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Film studies

Dossiers

Femmes fatales: dark ladies at the movies (Part 1: classical film noir)

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Jessica Rabbit in Who framed Roger Rabbit *(by Robert Zemeckis, USA 1988):*
"I'm not evil. They draw me like that!"

Introduction

1. Introduction

At the beginning of One-way street *(by Hugo Fregonese, USA 1950), an aerial night view of a big city is followed by a view of a street, while we here sirens wailing ... zooming in to a window on the last floor of a building, and against the light coming from a room we see the silhouette of a woman dressed in black ... The woman is smoking, she looks towards us, then out of the window, while the sirens get closer and closer ...*

This could well be the visual presentation of the femme fatale, a woman displaying an irresistible erotic charm which a man cannot escape, ensnaring him and leading him to his death ...

This image of an alluring, seductive and at the same time destructive woman has been rooted in the collective imagery since the most ancient literary sources: one could even start from Eve seducing Adam, thus causing the original sin and all its evil and fatal consequences. And in classical mythology, just think of Circe the sorceress, who changes Ulysses' men into pigs, or the mermaids, who try to seduce those same men with their alluring song ... Or think of Salomé, who dances for Herod so that she can get John the Baptist's head ... or of the medieval witches, whose purity and chastity could be seen as a disguise of their true evil nature - only to be condemned to the stake if they departed from the accepted norms ...

"The dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction is among the oldest themes of art, literature, mythology and religion in Western culture ... She and her sister (or alter ego*), the virgin, the mother, the innocent, the redeemer, form the two poles of female archetypes" (Note 1). In other words, 'All human societies have a conception of the monstrous feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject' (Note 2).*

In time, such concepts have also received psychoanalytical interpretations (the masochist man, subject to the Oedipus complex, the fear of castration, and so on), which today, thanks also to the evolution of feminist studies, are questioned and challenged, by putting forward wider socio-cultural visions, as we shall soon see.

Helen Gardner Theda Bara

The image of the femme fatale appears very early in silent cinema in movies, inspired by French and Italian cinema melodramas, which provided the model of a vampire-like woman (and later, the well-known term "vamp"). Such movies starred actresses displaying a subtly ambiguous charm, like Helen Gardner *or* Theda Bara *(see above).*

However, it is only with the so-called "hard boiled" detective novels, starting from the '30s, that the femme fatale starts to show the features which would make her an icon: the novels by Ross Mc Donald, by Dashiel Hammett (Red harvest, The glass key, The Dain curse, The Maltese falcon), by Raymond Chandler (The big sleep, Farewell, my lovely), by James M. Cain (The postman always rings twice, Double indemnity), *detective Mike Hammer's stories by* Mickey Spillane *– which were translated into films, later called noir, in the '40s and '50s (on* film noir *see the relevant* Interactive workshop*).*

2. The harbingers of the *femme fatale* in horror films

It is worth remembering that, just before the appearance of the movies which later would be called "film noir", a series of horror films had introduced the female image as a "monster", thus bringing closer two film genres which only later would be viewed as different and independent.

Rebecca *(by Alfred Hitchcock, USA 1940)*

Rebecca *can be considered the initiator of such films, although, paradoxically, the* femme fatale *is not physically present, but only as an obsession in the characters' minds. The new wife (Joan Fontaine) of a rich widower (Laurence Olivier) comes to live in his manor, but her life is immediately shaken by the constant memory of Rebecca, his first wife, who has clearly turned into an obsession in her husband's (and the housekeeper's) minds, so much so as to lead her almost to madness. The context where the story takes place is crucial: a sort of Gothic, gloomy old manor, in which the phantoms of the past never cease to move and haunt the present. But Rebecca, although dead, and even if she never appears not even in flashback, is/was a true* femme fatale, *involved in secret meetings, sexual-erotic obsessions, murder charges ...*

Cat people *(by Jacques Tourneur, USA 1942)*

Video 1

Video 2

The huge success of Rebecca led to the production of movies featuring the monster-woman, among which Cat people is the main title. Oliver (Kent Smith) is married to the shy Irina (Simeone Simon), who carries with her ancestral curse: when she is sexually aroused she changes into a panther, which obviously keeps the couple from fully living their love story. In the scenes above we see a friend, Alice (Jane Randolph) who on two different occasions has a "close encounter" with the panther. However, the appeal of this movie lies in the fact that we never get to see the panther: all the horror and panic sometimes seem to originate in the characters' minds. Through the use of the sound score and mostly through subtle light effects (see the sequence in the swimming pool, Video 2 above) the danger is only suggested, but just because of this it turns even more disturbing and terrifying. Here we go beyond the femme fatale*: the monster-woman is the result of ancient curses, in which the (female) sexual instincts become the focus of the story.*

However, it is worth considering, too, the role that the friend (Alice), plays in providing Irina's husband with a continuous support in his relationship with his strange wife: Alice is "the other woman", certainly pretty but not "fatal", the portrait of an independent, single, working woman: the stock image of the strong, autonomous woman of the war years. This character, which often appears in film noir, tends to represent the alternative to the femme fatale, ensuring a positive female presence in a world where male certainties were wavering, faced with the new female autonomy, as we shall see.

Captive wild woman *(by Edward Dmytryck, USA 1943)*

On the wake of the success of this movie other horror films were produced, featuring even more explicit stories. In Captive wild woman, for instance, a mad scientist turns orang-outang into a fatal woman, who turns again into a wild beast as soon as her fiancé embraces her ...

Thus such movies represent a well-defined trend in the depiction of female figures, and can rightly be considered as the harbingers of the soon-to-appear femme fatale.

2. What are the *femme fatale*'s main features?

Although, as we shall see, the femme fatale has partly changed her features in the course of time, several traits are rather constant. Perhaps the most complete description of this character was given by Michelle Mercure:

""The femme fatale" is an actress in every sense of the word. She lies, cheats, double-crosses, even murders her victims, and then cries, screams, sings, or whispers words of affection to the male protagonist to win him over, only to double-cross him again. It seems that everything she says and does is a fabrication of the truth, and her motive (although it too is often ambiguous) is usually greed. If her act isn't enough to snare the male protagonist into becoming infatuated with her, leading him to his destruction, her outward beauty will usually do the trick. Some of the most prominent characteristics of the outward appearance of the femme fatale include a cigarette, long, sexy legs that often dominate the frame, thick, luscious lips, gorgeous, wavy hair that frames her face perfectly, and an attire that is often very flashy: fur shawls and coats, long gloves that extend to

the elbows, evening gowns that shimmer and sparkle, clothing that reveals legs, cleavage, arms, back, and/or shoulders, and a sexy pair of high heels" *(Note 3).*

Veronica Lake in This gun for hire *(by Frank Tuttle, USA 1942)*

Rita Hayworth in Gilda *(*by *Charles Vidor, USA 1946)*

Despite such outward appearance which could very easily describe her, one has to admit that the femme fatale "is never what she seems to be" and that films featuring her "are transforming the threat of woman into a secret, something that must be aggressively revealed' (Note 4): such movies are often focussed on the preoccupation to uncover her mystery, to determine her motivations, to reveal what lies behind and within the dark side of this enigmatic figure. Obviously, all this refers back to the male gaze: it is generally through the protagonist's point of view that we gain an insight into what one can see and understand about the femme fatale (with the frequent addition of an off-screen "voice-over" which, again, usually belongs to the protagonist). Thus the story centres on the effects that the woman produces on the man, who is often a puzzled, if not bewildered being.

Who are these men, then? They are often private detectives, police officers or lawyers, often lonely, anti-social, disillusioned, dominated by angst and existential problems - people who are regularly to be found in ambiguous, dreary, dehumanized places, like red-light districts, dubious bars, desolate, anonymous office buildings; people who can boast a verbal wit, even if not necessarily smart, who often try to survive in a world dominated by corruption, crime and violence. Such men are often tangled up in this world themselves, in addition to falling prey to the seductive embrace of the femme fatale*. They are obviously stereotyped figures, as are the accompanying female characters.*

3. The *femme fatale*'s schemes

Double indemnity *(*by *Billy Wilder, USA 1944)*

In Double indemnity, *an insurance agent, Walter Neff (Fred McMurray) enters the house of one of his clients, Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) to renew a policy. The woman appears from above, on the first floor, wrapped in a white towel and with dazzling blonde hair. Walter is quick on the draw, and expresses his worry that the deadline for the policy may leave his clients "not fully covered" - a remark that is quickly picked up by the woman ("I was sunbathing"), to which Walter answers, "No pigeons around I hope. As the woman get dressed, Walter takes a look around but ... "I was thinking about that dame upstairs and the way she had looked at me. I wanted to see her again, close ...". Immediately after the camera frames the woman's legs getting down the stairs, with a braceelt around one ankle, while she buttons up her dress ... The first encounter between the two characters is rife with understatements and allusions, but it is soon clear that the woman, who introduces herself as the victim of a ruthless, violent husband, wants to persuade Walter to kill him for her, pretending to set up an accident, so as to cash in on a higher policy (the "Double indemnity" of the title). Not only does the man fall into her trap, but he will have to face the woman's double cross, whom he will eventually kill, though he will be wounded himself and finally arrested.*

The postman always rings twice *(by Tay Garnett, USA 1946)*

The femme fatale *often appears all of a sudden, and her seductive power is immediate, boundless, and impossible to resist. In this sequence from* The postman always rings twice *(a story already filmed in* Ossessione, *by Luchino Visconti, Italy 1943,with Massimo Girotti and Clara Calamai, and remade by Bob Rafelson, USA 1981, with Jack Nicholson and Jessica Lange), a drifter, Frank Chambers (John Garfield), looking for a job, has just finished talking to the owner of the inn where he happens to find himself, when his attention is drawn by a lipstick which is "accidentally" rolling on the floor towards him. The camera, following Frank's look, slowly moves upwards to reveal a woman's feet, then her legs. Frank's gaze, almost awe-struck and fascinated, frames the whole body of the woman (the innkeeper's wife, played by Lana Turner), dressed in scanty white shorts and blouse, plus a towel arranged as a turban. The man, almost in a trance, picks up the lipstick and, handing it to the woman, says, "Did you drop this?". The woman nods in assent, the two of them look at each other intensely (and we get a close-up of her), then she walks slowly towards the man, takes the lipstick from his hand and puts it on looking at herself in a small hand-mirror, and finally closes the door behind her. The man is literally captivated by this appearance - in this case, too, he is caught in the trap, and the two lovers will kill the woman's husband - although fate has death in store for both of them.*

Road house *(by Jean Negulesco, USA 1948)*

Sometimes the femme fatale *is not personally active, but her mere presence is enough to trigger a violent chain reaction - sometimes, in other words, she is seen as an almost involuntary tool of destruction and she and her partner change into a couple of "tragic lovers". In the sequence from* Road house *that starts at 11:21, we see a night club singer (Ida Lupino) while she is singing at the piano. This performance attracts all eyes, especially from two men, the owner of the club (Richard Widmark) and the club manager (Cornel Wilde). The male gaze is always the filter through which the femme fatale is perceived and the narration develops consequently. The singer in this sequence is not, strictly speaking, a femme fatale, but the men are still fascinated by her, and this will inevitably lead them to jealousy and murder.*

Angel face *(by Otto Preminger, USA 1952)*

Video 1

Video 2

It is interesting to note how in the trailers of these films the femme fatale *is always presented as a prominent character, if not the primary protagonist. In the trailer of* Angel face *(Video 1) the superimposed text says, "Beware of this woman! So warm ... So lovely ... So evil! For the men she loves she destroys! ... In the violent drama of a woman ... who traps a man into marriage ... and murder!". This trailer introduces the relationship between Frank (Robert Mitchum), an ambulance driver, and Diane (Jean Simmons), when Frank is called to give first aid to Diane's stepmother, who is found unconscious in her bedroom full of gas. Frank is not slow to realize that Diane is the one responsible for this attempted murder, through which the girl had planned to come into a substantial inheritance. Diane asks her father to employ Frank as a driver, then seduces him, persuading him to plan her parents' death. In Video 2, we see Diane starting to play the piano, cold and unperturbed, while the murder takes place (the brakes of her parents' car have been tampered with on purpose). The two murderers will be acquitted, but a tragical end awaits them, as in most of these movies. Frank plays a disillusioned man who almost unwittingly, as if drawn by fate, falls into*

the trap set up by Diane, the "angel" (as the title says) of death. From the very start, Frank is a loser and the designated victim of a doomed love, in which Diane is the ruthless schemer.

Leave her to heaven *(by John M. Stahl, USA 1945)*

Video 1

Video 2

Perhaps the most brutal femme fatale *is the protagonist of* Leave her to heaven*, a thoughtful and passionate wife (Gene Tierney), who is obsessively jealous of her husband (Cornel Wilde). If only she could have him all for herself … she does not hesitate to let her young handicapped brother-in-law drown (Video 1), she intentionally falls down the stairs to interrupt her pregnancy, which she sees an an obstacle to her love, and, finally, she poisons herself , trying to make her sister (and her husband, who has fallen in love with her) be blamed for her death: in this way, she tries to make her possessive obsession triumph even beyond her death. A tragic melodrama, in which love obsession goes hand in hand with the imperturbable coldness with which this "crazy woman" plans and performs her crimes.*

4. Behind the mask: the *femme fatale* as the mirror of society

It is not by chance that movies featuring the "classic" femme fatale *are the film noir which started to appear in the early '40s, i.e. during World War II and tin he following years (not forgetting the Korean war in the early '50s). During the war period many jobs, made vacant by the men sent to the front, were suddenly available to women. Women started to go out, to earn their living in an independent way, to take an active part in public life as never before, showing in this way not only that they could manage a family, but also that they could free themselves from a traditional patriarchal role and status. And not just that - an ever-increasing number of women entered the army, where they played practically all roles except active combat troops.*

This implied that men, once back from the war, found themselves in a completely different world, side by side with women who had shown that they could be trusted just as much, and, above all, who could make their own choices, thus at least partially undermining the traditional family model. The film noir of the period mirror this situation: the male gaze, which, as we have already seen, is in most cases the eye through which such movies interpret the world and present it to the audience, sees in such autonomous and brave women a danger to the patriarchal models of family, as well as of society at large, and mirrors the bewilderment and pessimism towards change - a change brought about by war, but now unacceptable to men, who would rather see women go back to their homes, underscoring the idea that a "career woman" could not find a husband and form a family. However, the female experience of the "freedom" associated with a new sense of assertiveness and self-esteem, , was now difficult to cancel. The fear that the new women's roles might undermine the whole system of American values was stronger in cities, where more than anywhere else people could find opportunities of work and leisure, and which were soon identified as the places where crime and immorality could flourish.

The femme fatale*, who actually in most cases lives in a big city, thus becomes the symbol of these unconscious male fears, which in turn lead to the punishment of such transgressive, greedy women, who bring with them violence and corruption: it is not by chance that the* femme fatale *is in most cases weeded out at the end of the film: she is either murdered or accidentally killed - although she*

often carries with her , in her self-destructive madness, the partners that she has seduced, thus lowering them to her moral level. "The femme fatale threatens the status quo and the hero precisely because she controls her own sexuality outside of marriage. She uses sex for pleasure and as a weapon or a tool to control men, not merely in the culturally acceptable capacity of procreation within marriage" (Note 5). This is therefore a multi-faceted challenge to the primacy of patriarchal tradition.

The physical destruction of the femme fatale*, as a consequence of her limitless greed for power, is well described in the final sequence of* Kiss me deadly

Kiss me deadly *(by Robert Aldrich, USA 1955)*

In this movie, detective Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker)(a character from Mickey Spillane's novel of the same name) in carrying out an investigation about a mysterious case which is considered to be invaluable (though we do not know its contents). During his investigation, he gets to know dark, corrupt places where merciless people torture and kill women. However, in this case, too, the detective happens to meet a femme fatale*, who, as we see in the above sequence, won't be stopped by anything: she kills in cold blood, ruthlessly, in order to obtain the mysterious case. But her unreined greed and her ruthlessness, which place her in the same category of the criminals we have seen crossing her path, eventually show to be lethal: as she opens the case, we discover some sort of radioactive material which will lead her to the final destruction - a destruction of the* femme fatale *by her own hand.*

5. Conclusion

In these movies, "it is not the inevitable demise [of the femmes fatales] we remember but rather their strong, dangerous, and above all exciting sexuality ... The final "lesson" of the myth often fades into the background and we retain the image of the erotic, strong, unrepressed (if destructive) woman. The style of these films thus overwhelms their conventional narrative content, or interacts with it to produce a remarkably potent image of woman" (Note 6).

End of Part 1.

Notes

(1) Pidduck J. 1993. *The "fatal femme" in contemporary Hollywood* Film Noir*: Reframing gender, violence and power,* A thesis in the Department of Media Studies, Concordia University, Montreal, p. 34.
(2) Creed B. 1986. *Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection,* na, p. 37.
(3) Mercure M. 2010. "The "bad girl" turned feminist: The femme fatale and the performance of theory", *The Undergraduate Review,* Bridgewater State College.
(4) Doane M.A. 1991. *Femmes fatales: Feminism, film theory, psychoanalysis,* Routledge, New York and London:, p. 1.
(5) Blaser N. 1996. *No place for a woman: The family in film noir,* Web page
(6) Place J. 1998. "Women in film noir", in Kaplan E.A. (ed.), *Women in film noir,* Bloomsbury, London, p. 36.

Want to know more?

***** From the *filmsite.org* website:
- The greatest femmes fatales in classic film noir by Tim Dirks

* From the *Taste of Cinema* website:
- The 20 greatest femmes fatales in American cinema by Andre Grier

* From the *List Challenges* website:
- The 50 hottest femmes fatales of all time according to youth culture website *www.complex.com*

* Female monsters: Horror, the "femme fatale" and World War II by Mark Jancovich
* The femme fatale by William Marling
* The femme fatale: the recurrent manifestation of patriarchal fears a thesis by Leslie Cecile Marie Anderson, University of Columbia
* The femme fatale in Hollywood film noir by Amy Lauren Zoons