesbian and queer communities, see Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1991) pp.234-35 and 296-97, Paula C. Rust, *Bisexuality and the Challenge to Lesbian Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), and Julie E. Hartman, 'Another Kind of "Chilly Climate": Effects of Lesbian Separatism on Bisexual Women's Identity and Community', *Journal of Bisexuality*, 5.4 (2006), 61-76.

the potential for duplicity in the behaviourally bisexual femme fatale. It is only by refusing any question of bisexuality that Violet is seen as trustworthy.

However, while this trend of erasing bisexual desire may imply that such desire does not exist, in these films, the alignment of the femme fatale with bisexual activity is a far less stable one than might be imagined. The femme fatale occupies a precarious position in terms of her loyalties and what can be seen of them, and this instability is made still greater in the case of the bisexually active femme fatale. While the narratives may seem to suggest that everyone, including the apparently bisexual femme fatale is 'really' either homo- or heterosexual, they are also informed by a concern that this may not be the case, that the bisexually active woman may be less easy to categorise and contain. Given the anxiety around the uncertain object choices of bisexuals, it is perhaps not surprising that bisexuality has been theorised in metaphors of betrayal and deceit. In a critique of Hélène Cixous' famous model of bisexuality as a bridge between hetero- and homosexual communities, Clare Hemmings employs the figure of the double agent, suggesting that

[a] double agent appears to be part of one camp but is also strongly identified with another. The implication is that one can never be quite sure where her allegiance actually lies. Cixous' bisexual bridge links the straight and queer worlds. The double agent, by contrast, is set up as a link between the two worlds, yet actually disrupts the very boundaries of the worlds we assume to be separate.<sup>30</sup>

This metaphor is a particularly poignant one in terms of the bisexually active femme fatale, whose non-fixed sexuality provokes anxiety and echoes the uncertainty surrounding her motivations and loyalties. Her fluid sexuality offers a revolutionary potential to disrupt current popular discourses on monosexuality, gendered binaries, and the idea that what you currently see of someone's sexual behaviour offers a complete map of their sexual orientation, a comprehensive account of the full range of their desires. Issues of knowledge, deception and the unseen hover over both bisexual women and the cinematic femme fatale, and the double agent metaphor neatly encapsulates both their perceived threat – that they are duplicitous and

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<sup>30</sup> Clare Hemmings, 'Resituating the Bisexual Body' in *Activating Theory: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Politics*, ed. by Joseph Bristow and Angela R. Williams (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993) pp.118-138 (pp.129-30).

likely to betray – and their radical potential to illustrate the possibilities and anxieties associated with the unseen. The double agent is not only dangerous, but also powerful and subversive, and the bisexual femme fatale functions in both capacities in contemporary cinema.

The double agent model allows the bisexually active femme fatale to disrupt assumptions about monosexuality and play with assumptions that conflate current object choice with sexual orientation. In *Basic Instinct*, Nick assumes that, even though Catherine could still be a killer, he is safe from any threat she poses when she appears to make a commitment to him, and therefore takes on the appearance of heterosexuality. His question to Beth about whether she ‘still like[s] girls?’ is one which implies a belief that sexual desires are something that can be renounced in favour of a new sexual orientation, and this belief informs his desire to ‘fuck like minks, raise rugrats and live happily ever after’ with Catherine, as he believes that her ongoing sexual relationship with him denotes a switch to heterosexuality. However, the final scene, in which Catherine resists the temptation to stab Nick with the ice pick at the mention of this happily ever after scenario, works against Nick’s assumptions: the double agent is still in the room, and playing both to heterosexist mores and dangerous ‘alternative’ sexuality.<sup>31</sup>

Finlay and Fenton argue that this scene represents a form of compulsory heterosexuality for Catherine, in which the top of the bed she shares with Nick represents normal heterosexual relations, and the underside of the bed, where she has hidden the ice pick, represents her lesbian potential and the murderous history that accompanies it, and argue that ‘[e]vidence within the film seems to suggest that unless she remains on this side of the bed (within a “normal” heterosexual relationship) her ability to survive will be

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<sup>31</sup> I am by no means denying that the idea of lesbian or bisexual orientation as inherently murderous is a highly problematic one. Rather, I would suggest that this scene works to disrupt the assumptions that Nick makes about sexuality as a binary structure.

threatened.<sup>32</sup> Aside from the important fact that Nick is also under threat if Catherine traverses the limits of the bed and the symbolic heterosexuality that Finlay and Fenton ascribe to it, the notion of the bed as boundary between sexualities is one which reinforces the notion that an understanding of a person's sexual orientation is reliant on who they are sleeping with at a given moment. Instead, it is more productive for an understanding of the bisexually active femme fatale to think of the boundary of the bed as a boundary between the seen and unseen aspects of sexuality. While the activity on top of the bed signifies current sexual behaviour, the ice pick below the bed represents an aspect of what is unseen about Catherine's sexual orientation. Finlay assumes that Catherine in the bed and Catherine with the ice pick are mutually exclusive in this film, but the ice pick can instead be seen to represent the danger inherent in Nick's assumption that what he sees of Catherine's behaviour is all that there is. While the narrative may hinge on questions about her sexual identity, Catherine remains a double agent to the end, capable of switching her behaviour from one sexual object choice to another, but this does not preclude the concurrent existence of both or many in terms of her sexual orientation.

In *Bound*, Violet as behaviourly bisexual femme fatale is able to put her plans to steal from the mob into action because of Caesar's assumptions about visible behaviour and its relationship with desire. Oliver and Trigo argue that 'questions of seeing or not seeing and knowing or not knowing are central to *Bound*. More specifically, questions of seeing or not seeing and knowing or not knowing the femme fatale determine the outcome of the plot', and these questions of seeing and failure to know are what ultimately cause Caesar's downfall.<sup>33</sup> Unlike *Basic Instinct*, which implies that Catherine is bisexually oriented despite not naming her as such, *Bound's* questions of loyalty are answered by the ultimate assumption that, although Violet has sex with men, she is a lesbian. Caesar is scuppered by his assumption that Violet's

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<sup>32</sup> Finlay and Fenton, p.68.

<sup>33</sup> Oliver and Trigo, p.190.

sexual relationship with him means that she is first heterosexual – his blindness to the possibility that she might be having an affair with a woman is used early on to comic effect – and then at least romantically invested in him enough that she will not kill him. In fact, it transpires that sex with the men in her life is ‘work’ for Violet, that she has no desire for Caesar at all, even though her sexual relationship with him would suggest that heterosexual attraction was at least a part of her orientation. Here, Violet’s bisexual behaviour, rather than bisexual orientation or identity allows her to function as a sexual double agent. It is this focus on appearances, and their distinction from desire, which moves the femme fatale who behaves bisexually beyond attempts to pornographise the femme fatale for the male gaze. The impossibility of truly comprehending women’s desires by scrutinising their actions or partners in any given moment is emphasised in these films.

As well as standing in for anxieties about the immediate legibility (or lack thereof) of women’s sexuality, the bisexually active femme fatale also foregrounds issues of infection and disease. The combination of anxieties surrounding the femme fatale with those associated with bisexual behaviour has a further implication in terms of the femme fatale’s danger. Bisexuality has, in recent decades, been strongly associated with fears surrounding disease and infection. While these fears have most visibly been connected with closeted bisexual men bringing HIV home from homosexual men to their unsuspecting female partners, concerns about bisexual women and HIV have also been the subject of much discussion.<sup>34</sup> And while some of these films engage with the concerns of women who sleep with women, they also foreground more general anxieties about bisexual activity and disease. While none of the films explicitly refer to HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases, the close relationship between

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<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Storr’s description of ‘debates over HIV and safer sex that raged in feminist, lesbian and bisexual women’s communities in the USA and UK during the 1990s, in which there was considerable controversy over the HIV risks of sex between women, and in which some lesbians did indeed represent bisexual women as “HIV carriers” who might bring the virus into lesbian communities’ (p.7), and Däumer’s argument that ‘[t]he threat of AIDS has only exacerbated such suspicion [of bisexuals from lesbian communities], leading many lesbians to view bisexual women as potential AIDS-carriers. Inherently contaminated, they endanger lesbian purity.’ (p.155).



sex and potential death in the films perpetuate the already existing connotations of the femme fatale with disease in contemporary cinema. Hirsch notes that

Indirectly, many neo-noir films of the 1980s and 1990s highlight the risk of sex in the age of AIDS, the new “war” that replaces World War II as the genre’s principle subtext. In the 1940s the case against sex could be seen as a general warning to control your libido; in the era of AIDS, neo-noir films about sex gone wrong issue a more urgent deceleration. In the past twenty years, the traditional link in noir narratives between sex and catastrophe is no longer merely symbolic or moralistic, although no noir film has addressed AIDS directly or enlisted it as a narrative cause.<sup>35</sup>

Hirsch’s argument for the new alignment of the femme fatale’s deadly sexuality with HIV infection is a convincing one in reading many of the neo-noir films, particularly those in the erotic noir thriller model of *Fatal Attraction*, such as *Disclosure*, *Body of Evidence*, *The Last Seduction*, and *Basic Instinct*, all texts in which the noir hero engages in adulterous or otherwise transgressive sex with the femme fatale. The addition of bisexual activity to the femme fatale figure, however, foregrounds further connections between the femme fatale, untrustworthiness, and the symbolic presence of HIV.

*Basic Instinct* is one such film, in which transgressive sex – in this case Nick’s relationships with both the prime suspect for a murder that he is investigating and his potentially deadly psychiatrist – stands in for the mortal dangers of unprotected sex in the era of AIDS. However, unlike the other films in the backlash canon of films in which Michael Douglas finds himself unable to resist deadly women, *Basic Instinct*’s dangerous female characters are not primarily obsessed with him, but are shown to have a variety of male and female sexual partners. Catherine’s sexuality in particular is presented as all-encompassing, as it is suggested that she has had sex with all of the film’s major characters, in a way that Stables describes as being ‘a kind of virus, infecting not only the hero, but also discovered to have infected all the female characters in the film, who are revealed to have some kind of sexual history with her.’<sup>36</sup> This emphasis in the film on Catherine’s, and by extension, Beth’s, bisexual promiscuity codes them as being universally infectious, implying that their bisexual

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<sup>35</sup> Hirsch, pp. 8-9.

<sup>36</sup> Stables, p.172.

behaviour makes them more prone to carrying disease, whether actual or symbolic. The bisexually active femme fatale's body then becomes a site of uncertainty; her hypersexuality symbolises a specific threat connected with promiscuity and non-monosexuality. Infecting everyone she encounters with her irresistible body, the bisexually active femme fatale is dangerous in her excess and her mass appeal.

*Bound's* sexual politics similarly imply a connection between the femme fatale's bisexual activity, duplicity, and disease, but in contrast with *Basic Instinct*, this dynamic is presented from the perspective of a lesbian sexual politics. Corky's disgust at Violet's sexual activity with men is not explicitly about sexually transmitted disease, but her discomfort at Violet's switching between male and female partners, teamed with Corky's strong visual alliances with a lesbian community – indicated most clearly by her status as a regular at a lesbian bar and her labrys tattoo – is one which echoes concerns about the bisexual woman who brings infection into lesbian circles. In a scene in which Violet explains to Corky that she sleeps with men for money rather than pleasure, Corky's claims that 'you can't understand, we're different' and her dismissal of the idea that 'inside of you there's a little dyke just like me' confirms this suggestion of animosity and intrinsic difference. The historical mistrust of bisexual women in some lesbian communities has a wide range of roots which go beyond concerns about disease, most significantly the concern that bisexual women are exploiting the resources of lesbian communities while clinging firmly onto the heterosexual privilege they gain from passing as straight. However, Violet's sexual activity with men takes places firmly behind closed doors – the only scenes in which she appears outside her apartment building occur when she is with Corky, rather than passing with male partners – and so I suggest that Corky's concerns do not stem from a resentment of unearned privilege. Instead, Violet's many male partners present an implicit physical danger; her bisexual activity renders her extra-deadly, her body a potential carrier of disease and of the taint of heterosexuality.

While I wish to retain the focus of this chapter on the four primary texts, it is useful at this point to return to a film considered in Chapter Two. This extra-deadliness of the femme fatale who sleeps with men and women is also apparent in *Cruel Intentions*: Kathryn's instructional kiss with the then virginal Cecile functions as a catalyst to Cecile's transformation into 'the premier tramp of the New York area', as she goes on to enjoy extensive amounts of (apparently) unprotected sex with the highly promiscuous Sebastian, before embarking on a relationship with Ronald, who also sleeps with Kathryn. While a kiss may not usually connote sexually transmitted disease in the same way as a sex scene, the kiss between Kathryn and Cecile is famous at least in part because of the highly visible spit-trail between the two women's mouths as the kiss ends. Although Caetlin Benson-Allot makes a convincing case for this spit-trail being a kind of consequence-free money shot for the safe-sex generation, noting that the target audience for *Cruel Intentions* had been taught that semen could kill, but open mouthed kissing was safe, it is the symbolic value, rather than the literal safety of the kiss, with which I am concerned here.<sup>37</sup> The visible presence of saliva, as well as visible tongues, in the kiss function as reminders of the transfer of bodily fluids and the contact of unprotected genitals that (presumably) occurs in the less graphically shot sex scenes.<sup>38</sup> This connotative kiss marks the beginning of Cecile's sexual education, after which her sexual activity develops rapidly, suggesting that, as in *Basic Instinct*, Kathryn's sexuality acts as a form of infection, both in terms of the rabid promiscuity that it ignites in Cecile, and as a means of exposing Cecile to sexually transmitted diseases that she may otherwise have avoided. The bisexually active femme fatale films play on anxieties and stereotypes surrounding bisexuality and disease that create the impression that the femme fatale is doubly deadly.

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<sup>37</sup> Caetlin Benson-Allot, "The "Mechanical Truth" Behind *Cruel Intentions*: Desire, AIDS, and the MTV Movie Awards' "Best Kiss", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 22.4 (2005) 341-58.

<sup>38</sup> It is worth noting here that barrier methods for safe sex are rarely even mentioned, let alone appear, in cinematic discourses around sex unless required for comedic purposes, as in *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (2005), or are significant to the narrative, particularly in the case of unplanned pregnancy narratives, as in *Juno* (2007) and *Knocked Up* (2007).

In addition to these narratives which summon forth the possibility of literal infection, the films discussed here also provoke anxieties about political contamination. In a cultural environment in which representations of women who behave bisexually are frequently seen as compromised lesbian representations,<sup>39</sup> the bisexually active femme fatale, whose body already signifies pollution and disease, comes to stand in for a range of these representative tensions. Alongside these concerns about lesbian visibility, the bisexually active femme fatale also represents a difficult figure for contemporary feminism. As I outline in the Introduction, in many ways, the femme fatale's power in sexuality echoes postfeminist rhetoric about the empowering nature of heteronormative display and performance. The bisexual behaviour of the femme fatales discussed here can be read as another iteration of this kind of 'powerful' performance and its intersections with straight pornography, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter. Just as the bisexually active femme fatale resists attempts to define her sexuality by her actions, this figure also refuses to be exclusively claimed for feminist meaning. The bisexual femme fatale is certainly open to accusations of pandering to the male gaze. Bisexual women are frequently perceived as performing bisexuality to appeal to the heterosexual pornographic fantasies: one subject in a study on bisexual identity noted that she resisted the label because of widespread assumptions that "[t]he bisexual woman is the ultra sex toy", and Bower *et al*, the authors of the study, note that in accounts like this one, there is a perception that 'women's bisexuality is stripped of any autonomous meaning. That is, it's reduced to, and defined in terms of, its appeal to heterosexual males.'<sup>40</sup> Similarly, concerns from lesbian and bisexual women about straight-identified women who kiss each other in bars for audiences of cheering men revolve around fears that queer women's sexuality is being

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<sup>39</sup> See my earlier comments in this chapter about Holmlund's use of 'bisexual' in relation to *Basic Instinct*, Tricia Jenkins' demands for lesbian authenticity in contemporary teen cinema which she views as pandering to the straight male gaze in "'Potential Lesbians at Two O'Clock': The Heterosexualization of Lesbians in the Recent Teen Film", *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 38.3 (2005), 491-504 (p.494), and the reactions from online fan communities to the lesbians who sleep with men storylines of *The Kids are Alright* (2010) and the US version of *Skins* (2011) for examples of this.

<sup>40</sup> Bower *et al*, p.38, p.39).

appropriated for the patriarchal gaze, as exemplified by Beth Ditto's reference to 'I Kissed a Girl' as a "boner dyke anthem for straight girls who like to turn guys on by making out or, like, faking gay," and Baumgardner's description of claims of bisexual identity in order to appear 'wild', and which are ultimately abandoned as "see my new tattoo" bisexuality, meaning that it's the safe appropriation of a signifier that once meant you were out of society but now just means you are under thirty.<sup>41</sup> In this context, the presence of the bisexually active femme fatale characters who do not identify as bisexual having sex with other women for purposes that may not stem from genuine sexual desire or romantic attachment can easily be interpreted as having been produced entirely to satisfy heterosexual male fantasies.

Indeed, even a film which does identify its main bisexual character as lesbian can be subject to such criticism when that character becomes involved with a man. The most highly discussed example of this is the reaction from lesbian viewers to *Chasing Amy* who felt that the film pandered to heterosexual male fantasies, an attitude which Ellen Degeneres summed up with the phrase 'I'd like to see [the female characters] kiss – as long as she still needs my penis.'<sup>42</sup> While Jonathan Alexander and Karen Yescavage's survey of reactions to the film rather sniffily dismisses such sentiment as coming from 'biphobic lesbians', these concerns do stem from genuine anxiety about the few available on-screen sexual relationships between women being both subsumed by yet more heterosexual relationships, and being appropriated by the male gaze.<sup>43</sup> In relation to this concern, Moorman convincingly argues that the fact that the lesbian and bisexual television drama *The L Word* features two bisexual characters who very rarely have sex with men in comparison to their numbers of female partners is a strategy 'to ward off accusations that they [Jenny and Alice] exist to cater to straight male fantasies.'<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> 'Ditto Takes Aim at Perry for Faking Gay', *Daily Express* (2 June 2009) <<http://www.dailyexpress.co.uk/posts/view/105007>> [accessed 4 October 2009], and Baumgardner, p.53.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Jonathan Alexander and Karen Yescavage, 'Bi Media Visibility: The Pleasure and Pain of *Chasing Amy*: Reactions to Blurred Identities and Sexualities', *Journal of Bisexuality*, 1.4 (2001), 115-35 (p.122)

<sup>43</sup> Alexander and Yescavage, p.128.

<sup>44</sup> Moorman, p.176.

The fact that such a strategy is necessary illustrates the delicate balancing act required to prevent bisexually active women on screen from being recuperated and heterosexualised by the voyeuristic male viewer.

The presence of this viewer constantly looms over the bisexually active femme fatale's sex with women: he is there in the softcore-influenced bedtime scenes in *New Best Friend*, in *Wild Things*' infamous threesome between two schoolgirls and their teacher, and the pool scene watched from a distance by an older man, in *Pretty Persuasion* when Kimberly seduces a lesbian reporter by whispering 'I could never give up men, I like cock too much, but sometimes, I just need a woman's touch', lines she has learned from her father's pornography. Male voyeurs and heterosexual pornographic influences abound in these films, suggesting that these images were either made for or open to appropriation by heterosexual male audiences hungry for girl on girl action. Although, as I demonstrated in the Introduction, queer sexuality on film is frequently characterised by an intangibility and lack of clear visibility or coherent representation, in many ways the bisexually active femme fatale suffers from an excess of visibility. Her sexual performances are perhaps too visible, occurring as they do in full view of the male gaze. Despite the frequent obliqueness of the noir narrative, and the femme fatale's resistance to clear definition, the bisexual performances of the femme fatale in these films arguably make her too open to recuperation by the heteronormative patriarchal gaze.

However, despite this, *Basic Instinct* and *Bound* do appear to resist this gaze. While their representations of bisexual behaviour cannot be termed entirely queer, nor are they quite as open to heterosexual recuperation as the films described above. In *Basic Instinct*, Stone's spectacular body is certainly displayed for a male audience, as demonstrated in the infamous crotch shot which occurs in front of a room full of observant male detectives, and much of Nick's relationship with Catherine occurs in a voyeuristic context as he follows her around San Francisco in an echo of *Vertigo*, but despite the film's sexually explicit nature, she does not

have a single sex scene with another woman. When Catherine and Roxy appear on screen together for the first time, their physical contact is possessive and provokes Nick to



**Figure 3.2: *Basic Instinct* (1992). Intimate space in the club toilets.**

frustration and anger rather than voyeuristic arousal, as they kiss in a brief and familiar way before Catherine stands opposite Nick, beside Roxy, with her hand on Roxy's breast, and they continue to kiss after he has

left the scene. Similarly, in the later club scene, Nick finds Catherine and Roxy together in a toilet cubicle. Roxy straddles Catherine, and, noticing him staring at them, Catherine kicks the door shut, obscuring them from his gaze in a way that once again complicates arguments about the performative nature

of Catherine's bisexual activity. While there is another man sharing cocaine in the cubicle with them, his comfortable presence in the queer space of the club, as well as his styling – earrings, a



**Figure 3.3: *Basic Instinct* (1992). Nick watches Catherine and Roxy dance, while their friend turns away.**

moustache, and a waistcoat worn without a shirt – do not position him as a voyeuristic heterosexual viewer. Indeed, in the subsequent dance sequence, the same man is shown dancing with Catherine and Roxy, but he turns away with a distinct lack of interest when their dancing becomes more intimate (see figures 3.2 and 3.3). Nick, on the other hand, does watch

them dance together, but the duration of the contact between Roxy and Catherine is extremely brief, as Catherine quickly turns her attentions to Nick, much to Roxy's disgust. While these scenes do certainly contain some degree of heterosexualised bisexual activity, Nick's discomfort with the relationship between Catherine and Roxy, as well as Catherine's physical disruption of the male gaze points towards a more complex version of bisexual representation than accusations of pandering to straight male fantasy can account for.

*Bound's* much more explicit scenes between the femme fatale and another female character offer an equally complex relationship between cinematic bisexual behaviour and the straight male gaze. As others have noted, *Bound's* key sex scenes are notable for their claims to lesbian authenticity, most obviously due to the input of queer sex educator Suzie Bright in the choreography of the sex scenes between Corky and Violet.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, both Tilly and Gershon are performers associated with queerness. Although she does appear in several queer-themed films, Tilly has for the most part played straight characters, but her cartoonish femininity and campy performances prevent her from being read in terms of conventional female heterosexuality. Gershon has played queer women in films both before and after *Bound*, and so carries a star text in which queerness is to some extent overlaid onto all of her characters.<sup>46</sup> However, despite this, the fact that there are no opposite-sex partnered sex scenes, and the film's enduring popularity with queer female audiences, *Bound* still occupies a somewhat problematic position in relation to the male gaze. As Elizabeth D'Angelo notes, both Gershon and Tilly were keen to explicitly state their heterosexuality while doing publicity for the film.<sup>47</sup> While this in itself does not necessarily mean that the film panders to the male gaze, this kind of explicit confirmation of heterosexuality lends those sex scenes an extra layer

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<sup>45</sup> For a fuller account of this, see Kelly Kessler, 'Bound Together: Audience Unification in Image Diversification', *Text, Practice, Performance* 3 (2001), 18-36 (pp.23-25).

<sup>46</sup> For more discussion of Gina Gershon's star text, see Linda Ruth Williams, pp.196-210.

<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth D'Angelo, 'The Semiotics of Homosexuality in Television Commercials and Film: *Diabolique* and *Bound*' in *Beauty and the Abject: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. by Leslie Boldt-Irons, Corrado Federici, and Ernesto Virgulti (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), pp.199-210 (p.208).



of performance. Although Corky and Violet are not doing it for the boys, the extratextual interviews suggest that Tilly and Gershon may be.

Both *Basic Instinct* and *Bound*'s representation of bisexually active femme fatale characters mean that the films occupy complex positions in relation to female sexual performance, postfeminist empowerment and the male gaze. While the threat of male recuperation constantly hovers over these characters, what the bisexually active femme fatale suggests is that although representations of female bisexuality may be open to contamination and appropriation by straight male fantasy, the representation of bisexuality on screen operates in complex and often contradictory ways. *Basic Instinct* and *Bound* expose these contradictions, and function as articulations of the uneasy relationship between female sexuality and cinematic representation.

### **Sexual Fragmentation: Representation beyond the Linear**

In the remainder of this chapter, I move beyond the more conventional narratives of these films, to consider two films with much more complex, fragmented narratives, in order to provide an account of the ways in which cinematic structure and visual style can offer ways of disrupting the anxious insistence at universal monosexuality that I have already discussed. In reading *Mulholland Drive* and *Femme Fatale* in terms of the relationship between their narratives and the ways in which they represent the bisexually active femme fatale, I suggest that these films provide narrative strategies for representing bisexuality which resist the more problematic options offered in more conventional narratives. *Mulholland Drive* is a film in two parts. The film begins when Betty (Naomi Watts), an aspiring actress, moves to Los Angeles in order to pursue her career, and meets a mysterious amnesiac woman who comes to call herself Rita (Laura Harring). Betty and Rita work together to find out what happened to her, and along the way become sexually involved. Approximately two-thirds of the way through,

the film shifts dramatically, to reveal new characters played by the same actresses. Betty has become Diane, a tragic failed actress, while Rita becomes Camilla, Diane's former partner who has left her for a successful film director. The distraught Diane arranges to have Camilla killed, before committing suicide. *Femme Fatale's* narrative works in a similar, albeit rather simpler way. Laure (Rebecca Romjin) is part of a team of jewel thieves, and embarks on the seduction of Veronica (Rie Rasmussen), a beautiful model, in order to steal her jewels at a major film festival. The plan goes wrong and Laure finds herself on the run, while her former partners in crime are jailed. Laure assumes the identity of Lily, a woman who has killed herself and who strongly resembles Laure, and makes a new life for herself as a rich man's wife while concealing her identity from the public. A photographer, Bardo (Antonio Banderas), succeeds in taking her picture, and she seduces and manipulates him in order to keep her identity a secret and prevent her former associates from finding her, but the plan fails and she is killed. Laure then wakes up, discovering that her adventures as Lily were all a nightmare. She saves the real Lily, setting into action a series of events that save her own life, and it is eventually revealed that she was in alliance with Veronica all along to steal the jewels. The film ends as Laure meets Bardo, apparently for the first time. In reading these complex narratives alongside the arguments I have already put forth about the representations of the bisexually active femme fatale, I argue that the fragmented cinematic narrative provides an important space for the identification and disruption of conventional narratives and anxieties about bisexual femininity.

As I argue above in relation to *Basic Instinct* and *Bound*, the bisexual femme fatale provokes narratives of detection in which identifying the femme fatale's sexual orientation is essential to solving the film's mystery, and it initially appears that the same is true of *Femme Fatale* and *Mulholland Drive*. The opening section of *Femme Fatale* takes place at a prestigious film festival, during which Laure, the eponymous femme fatale, seduces Veronica, the

modelesque date of an acclaimed director. This bathroom stall sex scene is presented as an elaborate ruse to remove Veronica's priceless diamond encrusted outfit so that Laure's accomplices can replace it with a cheap replica



**Figure 3.4: *Femme Fatale* (2002).  
Reflective femme fatales.**

and abscond with the jewels. At the very beginning of the film, Laure's face is reflected in the television screen on which she is watching *Double Indemnity*, implying a connection between Phyllis Dietrichson, the archetypal classic-era femme fatale, and Laure (see figure 3.4). Laure then dons a (Hollywood) butch-coded outfit of slicked back hair and leather vest as she is reminded of her instructions to 'charm the snake into the stall' by her male employer. This chain of events appears to set out Laure's role as femme fatale-for hire, employed for her ability to seduce anyone, and who dresses the part of a glamorous butch in order to fulfil her mission of seducing the naive and beautiful feminine woman in order to get rich.

However, by the end of the film, it is revealed that Laure and Veronica were in league to double-cross the jewel thieves and split the profits from the diamonds between themselves. During this ending scene their parting kiss implies a mutual understanding and an equal, sexually charged working relationship between them, rather than a femme fatale's seduction of an innocent party in order to acquire wealth. The early scene relies on the idea that Laure is playing a part in her bisexual activity with Veronica in order that her role in the jewel theft be taken at face value, and the revelation of a mutual attraction between the two women at the end of the film facilitates a shift in the story being told about both Laure's sexual orientation, and her trustworthiness. The question of when, and for whom, the femme fatale's sexual

attentions are genuine is central to the solving of her mystery, and the use of bisexual activity here depends on cultural perceptions of bisexual behaviour as unreliable, and indicative of untrustworthiness or uncertainty.

Similarly, *Mulholland Drive* initially appears to present a similar situation in which solving the mystery of the noir plot is made possible through a diagnosis of the bisexually active femme fatale's true desires. In my discussion of the film I employ the most commonly discussed reading of the fractured narrative, that the first two thirds of the film – the Rita and Betty section – are read as Diane's 'wish fulfilling "dream"', and the final Diane and Camilla section as the nightmarish reality that provoke the dream. In this account of the film, *Mulholland Drive's* noir plot is structured around one version of events which is initially presented as reality, and in which Betty and Rita's romance is unthreatened by other (male) parties, but which is ultimately revealed to be a fallacy, that while Camilla was once involved with Diane, she is now linked with her male director. Although in the second part of the film Camilla does engage in sexual activity with women, her relationship with the director is framed as her primary relationship, and as such is presented as a betrayal of Diane. The significance of all this for the representation of the bisexually active femme fatale is that the key to solving the mystery of the film lies in solving Camilla's sexual orientation. It is her bisexual betrayal of Diane that results in the fantasy sequence, and so by identifying what and who Camilla wants in reality, the viewer is able to identify this sequence as a fantasy and untangle some of the mystery of the narrative. Of course, there are other indications that the first section is Diane's fantasy – the dreamlike state of the too-perfect situation that Betty finds herself in on arriving in Hollywood is one of the more obvious examples – and this is by no means the only reading of the film's fragmented narrative, but I contend that the shift in gender of Rita/Camilla's primary sexual partner in the move from the dream section to the

reality section functions as a means of conflating the solution to the mystery with Camilla's sexual orientation.

However, while *Mulholland Drive* and *Femme Fatale* may appear to replicate the conflation of the femme fatale's sexual orientation with issues of truth and deception discussed in relation to the other key films in this chapter, it is important to note that in addition to this, they also employ complex, fragmented narratives which disrupt this tendency.

Gledhill argues of the classic-era femme fatale that

not only is the hero frequently not sure whether the woman is honest or a deceiver, but the heroine's characterisation is itself fractured so that it is not evident to the audience whether she fills the stereotype or not. Rather than a coherent realisation of the unstable, treacherous woman, we tend to find in film noir a series of partial characterisations juxtaposed, not necessarily in continuity but by gaps in time (see *Out of the Past*) and often in blunt contradiction with each other.<sup>48</sup>

This sense of the femme fatale as characterised by narrative fragmentation is continued and expanded upon in these contemporary bisexually active femme fatale films, adding to the sense of divided loyalties and uncertain cinematic politics of sexuality and gender, while at the same time undermining the binary sexual identities which the detective narratives of *Bound* and *Basic Instinct* seem to espouse. Representing bisexual activity on screen is a complex undertaking, fraught with pitfalls made up of the narrative methods of mainstream cinema.

However, as Roberts points out,

Notions of bisexuality, like narrative structure in cinema, operate on a space/time continuum, whereby the factors of presence, duration and order determine how it is expressed and understood. Therefore, any theory of visibility should have to take into account how the spatial and temporal dimensions intersect with those of the cinema across a narrative.<sup>49</sup>

Roberts' argument is an important one in identifying the importance of considering the role played by narrative structure and visual style in representing bisexuality cinematically, and it is with this in mind that I propose an alternate view of reading the femme fatale's bisexual activity. While linear narratives can shore up conventional models of sexuality, fractured,

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<sup>48</sup> Gledhill, p.31.

<sup>49</sup> B.C. Roberts, p.339.

fragmented narratives can do the opposite by refusing the simplistic linear model of sexuality put forward by many mainstream films.

One of the key problems in representing bisexuality in narrative cinema is that it is a medium which relies heavily on the traditional romantic idea of finding ‘the one’. Maria Pramaggiore argues that ‘[c]onventional coupled romance narratives, whether concerned with gay, lesbian, or heterosexual scenarios, make it difficult to recognize or to imagine bisexuality other than as a developmental stage prior to “mature” monogamous monosexuality,’ an idea which, when considering the romantic comedy format, suggests that the conventions of romantic comedy can only lead to affirmation of bisexuality as temporary.<sup>50</sup> Hollywood cinema then, with its conventions of narrative closure, may seem to offer little space for the representation of bisexuality as a long term and consistent identity or set of desires. When characters engage in ultimate coupling with ‘the one’ at the end of a narrative text, this acts as a form of repudiation of previous relationships, and in a behaviourally bisexual character, means that the sex of their ultimate partner acts as a way of fixing their identity as ‘really’ heterosexual or homosexual, depending on the sex of the final partner.<sup>51</sup> Pramaggiore adds that ‘[i]n order to use a visual medium to render “same” and “opposite” sex desires that are not mutually exclusive, two conditions must obtain: either the film must depict multiple, variously sexed partners in particular scenes, or it must suggest an “oscillation” between partners of both sexes.’<sup>52</sup> I contend that by using fragmented narratives and visual strategies,

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<sup>50</sup> Maria Pramaggiore, ‘Straddling the Screen: Bisexual Spectatorship and Contemporary Narrative Film’ in *RePresenting Bisexualities: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire* ed. Donald E. Hall, and Maria Pramaggiore (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996) pp.272-300 (pp.276-77). Moorman makes a similar argument in her account of *The L Word*, p.165.

<sup>51</sup> Hemmings offers a particularly detailed exploration of the relationship between the repudiation of past partners who do not fit with a person’s current sexual identity as a key aspect in the formation of a fixed monosexual subject position. Clare Hemmings, *Bisexual Spaces: A Geography of Sexuality and Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>52</sup> Pramaggiore, p.277.

it is possible to resist both this linear oscillation and the necessity of showing multiple partners in the same scene.<sup>53</sup>

As described above, *Femme Fatale*'s Laure is presented as a fragmented personality, spending a large section of the narrative as 'Lily', an alternate dream version of herself, in which she plays out the role of deadly, double crossing, hypersexual femme fatale, dying in the process, only to wake up and realise that she was dreaming. In the dream, Lily is every bit the femme fatale, and in reality she



**Figure 3.5: *Femme Fatale* (2002).  
Fragmentation through multiple mirrors.**

displays some of these tendencies in her seduction of Veronica and her double-crossing of her criminal partners, but her apparent loyalty to Veronica, and her rather more bloodless crimes complicate both the idea of the femme fatale as pure fantasy and the possibility of clearly



**Figure 3.6: *Femme Fatale* (2002). Laure in disguise,  
seen through a camera lens, and fragmented  
by venetian blinds.**

binarising sexuality. In addition to this, she is presented visually using split-screen techniques which allow her to fill the screen twice at the same time, she is shot through and behind camera lenses, hidden behind translucent

<sup>53</sup> This is not to suggest that scenes with multiple partners are essentially problematic, but rather that a consistent reliance on such scenes would merely function as a way of consolidating ideas about bisexuality as *inherently* kinky, greedy, or unfaithful. In addition to this, the multiple partner model can also appear clunky and obvious, as in the remake of *The Haunting* (1999), in which, when asked if she has trouble with commitment, Theo says, 'my boyfriend thinks so, my girlfriend doesn't. We could all live together but they hate each other.'

glass, reflected in mirrors and television screens, wearing wigs, disguises, and false bruises, and even her clothing seems to divide her with lines coming from thigh-high boots, stockings, bras cut at acute angles, while headscarves and sunglasses frequently divide her face (see figures 3.5 and 3.6). As Lily, the character does not behave bisexually, but rather seduces and double-crosses men. As Laure, she spends the first part of the film in the role of (pretend?) lesbian seductress, and double crossing men, and the final part following the dream sequence doing deals with a female lover, and potentially embarking on a romantic attachment to Bordo, the male photographer she dreamed of screwing over. In both narrative and stylistic terms, Laure is a fragmented character, and her motives and desires become fragmented because of this.

*Mulholland Drive* follows a still more complex narrative, as I outlined above. Again, the characters are fragmented, as the film features the same actress play different characters, while different actresses are dressed the same in order to create a doubling effect, as in Rita's adoption of a blonde wig which makes her resemble Betty. Rita/Camilla in particular occupies an extremely confused



**Figure 3.7: *Mulholland Drive* (2001).  
Doubling in the mirror.**

space (see figure 3.7). As Rita she frequently looks in mirrors to assess her appearance, and even the identity she adopts is taken from a film poster seen in reverse and initially only in part in the mirror's reflection (see figure 3.8). As in *Femme Fatale*, the characters take on different names at different times, and much of the action takes place in a slightly surreal dream-world. That the desires of Rita/Camilla are difficult to define is reflected in the film's visual iconography and styling. While the femme fatale herself is seen and described in





**Figure 3.8: *Mulholland Drive* (2001).  
'Rita' finds her identity in a fragment of a reflection.**

romantic and sexual attachments to multiple men and women in ways that are addressed in the plots as an aspect of the femme fatale's mystery, and apparently solved, this sense of closure is undermined by ways in which

multiplicity and fragmentation of sexual desire is echoed in the visual style and narratives of the films themselves.

Just as *Femme Fatale's* narrative points towards a sense of uncertainty around sexual identity and the femme fatale, I argue that *Mulholland Drive's* use of the dream sequence goes still further in demonstrating not just the impossibility of making clear judgements about women's sexual desires and identities based on appearance, but also the intense anxiety that this impossibility causes. Where *Basic Instinct* and *Bound* play on the idea that the monosexual assumptions of noir heroes and villains prevent them from noticing the double agent potential in the bisexually active femme fatale, *Mulholland Drive* employs these assumptions in the form of an impossible fantasy. To return to my earlier account of Diane's 'wish fulfilling "dream"' versus her nightmarish reality that provoke the dream, I contend then the first section, in which Rita, the dream-version of Camilla, is not bisexually active, functions as an articulation of Diane's desires for a 'simpler' world in which current actions translate to loyalty and fixed sexual identity.<sup>54</sup> While many readings of the sex scene between Betty and Rita, who cannot remember if she had has sex (with a woman) before, have focused on the relevance of the

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<sup>54</sup> Chris Rodley, *Lynch on Lynch*, rev. edn. (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005) p.267

softcore boarding school cliché that these lines evoke,<sup>55</sup> I would like to consider them in terms of the erasure of bisexuality and affirmation of the slippage between sexual action and orientation. As noted, in the Diane and Camilla section of the film, Camilla is revealed to have left Diane for a male film director, which provokes Diane to order the murder of Camilla, and to take her own life. In this context, the fantasy sex scene operates as a way of erasing the heart-wrenching effects of Camilla's bisexual behaviour by erasing her history. Rita, suffering from amnesia, cannot remember whether she has had sex with women before. Crucially, this implies that she cannot remember whether she has had sex with anyone before. San Filippo argues that the line 'opens up a space both on their parts and on ours the viewers' for exploration of their bi-potentiality.<sup>56</sup> However, I would argue that contrary to this, the erasure of Rita's history allows for a wish-fulfilling erasure of her bisexuality in Diane's fantasy, and one which is reliant on the model of understanding sexual orientation based on the current sexual partner.

Many theorists of bisexuality have noted that the focus on current sexual partner is a highly effective way of erasing bisexual history, and that the telling of bisexual histories, the practice of what Baumgardner describes as 'hav[ing] to constantly crowd every conversation with sign posts ("ex-girlfriend", "ex-boyfriend", "baby's father") to indicate the whole person I am.'<sup>57</sup> Diane's dream of an amnesiac sexual partner is informed by an anxiety that current formulations of sexual orientation and desire do not relate to her lived experience with the femme fatale Camilla. Her erasure of Camilla's sexual history creates Camilla as Rita, a blank slate whose behaviour does not belie a more complex sexual orientation, who is trustworthy and whose sexuality cannot be seen as a lie or a betrayal because her current choice of partner

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<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Heather K. Love, 'Spectacular Failure: The Figure of the Lesbian in *Mulholland Drive*', *New Literary History* 35 (2004) 17-32, and Maria San Filippo, 'The "Other" Dreamgirl: Female Bisexuality as the "Dark Secret" of David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001)', *Journal of Bisexuality* 7.1/2 (2007) 13-49

<sup>56</sup> San Filippo, (paragraph 4/58).

<sup>57</sup> Baumgardner, p.193. Emphasis in the original. For an example of criticism of the focus on current partners, see James, pp.217-40.

does not match her sexual history and orientation. Similarly, the fragmented narrative and visual style of *Femme Fatale* functions as a means of telling a sexual history in a non-linear, non-binary way which does not privilege a current or final partner. The films discussed in this chapter all play on an anxiety caused by the disruption of a monosexual model in which bisexual desire does not exist, and where it is possible to make a person stand still so you can see what they are, and the alliance of this anxiety with the femme fatale allows these concerns to be framed in the context of wider anxieties about feminine duplicity. These texts note the danger in making assumptions based on current sexual activity: the complex narratives of *Femme Fatale* and *Mulholland Drive* suggest that while it may be comforting to fantasise about less complex systems of sexuality, these systems remain a fantasy, while the noir-sucker plots of *Bound* and *Basic Instinct* demonstrate a failure to see past these fantastic systems that is blinkered and highly dangerous.

The relating of stories of bisexual behaviour is an important tool in fighting the invisibility of bisexual identity, and this is illustrated by Baumgardner's reference to crowding conversations with signposts of sexual histories as a way of claiming her experience as valid and consistent with her current sexual identity, and in Gibian's statement that

[t]o compensate for the lack of an adequate label, which I know would have its own limitations anyway, I find myself telling my story, or as much of it as the situation warrants. It gives people the chance to hear, not *defector* or *fence-sitter*, but process, struggle toward self-understanding, self-claiming. It gives them room to hear about my feelings and tell their own. It gives me – and all of us – room to be more than a name.<sup>58</sup>

The fictional femme fatale narrative without the repudiatory ending of ultimate coupling parallels these real life experiences in allowing space for this process of storytelling in which the texture of a bisexually active woman's sexual life can be created. In line with Gibian's privileging of stories over identity labels, Baumgardner argues that

[while] I would never insist that people who fall into the category that I would describe as bisexual all use the word *bisexual* to identify themselves [...] it is at the same time a feminist act to firm up the

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<sup>58</sup> Gibian, pp.13-14. Emphasis in the original.

existence of bisexuality. This doesn't mean pushing the term, but it does mean telling our stories – and taking them seriously, not treating our own lives as embarrassing or confusing.<sup>59</sup>

The telling of stories of women's fluid desire is a vital project for a feminist reclamation of sexual orientations that can so easily be dismissed as inauthentic, or appropriated by a patriarchal male gaze, and the fragmented narratives of these bisexually active femme fatale films provide that space for those stories to be told.

Like Baumgardner, I do not think that it is productive to term these characters that exist without labels 'bisexual', but rather to acknowledge that their narratives problematise notions of monosexuality, and assumptions that it is possible to pin down a woman's internal desires simply by capturing her actions during one moment of time. As tempting as it may be to attempt to shoehorn these characters into a preconceived model of bisexual identity for the purposes of broadening the discussion of bisexual identity on film, the femme fatale's inherent connection with what Doane terms 'perpetual ambiguity and the limits of vision in relation to knowledge' makes this a highly disingenuous project.<sup>60</sup> As identified in the introduction to this chapter, issues of invisibility, mystery and disguise hover around both the femme fatale and queer cinematic representation, and in these films, it is this ambiguity that offers the most potential for a queer feminist reading. Amber Ault has argued that, '[i]n the contested space of the bisexual body, the ultimate conflict is not between categories but about them, and the move to define and defend the bisexual subject paradoxically seems the move most likely to undermine the radical, transformative potential of its indeterminacy.'<sup>61</sup> In the instance of the bisexually active femme fatale, attempting to define her as 'bisexual' is a venture that threatens to reproduce the very assumptions about the transparency of sexual activity that bisexuality challenges by assuming that bisexual activity is equal to bisexual identity.

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<sup>59</sup> Baumgardner, p.218. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>60</sup> Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p.3.

<sup>61</sup> Amber Ault, 'Ambiguous Identity in an Unambiguous Gender Structure: The Case of Bisexual Women (1996)' in *Bisexuality: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Merl Storr (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp.167-85 (p.185).

Instead, the importance of these films lies in their unwillingness to pin down the femme fatale's sexual mystery by attributing a specific sexual identity to her, and the way in which none of her actions can be entirely claimed as either motivated by sexual desire or as an example of the femme fatale's sexual manipulations. The representation of her bisexual behaviour is further complicated by what San Filippo describes as a 'discursive gap between conspicuous implication and a curious lack of articulation' in reference to *Mulholland Drive*, and this tension surrounding a refusal to name what is hinted at through the femme fatale's bisexual activity occurs across the films.<sup>62</sup> To take San Filippo's phrase a step further, this discursive gap is the space in the bisexually active femme fatale film in which bisexuality is at once there and not there, never fully consolidated or undermined, where doubts are cast over what, if anything, can be seen as an articulation of real desire, or a manipulative technique.

The focus on fragmentation in *Mulholland Drive* and *Femme Fatale*, and its potential to reflect and comment on the issues of fixity of sexual identity, sexual history and temporality can be best explained through an analysis of Bordo's photographic collage of a Paris square in *Femme Fatale*. Bordo assembles this collage from photographs taken over the course of many years, in all seasons and at different times of day. As Mark Bould notes, '[l]ike the film, it is constructed out of quotations, captured moments; and, in fabricating a totality by spacialising the passage of time, it calls attention to the textuality of film itself. The substratum of film is the photograph [...] the individual image or frame which is made invisible when projected as part of a film.'<sup>63</sup> This spacialising of the passage of time can also be read as echoing many of the issues surrounding sexual behaviour, desire and identity. This collage is not a snapshot that demands the image stand still in order to be read, but an attempt to represent the whole via an attention to its shifts through temporal space, its changes and the different people that cross its path. As in the theoretical accounts of bisexuality as something which can only be

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<sup>62</sup> San Filippo, paragraph 1/58.

<sup>63</sup> Mark Bould, *Film Noir: From Berlin to Sin City* (London: Wallflower, 2005) p.104.

represented through the retelling of sexual history, an attempt to capture the wholeness of the square is reliant on a telling of its stories through images, and in doing so gestures towards a more inclusive version of representation. At the same time, the act of the artist's selection of particular pictures draws attention to the privileging of one moment in time and space over another, and leads to a further important factor in the understanding of bisexual representation: that the representation of the sexual self depends heavily on the particular stories that we tell.

Just as these two films work to disrupt the issues around knowledge and monosexuality raised in *Bound* and *Basic Instinct*, questions of sexually transmitted disease and infection also occur and are complicated in *Mulholland Drive* and *Femme Fatale*, as the complex plots suggest an uncertainty around the status of bisexually active women's bodies. The first section of *Mulholland Drive*, in which Rita, the dream-version of Camilla, has lost her memory, and is only sexually active with Betty, functions as a complex mixture of fantasy and nightmare surrounding bodily purity and sexual activity. I have discussed the implications of the fantasy of Rita's lack of memory concerning her sexual past for broader issues about the narration of sexuality earlier in this chapter, but I would like to return to it in order to focus here on the significance of this scene for the connection of the bisexually active femme fatale with untrustworthiness and infection. While the scene functions as a fantasy of a clean slate in terms of sexual orientation and identity, that Rita's sexual history is erased by her amnesia also locates her body as a hazardous site of potential disease. The notion, popular in both safer sex education and abstinence advocacy, that having sex with someone means having sex with everyone they have ever had sex with, haunts this scene in the form of a potential history of irresponsible promiscuity.<sup>64</sup> Although Betty/Diane may imagine that she is safely fluid-bonded

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<sup>64</sup> A particularly dramatic example of this model of sexual contact is the 'Sex Degrees of Separation' test available on a British pharmacy's website, which allows the user to approximate how many indirect sexual partners they have had based on questions about their direct partners in order to '[...] highlight how exposed you can be to STIs if you do not practice safe sex'. According to this test, even one direct sexual partner can mean

with a woman who has no sexual past, the possibility of every potential sexual past lingers over the scene.<sup>65</sup> Just as Rita's blank memory offers fantasy and temptation, the possibility of an unknown sexual history also implies the danger of infection at odds with Diane's fantasy of a pristine sexual encounter. The implication of the bisexually active woman's diverse and exciting sexual history, and its message of free-flowing sexual disease, cast the bisexual woman as a femme fatale because of the implied danger of her body, where that which is tempting goes hand in hand with that which will kill you. In this scene, rather than presenting the bisexual body as inherently infected, the film again posits a scenario which reveals the anxieties surrounding the legibility of bodies and their potential for infection, and the fantasies that we construct around bodies and sexual history in order to contain these anxieties.

Just as in *Basic Instinct* and *Bound*, these films also present issues of contamination, dilution and appropriation and each both supports and disrupts the male gaze in relation to the femme fatale's bisexual behaviour. In *Femme Fatale's* jewel theft scene, the femme fatale's seduction of her female mark takes place in front of her male accomplice, thus indicating the gaze of the male spectator, and on first viewing it appears that Laure's seduction of Veronica is purely practical, functioning as a means of acquiring the jewels. Her apparent shift to hypersexual heterosexuality in the middle section of the film suggests further that her bisexual behaviour served only as a way of getting what she wanted and providing an exciting sexual set-piece for the beginning of an erotic thriller, a kind of warm up act which echoes the frequent disruption of 'lesbian' scenes by male actors in mainstream pornography. However, again, the fragmentary narrative complicates this reading, as Laure's dream of being Lily positions her heterosexuality as a nightmarish, sinister fantasy, one from which she is happy to

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indirect partners by the thousands. 'Sex Degrees of Separation' *Lloyds Pharmacy* <<http://calculators.lloydspharmacy.com/sexdegrees/>> [accessed 26 September 2009].

<sup>65</sup> Here 'fluid bonded' refers to the practice of one or more sexual partners gaining a clean bill of sexual health in order to engage in unprotected sexual activity, i.e. without the use of condoms, dental dams, etc.

awake and live to change her circumstances. Once again, while such narrative strategies do not protect scenes of bisexual behaviour from the patriarchal gaze, they do work to disrupt them.

In *Mulholland Drive*, as I mention above, the bedroom seduction scene is frequently read in terms of its echoes of pornographic fantasy. However, despite this, strategies of fragmentation work even beyond the narrative and extend to the materiality of the film product itself. The DVD version of the film does not contain conventional chapters, and so the scene cannot be accessed in isolation from the rest of the film and experienced in the on-demand juke box fashion of much contemporary media. Where in Chapter Two I argued of *Wild Things* that the popularity of the sex scenes as separate from the film undermines much of the progressive potential of the flashback sequences, in the case of *Mulholland Drive*, this refusal to allow the scene to exist as a separate entity offers an important disruption of the pornographic patriarchal gaze. Technology has, perhaps, bypassed this strategy, and the popularity of youtube.com and downloaded films certainly offer the viewer alternative ways of accessing the scene, but the refusal of the direct route to the bedroom scene via DVD chapters does still present a valuable statement about the potential that even the most apparently clichéd sex scenes might have for disrupting the threat of patriarchal recuperation of cinematic sex between women.

The bisexual femme fatale stands in for a range of anxieties about the legibility of female sexuality, the possibilities of representing bisexual desire on screen, the relationship that bisexuality has with contemporary feminism, issues of disease and infection, and the recuperative properties of the male gaze when confronted with sexually explicit images of women together. However, in *Mulholland Drive* and *Femme Fatale*, the fractured narrative and a fragmentary visual style offers a way of complicating these anxieties, flagging up their composite parts, and even suggesting alternatives. They refuse conventional linear accounts of sexual desire, and the strategies of oscillation and multiple partnered sex that mark so much of



the cinematic representation of bisexuality. These films also work to reinforce one of the key contentions of this thesis, that the femme fatale is useful for feminist film studies because of the way that she forces concerns about the politics of cinematic representation of women to the surface, and embodies the complex contradictions that feminist criticism often finds so troublesome.

## **Conclusion**

These films can no more be entirely recouped for the patriarchal gaze than they can for bisexual feminism. A sense of anxiety pervades these films: the bisexually active femme fatale as double agent rears her head again, and poses a threat to masculinity. Hemmings argues that '[t]he double agent is the figure of political shame and personal amorality. She embodies personal and general confusion, with an often frightening and sinister knowledge of both the outside and the inside.'<sup>66</sup> This confusion and possession of knowledge by the bisexually active femme fatale allows her to transcend the notion of the wild girl who will make out with girls so that men can get their kicks. The bisexually active femme fatale provokes anxiety because, although the male gaze assumes knowledge of that which it objectifies, she disrupts the assumption that to see her is to know her desires. She carries knowledge about what she wants and who she wants, and although her sexual actions might suggest what these things are, it is impossible to be certain. The bisexually active femme fatale's desires are confusing, opaque, and potentially deadly, and so disrupt the ability of the patriarchal gaze to objectify her without a sense of anxiety provoked by her double agent status.

The behaviourly bisexual femme fatale provokes anxiety not only because it is impossible to get a full picture of her sexual orientation, her fantasies, desires and loyalties, but because she implies that the same is true of everyone, and of women in particular.

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<sup>66</sup> Hemmings, 'Resituating the Bisexual Body', p.130.

Through the absence of a clear cut desire, she points to corresponding absences in subjects beyond the femme fatale narrative which aren't addressed by a dominant ideology of assuming sexual orientation based on the sex of their current partner. Jan Clausen argues of such anxieties that '[s]ocially powerful groups have a stake in promoting the illusion of unconflicted identity because the maintenance of their power depends on keeping in place a constellation of apparently fixed, "natural," immutable social relationships and psychological postures.'<sup>67</sup> The concept that it is impossible to acquire a sense of someone's genuine desires based on their actions at a given moment occurs when these fixed and natural formulations of identity are disrupted, as is the case with the bisexually active femme fatale. The value of this figure for feminism is that her refusal to fall irrefutably on the side of either patriarchal exploitation or unproblematic feminist icon foregrounds the slippage that can occur between the two. She cannot be conclusively recouped for the male gaze, feminist iconography or bisexual visibility, but contains aspects of all three elements at different times.

The prevalence of bisexual activity in recent femme fatale narratives seems, to some extent, an obvious result of the parallels between notions of sexual excess, danger, and duplicity in both the femme fatale figure and in stereotypes surrounding the bisexual woman combined with a desire to add some extra pornographically inspired spice to the neo-noir erotic thriller to create an extra-sexy, extra-untrustworthy, extra-deadly femme fatale figure. However, alongside these factors, the bisexually active femme fatale speaks to wider anxieties surrounding the nature of sexual orientation, behaviour and identity. These femme fatales are not only not what they appear to be in the same sense as all femme fatale characters, but they provoke important and uncomfortable questions about the potential disconnect between desire and behaviour. These characters also sit at a point of slippage between patriarchal appropriation and useful and potentially subversive bisexual feminist iconography, providing a

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<sup>67</sup> Jan Clausen, 'My Interesting Condition (1990)' in *Bisexuality: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Merl Storr (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 107-11 (p.110).

timely reminder that it is not only a person's sexual desires that are hard to fix into place, but also the political meaning of representations of sexually powerful women. The bisexually active femme fatale raises difficult questions and provides provocative imagery for a feminist film critique, but most importantly she refuses to stay still and allow us to see clearly what she is.

# Chapter Four

## Organic Cyborgs: The Science Fiction Femme Fatale

This chapter is concerned with the figure of the femme fatale as a hybrid body in science fiction cinema. While science fiction cinema has frequently taken visual cues from film noir, the femme fatale more frequently appears in non-noir narratives in which the female body is combined with technological elements, or where an alien is masquerading as a beautiful woman, or where female mutants are presented as deadly seductresses. The femme fatale in science fiction, then, most frequently appears as a cyborg, a mixture of human and non-human, in ways which present that mixture as threatening and sexualised. In discussing *X-Men: The Last Stand* and *Species*, I suggest that the hybrid body of the femme fatale is subjected to intense scrutiny, as the symptoms of her hybridity are forced to the surface of the body so that they can be read and diagnosed. These films use the figure of the femme fatale as a way of interrogating female power and subjectivity, and ultimately present highly conservative narratives which focus on the refusal of female agency. I then move on to analyse *The Faculty* and *Alien Resurrection* and argue that, while these films employ very similar techniques in their representation of the female hybrid body, when considered in the light of the significance of the origin myth, these films offer much greater potential for feminist meaning and a representation of the powerful female body that is not undermined by essentialist codings of the hybrid body.

### **Future Fatales: Science Fiction, Feminism, and the Body**

As is the case with the majority of this thesis, the films I discuss in this chapter take in a variety of budgets, production values and categories, and, despite their apparent consistency as science fiction, represent a broad range of subgenres. As numerous critics have noted, science fiction itself is a slippery and amorphous classification, encompassing a particularly

diverse range of film and literary products.<sup>1</sup> Geoff King and Tania Krzywinska argue that science fiction cinema extends '[f]rom lurid comic book blockbusters to dark dystopian visions', and both extremities of this spectrum are present in this study.<sup>2</sup> Such flexibility is not limited to a static science fiction genre. Science fiction has a tendency to bleed into other genres, most notably horror,<sup>3</sup> and the majority of films considered here are strong examples of this generic flexibility, interested as they are in monstrosity, corporeal transformation, and the limits of the body. In this chapter, two of the texts I address are franchise films: the big budget blockbuster comic book adaptation, *X-Men: The Last Stand* and the sci fi horror sequel of *Alien Resurrection*, and the other two are smaller, but still widely released films: the neo B-movie *Species*, and *The Faculty*, a teen update of *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* (1956). However, despite their diverse industrial forms, these films all engage with notions of the female body as mysterious and not entirely human. These bodies function as threatening science fiction incarnations of the femme fatale, and as I argue in this chapter, they do so in surprisingly similar ways.

Science fiction is a genre which has been critically associated with radical potential, offering fantastic possibilities for the opening up of new and potentially transgressive discourses about technology, the body and its limits, and the nature of humanity. Given the genre's preoccupation with bodily integrity, it is perhaps unsurprising that its scope takes in a varied range of approaches to embodied gender. In her introduction to an edited collection of essays about feminist science fiction, Marleen S. Barr identifies the genre as a vibrant and

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Adam Roberts dedicates a chapter of his critical exploration of the genre to interrogating the ways in which it has been historically defined, and the implications of those definitions. Adam Roberts, *Science Fiction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), pp.1-28.

<sup>2</sup> Geoff King and Tania Krzywinska, *Science Fiction Cinema: From Outerspace to Cyberspace* (London: Wallflower, 2000), p.1. Similarly, Vivian Sobchack explores the expansiveness of the genre and its multiple definitions in some detail. Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New York: Ungar, 1987), pp.17-63.

<sup>3</sup> The historical slippage between these two genres in particular has been noted and interrogated by King and Krzywinska, p.50, and Mark Jancovich, *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p.10.

influential space for (re)thinking gender and exploring feminist possibilities.<sup>4</sup> This potential has been critically explored in relation to specifically feminist science fiction texts,<sup>5</sup> but more mainstream generic products, particularly in the case of film and television, have been viewed with greater ambivalence in terms of their radical possibilities for a discussion of boundaries of gender, the body, and difference. For example, Jenny Wolmark suggests that the metaphor of the alien as a symbol of difference often functions outside of feminist science fiction as a regressive attempt to shore up boundaries of power, arguing that the figure of the alien ‘enables difference to be constructed in terms of binary oppositions which reinforce relations of dominance and subordination’, adding that ‘[t]he alien has often been used within science fiction to reproduce, rather than question, those divisions [the boundaries and limits of social identity]’.<sup>6</sup> This chapter interrogates this assertion further, through a consideration of the alien-coded body of the femme fatale in a range of contemporary science fiction films. What is the potential of deadly women who are not entirely human for redrawing or dissolving boundaries of gender and agency? Is there a possibility of resistant, radical approaches to the representations of women and power within these mainstream film products, or do they simply consolidate existing anxieties about the female body?

Science fiction has been the subject of a wealth of feminist criticism and theory, from mainstream Hollywood blockbusters to explicitly feminist literature, and taking in a broad range of historical periods. More specifically, representations of gendered bodies in science

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<sup>4</sup> Marleen S. Barr, ‘Everything’s Coming Up Roses’ in *Future Females The Next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism*, ed. by Marleen S. Barr (Lanham and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), pp.1-4.

<sup>5</sup> For examples of this, see Barr, and Jenny Wolmark, *Aliens and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism, and Postmodernism* (Hemmel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatshead, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Wolmark p.2, p.27. Doane makes a similar assertion about the representation of technology and gender in contemporary science fiction, arguing that ‘[a]lthough [...] technology makes possible the destabilisation of sexual identity as a category, there has also been a curious but fairly insistent history of representations of technology that work to fortify – sometimes desparately – conventional understandings of the feminine.’, while Roberts notes that the radical potential of a future-thinking genre is frequently undermined by narrative tendencies towards nostalgia. Mary Ann Doane, ‘Technophilia: Technology, Representation and the Feminine’ in *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*, ed. by Sean Raymond (London: Wallflower, 2004), pp.182-90 (p.182), Adam Roberts, pp.27-28.

fiction and its intersections with horror have produced a wealth of critical writing, particularly within feminist film studies. In particular, several key films have been repeatedly interrogated in the light of theories of the body, hybridity, monstrosity, and femininity. Analysis of the *Alien* films featuring Ripley (1979-1997) is central to several accounts of gender and science fiction, particularly in connection with the monstrous mother archetype,<sup>7</sup> while the first two *Terminator* films (1984 and 1991), *Bladerunner*, and the representations of the Borg in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and the film *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996) have all played significant roles in shaping feminist criticism of science fiction cinema. As these examples attest, the figure of the cyborg plays a significant role in the critical discourse around femininity and science fiction, informed predominantly by Donna Haraway's seminal *Cyborg Manifesto*.<sup>8</sup> However, this focus on the cyborg has led to a considerable gap in feminist science fiction criticism. Jennifer González makes the distinction between the 'organic cyborg', which she defines as 'a monster of multiple species' and the 'mechanical cyborg', which is 'a techno-human amalgam.'<sup>9</sup> As González observes, feminist criticism has focused on the latter of these two types. It is part of the project of this chapter to redress this balance, as I contend that the organic cyborg offers even greater potential for a resistant feminist reading than the more deeply explored technological variety.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Notably, Barbara Creed dedicates a substantial chapter to the first film in *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 16-30, while three essays in the first *Alien Zone* collection are concerned with the relationship between *Alien* and feminism, and a fourth appears in the subsequent collection, *Alien Zone II. Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction*, ed. by Annette Kuhn (London and New York: Verso, 1990), *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. by Annette Kuhn (London and New York: Verso, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991). Originally published as 'Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s', *Socialist Review*, 15.2 (1985) 65-107.

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer González, 'Envisioning Cyborg Bodies: Notes from Current Research' in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. by David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 540-51 (p. 540). While the term 'organic cyborg' might appear to be an oxymoron, in line with Haraway's *Manifesto*, I read the cyborg metaphorically, so that the notion of the cybernetic organism can describe any amalgamation of the conventional human body and another, non-human element, including both the mechanical and the organic.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Cranny-Francis contends that in the past twenty years, the focus of bodily anxiety has shifted from concern about technology towards more organic invasions, arguing that '[t]he human/machine interface might still hold some threat. But even more threatening is the invasion of the body by organic and/or technological pathogens: The AIDS virus, Ebola fever, killer flu viruses, Golden Staph, and the bodily changes

However, despite the richness of the existing work on the female body in science fiction films and television, and the frequency of science fiction characters who resemble femme fatales, there is relatively little research into the specificities of this tendency. In her account of female aliens in science fiction literature, Robin Roberts asserts that ‘the most dangerous alien is the female alien who can mesmerize men through sexual allure or reproduce and overwhelm humankind’, but she does not connect this narrative trope with the femme fatale.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, while her observations about the reproductive threat of the female alien are echoed and extended within scholarship on science fiction cinema, her remarks about the seductive capabilities of such characters do not have their equivalent within film studies. In her recent examination of science fiction cinema, Christine Cornea devotes a chapter to the representation of femininity in science fiction and does explicitly reference the femme fatale as a recurring figure, specifically in *Bladerunner* and *Star Trek: First Contact*, before moving on to a consideration of the ass-kicking scifi heroine.<sup>12</sup> However, Cornea’s reading of these films takes place in the context of a wider discussion of female roles in science fiction within a more general, historical study of the genre, and is thus unable to offer a sustained assessment of the politics of the femme fatale’s frequent appearances in science fiction. The evocation of the femme fatale has also been noted in shorter studies focusing on specific science fiction texts. Gillis draws on the assertion by Doane, as discussed in the Introduction, that the femme fatale is not in control of the power she exhibits, to interrogate the representation of Trinity in *The Matrix* films (1999-2003).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Susan A. George draws

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produced by exposure to technological processes (such as mining, manufacture, genetic manipulation, cloning)’. It is with this in mind that I believe that a study of the science fiction femme fatale as an organic cyborg is a particularly productive area of investigation. Anne Cranny-Francis, ‘The Erotics of the (cy)Borg: Authority and Gender in the Sociocultural Imaginary’ in *Future Female, The Next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Science Fiction Criticism*, ed. by Marleen S. Barr, (Lanham and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), pp. 145-63 (pp. 156-57).

<sup>11</sup> Robin Roberts, *A New Species: Gender and Science in Science Fiction* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p.40.

<sup>12</sup> Christine Cornea, *Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp.154-60.

<sup>13</sup> Gillis, pp.74-85.



heavily on Janey Place's seminal account of women in film noir to read the Number Six cylon of *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009) as a classic femme fatale.<sup>14</sup> These readings of specific texts and characters point toward the potential of reading the repeated appearances of deadly beautiful women in science fiction alongside existing theoretical accounts of the femme fatale. However, this area remains largely unexamined, despite the frequent attention given to representations of female threat and monstrosity in criticism of the genre.

Correspondingly, broader criticism of the femme fatale contains very little reference to the recurrence of the figure in science fiction. As detailed in the introduction to this thesis, the critical discourses surrounding the femme fatale focus predominantly on classic film noir and neo-noir, and as such have developed a significant blind spot with regards to the connections between the deadly noir woman and representations of dangerous femininity in the more fantastic, speculative, or supernatural forms offered by science fiction.<sup>15</sup> If this connection is mentioned at all, it is in passing, and frequently looks back to mythological women, rather than more contemporary texts, as evidenced by Finley's brief discussion of the supernatural imagery used by pre-Raphaelite artists who 'created the beast-like woman, conclusively equating aggressive feminist women with demonic women.'<sup>16</sup> Similarly, discussions of classic noir often use monstrous terms metaphorically to describe female characters, so that spider women, black widows, praying mantises all feature heavily in the critical rhetoric surrounding the femme fatale, but those texts which literalise this metaphorical tendency are not

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<sup>14</sup> Susan A. George, 'Fraking Machines: Desire, Gender, and the (Post)Human Condition in *Battlestar Galactica*' in *The Essential Science Fiction Television Reader*, ed. by J.P. Telotte (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), pp.159-75.

<sup>15</sup> One significant example of science fiction's impact on femme fatale criticism is Barbara Kennedy's reading of *Romeo is Bleeding* (1993), a neo-noir text, in which she argues that the highly visceral, aggressive character of Mona can be read as a 'cyborgian fatale', that while she is made entirely of flesh, 'her dislocated and static body movements' connote the mechanical. However, this reading does not go beyond the central canon of neo-noir femme fatale films that I outline in the Introduction. Barbara Kennedy, 'Post-feminist Futures in Film Noir' in *The Body's Perilous Pleasures: Dangerous Desires and Contemporary Culture*, ed. by Michelle Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp.126-42 (p.136).

<sup>16</sup> Finley, p.214.

interrogated.<sup>17</sup> In this chapter, I bring together critical discourses surrounding the femme fatale's metaphorical monstrosity with those concerned with the monstrous femininity of many of science fiction's gendered horrors. In doing so I examine texts which engage with notions of female power by testing the relationship between agency, the female body, and monstrosity, in order to ask whether these texts allow for the possibility of a feminist femme fatale that might not exist in other genres.

The films discussed in this chapter follow an extensive tradition in which film and television texts rooted in the fantastic and supernatural present female characters who are mysterious, sexually appealing, and whose bodies are not what they seem. From the Maria-robot of *Metropolis* (1927), and the original series of *Star Trek*, with its multiple representations of deceptively beautiful and often deadly women,<sup>18</sup> to an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in which a sexy new teacher is revealed to be a giant shape shifting praying mantis who seduces boys in order to eat them,<sup>19</sup> as well as the many representations of sexually alluring female vampires that have proliferated throughout popular culture, the femme fatale often appears in science fiction, fantasy and horror as a misleadingly attractive monster in disguise. *Eve of Destruction* and *Steel and Lace* (both 1991) each offer narratives in which cyborg women seduce and destroy men who have wronged the women upon whom they were modelled,<sup>20</sup> and the notion of the sexy deadly robot is parodied in *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1997). More recently, the *Species* series (1995-2007) is predicated on the idea of the predatory alien

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<sup>17</sup> For examples see Place, pp.47-68 (p.48), Hirsch, p.8, and Cowie, p.125. Additionally, the films themselves gesture towards these metaphorical connections in the visual representation of the femme fatale's environs, which are frequently dark, gloomy, dusty, even cave-like, taking on the qualities of an animal's lair. Examples of this from classic noir include *Double Indemnity*'s dark, stifling drawing room, and the cool, dark, cavernous taverna from *Out of the Past*. In post-Code cinema, the darkened bedroom, replete with potential instruments of capture and death, as in *Basic Instinct*, arguably performs the same function. The titles of films can also attest to this comparison between the femme fatale and the deadly animal, as exemplified by *Black Widow*.

<sup>18</sup> These narratives appear most memorably in the first aired episode, 'The Man Trap', in which the deadly 'Nancy' is able to change her appearance to best appeal to the person who observes her, and a later episode 'Mudd's Women', which features women who maintain an unnaturally beautiful appearance with the help of drugs. *Star Trek*, S01, Eps.1 and 6 (1966).

<sup>19</sup> *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 'Teacher's Pet', S01, Ep.4 (1997).

<sup>20</sup> The rape revenge narrative appears frequently in these kinds of films, as the cyborg woman's deadly adaptations allow her to perform grisly murders upon the men she seduces. For a more recent version of this, see the vagina dentata horror film *Teeth*.

disguised as a beautiful woman, as are the *Decoys* films (2004 and 2007). While these images of the cyborgic woman as femme fatale appear throughout science fiction, fully fledged femme fatales are surprisingly absent from those texts which display a heavy film noir influence. While future noir – sometimes also called tech noir – takes many of its visual cues from classical film noir, the femme fatale rarely appears as a central character or plot point, and instead, the femme fatale is briefly referenced through 1940s iconography.<sup>21</sup> In films like *Dark City*, *New Rose Hotel* (1998), *The Matrix* trilogy and *Strange Days*, the femme fatale is evident in brief flashes, but is even more elusive than in the retro noir films I discuss in Chapter One. It is this discrepancy that leads me to discuss texts beyond the various neo-noir subgenres, as they, and science fiction in particular, offer a series of significant representations of the femme fatale that have been previously unexamined.

This wealth of texts appears in conjunction with a pattern of representation in contemporary cinema, as identified by Patricia Linton in her discussion of hybrid bodies, who argues that ‘in many contemporary fiction and film narratives, the alien is represented not as definitively other, but as an in-between creature – not entirely strange, not entirely human.’<sup>22</sup> The body in science fiction is a highly contested site, in which the boundaries of the body can be undermined or shored up. In particular, science fiction displays a particular fascination with testing the limits of bodies, in questioning distinctions between the human and the non-human, the self and the other. As Haraway argues, ‘[s]cience fiction is generically concerned with the interpretation of boundaries between problematic selves and unexpected others and with the exploration of possible worlds in a context structured by transnational

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<sup>21</sup> While *Bladerunner* aligns its cyborg women with the femme fatale’s iconography and sexual aggression, it remains a lone text in terms of its commitment to the figure as anything more than a signifier of noirishness.

<sup>22</sup> Patricia Linton, ‘Aliens, (M)Others, Cyborgs: The Emerging Ideology of Hybridity’ in *Alien Identities: Exploring Differences in Film and Fiction*, ed. Deborah Cartmell et al. (London and Stirling, VA: Pluto Press, 1999), pp.172-186 (p.172).

technoscience.<sup>23</sup> This constant interpretation of boundaries can manifest in the form of bodies which are not easily categorised, and where these boundaries appear to have been eroded. When aligned with the narrative and iconography of the femme fatale, this recent tendency towards uncanny inbetweenness results in a series of representations in which the anxiety that beautiful women are not what they seem is made literal. Human femininity is combined with an unnatural, non-human element to create a sexually appealing but deadly seductress. As outlined in the Introduction, critical discussion of the classic-era femme fatale has centred around the woman as a site of investigation, but in these films that metaphor becomes actualised, as the mystery within *is* unknown, alien, and dangerous.

The invocation of the femme fatale in the films in this chapter speaks specifically to a mistrust of the feminine, combined with scientific discourse in which an apparently normal external body can belie a dangerous and corrupt(ed) internal body. Patrick Gonder notes that such fears have existed and manifested in popular culture since the 1950s and the discovery of DNA, arguing that '[t]he body, then, is constructed as a site of suspicion, as a space for possible rebellion that requires special and extreme levels of surveillance by scientific experts. Communists, feminists, homosexuals, and other potentially subversive "cells" look like normal people.<sup>24</sup> This construction of the body as a deceptive terrain informs the representation of bodies which may look like women, but are revealed to contain something monstrous and dangerous. The femme fatales of science fiction discussed in this chapter are the results of the contemporary cinematic fascination with bodily hybridity, scientific constructions of the body as suspicious, and the much older narrative tendencies towards anxiety and fascination which characterise representations of mysterious women.

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<sup>23</sup> Donna Haraway, 'The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others', in *Cultural Studies*, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp.295-337 (p.300).

<sup>24</sup> Patrick Gonder, 'Like a Monstrous Jigsaw Puzzle: Genetics and Race in Horror Films of the 1950s', *Velvet Light Trap*, 52 (2003) 33-44 (p.36).

Science fiction has a unique ability to reshape the boundaries to the body and subjectivity. By setting its own rules, and working by its own internal logic, speculative cinema has the potential to create radical interpretations of the body of great significance to feminist film studies. However, it equally has a history of shoring up bodily norms, and re-enacting anxieties about typically marginalised bodies, and as such must be read as a genre containing as much harmful conservative potential as it offers feminist possibilities. In this chapter, I argue that the films I consider demonstrate both tendencies by employing the figure of the femme fatale as a means of legitimising the patriarchal scrutiny of the body and casting the power offered by the organic cyborg woman as threatening and rooted in dangerous sexual excess. Equally though, these films contain the potential for resistant readings which refuse the disruption of the powerful female hybrid. While the femme fatale is almost always presented as a mystery to be solved, it is possible for these films to deny the audience that solution. This final chapter, then, explores the promise and the problems of the hybrid femme fatale, and suggests that there may be a way to read such figures as subversive, durable, and resistant to the patriarchal narratives that surround them.

### **Bodies of Evidence: Possession, Science, and the Separation of Power**

In what follows I interrogate the femme fatale who is combined with the figure of the organic cyborg, and explore the ways in which the investigative strategies provoked by this combination manifest in two films, *X-Men: The Last Stand*, and *Species*. In doing so, I consider the ways that these films echo earlier narratives of demonic possession and medical scrutiny in order to uncover the mystery of the femme fatale, before arguing that these strategies lead to films in which essentialist representations of women and power are affirmed, and patriarchal authority over the powerful female body is consolidated. *X-Men: The Last Stand* is the third in a series of films in which the earth is populated not only by humans, but also by mutants,

some of whom use their supernatural powers to fight evil. In this particular film, Jean Grey (Famke Janssen), who was believed to have died at the end of the previous film, returns, but it is revealed that the Phoenix, a malevolent and powerful telepath who had hitherto been locked in her subconscious, has now taken conscious residence in Jean's body. The X-Men, led by Professor Xavier (Patrick Stewart), try to help her, but she escapes and joins a team of guerrilla mutants, before her power becomes too great and she has to be killed by Wolverine (Hugh Jackman), the mutant who loves her. *Species* presents a narrative in which aliens have sent a DNA code to earth which is picked up by the SETI programme. Scientists use this DNA to grow a half-alien, half-human hybrid called Sil (Michelle Williams as young Sil, Natasha Henstridge as adult Sil), but Sil escapes and wreaks havoc on Los Angeles, seducing and killing anyone in the way of her quest to procreate. Eventually, the team assembled to track her down and destroy her are able to kill her and her child. In discussing these films and their use of the hybrid femme fatale as a means of shoring up boundaries between women and power, I engage with the ways in which the films attempt to render the female hybrid body legible, and interrogate the consequences of that legibility.

As I outline in the Introduction, the femme fatale is a figure frequently characterised by an epistemological imperative on the part of the other, male characters in a film, as the narrative moves towards an uncovering of an assumed mystery connected with the femme fatale character. Themes of secrecy and concealment abound in femme fatale narratives, and the character herself is constructed as a primary object of investigation. In the films discussed in this chapter, the investigative fascination with the femme fatale in classical noir is taken to greater and more literal extremes as the deadly female body combines the human with the non-human in a way that invites examination. As well as echoing the epistemological narratives of classical noir, these films can also be read in the context of theories of the body from both film studies and feminist theory which identify the ways in which the female body

is posited as a readable text. As noted above, the body is frequently constructed as a site of suspicion in science fiction texts, and in these films, the investigative femme fatale narrative is combined with this scientifically informed construction of the body as a deceptive terrain requiring expert analysis in ways that result in texts in which the hybrid body of the woman is posited as a threat, a mystery to be opened up and explored.

In these films, the notion of woman as mystery is amplified and made literal, and it is the fact that the bodies under scrutiny are female that is so crucial to the treatment of the body as a site of knowledge in these films. While female bodies are frequently located as the spectacular focus in cinema,<sup>25</sup> science fiction and horror cinema's treatment of female bodies is particularly concerned with the physical instability of the female body. Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price note that women's bodies are culturally perceived as volatile as a result of their general ability to, amongst other things, menstruate, gestate life, and lactate, adding that, '[i]n contrast to the apparent self-containment of the male body, which may then be safely taken for granted and put out of mind, *the female body demands attention and invites regulation* [...]. In short, women are just their bodies in a way that men are not.'<sup>26</sup> While male bodies are also pre-discursively leaky, the female body in particular is *constructed* as distinctively leaky. These attributes mean that the female body is seen as not only unpredictable, but also dangerous, and as requiring not only attention, but intervention and investigation. The female body can be read as permeable in a way that the male body cannot, due to the heightened focus on movement of fluids from the body, and the female body's fetishised orifices. In the films discussed here, this permeability of the female body is used as a means to investigate the

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<sup>25</sup> For a key discussion of the complexities of this tendency, see Linda Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess' in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader* ed. by Sue Thornham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 267-81.

<sup>26</sup> Margrit Shildrick with Janet Price, 'Openings on the Body: A Critical Introduction' in *Feminist Theory and The Body: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999) p. 3. Emphasis mine. Cranny-Francis makes a similar point, arguing that in a phallogocentric society, female bodies are situated in relation to a normalised male body, so that the specific functions of the female body are pathologised and read as illnesses. As a result of this, female bodies are seen as open – and therefore readable – while male bodies must remain inscrutably closed. See Cranny-Francis, p. 150.

femme fatale, and identify the specific nature of the danger she poses, as her non-human elements appear on the surface, revealing her secrets. It is this perceived permeability that allows for scenes in which feminine bodies are ruptured by alien protuberances coming from within, and mutant attributes to manifest on the surface in scenes which seek to answer questions about the physical makeup of the femme fatale, to allow the investigators and the audience a glimpse into what she truly is.

In both films, the body is required to display its difference, so that the non-human qualities can be read and comprehended. This requirement echoes the possession narratives of horror films, and I argue that the ways in which these narratives have been read within feminist film criticism offer an illuminating perspective on the femme fatale characters in the films discussed in this chapter. The possession narrative frequently requires that the internal battle between the possessor and the (usually female) possessed is written on the body, as in *The Exorcist* (1973), *Stigmata* (1999), *Blackwater Valley Exorcism* (2006), *Constantine* (2005) and *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005). In these films, the demon within exhibits itself on the woman's skin, as previously pristine flesh changes colour, and develops cuts, scars, bruises, and sometimes writing. As Carol J. Clover argues of these narratives, 'film after film interrogates what *Beyond Evil* calls the "physical presence" of a woman: forces it to externalize its inner workings, to speak its secrets, to give a material account of itself - in short, to give literal and visible *evidence*' adding that 'occult films do their best, in much the same way pornography does, to make the female body "speak its experience".<sup>27</sup> In the films discussed in this chapter, films in which the female body is marked as not only unnatural, as in the possession films, but mysterious, as in the femme fatale narrative, the unnatural, often internal elements of that body are routinely subjected to processes of display. In making the exploration of the body an exploration of the mutant or alien elements of that body, these

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<sup>27</sup> Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p.82, p.109. Emphasis in the original.



films provide a tangible attempt to reveal the mysterious and potentially dangerous internal world of the femme fatale.

For example, in *Species*, the female body displays symptoms on the surface as it transforms from recognisable human woman into monstrous alien. Towards the beginning of



**Figure 4.1: *Species* (1995).  
Tentacles begin to rupture Sil's skin.**

the film, the opening up of Sil's body is directly aligned with the disclosure of truth and the communication of knowledge about the alien/woman nature of that body. In the first of many scenes in which her apparently

normal female body exhibits monstrous alien characteristics, the young Sil's skin begins to buckle and tear, revealing huge phallic tentacles (see figures 4.1 and 4.2). She becomes trapped

in a monstrous womb which has emerged from her own body, and is reborn as a fully grown woman. This scene occurs immediately before one in which a team of experts hired to track her



**Figure 4.2: *Species* (1995).  
Hundreds of tentacles emerge from Sil's body.**

down are given a high-tech

audio visual presentation on the history of Sil's existence. The juxtaposition of the two scenes aligns the opening up of the female body with the acquisition of truth about that body, reinforcing the idea that the body of the femme fatale harbours secrets, and from which

knowledge can be extracted. Similarly, in *X-Men: The Last Stand*, Jean Grey's first scene is notable for the ways in which she is physically different from the previous two films. Where Jean was previously a mild-mannered brunette, with her vastly increased levels of power she is now a voracious and aggressive redhead, who kills Scott, the mutant she loved before the advent of this new power, with a kiss. As she kisses him, her eyes turn black and a web of dark veins appear on her skin, indicating a sinister and demonic force within her otherwise conventionally beautiful body. In both films, the femme fatale's abnormality is written on the body, and, significantly, emerges through the skin which in turn acts as evidence. Women who initially appear to be entirely human are able to be read as organic cyborgs as these signs of mutation or alien elements appear on – and in Sil's case, through – the skin, rendering it legible and denoting the body as a hybrid body.

In these texts, the investigation of the femme fatale's body is frequently placed in a medical context, reinforcing the idea that the opening up of the female body will reveal its secrets, and echoing what Doane describes as the 'medical discourse' in the woman's film of the 1940s. She argues that 'the female body is located not so much as spectacle, but as an element in the discourse of medicine, a manuscript to be read for the symptoms which betray her story, her identity', and that the female characters in these films 'take the form of a didactic exercise designed to produce a knowledge about the woman.'<sup>28</sup> The films discussed in this chapter rework this exercise in a science fiction context by subjecting the unnatural body

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<sup>28</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Houndsmill: Macmillan, 1987) p.43, p.67. While Doane's argument refers to cinema of the 1940s, more recent medical advances have led to the body being increasingly envisioned as a text which can be read not only for symptoms of abnormality but also as a marker of any kind of activity at all. Anne Balsamo notes that

[i]n our hypermediated technoculture, body awareness is technologically amplified such that we know not only what we do but also how, why, and with what consequences. Modern medical discourse encourages us to monitor consumption of sugar, caffeine, salt, cholesterol, nicotine, alcohol, steroids, sunlight, narcotics, barbiturates and over-the-counter medications such as aspirin [...] A range of new visualization techniques contribute to the fragmentation of the body into organs, fluids, and gene codes, which in turn promotes a self-conscious self-surveillance, whereby, the body becomes an object on intense vigilance and control. Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), p.5.

This heightened emphasis on the body as a controlled and highly legible space is evident in the increasing popularity of forensic television crime dramas such as *Bones* (2005-), in which tiny fragments of bone can be used to identify individuals when read by scientific experts.

of the femme fatale to medicalised interrogation in order to attain knowledge about her. The mise-en-scene surrounding the investigation of the femme fatale in both *Species* and *X-Men: The Last Stand* is filled with medical and scientific items. This medical investigation of the body within the narrative operates predominantly as a means of acquiring knowledge about the femme fatale, as her unnatural attributes, coded as symptoms, are exposed and interpreted, sometimes resulting in an attempt at a cure. This treatment of the femme fatale body posits her unnatural elements as a disease or other undesirable ailment, highlighting her deviation from desired bodily norms, and presenting them as problematic and potentially dangerous.

In *X-Men: The Last Stand*, Jean Grey is positioned within an investigative medical context once she is returned to the school. In the first scene in the school's well-equipped laboratory, Jean is represented initially through a shot of a monitor on which a digital image of her brain activity is displayed, on which the word 'diagnostic' appears. The camera then tilts



**Figure 4.3: X-Men: The Last Stand (2006).  
The clinical patriarchal gaze.**

down to show Jean's unconscious head attached to a series of sensors. The telepath Professor Xavier's hands are placed on either side of her head. This firmly places Jean in the context

of being read and diagnosed, both by technology and by a scientific professional. Jean appears in this setting for both this and a later scene in the film. In both cases she is surrounded by a series of medical accoutrements, and is shot in a clinically blue light, aligning her clearly as a patient in a medical context (see figure 4.3). Her hybrid body is presented as a legible text, and its unnatural attributes can be read as symptoms. The series is set in a universe in which

mutant bodies are not presented as essentially unnatural, and where medicalised intervention on those bodies is presented as undesirable, as evidenced in Wolverine's various traumatic flashbacks to the time when his body was subjected to extreme surgical procedures, and in the triumphant representation of Angel's (Ben Foster) escape from the doctor's surgery where the mutant cure is administered. However, Jean Grey's body is nonetheless subjected to a medicalised intervention which *is* presented as necessary and desirable, not only because she is unconscious, and therefore presumably in need of medical attention, but also because, while both Wolverine and Magneto overtly question the ethics and validity of Xavier's methods, they ultimately come to admit their mistakes.

Similarly, in *Species*, Sil is positioned in a medical context early in the film. She first appears in extreme closeup, before an establishing shot shows her lying in a medical gown and slippers on a white bed in a glass-walled room. Like Jean, she is shot from above, so that the audience may observe her from an objective distance in this clinical setting. A series of further shots show that her room is surrounded by figures in white laboratory suits and safety goggles, that she is being watched by more men in suits from an elevated viewing platform behind another pane of glass and that she too has



**Figure 4.4: *Species* (1995).  
Medicalised observation.**

sensors attached to her face (see figure 4.4). As in *X-Men: The Last Stand*, Sil is presented as an observed specimen in a medicalised setting from the outset. It is later revealed that Sil was grown in the lab, so that her whole early life was spent under clinical scrutiny. This scrutiny does not stop once she escapes the lab, as Sil is later hospitalised, and a doctor watches in

amazement as her wounds heal instantly. Still more pervasively, the team of experts assigned to tracking Sil down after her escape constantly posit theories about her motivations, physiological makeup, emotional reactions, and potential next moves. It is only by employing the expertise of these professionals and applying their theories and observations that Sil can be tracked down and her threat eliminated. Significantly, the greatest threat to the team occurs when the analytical powers of their members are compromised when the anthropologist and the empath who is able to discern Sil's emotional reactions and motivations drink too many Long Island Iced Teas, which dulls their specialist skills so that Sil is able to seduce and kill the anthropologist without either of them raising the alarm. The implication in these films is that the expert medicalised scrutiny of the female body is not only desirable but essential. The power relations between the woman and the medicalised gaze is one which emphasises the idea of the woman's body being a vessel for secrets which must be exposed and made to account for themselves to an apparently objective, scientific, patriarchal investigator.

In both *X-Men: The Last Stand* and *Species*, this combination of the medical discourse with the echoes of possession narratives frames the science fiction femme fatale's body as requiring investigation and explanation. Their status as not fully human is signalled through a display of their difference, as the unnatural is written on the skin. While this indicates an echo of the tendency to present the femme fatale as an object of investigation, and replicates the patriarchal vision of female bodies as unstable and suspect, I contend that these films go still further in their reactionary portrayals of powerful female characters. Creed argues that '[t]he horror film attempts to bring about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order to reject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and the non-human.'<sup>29</sup> In these films, this line is arguably drawn not only between human and non-human, but between that which is woman and that which is alien, mutant,

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<sup>29</sup> Creed, p.14.

technological, and therefore is not-woman. What this means is that, as Creed points out, lines may be drawn between what is desirable and what is not desirable, and in these films this applies specifically to female behaviour. If that which is familiar, non-threatening and desirable (in both sexual and general senses of the word) is positioned as woman and that which is grotesque, dangerous and undesirable is positioned as not-woman, then this means that the boundaries of acceptable femininity can be drawn very clearly in these narratives. In these texts of hybrid bodies, these lines must be drawn within or on the surface of the body itself, and so the precise allocation and distribution of agency becomes vitally important to understandings of female power not only within science fiction and horror film, but within a more general patriarchal culture. To return to the points raised in the introduction to this chapter, while science fiction offers a space for radical revisionings of bodily norms, it also contains the potential for these norms to be shored up, and, in the case of these hybrid bodies, for an essentialist vision of femininity and power to be reified.

In these films, power is often explicitly attributed to the unnatural element within the woman. In *Species*, the investigative team decide to create a version of the alien which does not contain human female DNA as they want to see the alien in its natural state in order to assess its capabilities. As part of the discussion surrounding this endeavour, one of the team argues that ‘this human life form could be a mask, if we could see it without the camouflage’, to which another replies, ‘you’re right, you’re right, then at least we’d know what we’re dealing with.’ This exchange locates the source of the threat specifically in the alien rather than the human elements within Sil, suggesting that her femininity functions solely as a ‘mask’ behind which the alien holds all the power.<sup>30</sup> While various jokes are made in the film about the

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<sup>30</sup> Forest Pyle makes a similar point about *The Terminator*, suggesting that ‘[t]he movie proceeds to unmask the cyborg, to reveal visually that the semblance is indeed an illusion, that beneath the flesh and tissue there is nothing human.’ Forest Pyle, ‘Making Cyborgs, Making Humans: of Terminators and Bladerunners’ in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. by David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) pp.124-37 (p.129). I contend that, although the stark contrast between flesh and metal is not present in the hybrid femme fatale films, the various strategies I outline in this chapter – the use of the investigative narratives

naivety of the scientists who created Sil choosing female DNA to combine with the alien ‘so that it would be more docile and controllable’, these jokes arguably attest more to the idea that it is the alien who is ultimately in control, rather than the human woman, and act as a further means of separating the feminine from the body she carries. In her theoretical account of gender essentialism, Diana Fuss argues that ‘[m]ost obviously, essentialism can be located in appeals to a pure and original femininity, a female essence outside the boundaries of the social.’<sup>31</sup> I contend that it is just such an appeal to the idea of original femininity, to stereotypes of a singular and essential female consciousness, which scenes such as the one related above represent. In the hybrid body, there exists both the female and the unnatural, and these are investigated in turn and found to be entirely distinct.

In *X-Men: The Last Stand*, Jean’s relationship with the Phoenix is presented in similar ways, as characters frequently differentiate between the Jean they know, and the deadly mutation that has lain dormant within her. In one scene, she forcefully attempts to telekinetically seduce Wolverine, and he, noticing the change in her character, says, ‘Jean, this isn’t you.’ Although she insists that ‘this is me’, the sinister colour-changes in her eyes, and her constantly shifting moods suggest otherwise. Jean Grey’s new power is a result of a genetic mutation which is so powerful that it had to be sectioned off from her consciousness by Xavier, who placed psychic blocks in her mind to prevent her from accessing that power. Once the blocks are broken down and Jean Grey gains full access to her power, she becomes dangerous and unstable. Early in the film, Xavier says to a young Jean, ‘You have more power than you can imagine, Jean. The question is, will you control that power, or let it control you?’ This line affirms a separation of Jean and her power, even before the blocks have been established, and while it appears to suggest that Jean has the capability of owning her own

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of possession, medical discourse, and the femme fatale – allow for a clear separation between human and non-human, and more significantly, between women and power.

<sup>31</sup> Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.2.

power, the narrative presents the blocks as essential to keeping Jean from self destruction.<sup>32</sup> In this narrative, while Jean may have power, she cannot control it, suggesting that, even though the psychic barriers function as a means of separating Jean from her powers, ultimately she was separate from them all along. These scenes posit the power of the Phoenix as highly dangerous, and crucially, separate from Jean's humanity and the wishes of her consciousness.

While the mutant superhero narrative of the X-Men franchise frequently involves the struggle to control power, the treatment of Jean Grey's story in this text arguably exemplifies the point that the separation of power in this way is one reserved specifically for female characters. Scott Bukatman argues that

Mutant superheroes are not invulnerable; not only are they distinguished by (a frequently maudlin) emotionalism, but their first and most dangerous enemies are themselves. Optic blasts shoot from the eyes of the X-Men's Cyclops; he must shield them at all times [...] The visor's deadly secret evokes such figures of the monstrous-feminine as Medusa and Pandora's box. But the struggle of Cyclops involves holding back his energy, holding it within himself; to release it would be to destroy his own sense of being.<sup>33</sup>

In illustrating the struggle of the mutant superhero, Bukatman's point emphasises the gendered nature of the struggle over embodied power in these narratives. Unlike Jean Grey, Scott (James Marsden) is trusted to control a power which, while problematic, is clearly marked as his own. When considering the gendered aspects of power in the films, it is important to note that while Scott/Cyclops' power lies in the gaze, that of Jean Grey lies in the uncontrollable sexualised body. Jean's threat is frequently presented in aggressively sexual terms, as in the example described above of the kiss that kills Scott, and in her later attempts to seduce Wolverine, where she grabs him between her thighs in way that rapidly becomes more threatening than erotic. The threat of the mutant woman in the *X-Men* films is

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<sup>32</sup> The X-Men graphic novels and animated television series present the Jean Grey/Phoenix story and her relationship with the power of the Phoenix in a much more complex manner. While the film adaptation offers a picture of Jean Grey struggling to control a power she never really owned within a body she cannot control, these precursors presented versions in which the Phoenix's power operates more fluidly in relation to Jean's body and consciousness. Thanks to Adham Tawfik and Melanie Gibson for their assistance in navigating the dense history of the X-Men.

<sup>33</sup> Scott Bukatman, 'X-Bodies (The Torment of the Mutant Superhero)', in *Uncontrollable Bodies: Testimonies of Identity and Culture*, ed. by Rodney Sappington and Tyler Stallings (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994) pp.93-129 (p.115).



frequently coded as sexual and undesirable, evocative of *vagina dentata*, and it is significant that this threat is not limited to Jean. Jean's threatening thighs are echoed in Mystique's (Rebecca Romjin) murder of a prison guard, as she snaps his neck with her legs, while the toxicity of her kiss is similar to the power of Rogue (Anna Paquin), whose skin is deadly to the touch, causing a severe reaction and frequently death, in those with whom she comes into contact. Tellingly, it is these three characters who have their powers permanently neutralised, either through the new mutant cure, or through death, suggesting that containment is essential for this kind of unnatural female power.<sup>34</sup> In the case of Rogue and Mystique, the cure acts as a kind of exorcism, removing the threat that they pose and leaving them human and non-threatening.<sup>35</sup>

Doane argues that in narratives of medical discourse, the medical appraisal 'unveils a previously invisible essence – ultimately the essence of the female character concerned. The ideology which the films promote therefore rests on a particularly extreme form of essentialism.'<sup>36</sup> This point about the woman's film can arguably be expanded within my discussion of the unnatural *femme fatale*. The practice of opening up the female body, both in the context of the possession narrative or the medical gaze, allows not only for the *femme fatale*'s secrets to be revealed, but for them to be comprehended and categorised in an attempt

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<sup>34</sup> Like Mystique, Rogue and Jean, both Professor Xavier and Magneto (Ian McKellen) have their power taken from them, through death and a weapon loaded with the mutant cure respectively. However, the potential for retaining or restoring lost power *is* made available for these male characters in the narrative, reinforcing the idea that powerful femininity must be treated as unstable and threatening, while powerful masculinity should and must be restored. The final two scenes of the film show that Magneto can still move a metal chess piece, implying that his powers are returning, and that Xavier has transferred his consciousness and power into the body of a coma patient. Unlike the unpredictable, sexually dangerous representations of female power found in Rogue, Mystique and Jean, the power of these men has always been rooted in strategy, ethics and political reasoning, and it is arguably this difference that means that, while the unstable versions of feminine power have been permanently vanquished, Magneto and Xavier, as symbols of stable and rational power, are permitted to continue by the film's narrative.

<sup>35</sup> In both cases these exorcisms cannot be read as entirely voluntary. Mystique's cure comes in the form of a weaponised version of the drug, and is administered to her while she is defending Magneto. Rogue claims that her decision to sign up for the cure is her own choice, her mutation, which leaves her unable to touch anyone without killing them, means that she feels desperately unhappy and alienated from the mutant community that might otherwise have welcomed her. Questions of choice under these circumstances therefore become rather murky.

<sup>36</sup> Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, p.44.

to, in Doane's words unveil 'a previously invisible essence'. However, I argue that in the body of the hybrid woman, this practice involves a further process of separation in which distinct lines are drawn between that which is woman and that which is other. This process is particularly significant in a discussion of powerful women, because this separation repeatedly casts the other element as the powerful one, meaning that power and femininity are presented as distinct, and even placed in an oppositional relationship. In her discussion of the classic femme fatale, Doane states that 'her power is of a peculiar sort insofar as it is usually not subject to her conscious will, hence appearing to blur the opposition between passivity and activity', that in these texts the female body is 'itself given agency independently of consciousness', and that 'she is an ambivalent figure because she is not the subject of power, but its *carrier* (the connotations of disease are appropriate here).<sup>37</sup> Doane's argument articulates a metaphorical model of the separation of power and the feminine in the femme fatale which becomes literal in the bodies of the unnatural femme fatales of contemporary cinema. These narratives of mutant genes and parasitic aliens create situations in which the non-womanly element within the body of the woman is the powerful agent, and in which the woman literally becomes the carrier of that power.

The echoes of the possession narrative in these science fiction femme fatale films reinforce this separation of women and power, in that they are modelled on the parasitic relationship between possessor and possessed. In such narratives, a distinction is clearly drawn between the passive female body of the possessed, and the active, dangerous, and parasitic possessor. I contend that, while they are not traditional demonic possession narratives, the films discussed in this chapter follow similar patterns in their representations of the relationship between the human and non-human elements within the body of the femme fatale. As Aviva Briefel argues of possession narratives, the changes in voice and appearance,

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<sup>37</sup> Doane, *Femmes Fatales* p.2. Emphasis in the original.

the bringing of the unnatural to the surface, and the women's resistance to these changes, 'suggests a passivity inherent in the unwanted wounds.'<sup>38</sup> The passivity of the woman and activity of the unnatural implied by this process is evident in an occurrence which can be described as the 'moment of fear' which occurs within several of the representations of the unnatural femme fatale in these films. In a reversal of the points at which the unnatural is uncovered within the female body, in these moments, the sense of power which stems from these unnatural elements temporarily shifts to reveal feelings of fear and horror which are rooted in the powerless human woman part of these hybrid bodies. These moments echo the point in *The Exorcist* where, as Creed remarks, 'Chris unbuttons Regan's nightgown to reveal a message which seems to be written on the inside of her stomach. The words "Help Me" appear through the skin, indicating that the "real" Regan is trapped inside her own body.'<sup>39</sup> The effect of this moment is to identify feelings of fear and desperation within the hybrid body, and to attribute these feelings specifically to a 'real' human woman, an identifiable 'essence', to use Doane's words, who can be distinguished via these moments of fear from the alien, monster or mutation which has been identified as the source of her power, therefore effectively separating power and the feminine in a body which might otherwise appear to conflate the two.

In *Species*, Sil's moments of fear occur as the alien within begins to manifest on the outside of her body, so that in the moment when the lines between alien and woman are in danger of becoming blurred on her skin her screams of horror indicate that the human part of her is afraid and appalled, while the alien displays its power (see figure 4.5). After this scene, she does not demonstrate such fear of her alien attributes, but this would suggest that the alien has become dominant, that, as discussed previously, the human visage has become 'a mask.' Significantly, towards the end of the film, when her male human/alien child exhibits

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<sup>38</sup> Aviva Briefel, 'Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation and Identification in the Horror Film', *Film Quarterly*, 58. 3. (2005) 16-27 (p.21).

<sup>39</sup> Creed, p.36.

his first external signs of being alien in a scene where he calmly flicks out an enormous tongue to eat a rat, no such scenes of confusion or horror are evident, suggesting that there is no divide between his male humanity and the power offered to him by the alien DNA. Similar moments of fear occur in *X-Men: The Last Stand* as, while Jean claims that the new, hyper-



**Figure 4.5: *Species* (1995).  
Body horror.**



**Figure 4.6: *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006).  
A moment of fear.**

sexual, all-powerful version of herself ‘is me’, she is also given these moments of fear in the narrative. She is frequently shown to be confused and distressed (see figure 4.6), and at one stage begs Wolverine to ‘kill me, before I kill someone else.’ This request articulates Jean Grey’s desire to reject the power that is housed in a body that she has little or no control over. Despite her apparent wishes to control her own abilities, the vulnerable, ‘real’ Jean is presented as trapped by a threatening and demonic power that she does not want.<sup>40</sup>

As I outlined in the introduction to this chapter, the films discussed here are connected by their focus on the female-coded hybrid body, in which the body is part woman and part monster. This leads to an epistemological imperative, to explain the physical makeup of such bodies, and in doing so, erect boundaries around power and the feminine. There is

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<sup>40</sup> An interesting counterpoint to these narratives occurs in *Dreamcatcher* (2003), where Jonesy (Damian Lewis) is ‘possessed’ by an evil alien force. While great pains are taken to demonstrate the distinction between Jonesy and the alien – most notably in the fact that while Jonesy is from Maine, the alien has an English accent – the distinction between active alien and passive human are not made here. Instead, the film features a series of scenes in which Jonesy runs through his own mind, in the form of a library, in order to fight off the alien interloper, suggesting that the male possessed are able to mount an active resistance to the invasion of their minds and bodies, unlike the female characters discussed here, who can only scream in horror.

frequently an emphasis in these films on the origins of hybridity, on explaining how the woman came to be combined with the unnatural or monstrous, and identifying the source of that hybridity, and this preoccupation arguably contributes significantly to the separation of power and woman. This emphasis on the originating point of hybridity means that these films often identify a 'real' woman as part of these bodies, creating an essentialist version of woman that existed before and separately from the unnatural elements and the power and agency that came with them. These films present their origin stories early on in the narrative, and the message that the 'real' woman and the unnatural element were once separate implies that they may be separated again, and so a situation is created in which woman and the unnatural can be actively viewed as distinct, even within the wholeness of the bodily unit.

*X-Men: The Last Stand* features a title sequence which displays the mutant gene in computer-generated close-up, again displaying the reason for and origin of mutation, and suggesting that within the body exists a specific mutant element that can be isolated, and perhaps eliminated. This sequence in *The Last Stand* represents a part of the search for a cure for the mutant gene, suggesting that the powerful mutant element is something which can be eliminated, thus distancing mutation from the 'real' human body. While this title sequence implies that mutation *is* something which comes from within, and therefore might not automatically imply a separation of the human and the unnatural, Gonder argues that 'the fear of mutation is fundamentally a fear of a loss of power', suggesting that the discovery of DNA in the fifties meant that 'control, then, is no longer centralized in the head or heart, but is dispersed, disseminated throughout the body.'<sup>41</sup> What this argument suggests, then, is that the mutated gene represents a further separation of power from the 'real' self, as imagined as the human soul and consciousness, and so these sequences which suggest the origin of this

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<sup>41</sup> Gonder, p.34, p.35.

separation function as a reminder that the ‘real’ women exist in a state of permanent separation from a power which has mutated beyond their control.

Similarly, *Species* uses microscopic images to display the moment from which Sil’s hybridity originated, as the investigative team are shown a video of a human cell being injected with the alien DNA (see figure 4.7). The gendered coding of this is far from subtle: the

investigative team in

*Species* frequently

return to Sil’s

history, noting that

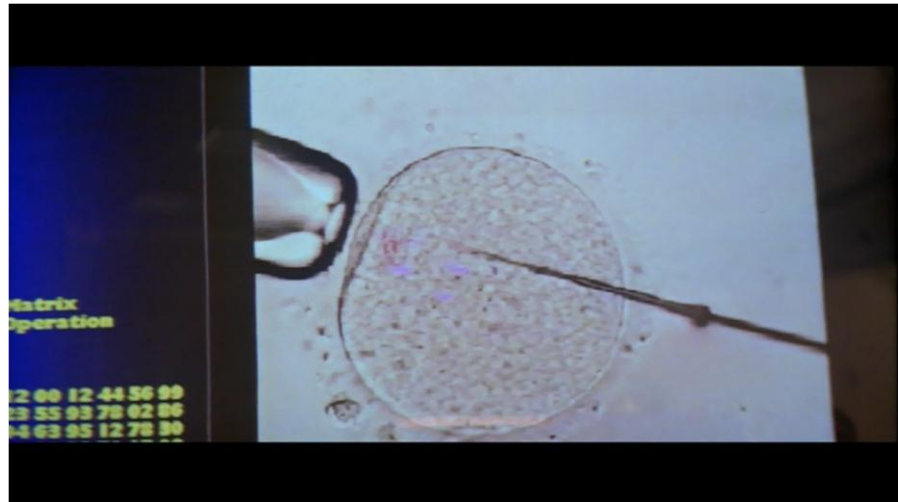
the human DNA

used to create her is

female, and it is

made explicit that

the human cell being



**Figure 4.7: *Species* (1995). Microscopic penetration.**

injected with the alien element is not merely a generic cell, but an ovum. The representation of the injection of the passive ovum from a woman, containing female DNA, renders the human element female, while the clinical medical syringe of alien matter implies a scientific, active, male, phallic, fertilising force, which permits both the viewer and the film’s investigative team to imagine an original human Sil as a vulnerable female body, removed from the (scientific, male) alien source of her power and agency. In these texts, the origin story is presented as a means of clearly distinguishing between the original human woman and the powerful alien element, and therefore enables a consolidation of the separation of the femme fatale from the source of her power.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> These Hollywood films are not the only ones which employ these strategies of origin storytelling. Both *Ginger Snaps* (2000) and *Teeth* provide visual representations of origins at the cellular level, as the process of mutation is represented in microscopic form in both of these indie films, suggesting that the

Both *X-Men: The Last Stand* and *Species* employ a series of strategies in order to render the body of the hybrid femme fatale legible. The body is required to share its secrets by bringing the unnatural element to the surface so that it can be observed and categorised, and is frequently placed in a medicalised context in order that the body's unorthodox behaviour can be read as a series of symptoms, thereby pathologising the powerful hybrid woman. By presenting this mutant or alien power as a parasitic force against which the female body is helpless, these films act in much the same way as demonic possession narratives in shoring up the boundaries between women and power. Finally, by creating origin stories for these hybrid bodies, these boundaries are made concrete, as an imagined point of original unity is posited, when the human woman and unnatural powerful element existed separately. Although science fiction contains the potential for subversive visions of the gendered body and its powers, in their depictions of the organic cyborg as femme fatale, these two films present narratives in which women appear to wield power, but are not permitted to be seen as powerful women.

### **Bodies without Origins: Beyond the Myth of the Original Woman**

At the start of this chapter, I suggested that science fiction provides a complex environment for negotiating issues of gender and the body. It simultaneously offers the chance to shore up traditional binary categories, and the potential for a more radical disruption of these boundaries. The argument I have so far put forward, that these narratives of deadly unnatural female bodies allows for a conservative reification of the boundary between women and power, supports Wolmark's assertion that science fiction, and the representation of the alien in particular, 'enables difference to be constructed in terms of binary oppositions which reinforce relations of dominance and subordination.'<sup>43</sup> Although Wolmark is speaking of the difference between the alien/other and the human in terms of separate bodies and organisms,

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conservative/subversive binary that is so often posited about Hollywood and independent science fiction cinema may itself be a false one.

<sup>43</sup> Wolmark, p.2.

her argument holds equally true in the context of the way in which the alien and human are constructed within the bodies of the hybrid femme fatale characters discussed above. However, these films do not entirely avoid the subversive possibilities of the science fiction genre, and instead some offer ways in which the texts can be read against the reification of patriarchal boundaries that their constructions of the hybrid body seem to suggest.

In the remainder of this chapter, I explore the ways in which *Alien Resurrection* and *The Faculty*'s construction of their hybrid women as femme fatales allows the investigation of the body that I have argued permeates these kinds of science fiction narratives. I then discuss the ways in which alternative meanings manifest in these films, despite such reactionary measures, through an engagement with theories of the body, hybridity, and the origin myth. *Alien Resurrection* is the most recent Ripley-centred text in a series of films in which she battles with deadly and parasitic alien creatures on a range of spaceships and planets. At the end of the previous film, Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) kills herself and the alien growing inside her to prevent the spread of the creatures. At the beginning of *Alien Resurrection*, Ripley is cloned and regrown by a team of government scientists under instructions to retrieve the alien for use as a weapon. The aliens then escape, and Ripley leads a group of pirates to safety. *The Faculty* features a narrative loosely based on *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*, and is set in a high school where the teachers and then the pupils are gradually overtaken by alien parasites that control their minds, rendering them generally more docile, but a distinct threat to anyone not infected. A group of teenagers join together to resist the threat, and gradually learn that there is a queen alien who controls all the parasites, and who must be defeated in order to restore normality. It eventually emerges that the queen alien is Marybeth (Laura Harris), the innocent, blonde, new girl in school: the surviving members of the group kill her, and order is restored. In discussing these two texts, I explore the ways in which the femme fatale narrative is used in a science fiction context to present the female hybrid as threatening, before suggesting a way in which



these films resist the kind of patriarchal containment of female power that appears in the films discussed above.

In these films, as in *Species* and *X-Men: The Last Stand*, the figure of the femme fatale is used in combination with the hybrid body of the organic cyborg to present anxious narratives about femininity and sexuality. In discussing the employment of this technique in *The Faculty* and *Alien Resurrection*, I argue that the use of the femme fatale narrative functions as a means of situating the conjunction of power and femininity as dangerous, and setting up the powerful female body as a mystery to be solved. Although these narratives occur within a science fiction context, the femme fatale emerges repeatedly as the primary method of representing the female cyborg. The effect of this is to present such figures as dangerous, sexually threatening, and in need of containment. In *The Faculty*, though Marybeth initially appears to be a virginal high school girl, the revelation of her status as an alien is rapidly followed by the revelation of her as a sexual threat. The wardrobe of twinsets and floral dresses she wore while masquerading as human disappears, and in the remaining scenes that she spends in human form she is exclusively wet and naked. Similarly, her earlier small-town innocence vanishes, and she becomes confident and mockingly flirtatious as she explains her deception. Further, Marybeth's sexual threat extends beyond her own body, as, once infected, the previously rather buttoned-up and harried female teachers become more sexually aggressive and display a more exaggerated sexualised appearance as their clothes become tighter, their hair becomes shinier, their eye make-up becomes smokier and their lipstick becomes redder. The figure of the femme fatale, here, functions as a means of demonstrating the specifically feminine threat of the powerful female hybrid.

Similarly, while Ripley's threat in *Alien Resurrection* is complex given the extensive history of the *Alien* franchise, it is still predominantly presented as a sexual threat, beginning with an early scene in which she attacks Wren, a doctor, by clamping him between her bare

legs.<sup>44</sup> While this scene evokes the vagina dentata, the presentation of Ripley's threat as a sexual one is further shored up by the discovery that her blood is acidic enough to burn through metal. As Ximena Gallardo C. and C. Jason Smith discuss, in *Alien Resurrection*, the sight of Ripley's corrosive blood sizzling through the metal floor raises the question, 'would sex with her burn the penis away?'<sup>45</sup> When the sexualised outside threatens to corrode and constrict, it is implied that the sexualised internal, the vagina, also threatens to corrode, constrict, and therefore castrate. This possibility is raised again after the aliens have escaped, and Ripley asks the predominantly male crew of the Betty, 'who do I have to fuck to get off this boat?' While she appears to be joking, her changeable and unpredictable nature suggests that she might mean 'fuck' in the sense of 'fuck over', 'betray', 'destroy', 'fuck up' in conjunction with its more usual association with sex, and the prospect of her castrating blood looms again. In this film, as in *The Faculty*, the notion of the hybrid woman is essential to the plot, and the casting of these figures as femme fatales ensures that the possibilities of female power offered by Marybeth and Ripley as alien women is presented as sinister and threatening, and fraught with familiar anxieties about women and sexual aggression.

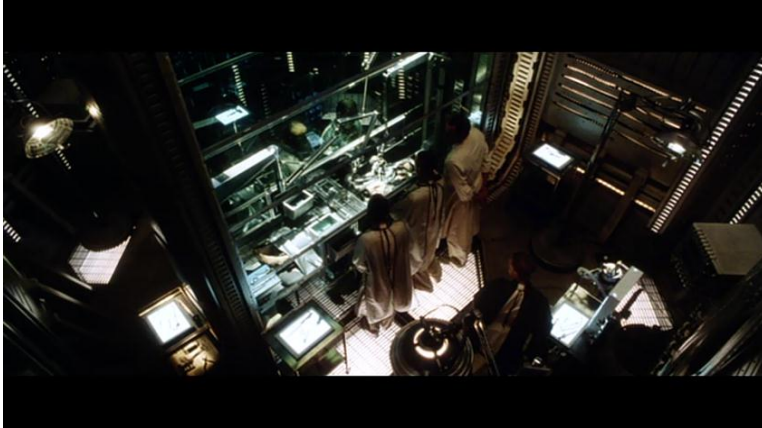
The use of the femme fatale in these films also functions as a means of legitimising the intense scrutiny of the hybrid woman's body that I outline earlier in this chapter. One of the primary narrative strategies evident in representations of the femme fatale in classical noir is the notion of woman as mystery, and the sexually confident woman in particular is presented as a riddle to be solved. The use of the femme fatale in these science fiction narratives, then, follows on from these earlier texts in legitimating the investigative approach to the hybrid woman's body. Just as in *X-Men: The Last Stand* and *Species*, both *Alien Resurrection*

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<sup>44</sup> As well as occurring twice in *X-Men: The Last Stand* as discussed above, this technique also appears in one of the more memorable scenes from another narrative of human/nonhuman bodies. In *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003), the T-X cyborg (Kristana Loken) wraps her legs backwards around the male terminator, before twisting her torso around to face him during their fight.

<sup>45</sup> Ximena Gallardo C. and C. Jason Smith, *Alien Woman: The Making of Lt. Ellen Ripley* (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), p.175.

and *The Faculty* use the close scrutiny of the body as a means of forcing the secrets of their organic cyborgs to the surface. One of the earliest scenes in *Alien Resurrection* places Ripley in a highly medicalised environment as a series of scientists observe her abdomen being opened up surgically to reveal the alien foetus (see figures 4.8 and 4.9), and the hole burned by the



**Figure 4.8: *Alien Resurrection* (1997).**  
Scientific observation of Ripley's surgery.

blood from her nose in the early scene discussed above performs a similar function in terms of exposition. In this instance, the opening up of the body allows knowledge to be transferred to the audience about Ripley's alien/hybrid

nature. *The Faculty* goes still further in suggesting that not only can the body of the femme fatale be opened to reveal secrets, it can also be closed to conceal the truth. In this film, when the group of students suspect that some of their number may secretly be aliens, or infected with aliens, they attempt to discover who it is by snorting a substance which has previously been established as dangerous to the alien body. In the first version of this incident,



**Figure 4.9: *Alien Resurrection* (1997).**  
The opened body observed in close-up.

only one student, Delilah, is revealed to be an alien agent, as the drug causes sinister shapes to swarm and ripple under her skin, as the body reveals her secret. However, in a flashback towards the end of the film, it

is revealed that Marybeth is the queen alien, and that she avoided detection during the drug-inhalation scene by activating fleshy barriers inside her nostrils that protected her against the chemicals, and pouring the drug onto the floor using a tentacle-esque finger. While the visual evidence of this flashback scene fulfils the demand that the femme fatale's body, to return to Clover's words, 'give literal and visible evidence' of itself and provide more knowledge about her secrets, the absence of this evidence in the original version of the scene emphasises the idea that this closing up of the body prevented the revelation of secrets, and allowed the femme fatale's internal alien to go undetected by the investigative process. Once again, the combination of hybrid woman and femme fatale functions as a means of legitimising the investigation of the body, of observing the powerful female body as a set of symptoms to be solved and explained.

However, while these two films may follow similar patterns to those discussed earlier, this does not mean that they offer the same conservative and essentialist model of female power in the hybrid body. *X-Men: The Last Stand* and *Species* make careful use of origin stories as a means of shoring up the boundaries erected between the female body and power. In the Introduction, I indicated that femme fatale criticism has in part been devoted to explaining and exploring the significance of the femme fatale's narrative ending, whether she is ultimately punished or allowed to get away with her crimes, and numerous claims have been made for the relationship between these endings and the femme fatale's command as an agentic, powerful cinematic figure. However, very little work has been done on the femme fatale's beginnings, and the connection between the representation of origins and the femme fatale's power. This is at least in part because the femme fatale is so frequently presented as the finished article, a mysterious figure without a backstory or history, and who appears without family connections or friends who might indicate how she became such a powerful and dangerous figure. While this lack of characterisation in the representation of female characters

in the contemporary, human, relatively realistic settings of classical and neo-noir must be viewed as a key factor in the femme fatale's apparent lack of subjectivity, I contend that an investigation of the role of origins for the hybrid femme fatales of science fiction opens up very different possibilities for understanding the representation of their power. The representative potential of science fiction allows apparently conservative depictions of the body, subjectivity and power to be complicated.

In recent years, numerous readings of the cyborg have emerged which situate such figures as both indicative of anxieties around mixing, hybridity and contamination in conjunction with the body, and as a powerful means of transgressing these anxieties, of breaking boundaries, and celebrating the more complex subjectivities that the figure of the cyborg might offer.<sup>46</sup> In her 'Cyborg Manifesto', Haraway argues that the cyborg 'skips this step of original unity', suggesting that the cyborg's lack of conventional origin story frees it from various limiting categories and narratives based around wholeness and patriarchal myth.<sup>47</sup> As Haraway suggests, Western origin myths about original wholeness have the effect of implying the possibility of a return to wholeness, or in the case of the films discussed above, implying the possibility of identifying the real, whole woman within the confusion of hybridity. On the other hand, the origin-less being that Haraway terms 'cyborg' 'would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot return to dust.'<sup>48</sup> This would suggest that the absence, or complicating, of origin stories is an important factor in the femme fatale's retention and ownership of her power. This offers a space for resisting the essentialist

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<sup>46</sup> Of particular interest here are Haraway's work on cyborgs and feminism, Susan Stryker's theorisation of the transsexual body as a cyborg body, and LeiLani Nishime's arguments about the cyborg's relevance to theories of race and miscegenation. See Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, Susan Stryker, 'Transsexuality: The Postmodern Body And/As Technology' in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. by David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp.588-97, and LeiLani Nishime, 'The Mulatto Cyborg: Imagining a Multiracial Future', *Cinema Journal*, 44.2 (2005), 34-49.

<sup>47</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p.151.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

impulses of the hybrid femme fatale's representation, and suggests a way in which these texts might be read as offering more complex feminist potential.

Origin myths function in science fiction texts as a way of rendering the body legible. In Bukatman's work comparing superhero bodies with the highly legible, hypermuscular bodies of bodybuilders, he notes that '[t]he superhero body is similarly written, but when read it will reveal a secret. Hence the fascination with origin stories in the comics: the secret is a secret history, a story embodied by the mark on the body.'<sup>49</sup> As Bukatman observes, origin stories play a particularly central role in superhero narratives, and these origin stories allow for a comprehension not only of the history of the character, but also of the history of the body. We therefore know, for example, where Spiderman's superhuman strength and agility come from, which allows his body to be read in the light of that knowledge. However, while these origin stories allow for a greater insight into the powerful body of the superhero, they do not function as a means of separation in the same way as in the hybrid femme fatale narratives I discuss here. While origin stories of superhuman masculinity may function merely as a way of narrating the history of those bodies, the use of origin myths to render marginalised bodies legible offers a way to explain away the threat that those bodies pose to patriarchal bodily norms. Gonder suggests that the rebellious body narratives of 1950s B movies act as metaphorical fantasies about blackness and miscegenation, suggesting that '[t]hese films enact a xenophobic dream-wish in which the insurgence of the black gene is not a rebellious act, but a diagnostic one; the undesirable mutation is detected, described and expelled, and the body is made healthy.'<sup>50</sup> This method of identification and expulsion is very similar to the organic cyborg narratives discussed earlier in this chapter, but while the films Gonder discusses allow the abject element to be contained in a particular body part – hands, eyes, and so on – and therefore contained or expelled easily, the hybrid femme fatale narratives present more

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<sup>49</sup> Bukatman, p.101.

<sup>50</sup> Gonder, p.43.

symbolic separations by allowing the hybrid woman's origins to be traced back through an explanation of her hybridity.

This focus on origins as a strategy of containment in relation to the marginalised body is particularly evident in popular cultural narratives about transsexual bodies. Transsexual women in particular are frequently presented as possessing inherently deceptive bodies – hence the number of texts in which heterosexual men are presented as having been deceived by transsexual women, only to be horrified by, and mocked because of, their ‘mistake’ – and, as Julia Serano notes, one means of addressing the anxiety caused by this perceived deception is to focus on origins in the form of ‘before’ photos, former names, and the specifics of the process of transitioning, adding that ‘[w]hen they request to see my “before” photos or ask me what my former name was, it is because they are trying to visualize me as male in order to anchor my existence in my assigned sex’.<sup>51</sup> This strategy of focusing on origins allows the transsexual woman to be imagined as a construction made from a male body and a series of medical, cosmetic and/or surgical interventions, thus shoring up normative notions of the sexed body and denying the transsexual woman the same female status as cissexual women. Similarly, the following argument, made in a letter sent to a popular gay and lesbian publication, embarks on a similar project of reducing the trans body to its origins as a means of containing its perceived threat by arguing that ‘[o]ne cannot change one’s gender. What occurs is a cleverly manipulated exterior: what has been done is mutation. What exists beneath the deformed surface is the same person who was there prior to the deformity.’<sup>52</sup> The use of origin myths in conjunction with marginalised bodies, then, has a limiting and subjugating effect. Bodies can be divided into real and constructed, female and male, technological and organic, original and additional. Values can then be placed on these divisions which

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<sup>51</sup> Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007), p.63.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Susan Stryker, ‘My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 1.3 (1994), 237-54 (p.239).

undermine the subjectivity of the body as a whole, and which foster essentialist attitudes to categories such as male and female and human and non-human.

As I have argued above about the representation of the femme fatale in science fiction, the coding of power as a parasitic force enables the symbolic separation of the vulnerable female body from its possessor, while the casting of the hybrid woman as a femme fatale allows for this separation to be presented as desirable. In the representation of the hybrid femme fatale, then, a key strategy in combating this generic tendency to separate power from the female body is a refusal of or resistance to origin myths. That the absence of origin story indicates a way in which the hybrid femme fatale might retain her power as her own suggests a possible way to read those films which do provide origin stories. In those films, the origin myth implies a return to wholeness, but what if the film does not ultimately offer that wholeness, but instead tangles up the previously separate elements of woman and powerful unnatural until they become indistinguishable? While both *Alien Resurrection* and *The Faculty* continue the narrative in which the femme fatale is metaphorically separated from her power before being destroyed as a deadly threat, I argue that, unlike the two films discussed earlier in this chapter, they both feature narratives which rapidly abandon the separation of elements implied by the origin myth, and instead provide a complex imbrication of woman, alien, and power.

*The Faculty* allows for this complication of the origin myth, where resistant reading allows for a much more complex and radical understanding of power, consciousness, and the body. It may be assumed that Marybeth has a fairly clear origin story. While *The Faculty* does not demonstrate the point at which the alien combined with the human female body to create Marybeth, the many scenes in which human beings are possessed by the crawling alien parasites implies that a similar process has taken place in the possession of Marybeth's body, endowing her narrative with a possessor/possessed dynamic, and creating a sense of



separation of woman and other which is rooted in the imagined point of possession. However, this is by no means irrefutably the case as we never see the point of possession, nor is it explained in the narrative. The assumption that Marybeth's body has been occupied by the master alien allows a separation of woman and powerful alien that is rooted in the *imagined* point of possession, and, I would argue, the ambiguity inherent to the Marybeth alien's origin story allows for an alternate story to linger. The audience are not encouraged to bisect Marybeth the woman and Marybeth the alien, as they have not been given the knowledge to do so. In *The Faculty*, the lack of origin story allows the boundaries between alien and woman to be collapsed, so that it is impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins, and thus impossible to attribute power to one or the other. This absence of information means that while it may be hinted that the alien is acting as a possessor, or a master to a female puppet body, it is never possible to tell for certain. While the film attempts to write the essence of the alien woman on her skin through the emphasis on her monstrous tentacles and inner alien body, the lack of origin story means that these signs are never clear or easily deciphered.

Additionally, the visual information provided about Marybeth's human/alien body and the dividing lines between the two also works to disrupt a clear sense of origin and the separation of power and femininity that this entails. For example, where *Species* places great emphasis on the ways in which the alien ruptured through the female human body, and features several scenes which focus on the splitting of skin, indicating a clear partition between the two, *The Faculty*'s depiction of the femme fatale's body works rather differently. When Marybeth is revealed to be the alien, the process of transition from her human body to her alien body is far less visceral. Two giant tentacles appear in the place of her arm between cuts to shots of her intended victim's horrified face, so that it is never clear how this process occurred. The join between the human skin and the greenish, reptilian skin of the tentacle is hidden by Marybeth's dress, so that the violent ruptures of *Species* are bypassed (see figure

4.10).<sup>53</sup> As Marybeth's transformation continues, her head quickly melts into a pinkish goo, and this bubbles up to be replaced by a spiny, lobster-like protuberance. After another cut away to the terrified victims, this in-between creature has been replaced by a giant betentacled monster. This series of cuts, and the lack of bodily ruptures, suggests an organic and smooth shift between the human body and the alien body, an implication that is consolidated when Marybeth morphs into human form again in a subsequent scene. As in the first conversion, it is extremely difficult to discern the precise details of the change, this time because it occurs under the ripples of a shadowy swimming pool. Due to this depiction of the bodily transformation, there is no sense of an original human woman functioning as a shell, and there is no violence or pain to the human body during the process, so Marybeth as a human girl is not posited as



**Figure 4.10: *The Faculty* (1998). Marybeth's tentacles.**

the victim of an alien possessor. As a result of this, the origins of the female-bodied alien cannot be neatly explained in terms of a narrative of possession or corporeal invasion, but instead the film works to obscure both the monster's history and the specifics of her body, thus complicating the question of her power and ownership of that power.

*Alien Resurrection* provides a similarly complex picture of the hybrid woman's origins. The film is, to some extent, equipped with an origin story from the outset. At the end of the third film in the series, Ripley had an alien growing inside her body, and the memory of her original, human self lingers for the audience from those earlier films, as was the case with Jean

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<sup>53</sup> The later flashback to the drug-test scene reveals that Marybeth's tentacles are attached seamlessly to her human flesh. There is a smooth graduation between the two, but once again, the process of change is not revealed as the film cuts directly from a shot of her human finger to one of her fully grown tentacle finger.

Grey in *X-Men: The Last Stand*. The scientists in the film explain the process of removing samples of Ripley's blood, and cloning her DNA in order to regrow her body and harvest the alien within her. Similarly, the title sequence and a scene in the lab display the various hybrid bodies created in unsuccessful attempts to clone Ripley and the alien, in a way which appears to illustrate the beginnings of the new Ripley by showing the cloning process, which, along with verbal explanations of the technique used, and an assumed prior knowledge of the 'real' Ripley of the previous films, identifies a specific point at which Ripley's body and the alien body became one. However, the origins of this hybrid Ripley are less clearly understood than these scenes might suggest. Kaveney points to what she sees as a 'failure' of Joss Whedon's script for the film, when she suggests that Whedon's more critically acclaimed work is able to make narrative and logical leaps which work on an emotional, poetic level because of its grounding in fantasy, rather than science fiction.<sup>54</sup> She notes that, '[t]o give but one example, Ripley's body appears to be made of standard human tissue, albeit with great muscular strength, yet the blood in her veins is, as is crucial at a couple of points in the plot, the strongly corrosive acid of an alien; how can one contain the other?'<sup>55</sup> However, while Kaveney argues that because the scientific concepts in *Alien Resurrection*, a science fiction film, do not make clear sense, the film is unsuccessful, I contend that this nonsensical science actually offers a subversion of origin myths.

Kaveney's observation that many of the scientific aspects of the film are unclear or do not make sense points to a way in which the film can be read as undermining the scrutinising

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<sup>54</sup> According to Kaveney, Whedon's strongest work relies on plot points which work on a metaphorical level, such as the narrative leaps made at the end of Season Five of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* which allowed Buffy to sacrifice herself for her sister. Kaveney argues that 'emotionally this works, even though it makes no literal sense, and when you are dealing with magic, what works emotionally and poetically is what works. The same cannot be said if you are dealing in science fiction terms.' Roz Kaveney, *From Alien to The Matrix: Reading Science Fiction* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), p. 190

<sup>55</sup> Kaveney, *From Alien to The Matrix*, p. 191. Here Kaveney misrepresents the similarity between Ripley's blood and that of the alien. While the aliens' blood is bright yellow, Ripley's is humanly red, suggesting that it is a diluted, humanised version. Despite this, though, Ripley's blood is powerful enough to eat through steel, and so the question of Ripley's ability to contain the blood safely within her body is not conclusively answered within the narrative logic of the film.

gaze of the medical discourse, as well as the clear-cut human/non-human divide of the possession narrative. That Ripley's body can contain the acidic blood that should eat through her flesh suggests that the dividing line between these two categories is less easily placed. Similarly, the origins that seem so obvious become much less clear once the film's own internal logic is applied. At no point is it suggested that being implanted with the foetal alien alters the DNA of the human host. In the earlier films, the alien foetus and human body operate in a clearly defined parasite/host relationship. If, under these circumstances, Ripley was cloned from samples of her blood, then the clone would be entirely human. However, this is not the case, and the film does not go to any lengths to explain why Ripley has become a human/alien hybrid, and so the scene in the room of failed clones, while appearing to present her origins, functions to confuse Ripley's genetic makeup still further, as monstrous alien parts jut out of apparently female bodies



**Figure 4.11: *Alien Resurrection* (1997).  
Ripley and a failed clone.**

with no real explanation as to how these bodies came to be (see figure 4.11). Although the ship's General is keen to see the Ripley and the alien as distinct, with Ripley's body simply being a 'meat by-product', this is patently not the case. Oblique references by the film's scientists to 'genetic crossing', and inherited memories passing down in DNA do little to explain this occurrence, and indeed, frequently make the situation still more incomprehensible. Brenda M. Boyle remarks that 'the very body of cloned Ripley defies category: is she human or alien? She disrupts without any vocalised query on her part the dichotomy between monster and human. She resists classification as or any allegiance to either

the human or the monstrous.<sup>56</sup> I argue that a significant part of this resistance of classification is as a result of the muddiness of the film's scientific concepts, and the refusal of the clearly defined origin myth that accompanies this confusion. While Kaveney may see this as a failure, for me this failure provides the film's most subversive element. While the film may initially appear to provide Ripley with an origin myth which encourages the separation of the real woman from the powerful alien, the murkiness around these origins means that the status of woman and alien become increasingly knotted up over the course of the film. Just as the lack of origin myth meant that the cyborg bodies cannot be seen as containing distinct and easily separable elements of woman and technology, *Alien Resurrection's* refusal to enact the myth of a return to wholeness that the origin story would dictate means that woman and power become increasingly entangled so that it is ultimately impossible to separate them, and potentially provides space for woman to own that power.

The figure of the femme fatale, as in the films discussed earlier in this chapter, allows the power offered by female hybridity to be presented as threatening, and to be aligned with similar anxieties about female sexuality and agency. The same techniques are used in order to render the femme fatale's body legible, and to reveal its secrets. However, in exploring the potential offered by the removal or undermining of the origin myth, I have suggested that, rather than being evidence of weak characterisation or flawed plotting, in science fiction the lack of a clearly defined history can offer a way for the femme fatale to be less easily read, so that her power might be her own, rather than something she unknowingly carries. What this means is that the hybrid woman with no tangible past becomes a poignant figure in a seemingly never-ending science fiction landscape in which the representation of hybrid femme fatale repeatedly requires that femininity is presented as the window dressing for a distinctly non-female powerful element.

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<sup>56</sup> Brenda M. Boyle, 'Monstrous Bodies, Monstrous Sex: Queering *Alien Resurrection*', *Gothic Studies* 7. 2. (2005), 158-171 (p.163).

## Conclusion

The films discussed in this chapter provide a complex space for the representation of the femme fatale. The tensions already at work in the representation of the beautiful deadly woman are emphasised by the introduction of the hybrid body, and the anxieties it presents about femininity, sexuality, and danger. In analysing *X-Men: The Last Stand* and *Species*, I have indicated the conservative potential of science fiction cinema to present women as inherently separate from power, even as they appear to represent tough, dangerous women. I have outlined the ways in which such representations speak to essentialist understandings of femininity and agency, and how the body, in an echo of the medical narrative of the woman's film and possession narrative, may be seen as a mystery to solve, a set of symptoms to decode, and in doing so, allow for a conservative vision of the woman as separate from power to emerge. However, in my discussion of *Alien Resurrection* and *The Faculty*, I have contended that it is possible for these kinds of representations of female power to allow for a resistant reading. A refusal of origins allows for a potentially more subversive understanding of the hybrid body to emerge, and it is this refusal, or complication of the mythology of origins which offers the possibility of a feminist recuperation of several of these films. While the hybrid body may suggest a potential return to an essentialist state, the refusal to reveal a clear sense of the mechanics of that hybridity is a refusal to shore up a binary of femininity and power.

Science fiction is a genre which, in its narratives of fantastic and futuristic bodies, offers both the potential to break down the conventional codings of gender and power, and the means to shore up conservative understandings of subjectivity and embodiment. While feminist critiques of the genre frequently argue that Hollywood can only offer the former option, I contend that it is possible for exciting, progressive representations of the hybrid body to exist even within mainstream productions. These films use a variety of strategies to

contain or expand female power, and in reading these four films I have interrogated the effect of these strategies, and suggested some ways that the hybrid bodies can be read not as puzzles to be solved, but as complex and ultimately unsolvable representations of female agency and subjectivity. While Hollywood science fiction certainly provides a variety of texts in which the hybrid femme fatale is displayed, solved, and contained, others offer the potential for radical reimaginings of the female body. Science fiction films, with their complex internal logic and specific attention to where the boundaries of the body lie and what they contain, can, I believe, provide surprising possibilities for rereading powerful femininity.

# Conclusion

The femme fatale is a vexed figure for both film criticism and feminism more broadly. The figure is hard to define, and provokes complex questions about the representation of female agency, sexuality, and desire. Beyond this, the figure also raises issues surrounding the cinematic epistemological imperative, narratives and conclusions, genre, and the ways in which these elements intersect when attempting to represent a complex relationship between femininity and power. In addition to this, I have discussed how the femme fatale is a highly problematic figure for feminism, and how this figure summons timely questions about the relationship between empowerment, choice, sexual display and performance, and patriarchal objectification in popular culture in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This thesis has not sought to provide simple answers to these difficult questions, but instead has worked through the specifics of the ways in which these tensions manifest in contemporary cinema. I have avoided offering reductive readings of the femme fatale based on assumptions and critical preconceptions, but instead have interrogated the ways in which these assumptions about the figure work within and across cinematic conventions and genres, and considered how the apparently contradictory meanings often attributed to the femme fatale coexist within this figure.

In the Introduction, I argued that one of the primary factors in the femme fatale's representation is not that she is to-be-looked-at, as Mulvey argues of women in narrative cinema, so much as she is *to-be-solved*. The to-be-solved-ness of the femme fatale points towards the potential for this figure to act as both a critique and an endorsement of a patriarchal sense of entitlement to a complete knowledge of women's bodies, intentions, sexualities and desires. Although Doane's contention that 'sexuality becomes the site of questions about what can and cannot be known' refers to films of the 1940s and 1950s, it



remains a valid one.<sup>57</sup> The epistemological imperative is still at work in the femme fatale's ongoing popularity amongst contemporary filmmakers serves as evidence of the continuing and evolving tenacity of the investigative attitude towards women, their bodies, and their motivations in the early twenty-first-century. My readings in this thesis demonstrate that the relationship between the representation of women as mysterious, and the feminist politics of such representations are difficult and contentious. As I argue in Chapter Four, attempts to define, identify, categorise and explain the femme fatale's body can effectively function as a dismissal of female power, while leaving space for ambiguity about her physicality allows for the possibility of a better integration of agency and femininity.

However, the simple affirmation and retention of the notion of the femme fatale as intrinsically mysterious does not automatically lead to the representation of a nuanced female character. Although I argue that filmic strategies of obfuscation are instrumental in preventing the power or sexuality of the femme fatale from being neutralised, this is not the same thing as allowing such figures to be entirely undeveloped and left, vaguely, as 'mysterious women'. Within cinematic representation there are, I argue, boundaries to be negotiated between complex characterisations of women, and neat attempts to solve the feminine mystery. Such negotiations can be found in many of the films I discuss here, in the domesticating retro noir narratives of *L.A. Confidential* and *Devil in a Blue Dress*, the efforts to represent the minefield of contradictions faced by the teenage girls in *Cruel Intentions* and *Pretty Persuasion*, the complex combinations of sexual and crime mysteries of *Bound* and *Basic Instinct*, and the mysterious alien bodies of *The Faculty* and *Alien Resurrection*. While narratives about mysterious women which treat their peculiarities as symptomatic inevitably risk 'explaining away' these complicated female representations, it is possible for narratives to work towards an

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<sup>57</sup> Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p.1.

understanding of women's relationship with power which is not formulated around the concept of women as diverting puzzles.

The notion of the femme fatale as to-be-solved also provokes inevitable questions of genre. The femme fatales of classic noir frequently appear in detective narratives, which, as the majority of the critics I discussed in the Introduction argue, foreground processes of investigation and typically position the femme fatale as central to the solving of the crime. However, I contend that, despite this history, conventions of genre function to support the ultimate investigation of the femme fatale, rather than the other way around. My interrogations of the texts in this thesis attest to the ways in which films of a variety of different genres repeatedly make interventions into female subjectivity, and engage with the represented female body, sexual orientation and desire, and feminine power in ways that go beyond noir. As my readings of contemporary films about teenagers and science fiction cinema in particular attest, the femme fatale can be subject to investigation without the framework of the detective narrative. The ways in which women are presented on screen are frequently informed by cinematic imperatives that themselves encourage investigation of the body, whether to provoke desire or horror, and the films discussed here are no exception to this. Those films discussed here which fall under the aegis of noir do launch investigations of femininity within the context of a criminal mystery narrative, but the retro noir and neo-noir films discussed in Chapters One and Three engage with the femme fatale and her many contradictions as worthy of investigation in their own right. The detective narrative, I argue, serves as a means of foregrounding the investigation of the femme fatale, rather than as a reason for that investigation, and such a revelation makes clear the importance of expanding the field of cinematic femme fatale criticism beyond film noir.

In addition to this, the question of the femme fatale's status as a cipher or an expression of realist discourse is one which does not yield simple answers. Within the films I

address in this thesis, both of these possibilities are explored, from the hyperbolic alien women of science fiction to the teenage bad girls in crisis. The feminist implications of these different possibilities are mixed and complex. Grossman may claim that the notion of the femme fatale is pure fantasy, and ‘a figure I want to identify as a phantom, an illusion and myth that I wish not so much to kill, but to deconstruct as a category that feeds gender fantasies.’<sup>58</sup> However, while this project of deconstructing the idea of the femme fatale is an important one, the results do not necessarily result in the clearing away of fantasy to reveal a nuanced, feminist depiction of realist femininity that Grossman expects. Although it might be assumed that accounts of realistic women would be more progressive than those films in which the femme fatale exists as an enigmatic fantasy, the reality is not that straightforward. In the films which make some effort to represent women’s lived experiences, such strategies have both sympathetic and highly reactionary effects. For example, in Chapter Two, I argue that some of the teen films discussed offer nuanced, if rather gloomy, depictions of girls’ struggles within patriarchal culture, while in Chapter One, I found that the efforts of the retro noir films to present their ostensive femme fatales as ordinary, domesticated women, functions as a disavowal of the femme fatale’s power. While one example demonstrates an effort to recognise the complexity of young women’s relationship with sexuality and agency in contemporary patriarchal culture, the other functions, as in the case of the epistemological drives discussed above, as a means of containing and limiting the potency of the femme fatale’s power, while working to locate her more firmly in an achievable or liveable context.

Similarly, in texts which present the femme fatale more clearly as a fantasy character, as in Chapter Four, the question of whether these texts are progressive or conservative is answered not simply by the fact of their depiction of women as hyperbolic fantasies, but rather by the ways in which they employ generic tropes in order to complicate or simplify the

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<sup>58</sup> Grossman, p. 21.

relationship between women and power. So while films like *Species* and *The Faculty* may appear to present similar narratives, the filmic strategies employed in creating those narratives yield very different results. Whether the femme fatale is presented as a representation of women's realities, or as cinematic fantasy is not, I argue, the key issue. Rather, what is at stake for the femme fatale's feminist potential is the matter of the depiction of her power, and whether she is represented in a way that simplifies or complicates her relationship with that power. While the notion of a sexy but duplicitous woman is not in itself particularly complex, there lies within the archetype of the femme fatale the potential for representations of multifaceted, agentic women.

The potential of this independent woman/projection of anxiety dichotomy is fairly limited. As the readings in this project have demonstrated, the figure of the femme fatale in contemporary cinema takes in a huge range of contradictory representations and positions, and it is more productive, I argue, to engage with the implications of those apparently irreconcilable contradictions for feminist film studies. In her re-reading of the classic noir femme fatale, Bronfen argues that

The *femme fatale* has resiliently preserved her position within our image repertoire precisely because she forces the spectator to decide whether she acts as an empowered modern subject or is simply to be understood as an expression of an unconscious death drive, indeed, whether we are to conceive of her as an independent figure or merely as a figure of projection for masculine anxiety.<sup>59</sup>

While this reading depends on the femme fatale's presence within the familiar noir narrative of the mysterious, deadly, and ultimately punished femme fatale who leads the hero to his downfall, a narrative that certainly does not apply across all of the films discussed in this thesis, Bronfen's point is a useful one. This notion that the femme fatale necessarily requires an intellectual back and forth from the viewer, that such representations might swing from one end of a critical binary to the other, with little space in between, suggests more, I argue, about the politics of representing women in mainstream cinema than it does about the femme

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<sup>59</sup> Bronfen, 'Femme Fatale', p.114. Emphasis in the original.

fatale specifically. While the idea of films as inherently containing either progressive or conservative meanings is an appealing one, particularly when faced with such troublesome images, the texts have the potential to flummox, frustrate, and delight, sometimes all at once.

It is the vexed nature of the femme fatale and the politics of her representation that make her such a vital figure for contemporary feminism and film studies. The femme fatale, with her contradictory meanings, embodies some of the most highly debated issues in feminist discourses around representation. These films inherently raise questions about the limits and potential of positioning women who meet highly normative standards of beauty as powerful icons of female agency. They point towards the constant shifting between patriarchal appropriation and feminist recuperation that inevitably accompanies such representations, and to the impossibility of ultimately claiming images of female sexuality for one side or the other within mainstream media contexts. Representations of the femme fatale also engage with fraught notions of postfeminist power through sexual performance and with the issues of choice which accompany such rhetoric. The femme fatale in contemporary cinema is an important figure for film studies more generally, most notably because such figures demonstrate the ways in which the weight of cinematic history can bear down on archetypal characters, crystallising them and allowing them to be re-viewed through new perspectives. These femme fatale characters frequently function in dialogue with the received version of film history, and point to the ways that layers of images from past films can be keenly felt in contemporary productions. The femme fatale can be a troubling, frustrating, pleasurable and thrilling spectacle for viewers. Her incarnations in contemporary cinema speak to more than simply patriarchal backlash against feminism, and she appears in a huge variety of films beyond noir. This thesis expands femme fatale criticism into vital new cinematic areas, to consider how the femme fatale's contemporary representation intersects with complex issues of gender and genre. In doing so, I have interrogated the ways in which female power in

contemporary cinema is innately connected to issues of knowledge, fantasy and sexuality. The femme fatale is not an easy feminist icon, but the range and complexity of her representations, and the quantities in which such representations are still appearing, mean that her potential for challenging simplistic understandings of the depiction of female power in mainstream contemporary cinema cannot be ignored.

# Filmography

*24* (TV) (Fox Network, 2001-2010)

*The 40 Year Old Virgin*, dir. by Judd Apatow (Universal Pictures, 2005)

*Above Suspicion: The Red Dahlia* (TV) (ITV, 2010)

*Against All Odds*, dir. by Taylor Hackford (Columbia Pictures, 1984)

*Alien*, dir. by Ridley Scott (Twentieth Century Fox, 1979)

*Aliens*, dir. by James Cameron (Twentieth Century Fox, 1986)

*Alien<sup>3</sup>*, dir. by David Fincher (Twentieth Century Fox, 1992)

*Alien Resurrection*, dir. by Jean-Pierre Jeunet (Twentieth Century Fox, 1997)

*American Graffiti*, dir. by George Lucas (Universal Pictures, 1973)

*Angel* (TV) (The WB Television Network, 1999-2004)

----- 'Are You Now or Have You Ever Been', S02, Ep.2, dir. by David Semel (2000)

----- 'Sleep Tight', S03, Ep.16, dir. by Terrence O'Hara (2002)

*Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*, dir. by Jay Roach (New Line Cinema, 1997)

*Back to the Future*, dir. by Robert Zemeckis (Universal Pictures, 1985)

*Back to the Future Part II*, dir. by Robert Zemeckis (Universal Pictures, 1989)

*Back to the Future Part III* dir. by Robert Zemeckis (Universal Pictures, 1990)

*Basic Instinct*, dir. by Paul Verhoeven (TriStar Pictures, 1992)

*Battlestar Galactica* (TV) (The Sci-Fi Channel, 2003-2009)

*The Big Sleep*, dir. by Howard Hawks (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1946)

*The Black Dahlia*, dir. by Brian De Palma (Universal Pictures, 2006)

*Black Widow*, dir. by Bob Rafelson (Twentieth Century Fox, 1987)

*Blackwater Valley Exorcism*, dir. by Ethan Wiley (Barnholtz Entertainment, 2006)

*Blade Runner*, dir. by Ridley Scott (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1982)

*The Blue Dahlia*, dir. by George Marshall (Paramount Pictures, 1946)

*The Blue Gardenia*, dir. by Fritz Lang (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1953)

*Bones* (TV) (Fox Network, 2005 – )

*Brick*, dir. by Rian Johnson (Focus Features, 2005)

*Brokeback Mountain*, dir. by Ang Lee (Focus Features, 2005)

*Body Heat*, dir. by Lawrence Kasdan (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1981)

*Body of Evidence*, dir. by Uli Edel (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1993)

*Born to Kill*, dir. by Robert Wise (RKO Radio Pictures, 1947)

*Bound*, dir. by Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski (Gramercy Pictures, 1996)

*The Breakfast Club*, dir. by John Hughes (Universal Pictures, 1985)

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (TV) (The WB Television Network, 1997-2001, United Paramount Network, 2001-2003)

----- ‘Teacher’s Pet’, S01, Ep.4, dir. by Bruce Seth Green (1997)

*But I’m a Cheerleader*, dir. by Jamie Babbit (Lions Gate Films, 1999)

*Cat People*, dir. by Jacques Tourneur (RKO Radio Pictures, 1942)

*Chasing Amy*, dir. by Kevin Smith (Miramax Films, 1997)

*Chinatown*, dir. by Roman Polanski (Paramount Pictures, 1974)

*Clueless*, dir. by Amy Heckerling (Paramount Pictures, 1995)

*Constantine*, dir. by Francis Lawrence (Warner Bros Pictures, 2005)

*Copycat*, dir. by Jon Amiel (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1995)

*The Craft*, dir. by Andrew Fleming (Columbia Pictures, 1996)

*Cruel Intentions*, dir. by Roger Kumble (Columbia Pictures, 1999)

*The Crush*, dir. by Alan Shapiro (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1993)

*CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (TV) (Columbia Broadcasting System, 2000 - )

*Dark City*, dir. by Alex Proyas (New Line Cinema, 1998)



*Dawson's Creek* (TV) (The WB Television Network, 1998-2003)

*Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid*, dir. by Carl Reiner (Universal Pictures, 1982)

*Dead Poets' Society*, dir. by Peter Weir (Buena Vista Pictures, 1989)

*Death Proof*, dir. by Quentin Tarantino (Dimension Films, 2007)

*Decoys*, dir. by Matthew Hastings (Imagination Worldwide, 2004)

*Decoys 2: Alien Seduction*, dir. by Jeffery Scott Lando (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2007)

*Detour*, dir. by Edgar G. Ulmer (Producers Releasing Corporation, 1945)

*Devil in a Blue Dress*, dir. by Carl Franklin (TriStar Pictures, 1995)

*Devil in the Flesh*, dir. by Steve Cohen (Mill Creek Entertainment, 1998)

*The Devil's Muse*, dir. by Ramzi Abed (Halo-8 Entertainment, 2007)

*Dexter* (TV) (Showtime Networks, 2006 - )

*Diabolique*, dir. by Jeremiah S. Chechik (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1996)

*Disclosure*, dir. by Barry Levinson (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1994)

*D.O.A.*, dir. by Annabel Jankel and Rocky Morton (Buena Vista Pictures, 1988)

*Double Indemnity*, dir. by Billy Wilder (Paramount Pictures, 1944)

*Down With Love*, dir. by Peyton Reed (Twentieth Century Fox, 2003)

*Dreamcatcher*, dir. by Lawrence Kasdan (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2003)

*Eve of Destruction*, dir. by Duncan Gibbins (Orion Pictures Corporation, 1991)

*The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, dir. by Scott Derrickson (Screen Gems, 2005)

*The Exorcist*, dir. by William Friedkin (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1973)

*The Faculty*, dir. by Robert Rodriguez (Dimension Films, 1998)

*Far From Heaven*, dir. by Todd Haynes (Focus Features, 2002)

*Farewell, My Lovely*, dir. by Dick Richards (AVCO Embassy Pictures, 1975)

*Fargo*, dir. by Joel Coen (Gramercy Pictures, 1996)

*Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, dir. by Amy Heckerling (Universal Pictures, 1982)

*Fatal Attraction*, dir. by Adrian Lyne (Paramount Pictures, 1987)

*Feast of Death*, dir. by Vikram Jayanti (Palisades Tartan, 2001)

*Femme Fatale*, dir. by Brian De Palma (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2002)

*Fringe* (TV) (Fox Broadcasting Company, 2008 - )

----- 'Brown Betty', S02, Ep.20, dir. by Seith Mann (2010)

*Gaslight*, dir. by George Cukor (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1944)

*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, dir. by Howard Hawks (Twentieth Century Fox, 1953)

*Gilda*, dir. by Charles Vidor (Columbia Pictures, 1946)

*Ginger Snaps*, dir. by John Fawcett (Cinema Village Features, 2000)

*Goldfish Memory*, dir. by Elizabeth Gill (Wolfe Releasing, 2003)

*Grease*, dir. by Randal Kleiser (Paramount Pictures, 1978)

*Gun Crazy*, dir. by Joseph H. Lewis (United Artists, 1950)

*The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, dir. by Curtis Hanson (Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, 1992)

*The Haunting*, dir. by Robert Wise (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1963)

*The Haunting*, dir. by Jan de Bont (Dreamworks Distribution, 1999)

*Heartbreakers*, dir. by David Mirkin (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2001)

*Heathers*, dir. by Michael Lehmann (New World Pictures, 1988)

*Hollywoodland*, dir. by Allen Coulter (Focus Features, 2006)

*The Hot Spot*, dir. by Dennis Hopper (Orion Pictures Corporation, 1990)

*The Hours*, dir. by Stephen Daldry (Paramount Pictures, 2002)

*House* (TV) (Fox Network, 2004 - )

*The Hudsucker Proxy*, dir. by Joel Coen (Polgram Filmed Entertainment, 1994)

*I Know What You Did Last Summer*, dir. by Jim Gillespie (Columbia Pictures, 1997)

*Imagine Me and You*, dir. by Ol Parker (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2005)

*In a Lonely Place*, dir. by Nicholas Ray (Columbia, 1950)

*The In Crowd*, dir. by Mary Lambert (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2000)

*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, dir. by Don Siegel (Allied Artists Pictures, 1956)

*Jackie Brown*, dir. by Quentin Tarantino (Miramax Films, 1997)

*Juno*, dir. by Jason Reitman (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2007)

*The Kids are All Right*, dir. by Lisa Cholodenko (Focus Features, 2010)

*Kissing Jessica Stein*, dir. by Charles Herman-Wurmfeld (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2001)

*Knocked Up*, dir. by Judd Apatow (Universal Pictures, 2007)

*The L Word* (TV) (Showtime Networks, 2004-2009)

*L.A. Confidential*, dir. by Curtis Hanson (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1997)

*Labyrinth*, dir. by Jim Henson (TriStar Pictures, 1986)

*The Lady from Shanghai*, dir. by Orson Welles (uncredited) (Columbia Pictures, 1948)

*The Last Picture Show*, dir. by Peter Bogdanovich (Columbia Pictures, 1971)

*The Last Seduction*, dir. by John Dahl (October Films, 1994)

*Laura*, dir. by Otto Preminger (Twentieth Century Fox, 1944)

*Law and Order* (TV) (National Broadcasting Company, 1990 - 2010)

*Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* (TV) (National Broadcasting Company, 1999 - )

*Lolita*, dir. by Adrian Lyne (The Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1997)

*Lonely Hearts*, dir. by Todd Robinson (Roadside Attractions, 2006)

*The Long Goodbye*, dir. by Robert Altman (United Artists, 1973)

*The Majestic*, dir. by Frank Darabont (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2001)

*The Maltese Falcon*, dir. by John Huston (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1941)

*The Man Who Wasn't There*, dir. by Joel Coen (USA Films, 2001)

*The Matrix*, dir. by Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1999)

*The Matrix Reloaded*, dir. by Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2003)

*The Matrix Revolutions*, dir. by Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2003)

*Mean Girls*, dir. by Mark Waters (Paramount Pictures, 2004)

*Metropolis*, dir. by Fritz Lang (Paramount Pictures, 1927)

*Mildred Pierce*, dir. by Michael Curtiz (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1945)

*Miller's Crossing*, dir. by Joel Coen (Twentieth Century Fox, 1990)

*Mini's First Time*, dir. by Nick Guthe (First Independent Pictures, 1998)

*Mona Lisa Smile*, dir. by Mike Newell (Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2003)

*Mulholland Drive*, dir. by David Lynch (Universal Pictures, 2001)

*Mulholland Falls*, dir. by Lee Tamahori (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1996)

*Murder My Sweet*, dir. by Edward Dmytryk (RKO Radio Pictures, 1944)

*New Best Friend*, dir. by Zoe Clark-Williams (Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2002)

*New Rose Hotel*, dir. by Abel Ferrara (Avalanche Home Entertainment, 1998)

*Night and the City*, dir. by Irwin Winkler (Twentieth Century Fox, 1992)

*Night Moves*, dir. by Arthur Penn (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1975)

*Out of the Past*, dir. by Jacques Tourner (RKO Radio Pictures, 1947)

*Out of Time*, dir. by Carl Franklin (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2003)

*Party of Five* (TV) (Fox Network, 1994-2000)

*Pearl Harbour*, dir. by Michael Bay (Buena Vista Pictures, 2001)

*Peggy Sue Got Married*, dir. by Francis Ford Coppola (TriStar Pictures, 1986)

*Phantom Lady*, dir. by Richard Siodmak (Universal Pictures, 1944)

*Pleasantville*, dir. by Gary Ross (New Line Cinema, 1998)

*Point Blank*, dir. by John Boorman (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1967)

*Poison Ivy*, dir. by Katt Shea (New Line Cinema, 1992)

*Poison Ivy II*, dir. by Anne Goursaud (Image Entertainment, 1996)

*Poison Ivy: The New Seduction*, dir. by Kurt Voss (New Line Home Video, 1997)

*Poison Ivy: The Secret Society*, dir. by Jason Hreno (New Line Home Video, 2008)

*The Postman Always Rings Twice*, dir. by Bob Rafelson (Paramount Pictures, 1981)

*Pretty Baby*, dir. by Louis Malle (Paramount Pictures, 1978)

*Pretty in Pink*, dir. by Howard Deutch (Paramount Pictures, 1986)

*Pretty Persuasion*, dir. by Marcos Siega (Samuel Goldwyn Films, 2007)

*Psycho*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock (Paramount Pictures, 1960)

*Rebecca*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock (United Artists, 1940)

*Romeo is Bleeding*, dir. by Peter Medak (Gramercy Pictures, 1993)

*Scream*, dir. by Wes Craven (Dimension Films, 1996)

*Scream 2*, dir. by Wes Craven (Dimension Films, 1997)

*Scream 3*, dir. by Wes Craven (Miramax Films, 2000)

*Scream 4*, dir. by Wes Craven (Dimension Films, 2011)

*Sex and the City*, (TV) (Home Box Office, 1998-2004)

----- ‘The Turtle and the Hare’, S01, Ep.9, dir. by Michael Fields (1998)

----- ‘Time and Punishment’, S04, Ep.7, dir. by Michael Engler (2001)

*The Silence of the Lambs*, dir. by Jonathan Demme (Orion Pictures Corporation, 1991)

*Sin City*, dir. by Frank Miller, Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino (Dimension Films, 2005)

*Single White Female*, dir. by Barbet Schroeder (Columbia Pictures, 1992)

*Skins* (TV) (MTV, 2011)

*Species*, dir. by Roger Donaldson (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1995)

*Species II*, dir. by Peter Medak (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1998)

*Species III*, dir. by Brad Turner (MGM Home Entertainment, 2004)

*Star Trek* (TV) (National Broadcasting Company, 1966-1969)

----- ‘The Man Trap’, S01, Ep.1, dir. by Marc Daniels (1966)

----- ‘Mudd’s Women’, S01, Ep.6, dir. by Harvey Hart (1966)

*Star Trek: First Contact*, dir. by Jonathan Frakes (Paramount Pictures, 1996)

*Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TV) (CBS Paramount Domestic Television, 1987-1994)

----- ‘The Big Goodbye’, S01, Ep.11, dir. by Joseph L. Scanlan (1988)

*Steel and Lace*, dir. by Ernest D. Farino (Fries Entertainment, 1991)

*The Stepford Wives*, dir. by Frank Oz (Paramount Pictures, 2004)

*Stigmata*, dir. by Rupert Wainwright (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1999)

*Strange Days*, dir. by Kathryn Bigelow (Twentieth Century Fox, 1995)

*Sunset Boulevard*, dir. by Billy Wilder (Paramount Pictures, 1950)

*Swimfan*, dir. by John Polson (Twentieth Century Fox, 2002)

*Teacher’s Pet*, dir. by Marcus Spiegel (Allumination Filmworks, 2000)

*Teeth*, dir. by Mitchell Lichtenstein (Roadside Attractions, 2007)

*The Terminator*, dir. by James Cameron (Orion Pictures Corporation, 1984)

*Terminator 2: Judgement Day*, dir. by James Cameron (TriStar Pictures, 1991)

*Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, dir. by Jonathan Mostow (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2003)

*True Confessions*, dir. by Ulu Grosbard (United Artists, 1981)

*Ulli Lommel’s Black Dablia*, dir. by Ulli Lommel (Lionsgate, 2006)

*Vertigo*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock (Paramount Pictures, 1958)

*When Will I Be Loved?*, dir. by James Toback (IFC Films, 2004)

*Where the Truth Lies*, dir. by Atom Egoyan (THINKFilm, 2005)

*Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, dir. by Robert Zemeckis (Buena Vista Pictures, 1988)

*Wicked*, dir. by Michael Steinberg (Columbia TriStar Home Video, 1998)

*Wild Things*, dir. by John McNaughton (Columbia Pictures, 1998)

*X-Men: The Last Stand*, dir. by Brett Ratner (Twentieth Century Fox, 2006)

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