

*Femmes fatales: dark ladies at the movies*  
(Part 2: the neo-noir)

Luciano Mariani [info@cinemafocus.eu](mailto:info@cinemafocus.eu)

[Go to online version \(Italian and English\)](#)

**1. An era of transition: the "New Hollywood"**

*Towards the end of the '50s, the traditional femme fatale, who had been portrayed in her most classical features in the film noir of the previous decades, starts showing signs of change. Starting from some Hitchcock movies like Vertigo (USA 1958) and North by north-west (USA 1959), the woman as a protagonist continues to be at the core of the narrative and to affect the decisions and actions of the male co-protagonist, but without that almost diabolical determination which had been one of the crucial features of the classical femme fatale. In both movies, these women seem to be ensnared by circumstances and their machinations follow criminal schemes beyond their control.*

*In the following two decades, which saw the success of what was later called "New Hollywood" or "Hollywood Renaissance", the femme fatale appears much less frequently and loses her central position in the narrative, now more often playing the role of passive victim rather than the role of seductive and destructive schemer. There are several reasons for this evolution, and they are to be found, once again, in the changing socio-cultural context. During these decades, which saw not only student protests and feminist movements, but also political upheavals following the murders of John and Robert Kennedy and of Martin Luther King, as much as the wounds, which will be slow to heal up, of the Vietnam war and the Watergate scandal, cinema, too, reflects the wish for, but also the fear of, change, through more realistic and disillusioned overtones. In the meantime, women's position in society, with their growing working independence, the emancipation movements and the new sexual freedom, caused a substantial change in social attitudes. It is not by chance that the Production Code (or Hays Code), with its rigid censorship constraints (which provided that the audience should never be led to sympathise with criminal or evil characters, and, all the more so, that femmes fatales should always be punished at the end of the movie), was cancelled in 1968, at a time when the classical puritan themes of male subjectivity and of women's threatening sexual and economic liberation were beginning to fade away. In the same years Hollywood cinema was also beginning to feel the influence, both stylistic and conceptual, of the various "nouvelle vague" (new wave) and "auteur" movements coming mostly from Europe.*

**Marnie (by Alfred Hitchcock, USA 1964)**[Video 1](#)[Video 2](#)

*The femme fatale still shows her typical features, but now the focus of narration shifts towards the analysis and representation of the causes of these psychological traits. Marnie (Tippi Hedren) is a typical example: the woman is certainly a criminal, but her crime is kleptomania, an obsession which the movie sets out to explore its deep-seated roots (the woman is described in detail by Video 1, in Italian). In this search for hidden truths, the woman is helped by a man (Sean Connery), who, however, will have to win her frigidity and her fear of the male figure (Video 2).*

**Chinatown (by Roman Polanski, USA 1974)**

*In Chinatown, too, the protagonist (Faye Dunaway) is above all a victim of child abuse and of a corrupt context, and, just like in Marnie, is actually obsessed by her internal ghosts, and is therefore more self-destructive than really dangerous for her sexual and economic ambitions - much as she needs someone (a man - Jack Nicholson) who can help her get rid of such ghosts: a change, if not a complete reversal, of the gender roles shown in classical film noir. These women are themselves the victims of the violence and repression hosted in families as well as in corrupt economic contexts. It is not by chance that by the end of the '70s families and communities in American society show clear signs of a deep crisis, as witnessed by soaring divorce rates, social unrest, widely spread lack of confidence, at a time when mass consumption and middle-class aspirations become increasingly evident, together with the increased need of (and pressure for) a stronger role of women both at work and in the family (Note 1). Perhaps the end of the feminine seductive power has never been so well portrayed as in the child prostitute who, in Taxi driver (by Martin Scorsese, USA 1976) finds herself in the middle of an explosion of violence which she barely manages to escape.*

**2. The femme fatale in the '80s and '90s neo noir**

*At the beginning of the '80s a series of films showing clear links to the classical noir, but also a trend towards the renewal and updating of its prominent features, start to appear - they would later be called neo-noir. In such movies the femme fatale returns centre-stage, but most of all takes up, once again, those features of erotic seduction and destructive charge that had been a staple of her "classical" ancestors.*

"Consistent with the fact that more women were moving into positions of authority in the world of work, [the new femme fatale] is more likely to be an intimidating character of sophistication, wealth and power. Dressed out in a successful career or with the benefits of economic independence, the contemporary (or post-*noir*) seductress is generally smarter and more sexually demonstrative than her classic prototypes. She no longer needs the man for violence as she is fully capable of it, not as a means to profit, since she is already rich (or at least fully equipped for career success)" (Note 1).

*To this end, a comparison between the [first version](#) (by Tay Garnett, USA 1946) and the [more recent version](#) (by Bob Rafelson, USA 1981) of The postman always rings twice is most useful: not only is the woman (Jessica Lange) more sure of herself, standing up to her passionate lover (Jack Nicholson), but, after her husband's murder, she is also able to continue the family business (by*

*successfully managing a restaurant) almost all by herself: in other words, the man is no longer necessary and the woman has all the qualities to compete with him (while still showing a devastating strong sexuality). This new femme fatale is no longer a fatal temptress, who simply sets in motion a criminal scheme, but has now changed into an active and autonomous protagonist, fully capable of taking matters into her own hands.*

*As we said, once the Hays Code was cancelled, in the '80s movies were given a freer hand in clearly showing what was formerly impossible to show: violence and explicit sex (including a transgressive female sexuality) now replace the allusions and understatements through which classical film noir had always tried to suggest its "forbidden contents".*

*The character who has best become a symbol of these years and this neo-noir trend is probably Matty Walker in Body Heat.*

### **Body heat (by Lawrence Kasdan, USA 1981)**

[Video 1](#)

[Video 2](#)

[Video 3](#)

*In a scorching summer in a city in Florida, a lawyer (William Hurt) is easily seduced by Matty, a very sexy, and very rich, lady (Kathleen Turner), with whom he immediately starts a relationship charged with reckless eroticism (in Video 2, when the woman remarks that "All men are children", the man answers, "Perhaps you shouldn't dress like that" - "It's just a blouse, I wonder what else I should wear" - "you shouldn't wear that body"). It doesn't take Matty long before she persuades the man to kill her husband, so that they can share the relevant inheritance. However, the man is as infatuated with her as he is naive: not only will he discover that Matty will be the sole heir, but he will be put in a position to take on the full blame of the murder. But the real meaning of the movie is not revealed until the ending (Video 3): we see the man, now in jail, finding out that Matty had taken the place of another woman, while we see her enjoying a breezy holiday in an exotic place, where she has everything and everybody at her disposal. Matty, the dangerously seductive temptress, has done everything in her power to enjoy the inheritance all by herself - a veiled hint at the "Reagan decade" which was opening up a season of limitless liberalism, self-centredness, hedonism, extreme individualism and triumph of the image over and beyond substance. It is not by chance that Matty does not only hide her true intentions, but she also manages to literally replace another woman, thus creating a new "profile" well suited to a world made up of appearances and unrelenting cruelty. There is no punishment for this new femme fatale, who "gets away with it" in spite of everything and everybody.*

### **Black widow (by Bob Rafelson, USA 1987)**

*Black widow, too, follows this typical plot, possibly with even greater determination and surely with greater ambiguity. A federal agent (Debra Winger) starts investigating a series of suspicious "natural deaths" of wealthy middle-aged men who, just after marrying, are regularly murdered, leaving their wives to enjoy the usual rich inheritance. The agent singles out a woman (Theresa Russell) who could be responsible for all these murders, a sort of sophisticated, beautiful serial killer, and in order to discover her secrets finds a way to meet her and become a close friend - although, in the meantime, in order to keep up to the role, she starts imitating her in the way she*

*dresses, arranges her hair and behaves in public: the two women thus start an ambiguous relationship, in which the agent is almost seduced by her evil companion. The movie is a spider web trapping two faces of the same female image: and although in this case the murderess is eventually punished, we are left with the strong impression that we have witnessed a cruel game made up of appearances, lies and seduction.*

**Fatal attraction (by Adrian Lyne, USA 1987)**

[Video 1](#)

[Video 2](#)

*As the decade progressed, and the initial optimism was being put to the test of new, heavy social and financial crises, the femme fatale, too, was subject to a sort of "restyling". In Fatal attraction, a successful and (apparently happily) married lawyer (Michael Douglas)(a yuppie, as a character like this would be called at the time), gives in to a woman (Glenn Close)'s blandishments. For him it is just a one-night stand, but the woman, who is very attractive and seems quite harmless at the start, soon reveals her true nature: she is actually a lunatic, and develops a possessive attitude, ending up by threatening the man's family. This woman's determination will not stop at anything, and only a violent final fight will free the man and his family from this endless nightmare. (In Video 1, in Italian, the woman manages to get access to the man's home and meets his wife .. thus violating the family's intimacy; see also the English trailer Video2).*

*It is very clear that this woman, who is neither a wife nor a mother, aspires, in addition to professional success, which she already enjoys, to the middle-class status of the traditional family, too - and, since she cannot obtain it, throws herself against the same patriarchal order, starting with the seduction of the weaker part - the man-husband-father. Hence the implied message that the nuclear family needs to be protected as a social institution against these threatening, ambitious single women.*

*It is particularly illuminating to consider the production history of this movie. In an earlier version, the husband was sentenced for his lover's death. After the movie was first released, and following audiences' reactions, the ending was changed so that the man could see his right to defend his family fully recognised, thus meeting the fears about the frailty of this institution and the social need to preserve the yuppie's status (including, needless to say, his economic safety). Last but not least, we cannot forget that these were the times when AIDS was rapidly spreading, which implied the condemnation of promiscuous sexual behaviours and the punishment of all those who practise them (and one single night is enough to endanger everything ...).*

*This general disapproval of the femme fatale goes hand in hand with a cultural ambivalence towards a liberated female sexuality: "The resurgence of the femme fatale in the cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, the argument goes, is indicative of a political climate which took into account the gains of feminism, and was simultaneously hostile to women in the wake of those gains" (Note 2).*

*A new, further development of the femme fatale image in neo-noir films came with Catherine Trammel in Basic instinct.*

Basic instinct (by Paul Verhoeven, USA 1992)

*In this case, too, we meet a detective (Michael Douglas, again ...) who is investigating the murder of a man who was killed with an icepick while having a sexual intercourse: a beautiful blonde (Sharon Stone) is soon suspected - she is both a very wealthy woman, holding a degree in psychology, and a successful writer, but she is also involved in the "accidental" death of her parents (whose inheritance she is now enjoying) as well as of two previous partners. And what's more, the other women surrounding her are equally dangerous: one is suspected of murdering her husband and children with a carving knife; another of cutting her younger brother's throat with her father's razor; and even a psychoanalyst, who is the detective's lover, is suspected of murdering her ex-husband. The detective himself is not so very different either: his wife committed suicide after he shot two tourists under unclear circumstances - besides, he is addicted to alcohol and drugs and has sadomasochistic tendencies. All in all, in this weird setting (which the writer uses as a source of inspiration for her bestselling novels) nobody is above suspicion and ambiguity haunts everything till the very end, with sexual games involving everybody (the beautiful writer-psychologist is also bisexual ...). The scene when the woman is questioned by a team of police officers readily reached cult status: she has total control of the circumstances and defiantly uses sexual attraction to seduce body and soul of the unfortunate men sitting in front of her. When she crosses her legs (and the audience has been warned that she is wearing no underwear), the men get a glimpse of her genitals - enough to make them lose their minds ...*

*Apart from the implausibility of the plot and characters, this movie is, once again, a reminder of the social perception of the frailty of the family as well as of the danger represented by "open" sexual relationships - but is also shamelessly and cynically misogynous in its exposure of the usual "castrating female" (at a time, let's keep this well in mind, when AIDS was tragically spreading around), as well as dominated by the "male gaze", which objectifies the woman, making her into a dangerous and fascinating fetish. At the end of the movie, which cunningly leaves the audience wondering who the real murderer is, we see the woman and the detective making love ... but under the bed she is hiding an icepick ...*

*At the time of its release, the movie had to face the violent opposition of gay and lesbian activist groups, who accused it of perpetuating the Hollywood tradition of portraying gays and lesbians as murderers and psychopaths. As it often happens in such case, these protests helped advertise the film itself and raise its profile beyond and above its (few) filmic merits.*

*"This is a movie about male anxiety and paranoia. Women who are sexually powerful cause their anxiety, as do women emotionally attached to other women. Catherine is both. True - she and the other three might all be killers. But look who they've killed. Family, for one thing. Brothers. Men who might become husbands. It's part of the whole male anxiety scenario. In fact, it's almost a parody of a guy's worst nightmare" (Note 3).*

*We shall again find Michael Douglas, by now an icon of the mad seduced by a femme fatale, in [Disclosure](#) (by Barry Levinson, USA 1995, from the novel by Michael Crichton), the third chapter of an ideal trilogy, after Fatal attraction and Basic instinct, where, once again, he plays a manager who does not only give in, professionally speaking, to one of his previous lovers (Demi Moore), but is also sexually trapped, endangering his marriage and ending up with an accusation of both sexual harassment and professional incompetence. A double defeat for the man in his weakest points, at a time when the uncertainty of the workplace, the challenge of workers' rights (including the "white*

collars"), the crisis of the middle class and the super-power of the big "third sector" companies were (and are) keys to a general sense of social anxiety. Douglas had already played a manager going berserk after losing both his wife and his job in [Falling down](#) (by Joel Schumacher, USA 1993).

#### [To die for \(by Gus Van Sant, USA 1995\)](#)

Compared to the satanic Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*, Nicole Kidman in *To die for* seem to pale, but the career woman who, this time just for business, is ready for everything is perhaps more subtly portrayed. The movie is set, not in the posh surroundings of *Basic Instinct*, but in a (no less dangerous and ambiguous) middle class suburban area, where the protagonist (a yuppie, too), with a degree in electronic journalism, is at the moment commenting the weather forecast in a local TV station, although she has far greater ambitions, because, as she says, "You are nobody if you don't appear on TV". Unfortunately for her, her steady and fierce determination she finds an obstacle in her American-Italian husband (Matt Dillon) - and to eliminate this unpleasant inconvenience she does not hesitate to seduce two teenagers, asking them to kill her husband. This movie, too, (easily) targets social and professional climbing, the pursuit of success at all costs, manipulation by TV and consumer society - all targets which are all the more dangerous due to women's careerism, which, however, is eventually punished.

#### [Femme fatale \(by Brian De Palma, Francia/France 2002\)](#)

We cannot forget a movie which has *Femme fatale* as its title, although in this case the fatal woman is only part of a puzzle and an intricate web of reality and lies which are in the first place visual rather than narrative. Telling the story of a beautiful woman who steals a bunch of jewels, let everybody believe in her suicide, and then reappears a few years later as a diplomat's wife, director De Palma loses himself in his technical virtuosity, which focus on pure visual inventions, as if he were asking the audience to enjoy forms and images, which are now only a network of appearances serving a purely superficial film enthusiast's game.

The femme fatale cycle in '80s and '90s (and beyond) neo noir includes a range of movies which, in most cases, have enjoyed moderate or half-hearted critical and audience success: movies like [Final analysis](#) (by Phil Joanou, USA 1992), [Body of evidence](#) (by Ulrich Edel, USA 1992), [The hand that rocks the cradle](#) (by Curtis Hanson, USA 1992), [Poison ivy](#) (by Katt Shea Ruben, USA 1992), [Single while female](#) (by Barbet Schroeder, USA 1992), [The last seduction](#) (by John Dahl, USA 1993), [Bound](#) (by Larry and Andy Wachowski, USA 1996), [Cruel intentions](#) (by Roger Kumble, USA 1999), [Derailed](#) (by Mikael Hafstrom, USA 2005). And even movies for/about teenagers, often set in schools or colleges, have featured updated versions of the femme fatale ([Heathers](#), by Michael Lehmann, USA 1989, [Wild things](#), by John McNaughton, USA 1998).

### 3. A touch of irony

#### [Serial mom \(by John Waters, USA 1994\)](#)

[Video 1](#)

[Video 2](#)

[Video 3](#)

[Video 4](#)

*Mrs Sutphin (Kathleen Turner) is a loving wife and mother, a perfect housewife, an environment-friendly and nature-loving citizen - she would seem to be poles apart from the classical femme fatale. Pity that, to defend her family and everything she believes in, she does not hesitate to torment with obscene phone calls a neighbour who does not follow the rules for the separate collection of rubbish, to kill a boy who has just left her daughter, as well as a teacher of the local school, another neighbour who does not rewind the tapes she hires at a nearby shop, and so forth (Video 1: Italian trailer; Video 2: English trailer). She is a perfect "Doris Day" of her time, the nice, irreproachable neighbour who upturns all conventions and appearances of the quiet American middle class suburban life. After she is arrested, she will defend herself at the trial, refusing a lawyer's assistance, by using her well-tested weapons: she provokes the reactions of the neighbour she harassed with her obscene phone calls, up to the point that the latter ends up accused of contempt of court (Video 3), and she seduces a poor man who, facing her hidden sexual exhibition, eventually loses his head and ends up totally bewildered ... (Video 4). Found not guilty, as she walks towards the exit of the courtroom she will find the time to kill a member of the jury, whom she finds guilty of wearing white shoes before Labour Day ... Serial mom is a falsely transgressive but really cruel satire of many conformist myths and repressed psychoses of American society, through the portrait of a femme fatale who, with the help of an ironic approach and a smile on her face, helps us to reflect once again on the role that the female figure has played and continues to play in the subtle workings of power, of the role play between the sexes and of violence in society (and not just American society).*

#### **4. Conclusion**

*The femme fatale has not been featured only in classical film noir and in neo noir films of the last decades, although she is one of the main and most frequent characters in this film genre. As we noticed, this character has appeared, and continues to appear, in other film genres, too, including horror films, epic and mythological sagas, melodramas, pornographic films and, more generally, thrillers and detective movies - especially today, at a time when traditional genres tend to merge and new, particular sub-genres are constantly created.*

"The application of the study of the femme fatale is far-reaching, even in modern times. Today one would not use the term "vamp" or femme fatale. However, the implications of "slut" or "bitch" are the same. We are still living in a time of fear: fear of feminism, fear of gender equality, and fear of sexual equality, thus of course the female monster still lives on. Which is why we must continue to study her. One cannot know a culture without knowing its fiction and its (our) monsters" (Note 4).

#### **Notes**

- (1) Boozer J. 1999. ["The lethal femme fatale in the noir tradition"](#), *Journal of film and video*, vol. 51, Issue 3/4.
- (2) Farrimond K. ["The contemporary femme fatale: Gender, genre and American cinema"](#), Routledge, p. 5.
- (3) Carr C. 1992. "Reclaiming our basic rights", *The Village voice*, April 28, p. 35-36.
- (4) Barnes-Smith D.L. 2015. ["Fatal woman, revisited: Understanding female stereotypes in film noir"](#), Undergraduate Theses and Professional Papers, 38, University of Montana, p. 22.



## Want to know more?

- \* From the *WatchMojo.com* YouTube channel:
  - [Top 10 femmes fatales in modern movies](#)
- \* From the *American History - from Revolution to reconstruction* site:
  - [Women in film noir](#)
- \* [The 1990s Hollywood femme fatale: \(Dis\)figuring feminism, family, irony, violence](#) by J. Pidduck, *Cineaction*, 1995, 38
- \* [The "fatal femme" in contemporary Hollywood film noir: Reframing gender, violence and power](#) a thesis by J. Pidduck, Concordia University
- \* [Re-reading the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: an evolutionary perspective](#) by D. Walker, University of Auckland
- \* [Subversion of the male gaze: The empowered femme fatale within neo-noir](#) by J. Bitomsky

cinemafocus.eu