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Women in Film Noir

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Film noir has proven to be a fascinating site of inquiry for feminist film criticism. This is true of the 1940s' corpus of films which originally suggested the category "film noir" to a European critical audience, of the neo-noir that seemed to flourish in the New Hollywood of the 1970s, and more recent iterations of noir as a visual style that has proven remarkably adaptable across crime and erotic thrillers, horror hybrids, and self-reflexive postmodern cinema. Filmmakers and critics alike have been intrigued by the possibilities and the intricacies of noir imagery with its expressionistic lighting and stylized framing. Noir's striking visuals are coupled in the 1940s' corpus with complexly layered narratives, an atmosphere of gloom, and uncertain or ambiguous female characters. If critical interest in noir stems from the complexity and richness of the films that make up the noir corpus, a specifically feminist interest in this form of filmmaking stems from its distinctive use of the female form and its deployment of female characters who model a Hollywood femininity that is both absolutely consonant with contemporary norms of gendered identity while also being in some significant ways off-key.

From private-eye scenarios such as *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), *Murder, My Sweet* (Edward Dmytryk, 1944), and *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947) to the criminal milieu of *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946) or *The Big Heat* (Fritz Lang, 1953) and to the more intimate (though no less crime oriented) dramas of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946) and *The Woman in the Window* (Fritz Lang, 1944), studio-era noir features – and even at times foregrounds – striking female characters who are mysterious, ambiguous, often entrancing, and at times duplicitous. The very diversity of the titles cited here – and the female stars and roles associated with them – is salutary, underlining the necessity of avoiding reductive assumptions in any attempt to encapsulate as broad a topic as that of "women in film noir."

Noir scholarship has explored at length the complex and inventive ways in which this type of filmmaking represents female identity and female sexuality. I follow here Elizabeth Cowie's contention that "if *film noir* is not a genre, it is nevertheless recognizable," suggesting that perhaps noir's representation of women is one important aspect of its recognizability.[1] Noir is often understood as a cinematic space that both expresses and challenges patriarchal constructions of women (and, indeed, as a form of cinema that challenges conventional forms of masculine heroism). For many critics this ambivalence about women's place can be attributed in part to the social turbulence of World War II and its aftermath, just as later iterations of noir can be read against the unfolding of feminist activism and renewed debate about women's status – and particularly their place in the public world as much as the intimate spaces of the domestic. In tackling these questions, this chapter covers the representation of women in American film noir, and the scholarly work that has sought to make historical, generic, and cultural sense of these representations. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first explores critical perspectives on women in film noir, focusing initially on the feminist interventions of the 1970s that were to prove so influential in framing debates on noir, moving on to consider more recent commentaries and ideas. The subsequent sections turn to consideration of film noir itself, the classic films of the 1940s (and some examples from the 1950s) in the second section, and the distinctive presentation of women in neo-noir in the third and final section.

Critical Perspectives on Women in Film Noir

The publication of Ann Kaplan's edited collection *Women in Film Noir* in 1978 provides a starting point for thinking about critical perspectives on the subject. *Women in Film Noir* established noir as a key space for feminist inquiry at a moment when filmmakers were actively engaging noir conventions in neo-noir films such as *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), *The Long Goodbye* (Robert Altman, 1973), and *Klute* (Alan J. Pakula, 1971). Indeed, Christine Gledhill's analyses of *Klute* bookended the first edition of Kaplan's anthology, demonstrating the continuing vitality of the genre. This book made an important intervention in developing debates about noir and in an emergent feminist film scholarship which interrogated the tortuous repressions and power play involved in Hollywood cinema's representation of women. As Kaplan writes in her original introduction: "The film noir world is one in which women are central to the intrigue of the films."[2] The collection highlighted the doubleness and ambivalence of noir's representation of women, emphasizing the characteristic complexity of the genre's presentation of female desire and desirability. Many of the themes explored in this book – an opposition between "good" and "bad" women, the noir woman as a sign of (phallic) power, and the extent to which sexuality is a key trope of the noir woman – would become central to noir scholarship.

What is perhaps most striking about this critical moment is the extent to which feminist scholarship engages closely with popular cinema's misogynous

representation of women, finding traces of resistance to patriarchal discourse. In foregrounding and valuing noir's imagining of female strength and determination, despite the framing of that strength as perverse, feminist work on film noir extended the view of critics such as Paul Schrader, who argued that noir trained "a harsh uncomplimentary look at American life."[3] Though Schrader has little to say on gender, feminist scholarship teases out how central a discredited model of gendered hierarchies are to the American society that noir seemed determined to unpick.

In her essay for Kaplan's anthology, Janey Place writes that "film noir is a male fantasy, as is most of our art."[4] In other words, these are images which centered on a male point of view, narratives structured by a patriarchal logic in which women are always framed as less than men. The point for feminist critics of noir is not to suggest otherwise but rather to point to noir's characteristic playing out of that logic in a manner potentially troubling for patriarchal culture. For Place, the question is not one of how *progressive* noir's articulation of independent women might be; it would be difficult to make such a case. Rather she points out how vibrant noir's villainous female characters are, how central to the frame and to the compelling visual style of the genre. For Place, and for other feminist critics, the interest of 1940s' noir lies in its use of prevailing patriarchal stereotypes that opposed bad, dangerous sexual images of women to good, virginal ones. Noir, she writes is "one of the few periods of film in which women are active, not static symbols, are intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive power, not weakness, from their sexuality."[5] This interest is part of a wider shift in feminist criticism during the 1970s away from an earlier concern with positive images and towards more complex textual readings. Place identifies the genre's use of contrasting female types, "the deadly seductress and the rejuvenating redeemer," in films such as *Out of the Past* in which Jeff Bailey's (Robert Mitchum) romance with wholesome Ann Miller (Virginia Huston) is contrasted with his prior relationship with the dangerous and exciting Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer). The more comforting models – comforting for men, that is – of what it is to be a woman in the world lack the passion, energy, and the excitement of less certain, perhaps less reliable, female characters. For feminist criticism, noir's most duplicitious female characters – of which Barbara Stanwyck's Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) is certainly the benchmark – are compelling constellations of Western culture's conflicted view of women. "Rotten to the heart" (her own description), Phyllis Dietrichson is the locus of the film's action and a figure of amoral greed; in her ambitions and her open expression of boredom and frustration with married life, she is refreshingly far from Hollywood's more typical configuration of domestic femininity. Though in many ways she is a mere figuration of evil, her negation of such models of femininity is striking in the context of the period.

Elizabeth Cowie summarizes what would become the critical commonplace of noir as a male-centered mode in generic opposition to the woman's film: "These films then appear to be the antithesis of the 'woman's film,' for although *film noir* often features strong, independent women with determined and determinate desires, it has been argued that this figure is invariably destroyed, either literally, or metaphorically, and replaced by her inverse, the nurturing woman."[6]

For Cowie the case is not so straightforward; as she observes, relatively few noirs pursue the narrative of deceptive woman luring man to his downfall (the *Double Indemnity* scenario). Moreover, as she notes, the "obsessed or psychotic character" so often deemed to be central to noir is not always either the protagonist or male.[7] Counter examples, films which center on women's stories, have not tended to be as central to the critical canon of noir. Their designation as women's films instead suggests a gendered tension in the ongoing critical construction of noir as a category. Cowie challenges the critical tendency to read noir as masculine, a tendency which she argues "obscures the extent to which these film afforded women roles which are active, adventurous and driven by sexual desire."[8] Thus feminist criticism has sought not only to expand the noir corpus but also to focus renewed attention on the sorts of female roles found within accepted examples of the form.

The critical endeavor here is one of re-centering the woman's story. Pam Cook's account of *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945) addresses these questions via a consideration of the film's different voices: the contrast between Mildred (Joan Crawford) as a figure immersed in the conventions of melodrama and as a participant in the crime-thriller conventions of noir. Organized around a series of flashbacks, the film contrasts the official narration of the investigating officer with Mildred's account of her past. For Cook, the film enacts Mildred's rejection of the law in her refusal of her position as wife and her assumption of an authoritative role as economic provider. Her assumption of authority builds on Mildred's positive qualities as seen in the flashback sequence: "she is strong, hard-working, honest and single-minded, not to mention ambitious."[9] The movement from this positive perspective in what Cook terms the "melodramatic sections of the film"[10] to a scene of social implosion and ultimately murder involves the shift to a noir aesthetic that underlines how "Mildred's take-over of the place of the father has brought about the collapse of all social and moral order in her world."[11] Effectively, Cook argues, Mildred's attempt to narrate her own story is overtaken by the framing noir discourse, suggesting the marked differences between noir and melodrama.

While one important strand of feminist scholarship on women in film noir employs a psychoanalytic framework to make sense of the powerfully sexualized women who appropriates male authority, an equally important strand foregrounds the relationship between images of female authority and contemporary social structures. Although some examples of film noir feature the figure of the returning veteran, the war is more often an absent presence. Yet the war period is hugely significant for the configuration of gender in American society. As has been often discussed, this is a period in which women enter previously closed professions, receiving enhanced wages for their work in industry and administration as well as military service itself. In line with gendered hierarchies, postwar retrenchment involved shifting women out of work or back into lower paid positions. For Sylvia Harvey, such social shifts, taken together with the "depressed peacetime economy," frame her observation that traditional configurations of the family are effectively absent from film noir. Thus she writes, "These economic changes forced certain changes in the traditional organization of the family; and the underlying sense of horror and

uncertainty in film noir may be seen, in part, as an indirect response to this forcible assault on traditional family structures and the traditional and conservative values which they embodied."[12] These economic changes frame a film like *Mildred Pierce* – which does not explicitly engage with the war – and its presentation of Mildred as a woman who is effectively forced to take on the role of provider for her family.

Harvey argues that a canonical noir text such as *Double Indemnity* stages the woman as a sign of desire for insurance salesman Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray), an emblematic alienated male in an economy driven by corporations rather than individuals. Yet she also makes the point that in noir "both men and women seek sexual satisfaction outside marriage,"[13] noting that Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* and Elsa Bannister in *The Lady From Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1948) "are actively involved in the violent assault on the conventional values of family life."[14] It seems clear why so many critics have employed psychoanalytic frames in making sense of gender and noir: the films are so often excessive and even bizarre in their coding of sexuality and crime. Above all, it is the figure of the "femme fatale" which has come to stand for noir's innovative representation of female desire. For feminist scholarship in the 1970s (and indeed subsequently) an interest in the femme fatale signaled a complex approach to female representation and an interest in psychoanalysis. The strong noir woman is, in this account, also a woman who appropriates authority but who is unable to effectively control her power. As Mary Ann Doane writes of the femme fatale (and she is speaking here of the figure more broadly than only in relation to noir): "She is not the subject of feminism but a symptom of male fears about feminism. Nevertheless, the representation – like any representation – is not totally under the control of its producers and, once disseminated, comes to take on a life of its own."[15]

The very success of the critical formulation of the femme fatale and the interest it has generated has in turn had a number of effects. There is a danger in rendering the femme fatale – supposedly a site in which cinema articulates the unknowable – in a straightforward, explanatory description. In the process, the very complexity of which she is a part is sidestepped. Just as problematic is the tendency to read all women with agency in film noir as femmes fatales. As Julie Grossman notes, the formulation can obscure as much as it reveals: "An overemphasis on the *femme fatale* has not only resulted in a misreading of many film noir movies, but has fed into cultural and critical obsessions with the bad, sexy woman, which inevitably become prescriptive and influence cultural discourse about female agency in counterproductive ways."[16] Grossman's concern is with noir's presentation of not the femme fatale but the *femmes modernes*, modern women who are centered on fulfilling their desires whether "sexual, capitalist, [or] maternal."[17] Her point is well taken; thinking about women in film noir means placing the "femme fatale" in context rather than allowing her fantastical form to displace the social tensions she expresses. Though, as Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe observe, a significant number of critics "have worked to challenge this overdetermination of the femme fatale as a *noir* icon, attempting to displace her from this position of centrality within the genre," the association has proven difficult to dislodge.[18]

The second edition of *Women in Film Noir* was published in 1998 with new essays that responded to both critical developments and numerous cinematic remakings of noir themes and images. The image of the femme fatale had become solidified in criticism, as indicated above, but also in films which cited this figure as a marker of dangerous female sexuality in a manner that was increasingly two-dimensional, flattened-out, in effect a form of pastiche. Within a postmodern film culture, a hypersexualized version of the femme fatale is recycled in new contexts. It is perhaps no surprise that Fredric Jameson cites the neo-noir *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasden, 1981) as a marker of the postmodern turn, a film with a contemporary setting which is nonetheless shot through with nostalgia.[19] Jameson's primary concern is not with gender; for those critics who do apply a feminist perspective to such examples of neo-noir, two elements are particularly foregrounded: first the insistence on eroticism with many examples of neo-noir including sexually explicit scenes; second, the extent to which the dangerous, sexual woman serves as a negative marker of feminism. Widely discussed examples such as the commercial hit *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987) and the smaller scale erotic thriller *The Last Seduction* (John Dahl, 1994) exemplify both of these concerns.[20]

Kate Stables writes that "the postmodern fatal woman is a creature of excess and spectacle, like the films she decorates."[21] In *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoven, 1992), for instance, Catherine Tramell, as played by Sharon Stone, functions as a citation as much as a performance, one that veers towards parody. In this and in other movies of the 1990s, such as *Bound* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1996), the noir woman's dangerous sexuality is inscribed as either lesbian or bisexual without any suggestion that these are lesbian films in any meaningful sense.[22] For Stables, writing on *Basic Instinct*, "lesbianism is both a symbol of sexual outlawry, and an expression of Tramell's power over the hero."[23] Inscribing the noir woman's sexuality as transgressing heterosexual norms, these movies extend the logic of 1940s' noir and critical perspectives on it, which suggest that the noir woman's amorality is in effect a rejection of feminine codes of submissive behavior. Yet the emphasis on the new femme fatale as a sort of cinematic citation tends to flatten the complexity of her articulation in earlier texts, just as the insistent delineation of her transgression as inevitably sexual works to objectify her in new ways.

While various critics locate neo-noir and its re-articulation of the strong, sexual noir woman in relation to postmodern film culture, it is also worth noting some other connections that feminist scholars have drawn. Yvonne Tasker argues that neo-noir exploits the postmodern femme fatale as a marker of feminism, conflating eroticized images of working women with a noir legacy in which female desires are both given expression and framed as socially destructive.[24] Linda Ruth Williams traces the connections between noir and erotic thrillers, a multi-generic form which exploits the cultural associations of sex, violence, and strong women. For Williams there is a crude commercial logic at work: "noir sells, particularly when used in conjunction with (and in justification of) sex."[25] Noir functions here to provide cultural cachet, a set of visual devices that aim in part to legitimate, suggesting that more than straightforward exploitation is at work.

Women in American Film Noir

Feminist criticism draws attention to the *dislocation* of gender types displayed in film noir of the 1940s. This dislocation is both textual and contextual. At a textual level, noir features female characters that do not conform in any straightforward way to conventionally feminine – that is, submissive – codes of Hollywood cinema whether by virtue of their self-interest, their sexuality, or both. Just as significantly, noir women express a dislocation which is absolutely grounded in the shifting gender ideologies of the 1940s. This is evident in, for example, the determination of many noir women to make something of themselves, whether in the public world or via a different relationship to the more private (intimate even) spaces of the domestic. A film like *Mildred Pierce* stages this explicitly via Mildred's commercial endeavors in the restaurant business and her social aspirations expressed through the lavish indulgence of daughter Veda. While the former enterprise is admirable – and readable as such in the particular context of wartime demands on the female labor force – the latter suggests folly, and leads to murder. Of course the two are intimately connected in the film itself, so that Mildred's determination, her professional success, and her rejection of her first husband Bert are bound up together. This conveniently allows the film a sort of resolution as Mildred and Bert leave the police station together, implicitly reconciled. The characteristic layered narrative structure of noir – here consisting of a series of flashbacks in which Mildred speaks of her past – allows the complexity of Mildred's motives and actions to unfold gradually with the truth of the initial crime scene withheld.

Mildred Pierce exploits Joan Crawford's star image, which coupled glamour with a back story of achievement through hard work, determination, and talent.[26] As Mildred Pierce, Crawford embodies the contradictions of Hollywood female stardom in the 1940s and to an extent white American womanhood more broadly in this period. That is, Hollywood's high glamour constructions of sexualized images of women involve work, work that is typically masked. In this least overtly glamorous of roles, Crawford articulates determination, toughness, and vulnerability. For Jeanine Basinger she also articulates a specifically female anger. She writes, "Everything about the movie is authenticated by the anger of Joan Crawford, and *Mildred Pierce* connects covertly to viewers by way of this rage."[27] While Basinger frames the film in the generic context of the woman's picture, this emphasis on anger connects well with feminist scholarship on noir. Rather than turning on her relationship to a man, *Mildred Pierce* portrays a woman defined by motherhood on one hand, economic necessity on the other. This framing shifts the focus away from sexuality as the locus of the noir woman's mystery. Mildred's second marriage to Monty has as much to do with providing for daughter, Veda, as it does with her own desires. In the contrast between melodrama and noir detailed earlier, Mildred's maternal sacrifice – traditionally a cultural marker of appropriate femininity – emerges as pathological.

Though she is driven – a quality which, in the terms of the period, perhaps even renders her masculine – and troubled, claiming to have killed Monty (in an attempt to protect Veda once more), Mildred Pierce is no femme fatale. Neither, it is

ultimately suggested, is Rita Hayworth's Gilda in the film of the same name. In both films, male cops provide an authoritative, and yet in many ways inadequate, account of the woman's behavior. In *Mildred Pierce* the investigating officer makes clear that he knows it was Veda and not Mildred who shot Monty, without seeming to understand the passions that drive the mother; in *Gilda* the cop reassures Farrell (Glenn Ford) with the words "Gilda didn't do any of those things you've been losing sleep over." Questions of gender norms, sexual morality, and legality overlap as women are castigated for suspected promiscuity, even for ambition, as much as for theft or murder. Indeed, this suggests something of why the noir woman is such a compelling sign of transgression even when she has not actually transgressed. The noir woman is engaged in what we might today term a sort of reputation management; her actions, illicit or otherwise, are explicitly framed by the need to *appear* a certain way. Thus, while noir is undoubtedly organized around male desires and male point of view, in its concern with appearance and perception, with the centrality of women's image for their being in the world, noir films articulate concerns that are hugely important for women and for feminism.

Julie Grossman takes this further, arguing that the characteristic psychoanalytic interrogation of women in film noir has resulted in the downplaying of the social and historical context of the films. "Film noir strongly indicates the problems that remain in our cultural imagining of and about women."[28] Numerous films, she argues, show male characters willfully misreading women's desire for independence, a misreading with which the critical designation "femme fatale" – as if it explained everything by naming it as such – effectively colludes.

These dynamics are explicitly at stake in *Gilda*, which revolves around a perverse triangle between the characters of Ballin Mundsen (George McCready), Johnny Farrell, and Ballin's wife, Gilda. After Ballin's seeming death, Johnny marries Gilda; what she takes as renewed love he treats as a form of punishment. He forces her to live in a "vacuum," imprisoning her in a world of isolated luxury. While *Gilda* is marked as Johnny's story via his voiceover, his instability and cruelty is evident. Indeed Gilda's expression of regret at having married two insane men (as she puts it) is persuasive precisely in the terms set out by Grossman; the film vividly imagines marriage as imprisoning for Gilda, contrasting the various interiors in which we see her – the club operated by Johnny and owned by Ballin, Ballin's home, the club where she performs for a man she imagines will rescue her, the rooms in which Johnny effectively imprisons her. Writing of a cultural preoccupation with gendering spaces, Grossman argues that "film noir has always shown the destructive nature of these boundaries by demonstrating what happens when women cross these lines."[29] Though Johnny effectively persecutes Gilda until the film's final scene, Grossman suggests that the cultural idea of the femme fatale allows a perpetuation of this symbolic violence. Her analysis builds on Richard Dyer's formulation of Hayworth's star power as a kind of counter to these misogynous discourses.[30] Dyer argues that "Gilda's charismatic performances, like her wit, disrupt male voiceover, narration, and control, substituting female autonomy for male ideation."[31]

   Out of the Past and *The Lady from Shanghai* both feature women who present themselves to the hero as attempting to escape the constraints of domineering and unsatisfactory men. In *Out of the Past*, Jeff is initially hired by the controlling Whit Sterling (Kirk Douglas) to track down Kathie for him; these scenes are contained in a flashback and thus already framed by Sterling's ongoing pursuit of Jeff in his new life, a pursuit which suggests both obsession and menace. In *The Lady From Shanghai*, Elsa Bannister (Rita Hayworth) orchestrates Michael O'Hara's (Orson Welles) first view of her as a mysterious figure, subsequently appearing as a damsel in distress, as vulnerable wife to the monstrous Arthur Bannister (Everett Sloane) before ultimately being revealed as a scheming killer. Elsa is a sort of screen onto which male characters project their desires; her skill is to manipulate that process, although she is uncovered in the end. Greer's Kathie and Hayworth's Elsa are evidently femmes fatales, their danger intimately connected to their erotic power and their ability to manage their own images; they do this not only to suggest sexuality but also vulnerability. The deception becomes evident when the mask slips; in *The Lady From Shanghai*, O'Hara reveals his knowledge of Elsa's treachery as they embrace in the Chinese Theatre (Elsa is seemingly hiding him from the police). Close-ups of her impassive face, the expression frozen as her deception is exposed, suggest that there is little of substance behind the mask.

   The prevalence of the femme fatale as a staple of 1940s' noir has undoubtedly been overstated, and indeed the tendency to read strong female characters through this prism can be extremely reductive. Nonetheless, the figure of strong, desiring women whose ambitions or actions produce turmoil and even death for male characters is a feature of several high-profile examples of film noir. Of these, the most regularly cited are perhaps *Double Indemnity* and *Out of the Past*. Both films feature duplicitous female figures who involve the male heroes in crime. In *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis Dietrichson is brash, modern, and thoroughly sexualized: she functions, in Harvey's words, as a "sexual commodity."[32] To the film's narrator – one can hardly call him a hero – Walter Neff, she serves as both enticement and as an opportunity to test the system. Both characters are portrayed as dissatisfied with their mundane lives; for Walter, Phyllis represents the chance to break from "the boredom and frustration of a routinised and alienated existence" that characterizes the modern world.[33]

   Thinking about women in film noir using the figure of the femme fatale is not only problematic because of the cases in which its detection in prominent examples of the form have been mistaken, but also because all women who are strong, sexual or both seem to be deemed "femmes fatales," as if that explained any more than would deeming a male character to be a "hero." As Cowie writes, "'*femme fatale*' is simply a catchphrase for the danger of sexual difference and the demands and risks desire poses for the man."[34] Cited in advertising and in movies that perpetuate the conflation of dominance with manipulative sexuality, she has become a stereotype stripped of context. Such flattened citation is ironic since it is in many ways the complexity, the layered and shifting aspects of female characterization, which has arguably drawn and held feminist interest in noir. Indeed some 1940s' noirs articulate

these themes quite explicitly, notably *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944) and *The Woman in the Window*, two films in which a woman's portrait serves as the site of male desire with little or no regard to the complexity of the model whose image is appropriated. It is the twist, the humor, and the challenge of both films – although they are very different in many ways – to confront the male protagonist with the fragility of their assumptions. Both suggest that a preoccupation with appearance and the production of images is not the sole provenance of neo-noir.

Scholarship on the question of women and film noir has also increasingly centralized tropes of race and ethnicity. Again this is in part a response to new developments in noir filmmaking, but it also represents an attention to the texts of noir in the 1940s and 1950s through different critical frames. If, in Grossman's terms, noir women frequently demonstrate the problems of gendered binaries for mapping social space (public/private most obviously), border crossings of other kinds are also clearly important to film noir. The association of noir women with non-American national spaces and with ethnic tropes of Otherness is one dimension of this topic. In *Out of the Past*, for example, Jeff first encounters Kathie in Mexico; as Naremore notes, such scenarios offer an implicit suggestion of an alternative to America, with what he terms "the Latin world" routinely "associated with a frustrated desire for romance and freedom" which is never actually fulfilled.[35] In *Gilda*, the South American action is defined against an American past and future. Similarly Elsa's past in *The Lady from Shanghai* (specified in the title) is framed in terms of a splicing of geographical and moral mobility; as Oliver and Trigo write, Elsa is overtly constructed "as both white *femme fatale* and treacherous Asian."[36] Yet the noir that most explicitly engages with themes of border crossing, *Touch of Evil*

Figure 21.1   Elsa Bannister's (Rita Hayworth) associations with Asian culture suggest a splicing of geographic and moral mobility in *The Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1947). Produced by Orson Welles and Harry Cohn for Columbia Pictures.

(Orson Welles, 1958), uses the trope to foreground male rather than female identity, in the process decidedly negating any possibility of escape which the figure of the border might suggest.

Women in Neo-Noir

Touch of Evil is a distinctly self-reflexive film, one which some critics take to mark the end of classic noir. Such self-reflexivity would become increasingly prominent in neo-noir with significant implications for the representation of noir women. In her discussion of *Klute*, Christine Gledhill cites director Alan J. Pakula's comments on his intent to bestow the film with the "characteristics of a forties thriller." For Pakula, "it wasn't pastiche which interested me but, on the contrary, making a contemporary exploration through the slant of a classic form."[37] No doubt much of the continued critical interest in noir stems in part from the extent to which American and European filmmakers have been drawn to, and self-consciously reworked, the genre's conventions. From a term conjured by French critics to describe a disparate group of films which shared themes of crime and striking visual style, film noir has become a term regularly used in popular reviews and even in the marketing of movies. The American neo-noir that emerged as part of the New Hollywood of the 1970s was a creative and at times innovative engagement with earlier filmmaking traditions. It also coincided with a period of feminist activism and followed a significant relaxation of industry self-censorship with respect to sexual content. Questions of women's independence, economically and culturally, were pressing and public in the 1970s. Like their 1940s' counterparts, neo-noir movies offered different representations of women which responded in part to this context.

A consideration of two examples of neo-noir from the 1970s, *Klute* and *Chinatown*, demonstrates the diverse ways in which noir conventions were reworked at this moment. The narrative events of *Klute* are triggered by the disappearance of Tom Gruneman while in New York on business. Following the failure of the police to uncover the truth, PI John Klute (Donald Sutherland) travels to the city to investigate. Klute's subsequent inquiries center on prostitute and aspiring actress Bree Daniels (Jane Fonda). Urban, sophisticated, and economically independent, Daniels embodies female liberation, in contrast to Klute's stern traditionalism. Her sexual openness as well as her involvement in sex work signal new attitudes quite distinct from the coded eroticism of 1940s' noir. To call her a femme fatale makes little sense; while she is certainly a complex character, her defining characteristic is openness rather than mystery. Indeed, as Grossman argues of prominent female figures of 1940s' noir, Bree Daniels is a *femme moderne*; she exemplifies both the possibilities and the contradictions, the very real limitations of modern life.

Yet, as with earlier examples of film noir, neo-noir scenarios such as *Klute* foreground the importance of image and appearances for women negotiating the contemporary social world. Prostitution is represented as allowing Bree Daniels independence in the film, but it is not romanticized; indeed, she aspires to modeling

and acting as routes to expression and opportunity. Her confidence and modernity is counterpointed to moments of intimacy in which the film portrays Daniels as isolated, spied on, endangered. It is in these interior scenes that the noir aesthetic is most pronounced, drawing also on horror via the persistent suggestion of unseen watchers located in off-screen space. At other points the city is drenched in light, with location shooting and shots of Daniels moving around urban space producing a distinctive sense of immediacy and contemporary life.

Connections between sexual expression and danger are at the core of *Klute*, with Bree Daniels making her living from male fantasy and her ability to handle diverse desires. Bree is stalked, spied on, and almost killed following a scene in which she is forced to listen to a tape recording of another prostitute's murder. This violence against Bree, enacted through the medium of recording and controlling women's voices, suggests that repression remains central to the articulation of sexuality. This strategy is set up within the film's opening credits. This sequence features a close-up of a tape player, suggesting a voice that has been acquired illicitly. The soundtrack features Fonda's distinctive voice suggestively arguing for sexual freedom ("you should never be ashamed . . . do it all") while menacing music provides a sinister dimension to these words. As Grossman argues with respect to 1940s' noir, *Klute* features men all too ready to judge Bree Daniels on the basis of her profession. Corporate villain Peter Cable (Charles Cioffi), who hires John Klute to investigate the crimes that he himself has committed, accepts Daniels' invitation to sexual openness, indulging and enacting fantasies via acts of sadistic violence. The film also makes explicit how that double standard operates against Daniels in terms of her economic security, her ability to make connections, and her personal safety. *Klute*'s contemporary setting, its stylized use of urban settings and complex use of sound, all point to a sophisticated reworking of noir, one informed by feminism and by images of women's liberation. Yet the opposition between the everyday and what lies underneath is entirely consistent with earlier examples of noir and its foregrounding of perverse or distorted aspects of human subjectivity. Bree Daniels is blamed for something, for the desire she does not manage to effectively control; the film's employment of noir imagery, with the mise-en-scène trapping her in a call box and her apartment from the earliest scenes, seems to suggest her vulnerability (perhaps even her culpability) in this process.

Chinatown, by contrast, is a period neo-noir, evoking an earlier historical moment not only through plotting and theme (suggesting the films of that earlier moment) but via its careful reconstruction of costume and sets. As James Naremore writes, "though *Chinatown* makes use of Panavision and highly mobile camera equipment that enables an operator to walk with characters through doorway and into tight spaces, it cleverly adapts the new technology to the feel of the old studio films; throughout, the framing is tight and restrictive, and the color scheme is relatively muted and monochromatic."[38]

As with *Klute*, *Chinatown* uncovers illicit desires and behaviors – incest as well as the usual murder and corruption – that the parameters of the Production Code would have prohibited from the original noir cycle, however much it worked to

Figure 21.2 Bree Daniels (Jane Fonda) is figured as both emancipated and threatened by modern urban life in *Klute* (Alan Pakula, 1971). Produced by Alan J Pakula for Warner Bros.

suggest what it could not show. *Chinatown* features Jack Nicholson as Jake Gittes, a sleazy PI who deals in cases of adultery and who is drawn into a complex plot involving city corruption and sexual abuse. The mysterious woman, Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway), whom Gittes investigates, is ultimately revealed to be a victim rather than an aggressor. Evelyn attempts to protect her sister/daughter, but is shot dead in a bleak ending which the film projects onto the district of Chinatown as yet another racialized metaphor.

Naremore understands *Chinatown* as a critique of 1970s' America that exploits the imagery and film style of the past to make its point about the roots of corruption. Yet it is interesting that the period setting seems to obviate the need to engage with contemporary challenges to ideas about femininity and womanhood – that is, with feminism in its 1970s' context. The film is a study in failure, "truly pessimistic"[39] in Naremore's terms, with Gittes's unlikely hero unable to effect change or save Evelyn Mulwray. Evelyn herself lacks the drive and agency of women in much 1940s' noir; the mystery that she embodies has to do with damage that has been done to her by the monstrous Noah Cross (John Huston), a damage she seems incapable of escaping. The energy that so many critics attribute to noir women is distinctly – and significantly – lacking in this retro neo-noir.

The conflation between sexual expression, sex work, and female independence that characterizes *Klute* is evident to varying degrees in a number of examples of neo-noir. It is clear that shifting patterns of censorship and the possibility of greater explicitness with respect to sexual representation mark a significant shift from noir to neo-noir. Films as diverse as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Bob Rafelson, 1981), *Body Heat*, *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986), *Bound*, and *In the Cut* (Jane Campion, 2003) feature graphic sexual scenes in contrast to the studio era's prohibitions and highly coded exchanges. The extent to which this relaxation is in turn allied to a discourse about feminism is surely significant. *Fatal Attraction*, for

example, has been widely discussed in relation to its perverse take on feminist tropes of female success and female sexuality. The film features scenes of impulsive and risky sexual encounters, with eroticism a key component in its marketing – alongside noir thriller elements such as mystery and danger. The film centers on the deranged figure of Alex Forrest (Glenn Close) who simultaneously suggests the successful, self-contained professional woman (read feminism) and an insidious equation of female independence with hysteria. Her violence is not motivated by money or the desire to escape a constricting relationship, as in many examples of noir – she is economically successful and conspicuously so – but seemingly by the desire to take up a position of femininity. Expressing the manifold contradictions of postfeminism, this attack on conventional femininity via the persona of the deranged noir woman is of a tangibly different quality than the examples featured in classic noir.

The original cycle of film noir centered on white society, as was the norm in Hollywood films of the period, with questions of race and ethnicity operating at the margins of the noir world. Unsurprisingly, given its thematic concern with mystery and otherness, and its visual register of light and dark, fantastical constructions of race can be seen to haunt film noir. The questions posed by this haunting become increasingly significant for feminist critics' engagement with the gender politics of noir. As Manthia Diawara puts it, "through its focus on formalist devices, feminist criticism exposes film noir's attempts to paint white women 'black' in order to limit or control their independent agency, their self-fashioning."[40] Where do these constructions leave black women? If 1940s' noir pushed African Americans to the sidelines, neo-noir emerges at a point when such representational hierarchies are being challenged not least in the work of new black filmmakers, what Diawara terms "noir by noirs." We have seen how new configurations of female experience are foregrounded in neo-noir, with an emphasis on sexual freedom and the inclusion of lesbian and bisexual characters (however sensationalist their representation). Yet if noir has long used racial signifiers to suggest white women's otherness, Hollywood cinema's tendency to represent African American women in terms of sexual availability renders the noir woman's conflation of sex, mystery, and crime redundant.

In this context we can consider two examples of period neo-noir which foreground, in different terms, an African American experience of the city: *A Rage in Harlem* (Bill Duke, 1991) and *Devil in a Blue Dress* (Carl Franklin, 1995). *A Rage in Harlem* centers on Imabelle (Robin Givens), described by Chris Straayer as a "vigorous femme."[41] Though she is sensual in her manner, seduces the hapless innocent Jackson (Forrest Whitaker), and thus draws him into a dangerous world of crime, Imabelle is figured as constant: in genre terms, Jackson seems cast as the ultimate comic fall-guy, yet the film ends with the couple reunited. The presentation of their movement from New York to Mississippi suggests a different sort of geographical mobility – though no less fantasized – than the border crossings of classic noir. Here, then, the noir woman is not the mysterious/treacherous presence that the film's imagery might suggest. While *A Rage in Harlem* exploits comic elements in

combination with noir, a juxtaposition which renders its noir woman as both sexual and trustworthy, *Devil in a Blue Dress* situates its central female figure in the established noir terms of mystery, sexuality, and danger. Easy Rawlins (Denzel Washington) is drawn into a plot involving the enigmatic Daphne Monet (Jennifer Beales). Her racial passing reworks the border crossing themes of noir in a context of racialized as well as gendered spaces, with the noir woman once more both victim and screen onto which other characters' desires are projected.

These examples suggest the extent to which the noir woman has become a sign of a different kind in neo-noir. Her status as screen onto which male anxieties about female sexuality and female independence are projected functions differently in a cinematic context shaped by an insistent awareness of image. A film such as *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001) suggests the extreme re-articulation of the female types that feminist criticism has identified in noir. Good/bad women morph into each other in dreamlike scenarios and inexplicable shifts which suggest how insubstantial – that is, fantastical – these images are. Whether she is deployed artfully or not, today the noir woman – be she figured as strong and sexually assertive, haunted, vulnerable, or victim – is a sign of Hollywood history and of Hollywood cinema's tendency to mythologize the female image.

Notes

 1 Elizabeth Cowie, "*Film Noir* and Women," in Joan Copjec (ed.), *Shades of Noir* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 129.
 2 E. Ann Kaplan, "Introduction to 1978 Edition," in Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir* (London: BFI, 1998), p. 16.
 3 Paul Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir," *Film Comment* Spring (1972), p. 8.
 4 Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir," in Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir*, p. 47.
 5 Place, "Women in Film Noir," p. 47.
 6 Cowie, "Film Noir and Women," p. 126.
 7 Cowie, "Film Noir and Women," p. 134.
 8 Cowie, "Film Noir and Women," p. 135.
 9 Pam Cook, "Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*," in Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir*, p. 74.
10 Cook, "Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*," p.74.
11 Cook, "Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*," p. 75.
12 Sylvia Harvey, "Woman's Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir," in Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir*, p. 38.
13 Harvey, "Woman's Place," pp. 41–42.
14 Harvey, "Woman's Place," p. 43.
15 Mary Ann Doane, *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 24–23.
16 Julie Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale: Ready For Her Close-Up* (London: Palgrave, 2009), p. 5.
17 Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale*, p. 3.
18 Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe, *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts* (London: Palgrave, 2010), p. 5.

19 Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture* (London: Pluto, 1983), pp. 111–125.

20 For a comprehensive account of the film's gender politics see Suzanne Leonard, *Fatal Attraction* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

21 Kate Stables, "*The Postmodern Always Rings Twice*: Constructing the *Femme Fatale* in 90s Cinema," in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir* (London: BFI Publishing, 1998), p. 167.

22 Which is not to say that there is no lesbian audience for such movies.

23 Stables, "*The Postmodern Always Rings Twice*," p. 170.

24 Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 13–14.

25 Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 27.

26 Crawford took the Best Actress Oscar for her role in the film.

27 Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women 1930–1960* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), p. 177.

28 Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale*, p. 39.

29 Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale*, p. 28.

30 Richard Dyer, "Resistance through Charisma: Rita Hayworth and Gilda," in Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir: New Edition*, pp. 115–122.

31 Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale*, p. 104.

32 Harvey, "Woman's Place," p. 39.

33 Harvey, "Woman's Place," p. 40.

34 Cowie, "Film Noir and Women," p. 125.

35 James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1998), p. 230.

36 Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo, *Noir Anxiety* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 52.

37 Cited in Christine Gledhill, "*Klute* 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism", in Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir* (1998), p. 33.

38 Naremore, *More than Night*, p. 205.

39 Naremore, *More than Night*, p. 209.

40 Mathia Diawara, "Noir by Noirs: Towards a New Realism in Black Cinema," in Copjec (ed.), *Shades of Noir*, p. 262.

41 Chris Straayer, "*Femme Fatale* or Lesbian Femme: *Bound* in Sexual *Différance*," in Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir* (1998), p. 156.

The classics of film noir, of which The Maltese Falcon is a major example, often featured stock characters. Female characters, in particular, took on certain characteristics in noir, and more often than not, were painted as unreliable and morally corruptible, either because they used their sexuality for deceit, or because they were too emotional to think clearly and be of any help. Â Indeed, as unflattering as the portraits of women in noir films can be, they are often more three-dimensional than the more condescending portraits of women in other films of the time. For all her flaws, Brigid is a crafty villain, and in spite of her performance of dependence and distress, becomes something of a competitor to Sam. The first edition of "Women in Film Noir" (1978) assembled a group of scholars and critics committed to understanding the cinema in terms of gender, sexuality, politics, psychoanalysis and semiotics. This edition is expanded to include further essays which reflect the renewed interest in Film Noir. Exploring "neo-noir", postmodernism and other contemporary trends, new essays offer readings of, among others, "Bound" and "Basic Instinct", broadening the scope of the book to include questions of race and homosexuality. About the Author. E. Ann Kaplanis Prof Start studying Women in film noir. Learn vocabulary, terms and more with flashcards, games and other study tools. Â Who wrote "Double Indemnity". Claire Johnston. Mise-en-scene of noir imitates. murkiness of the plot. Story is mystery. Lighting where one or two figures are lit and the rest are in shadow. Chiaroscuro. Cross-lighting of female protagonist indicates what? Scheming and duplicity. Significant story told in flashback or Analepsis. Males in noir are usually Injured, impotent, confused, or beaten. Detective is usually also 50 of Film Noirâ€™s Most Fashionable Moments. This summer, our own film editor Jason Bailey is leading a course study discussion group for TCMâ€™s film noir class Into the Darkness (free and online), taught by Richard L. Edwards, Ph.D. of Out of the Past: Investigating Film Noir podcast fame. Watching all this noir has set our fashion-loving hearts aflame. Inspired by detective tales, featuring dangerous dames and tough guys galore, noirâ€™s greatest characters were always dressed to impress. Fashion in film noir was dazzling, but oftenâ€¦ Cute Shoes Me Too Shoes Vintage Heels Retro Vintage Wedge Shoe