

**"She's filing her nails while they're dragging the lake:"
representations of women in contemporary *film noir***

by


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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the representation of women in contemporary *film noir*. Its purpose is to demonstrate how *film noir*, by virtue of its pessimistic and anti-institutional thematic concerns and formal strategies, offers a unique opportunity for more progressive representations of women and gender relations than mainstream narrative cinema conventionally allows. Through an investigation of *Blue Velvet*, *Twin Peaks*, *Body Heat*, *The Last Seduction*, *Bound*, and *Diabolique* I identify the ways in which *film noir* exceeds and challenges the boundaries of conventional mainstream narrative cinema. The methodology used incorporates theories of representation, theories of spectatorship and feminist cultural theory.

This work seeks to articulate the way in which *film noir* problematizes and denaturalizes patriarchal social practices and systems, provides the female spectator with a pleasurable, empowered construction of woman through the figure of the *femme fatale*, and expands discourse on gender and sexuality by subverting the mainstream endorsement of a heterosexist cultural norm.


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Contents

Introduction	1-5
Chapter One "She's filing her nails while they're dragging the lake:" <i>film noir</i> , feminism and the female spectator	6-24
Chapter Two "What a town without pity can do:" David Lynch and the problem of patriarchy	25-45
Chapter Three "Smarter than the man in every way:" feminism, female frustrations and the <i>femme fatale</i>	46-65
Chapter Four "Sisters are doin' it for themselves:" <i>film noir</i> , female fascination and gender transgression	66-85
Conclusion Miles to go before we sleep: conclusions, caveats and future directions	86-91
Bibliography	

Introduction

The primary goal of this thesis is to account for the appeal of the contemporary *film noir* for the female spectator. Specifically, it is my position that *film noir* offers a range of pleasurable interpretations for the female spectator, and that these pleasures are built upon *film noir's* generic tendencies to challenge the dominance and coherence of a patriarchal *status quo* and to present an image of woman which simultaneously threatens and transgresses the disempowering prescription of femininity common to the mainstream narrative film text. *Film noir* offers an opportunity for the female spectator to both read and reaffirm resistance to patriarchy and to extrapolate from the film text an articulation of feminist concerns. More importantly, *film noir* offers valuable and useful examples of oppositional practice within mainstream narrative cinema, which, once identified, can be applied to feminist film making in a way that offers pleasurable and accessible feminist challenges to a wide and diverse female spectatorship.

The first chapter of this work, "She's Filing Her Nails While They're Dragging the Lake," sets out the methodological framework for this argument and attempts to contextualize this work within the larger body of feminist film scholarship and theoretical approaches to *film noir*. This chapter outlines the relevance of historicist approaches to classic *film noir* for considerations of contemporary *film noir* and attempts to locate the female spectator. My aim in this chapter is to position the *film noir* text in a social context that accounts for the strategies of the text and the interpretations of the female spectator. *Film noir*, when understood within a patriarchal social context, provides a means of

articulating the contradictions women face within patriarchy. Specifically, this chapter addresses how patriarchy establishes competing definitions of femininity and conflicting notions of women's roles in society which are, in turn, negotiated through the textual practices of *film noir*. Arguably, these negotiations, when viewed by the female spectator, can then be read as a recognition of, and a potentially pleasurable escape from, women's conflicted position within contemporary patriarchal society. In addition, this chapter addresses the role contemporary discourse around postmodernity and postfeminism plays in informing a progressive reading of the gender relations in the contemporary *noir* film.

The second chapter of this thesis, "If You Go Out in the Woods Today You're Sure of a Big Surprise," engages directly with the work of David Lynch, specifically *Twin Peaks* and *Blue Velvet*. The central premise of this chapter is that, by working within the pessimistic traditions of *film noir*, Lynch offers a critique of patriarchal institutions and practices which are otherwise endorsed and legitimated by mainstream narrative film. Specifically, this chapter identifies how Lynch undermines the normalizing tendencies of mainstream film by subverting both their formal structure and conventions. In disrupting the conventional representation of reality, Lynch's films de-naturalize numerous institutions and practices which are predicated upon the subjugation and subordination of women. Specifically, this chapter examines how *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks* subvert conventional representations of the patriarchal nuclear family, the law, masculinity, and the economic system in order to render them problematic and horrific. This chapter evaluates how Lynch undermines the conventional protagonist of mainstream film, disrupts the voyeurism upon which the mainstream cinematic apparatus is based, and undermines the

standard placement of the spectator by destabilizing the text's ability to make meaning.

The third chapter of this thesis, "The Triumphant Seductress," builds on the disruptions *film noir* creates, to address the role of the *femme fatale*. Through an analysis of *Body Heat* and *The Last Seduction*, I examine how the *femme fatale* functions as a pleasurable and empowering female figure whose ability to successfully navigate the contradictions within patriarchy offers the female spectator an affirmation of her lived experiences. Specifically, this chapter addresses the pleasures of the revenge fantasy and the disempowered masculine character.

By problematizing patriarchal practices, *film noir* leaves a space for the *femme fatale* to assert her strength, independence and sexuality in a way that transcends the confines of the patriarchal context in which she exists. In doing so, *film noir* provides the female spectator with a rare figure of female strength and defiance. This interpretation, which recognizes and acknowledges the strength of her appeal and the appeal of her strength, closely reflects my own reading of the *femme fatale* and that of other feminists I know. The direction this work has taken is, in fact, a direct tribute to a number of important women and the readings of films which they have shared with me. Their responses have convinced me that women can and often do read films in ways which may contradict or trouble more hegemonic interpretations, and in ways which are often highly attentive to contradictions within the film text.

The fourth chapter of this work, "Sisters are Doin' it for Themselves," moves beyond the *femme fatale* as an isolated female character, to address how specific contemporary *noir* films have worked with the genre's subversions of dominant ideology

and codes of representation to subvert the heteronormative assumptions of mainstream film and society. This chapter engages with the films *Bound* and *Diabolique* in order to argue how *film noir* can serve as a vehicle for the revision of sexual identity and the articulation of women's community. This chapter identifies *film noir's* potential to endorse women's community and solidarity in defying the restrictive confines of patriarchal society. Of the chapters in this work, Chapter Four engages the least with existing theories of *film noir*. In part, this lack of theoretical context is an indication of the lack of scholarship on lesbian identity and women's community in *film noir* specifically. This chapter is also more attentive to the specifics of the gender politics in *Bound* and *Diabolique* because these films are not simply operating within, but expanding the possibilities of *film noir* as a progressive genre.

The fifth and final chapter of this work is the conclusion, which revisits the potential *film noir* offers for feminist film praxis and acknowledges certain caveats around the inherent limitations of critical position assumed in the preceding chapters. The issue of feminist praxis is one which, although not directly examined in this work, is central to its explorations. While feminist analysis is a laudable activity in its own right, it is my strong conviction that feminist film criticism should always consider the potential for feminist film making. While I could have taken a more reactionary approach to *film noir*, I have chosen, instead, to address the progressive tendencies of particular *noir* films specifically because I see them as potential reference points for feminist film praxis.

Although there is a need for feminist film to work outside of the structures of narrative cinema, narrative cinema offers the best opportunity to reach the widest

audience. Non-narrative feminist film is important, but so is narrative feminist film. As such, my intention in providing a progressive reading of contemporary *film noir* is to highlight an opportunity within narrative cinema from which feminist film praxis can derive examples of resistant strategies and within which feminist film praxis has the potential to work and to make feminist concerns accessible to a wider audience.

Chapter One

"She's filing her nails while they're dragging the lake:" Film noir, feminism and the female spectator

The title of this thesis is a line taken from the Elvis Costello song "Watching The Detectives." Both the line and the song itself seem especially relevant starting points given the topic and approach I have chosen. The song, as its title suggests, narrates the consumption of what sounds like a classic *film noir*. However, as the line suggests, Costello's first person (presumably male) narrator is not the one who is consuming that film. Rather, there is an unspecified "she" who is both watching and filing. What is interesting about this female spectator is that the song does not specify whether "she" is filing her nails within the film text or without. In other words, there arises a hazy 'grey' area in which the woman is potentially simultaneously the watcher and the watched.

This elision between femininity as (prescriptive) image and femininity as (enacted) gesture is raised by Mary Ann Doane as the location of the greatest challenge to contemporary feminist film praxis.

The impasse confronting feminist filmmakers today is linked to the force of a certain theoretical discourse which denies the neutrality of the cinematic apparatus itself. A machine for the production of images and sounds, the cinema generates and guarantees pleasure by a corroboration of the spectator's identity. [...] it is not accessible to the female spectator, who, in buying her ticket, must deny her sex. There are no images *for* her or *of* her.¹

¹Mary Ann Doane, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," October: The First Decade, 1976-1986, ed. Joan Copjec, et al (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987) 327.

In short, there is an ambiguity for the female spectator of existing both inside and outside the film text, to the extent that the text serves to both reaffirm and reproduce a particular representation, and ultimately expression of femininity. As feminist theorists, beginning with Laura Mulvey, have expressed, the mainstream narrative cinematic apparatus is one which, among other tendencies, constructs women as objects of an exclusively male gaze² and denies her subjectivity and agency absolutely. The cinematic apparatus is thus theorized as a one directional prescription thrust upon the passive female spectator.

Compelling though this line of argument may be for the purpose of critiquing the patriarchal tendencies of mainstream narrative cinema, as a stepping-off point for oppositional feminist praxis, or for theorizing strategies of resistance, it leaves a great deal to be desired. Most problematically, this line of theory - although ostensibly critical of patriarchal signifying practices which deny women agency - accepts the premise that woman has no agency. Yet, the female spectator, although bound to the filmic construction of woman via the common performative enactment of femininity, can never be as absolutely contained or disempowered as the objectified filmic representation of woman. As a socio-historic agent, her consumption of popular cultural texts and their images of woman is inevitably complicated by her occupation of a subject position, as the watcher. According to Jackie Stacey, a feminist film theorist who has written extensively on the role of the female spectator, "female spectatorship might be seen as a process of negotiating the dominant meanings of Hollywood cinema, rather than being passively

²Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Screen 16. 3(1975): 6-18.

positioned by it."³

As *a* woman, the female spectator may be seen to exist within the text, to the extent that action within the text is perpetrated by or against *a* woman, as constructed by the text. However, as an historical agent who exists outside of the text, the individual female spectator may or may not identify with or derive pleasure from certain (re)presentations or constructions of "Woman."⁴ As in Derrida's discussion of the postal principle, in which "a letter can always *not* arrive at its destination"⁵, a female spectator's perception of a filmic construction of woman can always *not* be the perception most consistent with the apparent strategies of the text. In other words, there is not a direct symbiotic relationship between the female spectator and the filmic construction of woman. Rather, the extent to, and ways in which, specific filmic constructions of woman are seen to be relevant or meaningful for individual female spectators is a process of negotiation. If meaning is thus, a process of negotiation which is shaped by, among other things, gender, what meanings can *film noir* be seen to offer up for negotiation by a female spectator?

The female spectator's negotiation of a text's meaning is influenced by an incalculable number of factors which make up her subject position. These factors may

³Jackie Stacey, Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship (London: Routledge, 1994) 12.

⁴For a complete discussion of the relationship between representation and social constructions of gender see: Teresa de Lauretis, "The Technology of Gender," Technologies of Gender (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 1-30; and Teresa de Lauretis, Alice Doesn't (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984).

⁵Jacques Derrida, "Le Facteur de la verite," The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1987) Trans. Alan Bass

pertain to individual biographic material or to more general social positioning, including not only gender, but race, sexuality and class location. While it is difficult to theorize spectatorship in a way that accounts for every possible biographic experience, it is, to an extent, possible to theorize "a" spectatorship which accounts for certain generalities. In other words, it may be possible to theorize a position for a female spectator based upon a certain cultural context, while recognising there are exceptions to this position. For the purpose of locating this work, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of my own spectatorship. While my readings of the films under investigation are theoretically informed (theory coming equipped with its own set of privileging filters and preconceptions), my readings are also undeniably informed by my own subject position, which is that of a white, heterosexual, middle-class, formally educated woman. It is not my contention that my reading of these films, as "a" female spectator, constitutes an absolute or even authoritative interpretation.

While spectatorship is a central concern of this investigation, it is necessary to anchor the act of interpretation to the text itself as the object or source of evidence. Thus, my consideration of the texts seeks to account for the ways in which particular *noir* films may be seen to facilitate a spectator position that enables progressive or pro-feminist interpretation. In order to locate these readings within existing scholarship on *film noir*, it is important to first identify the two key theoretical approaches to *film noir* within the discipline.

The first of these theoretical positions could be described as psycho-sexual. These theories emphasize the extent to which *film noir* can be read primarily as a narrative

manifestation of psychoanalytic tropes, in particular the Oedipal triad. The primary assumption of this theory is that *film noir* functions as a site for the negotiation of masculine subjectivity. Alternately, such theories discuss *film noir* as a negotiation of "deviant" masculinity, within a psychoanalytic framework.⁶ In brief, this realm of theory presupposes a disenfranchised male protagonist/masculine subject attempting to transcend the pre-social realm of the (m)other for the realm of the father. In order to reconcile himself to the ultimate power of the father (which is frequently (re)presented in *film noir* as the power of law) the male protagonist/subject must first be persuaded of the illegitimacy of the power of the mother (which, through the character of the *femme fatale*, is (re)presented within *film noir* as lawlessness).⁷

She persuades him and causes his death in a manner reminiscent of Deleuze's description of the "bad" pre-Oedipal mother.⁸

Joan Copjec suggests that the threat embodied by the *femme fatale* is more than a mere necessity of the Oedipal castration scenario (in which the masculine subject must first perceive the (m)other as castrating before (re)cognising her as castrated), but that she is ultimately threatening because of her sexual Otherness or *jouissance*⁹. According to Frank

⁶See Deborah Thomas, "*Film Noir: How Hollywood Deals With the Deviant Male*," *Cineaction* 13/14 (Summer 1988) 32-44.

⁷See Clair Johnston, "Double Indemnity," *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1980) 100-111.

⁸Tony Williams, "*Phantom Lady*, Cornell Woolrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic," *Cineaction* 13/14 (Summer 1988) 60.

⁹Joan Copjec, "The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal: Private Space in Film Noir," *Shades of Noir* ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993) 167-197.

Krutnik, *film noir* thus serves as a form of "man's melodrama"¹⁰ in which the goals and desires of the male subject are repeatedly thwarted and forestalled and the sexuality of the *femme fatale* is implicitly dangerous.¹¹ This approach to *film noir* is useful to the extent that it provides a filter for analyzing how certain *film noir* narratives seek to punish or contain female characters in ways consistent with (primarily) Freudian theories of the negotiation of masculine subjectivity. Such interpretations demonstrate how *film noir* functions to naturalise the universality of a patriarchal social structure.

Because psychoanalytic investigations of the genre start from a specific universalist premise, they have a tendency to legitimate their own investigative template by always finding what they set out to find, and by disregarding other elements of the text that do not pertain to this model. Furthermore, psychoanalytic theories of *film noir* fail to adequately account for the relationship between the film text and the specific socio-historic context in which it is produced and consumed.

The second common theoretical approach to *film noir* is one which focusses exclusively on the socio-historic specificity overlooked by psychoanalysis. Rather than envisioning *film noir* in relation to a metanarrative of subjectivity, these theorists attempt to locate *film noir* within a set of highly particularised social conditions within post-World War Two America. Specifically, these theorists argue that factors such as the pre-war escalation of divorce rates, the wartime entry of large numbers of women into the work

¹⁰Florence Jacobowitz, "The Man's Melodrama: *Woman in the Window* and *Scarlett Street*," *Cineaction* 13/14 (Summer 1988) 64-73.

¹¹Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, (London: Routledge, 1991).

force, and the subsequent post-war mandate of removing them from that workforce play a significant role in shaping the narrative and thematic concerns of *film noir*.

Because of the war's demands, women had entered the nation's workforce in unprecedented numbers, taking over what had formerly been male jobs and, in the process, showing their ability to do that work as well as the men. Along with the masculine displacement that this situation threatened came a radical shift in the family structure, due partly to the absent male, but also to the new-found independence, ambition and authority of the female as breadwinner and head of house.¹²

While theorists within this school of thought privilege a range of factors in determining the content of *film noir*, these socio-historic theories are largely consistent in their suggestion that *film noir* functions as a key site for the negotiation of social tensions pertaining to the gendered organization of society and the structure of the family.

Although socio-historic theories attempt to contextualize *film noir* within a social real, their emphasis is predominantly on the context of production and they do not address the role of the spectator in any meaningful way. Perhaps an even greater difficulty with this branch of theory has been its limited application. Because it considers only the relationship between *film noir* and the post-war era, much work in this area is impossible to translate for films outside this period. Richard Maltby, in an attempt to move beyond the confines of this narrow scope, articulates two key pitfalls of the socio-historic interpretation of *film noir*. He cautions first against the teleological impulse,

Cultural history is too diffuse to allow of clear causal relationships; the most it can attempt is to establish a chain of plausibility, to

¹²J.P. Telotte, "Siodmak's Phantom Women and *Noir* Narrative," Film Criticism XI.3 (Spring 1987) 2.

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¹²J.P. Telotte, "Siodmak's Phantom Women and *Noir* Narrative," Film Criticism XI.3 (Spring 1987) 2.

suggest that one explanation for a particular representation is the existence of a particular set of circumstances.¹³

Second, Maltby identifies the potential limitations of this historicist template in relation to *genre*,

What is involved in such criticism is a process of historical distortion which comes about from the practice of generic identification, and has the effect of imposing an artificial ideological homogeneity on Hollywood production¹⁴.

Despite these limitations to, and differences between, psycho-sexual and socio-historic approaches to *film noir*, both positions share certain valuable assumptions about the *genre*. Specifically, both envision *film noir* as a potentially prescriptive *genre*, which attempts to negotiate relations of gender through narrative. Both approaches recognize that *film noir* has specific social interpretations and consequences which pertain directly to the organization of sex gender relations in society.

As a result of many of the underlying assumptions within both of these theoretical positions, some feminist film theorists have concluded that *film noir* is largely, if not essentially, a reactionary practice in its representations of women. Within the psycho-sexual (pre)scription, *film noir* renders woman castrated, while within the historicist paradigm the *femme fatale*'s eventual narrative containment is seen as a gesture to merely naturalize the wartime working woman's post-war re-conscription into the domestic sphere.

¹³Richard Maltby, "*Film Noir: The Politics of the Maladjusted Text*," Journal of American Studies 18 (1984) 50

¹⁴Ibid, 57.

However, within the parameters of what I have identified as a socio-historic approach, other feminist theorists have suggested that *film noir* may actually function in potentially subversive or progressive ways. Linda Williams, in a critique of both the psychoanalytic and the socio-historic approach to representations of women in *film noir*, makes the important observation that what is overlooked by both methods of reading is the "contradictory situation of the historical female spectator."¹⁵ "Woman as historical subject gets lost in the process."¹⁶ By using an approach which accounts for the agency and contradictory social location of the female spectator, it becomes possible to analyze how *film noir* is meaningful not simply within a particular social context, but to a particular audience. Theorists working from this position argue that *film noir*, by virtue of its pessimistic and nihilistic stylistic and thematic devices, and its tendency to destabilize the authoritative masculine voice and point of view of most mainstream narrative film, offers a potentially rich critique of certain institutions and structures. These institutions include the law, the church, the government, and the patriarchal nuclear family. This position is typified by Sylvia Harvey, who suggests:

...film noir offers us again and again examples of abnormal or monstrous behaviour, which defy the patterns established for human social interaction, and which hint at a series of *radical and irresolvable contradictions buried deep within the total system of economic and social interactions that constitute the known world*¹⁷.

¹⁵Linda Williams, "Feminist Theory: *Mildred Pierce* and the Second World War," Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television, ed. E. Deidre Pribram, (London: Verso, 1988) 13.

¹⁶Ibid, 19.

¹⁷Sylvia Harvey, "Woman's Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir," Women in Film Noir, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1980) 22.

(emphasis mine)

Such theorists argue that, by casting doubt upon both the legitimacy and impermeability of those institutions which are heavily predicated on the subjugation of women, *film noir* opens up the possibility of resistance to their authority.

In addition to analyzing *film noir's* representation of a patriarchal capitalist social context, these theorists specifically address the strategies through which *film noir* represents women. Much of this work is directly concerned with the *film noir femme fatale* and how, by virtue of her strength, she can be read as a potentially progressive figure. Theorists within this category argue that the *femme fatale* offers the female spectator a pleasurable and empowering representation of woman by constructing an independent, sexually aware, self-assured ideal. E. Ann Kaplan suggests, "the female characters of *film noir* stand outside the male order and represent a challenge to it"¹⁸ and, according to Janey Place, *film noir* offers a rare period in film history "in which women are active, not static symbols, are intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive power, not weakness from their sexuality."¹⁹ That the *femme fatale* stands out as a particularly strong female representation is not exclusively the result of progressive textual strategies of *film noir*, so much as it is a combination of these representations and their reception by the female spectator. The female spectator interprets the *femme fatale* not only in relation to her own lived experience, but also in relation to current social

¹⁸E. Ann Kaplan, "The Place of Women in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*," Women in Film Noir, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1980) 83.

¹⁹Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir," Women in Film Noir, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1980) 35.

tensions and discourse around the status of women in society.

Despite Richard Maltby's caveat on the teleological dangers of social history, in order to adequately account for the position of the contemporary female spectator in relation to the contemporary *noir* text, it is important to identify at least a provisional constellation of factors that potentially inform the female spectator's negotiation of the *film noir* text. These are not so much production-focussed enabling conditions as they are interpretive filters through which *film noir* may be seen to make sense. Specifically, there are three interconnected dynamics identified within the literature on classic *film noir*, that arguably resurface or continue into the contemporary Era. These are: anxieties around economic disenfranchisement; political alienation; and, popular discourse around the advancement of the rights of women.

Starting with the issue of economics, it is important to consider the continuum of mid-century "depression" and late-century "recession" climates, for economics play a significant role in shaping perceptions of women's extra-domestic labor. According to David Reid and Jayne Walker, the economic disenfranchisement of the depression, which gave rise to, and served as the backdrop for, the hard-boiled detective novel was a precursor and narrative source for many classic *noir* films.²⁰ Within a contemporary context, *film noir's* articulation of economic disenfranchisement and uncertainty may be read as a response to increasing globalization and the invisibility of political control and alienation of labour which accompany this trend. Additionally, mid-century anxieties

²⁰Marc Vernet, "Film Noir on the Edge of Doom," *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993) 1-31.

about the shift to a more urban economy, as expressed through sinister urban motifs in classic *film noir*²¹, arguably persist in contemporary tensions about the shift to non-domestic production, as evidenced by the prevalence of post-industrial motifs in contemporary *film noir*.²²

Politically directed theories of classic *film noir* have, by contrast, linked the *genre's* nihilistic, pessimistic, anti-institutional bent to the paranoia and constitutional disempowerment implicit in McCarthyism²³. While more recent intrusions into the political beliefs of American citizens may appear to pale in comparison, increasing pressures from neo-conservative groups to both prescribe and legislate acceptable social beliefs and practices are no less sinister to many. Prescriptive neo-conservative moralizing, including the preservation of "family values," the vilification of non-traditional families, and the attempt to employ all means available, including murder, to deprive women of reproductive freedom of choice poses as real a threat to the rights and freedoms of late twentieth century Americans as McCarthyism did to the rights of mid-century Americans.

While the New Right movement failed to enact many of the specific legislative measures on its list, it made great strides in the wider - and, in the Reagan and Bush years, increasingly more important -

²¹David Reid and Jayne L. Walker, "Strange Pursuit: Cornell Woolrich and the Abandoned City of the Forties," *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993) 57-96.

²²Fred Pfiel, "Home Fires Burning: Family Noir in Blue Velvet and Terminator 2," *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993) 227-259.

²³ See Philip Kemp, *From the Nightmare Factory: HUAC and the Politics of Noir*, *Sight and Sound* LV.4 (1986): 266-270.

realm of public relations.²⁴

Most important to this paper is the way *film noir* operates to incorporate and negotiate existing social tensions, in both the classic and contemporary era, around the status of women. Theorists of classic *film noir* have emphasised the ways in which *film noir* can be seen to articulate contradictions within societal expectations of gender roles and the structure of the family. In particular, they cite contradictions between: the economic necessity of woman's extra-domestic labour and her socially mandated domesticity; the social expectations of masculinity as strength and impermeability and popular anxieties about the delicacy of reintegrating potentially traumatised veterans into post-war society; and, the promotion of the patriarchal nuclear family as ideal and increasing disillusion with, and dissolution of, such families.

In addition to this pessimistic tendency to challenge status quo social arrangements, it is also possible that the contradiction between strength and danger in the figure of the *femme fatale* constitutes a recognition of the lived experiences of the female spectator. According to Michael Renov and Linda Williams, particular films (Renov cites *Leave Her to Heaven*, Williams cites *Mildred Pierce*) point to discrepancies between social definitions of femininity and the actual conditions of women's lives. Specifically, they argue that such films articulate inherent contradictions between differing roles in women's lives, such as contradictions between women's roles as wives and mothers.²⁵

²⁴Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 230.

²⁵ See Michael Renov, "Leave Her to Heaven: The Double Bind of the Post-War Woman," *Journal of the University Film and Video Association* 35.1 (1983): 28-36; and Linda Williams,

As wife, woman's role is defined not only within an economy of labour, but also within a specifically sexual economy; she is *all* for her husband. Yet, as mother, woman's prescribed servitude, that she be *all* for her child, may come into direct conflict with her role as wife, in as much as she has only one "all" she can give. Similarly, woman's role as patriotic American, which requires she contribute to "the war effort," may come into direct contradiction with her socialised understanding of herself as both wife and mother, as may pressure to participate in a capitalist economic environment.

These contradictions among diverse popular images of femininity were equally prevalent in the post-war period. According to Joanne Meyerowitz's study of the diversity of representations of women in 1950s America, images of successful women in the public sphere were prolific, yet often couched in references to the domestic, articulating the complexity of women's social position,

While feminine stereotypes sometimes provided convenient foils that enhanced by contrast a woman's atypical public accomplishment, they also served as conservative reminders that all women, even publicly successful women, were to maintain traditional gender distinctions.²⁶

According to Michael Renov, contradictory popular advertising images of women in the war and post-war era can be seen as directly relevant to the simultaneously threatening/dangerous and empowered/progressive figure of the *film noir femme fatale*.

"Feminist Film Theory: Mildred Pierce and the Second World War," Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television, Ed. E. Deidre Pribram (London and New York: Verso, 1988) 12-30.

²⁶Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique," Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1994) 233.

Although Renov reads the *femme fatale* as a reactionary archetype, he acknowledges the contradiction inherent in her objectification at the level of the image while she simultaneously encourages identification which constitutes a form of address to the female spectator.

The represented female of this image category is characteristically veiled, distorted, or disproportionate to the surrounding field of objects. These deforming images, far from imposing pure objecthood or an exclusion of female subjectivity, are, without exception, targeted for and addressed to a female consumer.²⁷

By articulating such contradictions through representation, *film noir* may be seen not only to address women directly, but to insinuate that such contradictions are rooted in broader systemic social practices. In short, *film noir* may be read as a reaffirmation that "the personal is political".

In considering the contextual filter for contemporary *film noir*, it is important to note that contradictions around women's roles in society are hardly unique to the post-war moment, but rather these can arguably be seen to have intensified within the context of contemporary debates between feminism and postfeminism. The important distinction here between feminism and postfeminism lies in the perception of the social positioning of women and of gender equality. The feminist position contends that equality is an achievable, though not yet realized goal; in contrast, the postfeminist position asserts equality has been fully realized, and seeks to "move beyond" feminism to a universal "humanist" discourse of gender. Despite a mainstream, postfeminist sensibility which

²⁷Michael Renov, Advertising/Photojournalism/Cinema: The Shifting Rhetoric of Forties Female Representation," Quarterly Review of Film and Video Vol. 11, No. 1 (1989): 16.

dictates "you've come a long way, baby," women's lived experience frequently dictates otherwise. Modleski articulates this precisely in her observation, "for many women the phrase women's experience" is shorthand for "women's experience of oppression."²⁸ In other words, there is a rupture between the "new masculinity" of "post-feminist" mainstream cinema and an ongoing feminist consciousness - whether nascent or radical - among female spectators.

Like the rhetoric of the independent post-war woman, contemporary rhetoric around the carnivorous "career woman," who poses a threat not only to the integrity of the patriarchal nuclear family, but also to the economic integrity of the capitalist system, can be read as a counterpoint to the social advancement of women. Thus, the contemporary female spectator comes to the *film noir* text with an understanding that female strength and independence are highly contested commodities. She experiences the *noir* film's representations of gender contradictions from a gender position which is contradictory by virtue of her social context. Like the *film noir femme fatale*, the contemporary female spectator inhabits a world in which whatever power she holds is susceptible to both exaltation and suspicion, and may well only be useable under the most undesirable of circumstances.

While these contexts have also produced films which appease and legitimate conservative politics, the proliferation of *film noir*, as a pessimistic cultural product, suggests a social context which is sufficiently marked by pessimism, paranoia,

²⁸Tania Modleski, Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age, (New York: Routledge, 1991) 17.

disenfranchisement and distrust. If the resurgence of *film noir* in recent decades is interpreted not as a *re-surfacing* of common social elements so much as a *continuation*, and possible intensification, of social anxieties and tensions, it is easier to account for the extremity of the pessimism common in contemporary *film noir*. Rather than articulating a crisis of faith in specific systems and structures, contemporary *film noir* can be seen as a deeper challenge to the possibility of systems at all. *Film noir* in the contemporary moment can be related to, though not dismissed as, an articulation of the "postmodern condition," in which the inevitable failure of logic, reason, and totalizing universals produces a fractured, partial and highly skeptical human subject.

If the failure of reason and the questioning of "civilization" in the wake of the atomic bomb and the Nazi death machine is a factor in the post-war crisis of faith, then the continuation of human misery from Auschwitz to Hiroshima, to Vietnam, to Bosnia insinuates not only a rupture in the narrative of progress and the optimistic possibility of good, but a total evacuation of the belief in resolution at all. It is not new, it is Conrad's Kurtzian "horror." But, unlike Conrad's horror, the horror of *film noir* is not nestled in the "dark heart" of colonialism, but in the makeup and fibre of American society. Not only does "civilization" fail to contain the horror, it enables it. According to Fred Phiel,

it seems clear that one effect of the terrible defeats dealt out here throughout the 1980s to every potentially progressive constituency has been to deepen widely held libertarian-individualist suspicions that no structural or institutional transformations for the better are possible, that nothing political can be done.²⁹

²⁹Fred Pfeil, "Home Fires Burning: Family Noir in Blue Velvet and Terminator 2," *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993) 255.

While such a hyper-pessimistic evacuation of the potential of progressive movements is ultimately antithetical to the emancipatory goals of feminism, Pfeil's general observation of the social malaise of post-1960s America is nonetheless a valuable point of reference for the cultural context in which contemporary *film noir* has been produced and consumed. It is also important to note that discourse of the *malaise* of the "postmodern condition" and the failure of the universal human subject presents a potentially progressive departure point for feminist theory.

After all, as Somer Brodribb documents through painstaking examination of the theoretical underpinnings and precedents of postmodernism, the failure of the universal subject is a crisis only for those whose subjective experience corresponds to that universal.³⁰ For women and other marginalized groups, the fallibility of this universal is neither new, nor necessarily troubling. Thus, while the social disruptions thematized within *film noir* may be read as reactionary in that they posit a threat to the established normative dominance of patriarchal capitalism, these disruptions are potentially emancipatory for the female subject, because it is within the ruptures of this norm that her oppositional consciousness is forged.

While *film noir* is certainly not the only film practice engaged in the negotiation of such concerns, what is remarkable about the *genre* is that, unlike many other kinds of film which seek to resolve such tensions according to various narrative strategies, *film noir* ultimately fails to resolve the social tensions it invokes. In this sense, *film noir* may be

³⁰Somer Brodribb, Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1992).

seen as a progressive practice which articulates deep seated irresolvable contradictions within existing social systems, thereby challenging the effectiveness and authority of such systems.

These contradictions, how they are represented in contemporary *film noir*, and how they are interpreted by the female spectator are the primary issues with which the chapters which follow are concerned. They address contemporary *film noir* as a negotiation of contradictory gender paradigms within society, and attempt to account for the ways in which *film noir's* negotiations and outcomes can be seen as both pleasurable and empowering for the female spectator.

Chapter Two

"What a town without pity can do:" David Lynch and the problem of patriarchy

One trademark feature of traditional mainstream narrative cinema is its tendency to adhere to generic conventions. The audience is typically provided with a sympathetic protagonist whose ideas represent a set of normalizing hegemonic cultural assumptions and values. Conventional mainstream narrative film has a tendency to resolve the complications and disruptions it invokes, thereby reaffirming the ideological position of the protagonist and, in turn, the cultural values he embodies. Through the repetition of this formula, mainstream film fulfills a social contract with the spectator, in which social tensions are explored in ways that reaffirm expectations of "normalcy."

Film noir, although it undeniably has its own set of conventions, often troubles this endorsement of *status quo* ideas and values because it often creates disruptions and tensions that it fails to resolve. Furthermore, the complications *film noir* invokes often emerge, not in opposition to but from within, the accepted "norm" most mainstream narrative film seeks to endorse. Far from serving as an "ideological safety valve"³¹ in which social conflicts are symbolically resolved with a finalizing control unachievable in the social real, *film noir* thrives on the exposition of problems so great that they can not be satisfactorily resolved within the framework of the narrative. Unlike much traditional mainstream narrative film, *film noir* frequently depends upon anti-heroic protagonists, unhappy endings, and the invocation of problems too monumental to achieve effective

³¹Sylvia Harvey 27.

closure. Characterised, as it is, by disenfranchisement, disillusionment and corruption, *film noir* may thus be read as potentially progressive, in that it is seen to articulate a constantly anti-establishment position, which calls into question the legitimacy of a wide range of institutions conventionally endorsed by mainstream cinema, including legal and economic structures and practices and the patriarchal nuclear family.

Furthermore, in often failing to resolve the tensions it invokes, *film noir* encourages a more active spectator position than many mainstream genres, because of its failure to contain or resolve the institutional corruption it insinuates. By challenging dominant institutions and failing to provide safe closure, *film noir* leaves the spectator with a lingering dis-ease about corruption within the social real. As in the 1956 film *Kiss Me Deadly*, *film noir* functions like a briefcase which opens to reveal the Pandora's box of "the great whatsit," a *tabula rasa* of corruption, criminality and moral uncertainty.

These general observations about *film noir* are the basis of my investigation of contemporary filmmaker David Lynch. In both *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*, Lynch works within the conventions of *film noir* to construct a pessimistic and problematizing vision of the commonplace social practices and institutions conventionally endorsed by traditional mainstream narrative cinema, including the patriarchal nuclear family, the law, economic hierarchy, and traditional masculinity. By examining how Lynch works within *film noir* to problematize traditionally affirmed institutions and structures and address irresolvable contradictions within contemporary society, I hope to articulate a reading that accounts for progressive tendencies. Specifically, I am interested in examining how these tendencies offer progressive challenges to traditional representations of gender relations.

It is precisely Lynch's representations of women that have often drawn criticism and disdain from some feminist critics³². Undeniably, his films are pervaded by very troubling images of sexual violence and victimization, and I do not refute the possibility of a much less progressive interpretation than my own. However, my reading of Lynch's work depends upon a clear distinction between representation and endorsement. I would argue that Lynch's films invoke sexual violence, not in order to naturalise oppressive gender relations, but in order to render them both horrific and systemically rooted. Lynch's constructions of gender are further informed and strengthened by his tendency to draw upon conventions of melodrama, a contemporary, 'sister-genre' of classic *film noir*, commonly referred to as "the woman's film." Slippage between these two *genres* is not a unique feature of Lynch's work. In fact, progressive readings of gender politics in classic *film noir* are often anchored to specific texts which incorporate both.³³

The film noir is the paranoid and "perverse" version of the melodramatic form that drives narrative contradictions to their impossible limits.³⁴

Melodramatic *film noir* represents a paranoid, claustrophobic and disrupted

³²See: Diana Hume George, "Lynching Women: A Feminist Reading of *Twin Peaks*," Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to *Twin Peaks*, ed. David Lavery (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1995) 109-119; and Barbara Creed, "A Journey Through *Blue Velvet*: Film, Fantasy and the Female Spectator," New Formations 6 (Winter 1988) 97-117.

³³See: Linda Williams, "Feminist Film Theory: *Mildred Pierce* and the Second World War," Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television, ed. E. Deidre Pribram (London: Verso, 1988) 12-30; and Robert Lang, "Lucia Harper's Crime: Family Melodrama and *Film Noir* in *The Reckless Moment*," Literature/Film Quarterly 17.4 (1989) 261-267.

³⁴Robert Lang, "Lucia Harper's Crime: Family Melodrama and Film Noir in the Reckless Moment," Literature/Film Quarterly 17.4 (1989) 266-7.

universe common to all *film noir*. Yet, it departs from the hard-boiled strain of the genre, which often situates these thematic concerns in an urban context, by locating itself within a domestic and/or small town context. Visually, melodrama shares *film noir*'s dependence on an externalized, symbolic projection of internal emotion, in that it too relies heavily upon stylistic strategies to convey the emotional position of characters. Elizabeth Cowie suggests *film noir* can be seen "as a kind of development of melodrama,"³⁵ in which obstacles are derived more from internal responses to external events than by external forces alone.

According to Mary Ann Doane, melodramatic discourse locates the "fullness of meaning"³⁶ outside of linguistic structures, in order to "recover for meaning what is outside meaning."³⁷ In *The Desire to Desire*, she states:

The desire of melodrama to recover an originary language which is not structured through difference is manifested in the genre's strategy of deflecting signifying material onto other, nonlinguistic registers of the sign - gesture, looks, music, mise-en-scene.³⁸

This characteristic of visual excess in the melodramatic *noir* film is pervasive in the work of David Lynch, clearly signalling its relationship to the genre. Lynch's heavily atmospheric style is marked by a dependence on symbols, a predominance of shadows and

³⁵Elizabeth Cowie, "*Film Noir* and Women," *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993) 130.

³⁶Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire To Desire* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1987) 85.

³⁷Doane 85.

³⁸Doane 85.

motifs of darkness and the unknown, and a brooding and haunting musical score which interacts with the *mise-en-scene* to obscure static temporal reference and insinuate a fluidity between the contemporary context of the work's production and the classic era of the 1940s *noir film*. The abundance of Lynch's visual style further re-enforces the structural devices which contribute to a decentred, destabilized perspective which renders a static reading problematic. Lynch's work draws on almost every *noir* device ever used for decentring the act of narration. His work is marked by a proliferation of doubles and *doppelgangers*, an interweaving of multiple plot-lines, and a fragmentation of the act of detection. Lynch's detectives never solve the mystery completely, or alone. Knowledge itself is revealed as partial and fragmentary. Together, these stylistic tendencies and formal devices create a layering, obscuring effect which foregrounds the thematic centre of Lynch's work, in which the ordinary and the perverse are simultaneously explored, exposed, and explicitly linked.

Drawing on the melodramatic tendency to focus on the domestic and the small town, *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks* emphasize the destabilisation of the very cornerstones of American society. By locating the horror in the small town, Lynch suggests it is not only everywhere, but specifically in the most wholesome of places, Lumberton and Twin Peaks, USA, never-never lands of football captains, beauty queens and cherry pie. According to Janet Preston, in locating the horrific in the small town, Lynch's work departs from other Dantean allegories of moral corruption, such as *Apocalypse Now* and *Mosquito Coast*, which situate madness safely beyond the "civilised world." Of *Blue Velvet*, she observes:

...the irrational exists just beneath the deceptive tranquil surface of civilized life [...] the action takes place in small town America where order traditionally prevails and among guardians of convention and custom, middle-class Americans. Part of the movie's horror is that the expected is reversed; the irrational exists within the same context as the rational.³⁹

The establishing sequence of *Blue Velvet* illustrates this tension in Lynch's work between the surface appearance, or expectation of good, and the evil which lurks beneath that surface. The film's opening montage of red roses, white picket fences, crossing guards and fire fighters immediately signals an idealised world. In dreamlike slow motion Lumberton, USA is coded as a racially homogenous heartland of safety, family, and heterosexual romantic love. However, the stability of these images is simultaneously undermined through the use of over-saturated color, which renders them unnatural, surreal. In summarizing Lynch's technical predilections, Reni Celeste observes:

...beginning with *Blue Velvet*, a new use of color emerges, similar to *The Wizard of Oz* in that it also serves to complicate our sense of the real. Lynch will use color to paint an America that is as surreal as the Emerald City itself, but without the return to the reassuring black-and-white softness of Auntie Em.⁴⁰

Instead, Lynch's technicolor dreams soon descend into a more nightmarish vision of the small town, in which the lush, verdant lawn is merely the facade of a seething pit of insects, where the subterranean literally meets the suburban. Likewise, the majestic Douglas Firs of Twin Peaks which so captivate FBI agent Dale Cooper soon turn horrific,

³⁹ Janet L. Preston, "Dantean Imagery in *Blue Velvet*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 18. 3 (1990): 168.

⁴⁰ Reni Celeste, "*Lost Highway*: Unveiling Cinema's Yellow Brick Road," *CineAction* 43 (1997): 36.

and "the owls are not what they seem." Preston suggests:

Lynch's first effort is to establish the radical disjuncture between what seems to be and what is, between appearance and reality⁴¹.

Beyond undermining a conventional representation of white, small town America, Lynch's films also assault conventional notions of the most foundational of social units, the patriarchal nuclear family. The family unit in Lynch's work is perpetually characterised by dysfunction. Nowhere is this more clearly epitomised than in the Palmer family of *Twin Peaks*. The series returns again and again to the image of the Palmer house, invoking the ideal facade of normalcy. Yet, as the work goes on to reveal, that facade conceals the very horror which is its conventional antithesis. This destabilized representation of family life is a key feature through which Lynch's work functions as *film noir*. According to Sylvia Harvey,

It is the representation of the institution of the family, which in so many films serves as the mechanism whereby desire is fulfilled, or at least ideological equilibrium established, that in film noir serves as the vehicle for the expression of frustration. [...] Moreover the kinds of tension characteristic of the portrayal of the family in these films suggests the beginnings of an attack on the dominant social values normally expressed through the representation of the family.⁴²

Initially, the threat to the Palmer household appears to come from without. First presented as an autonomous character, BOB, the killer, is a long haired drifter, whose denim clothing and scent of engine oil code him as a working class outsider to the

⁴¹ Preston 168.

⁴²Sylvia Harvey, "Woman's place: the absent family of film noir," *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1980) 23.

seemingly clean, white-bread middle-class world of teenage Laura Palmer. He is entirely removed from the family patriarch, Leland Palmer, who, as father, husband, lawyer is seemingly the most ordinary and acceptable of men. However, when BOB is revealed as another face of Leland Palmer, he ceases to function as a threatening external other. The father, and by extension the patriarchal nuclear family is rendered horrific⁴³. By representing Leland as an "everyman" pillar of his community, while simultaneously casting him as the incestuous, murderous monster, Lynch clearly articulates the extent to which "everyman" could well be capable of Leland's depravity and violence. According to Hobart and Smith:

What made *Twin Peaks* hard to watch was its powerful suggestion that sexual violence is not pleasurable or natural but is common and is practiced by lots of seemingly average men. *Twin Peaks* horrified us because it held a mirror up to the American family and what we saw when we gazed upon it was a brutality that made many of us sick.⁴⁴

The incestuous world of *Twin Peaks* and the insinuation of incest in *Blue Velvet* yet again anchor Lynch's work to *film noir*. In her response to Fredric Jameson's observations on *film noir* and nostalgia, Creed points out this relationship between *Chinatown* and the generic tendencies of *film noir*,

The possibility of incest, symbolically alluded to in the '40s noir film, has become a reality in *Chinatown*; it signifies the complete

⁴³ Preston suggests that the incestuous father is similarly implied in *Blue Velvet*, citing specifically the framing of Sandy against a "bigger-than-life photograph of her father" in her bedroom, as well as the implication of Detective Williams in the police corruption at the heart of the narrative through multiple clues within the *mise-en-scene* of his home office. Preston 171.

⁴⁴ Hobart and Smith 255.

failure of the symbolic order.⁴⁵

Twin Peaks re-enforces this critique of the family as a site of oppression in its representation of the roles occupied by women within the Palmer household. Sarah Palmer, the mother, is perpetually sedated and, as a result, appears oblivious or powerless to her husband's incestuous assaults on their daughter. Sarah Palmer represents a perverse counterpoint to the June Cleaver image of the American housewife, as she sits aimlessly in her kitchen drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes and watching television; an image that is repeated in *Blue Velvet's* depiction of Jeffrey Beaumont's mother and aunt perpetually mesmerised by the television set.

The suggestion that "routinised boredom and a sense of stifling entrapment are characteristic of marriage"⁴⁶ implicit in this depiction of matrimonial and familial *malaise* is consistent with other *film noir* representations of the family. This glimpse inside the two households discredits the external image of the seemingly perfect white, middle class family. Once the facade is stripped away, the Palmer household reveals that the family offers only two places for women: a figurative coma or a literal coffin.

...noirness is thus not an alternative world of temptation, illicitness, or irresponsibility; it is simply the repressed underside of an otherwise ordinary domestic life, which, under the proper circumstances, can become a terror for the woman subject to a

⁴⁵Barbara Creed, "From Here to Modernity: Feminism and Postmodernism," *A Postmodern Reader*, eds. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993) 407.

⁴⁶Sylvia Harvey, "Woman's place, the absent family in film noir," *Women in Film Noir*, (London: British Film Institute, 1980) 29.

partiarthal economy.⁴⁷

The lack of options available to women is further articulated through the proliferation of doubles, *doppelgangers*, and erotic triangles in Lynch's work. Particularly in *Twin Peaks*, similar, yet permuted narratives overlap, exposing synchronic and alternative scenarios in which like characters enact and re-enact limited possibilities. Through a complex network of erotic triangles, the women of *Twin Peaks* are shown trapped in a dilemma of undesirable options, underscoring the futility of what Mary Daly refers to as "The Illusion of 'Dionysian' Freedom" in which women are enticed to swing endlessly between two seemingly disparate definitions of masculinity without effecting any kind of transgression.⁴⁸ The impossibility of escape is best expressed in the fate of Laura Palmer's *doppelganger*/cousin, Matty. Matty's annihilation, despite the radical differences between her and Laura, confirms that Laura's death was not a fate of her own making, but an inevitable byproduct of corrupt society in which the victimization of women is acceptable, and almost unavoidable.

By constructing a sexual universe pervaded by rape, incest and murder, Lynch emphatically refuses to allow a comforting distance from the oppressive sexual practices women face within patriarchal society. Arguably, by foregrounding the victimizing extremes of masculine sexuality, Lynch renders conventionally endorsed masculinity problematic and denaturalizes relations of subjugation. This interpretation of Lynch's

⁴⁷R. Barton Palmer, Hollywood's Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir (New York: Twayne, 1994) 145.

⁴⁸ Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978, 1990) 64-69.

work is articulated in Randi Davenport Hobart and William Smith's analysis of *Twin*

Peaks:

...in its exploration of the behavior of abusive men and the damage suffered by their victims, *Twin Peaks* is informed by, rather than at odds with, recent feminist discussions about sexual violence.

Indeed, the series exposes the regularity with which women find themselves victimised by men.

By sympathetically focussing its audience's attention on the sexual victimization of women, *Twin Peaks* demands that its audience understand not just that sexual violence occurs, but that our culture tolerates a range of practices that serve to authorize violence against women.⁴⁹

Blue Velvet similarly erodes distinctions between acceptable and deviant masculinity.

Although the film begins by coding Jeffrey as the nice "boy next door," it gradually undermines this assumption by increasingly associating him with the same violent behaviors he initially appears to contrast. Not only does this call into question the legitimacy of conventional masculinity and male sexuality, but it does so by undermining the audience's identification with the sympathetic male protagonist, thereby challenging that entire set of relations between the text and the spectator.

Blue Velvet evacuates Jeffrey's squeaky-clean persona by demonstrating his commonality with Frank, whom Betsy Berry aptly describes as "embodying the strange and opposing characteristics of an eighth grade hoodlum and the Marquis De Sade."⁵⁰

The two are linked by their sexual violence as the film juxtaposes scenes of Jeffrey

⁴⁹ Randi Davenport Hobart and William Smith, "The Knowing Spectator of *Twin Peaks*: Culture, Feminism, and Family Violence," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 2.4 (1993) : 255.

⁵⁰ Betsy Berry, "Forever In My Dreams: Generic Conventions and the Subversive Imagination in *Blue Velvet*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 16.2 (1988) : 83.

watching Frank rape Dorothy and Jeffrey hitting Dorothy while he has sex with her. By establishing consistent sexual behaviours, *Blue Velvet* directly implicates the wholesome boy next door in the psychotic, sexual violence of Frank's morally and legally unsanctioned version of masculinity. As Frank tells Jeffrey, "you're like me". According to Berry:

Jeffrey Beaumont is discovering not only the opposing realities of the world around him, but also the two natures which are in opposition within himself.⁵¹

This association of conventionally "normal" and conventionally "deviant" masculinities resurfaces in the juxtaposition between Frank and Sandy's all-American boyfriend, Mike.⁵² Mike represents the conventional white, heterosexual home-town football hero, whose athletic activities and sexual territorialism representative socially acceptable expressions of masculinity. When Mike and his drunk teammates chase Sandy and Jeffrey, the implications of Mike's conventional masculine identity are implicitly paralleled with the unsanctioned, violent and criminal masculinity of Frank.

This similarity is immediately established by Jeffrey's assumption that it is Frank chasing them, and further re-enforced by the dialogue, in which Mike orders Sandy, "shut up, nobody's talking to you" in the same way Frank orders Dorothy to "shut the fuck up." Both scenes show drunk, violent men, recklessly speeding, intent on assaulting Jeffrey for

⁵¹ Berry 85.

⁵² Mike's "ordinariness" is reinforced by his name, as perhaps the most common given name Lynch could have chosen. That his equally ordinary best friend is "Bobby" is also interesting, given that *Twin Peaks* also features macho football jocks named Mike and Bobby. The ordinariness of the name Bob lends an additional sinister touch to the killer, BOB, which further works off the expression "Bob's your uncle" for incestuous *double entendre*.

violating their proprietorial rights to female characters. Once again, conventionally acceptable masculine ideals and deviant expressions of masculinity are revealed as comparable expressions of aggression and domination, thereby disrupting a safe separation between the two. By proposing that good and evil exist within a continuum, as opposed to the conventionally binary relationship prevalent in mainstream narrative cinema, Lynch's work shows critical potential to de-stabilize expected notions of norm and other. This continuum functions as a broad-based social critique because it is not limited to the domestic sphere or sexual domination between individual characters. Instead, this continuum exists in all aspects of the universe Lynch constructs in his work, from the family to the economic sphere to the law.

In the same way that the ideal father is also the ideal psychopath in *Twin Peaks*, so too is the ultimate capitalist the ultimate criminal. Because the town's economic patriarch, Benjamin Horne, is also the town's pimp, the accumulation of wealth is directly associated with criminality and with the exploitation of women's sexuality. Significantly the distinction between Horne's legitimate and illegal ventures is blurred at the perfume counter of Horne's Department Store, from which high school girls are recruited into Horne's brothel, highlighting the continuous relationship between the socially sanctioned objectification of women through standardized beauty codes imposed by, among other things, the cosmetics industry, and the sexual commodification of women within prostitution.

As an overall entity, the corporate realm in *Twin Peaks*, as characterized primarily by the mill and Horne's diverse - legal and illegal - holdings, which between them appear

to employ the majority of the townspeople, is depicted not as a benevolent source of livelihood, but as a dangerous, corrupt, self-interested realm, driven by profit at any cost.

In his analysis of the economic relationships typical of *film noir*, Nicholas Christopher observes,

The tycoon is a seminal figure in film noir who often bridges the deceptive terrain of respectability and culture and the treacherous provinces of crime.⁵³

and

The cop and the criminal, the gangster and the tycoon, become interchangeable, and the crime that is socially acceptable, behind its succession of veils, may be responsible for more deaths in real numbers than the violent street crime.⁵⁴

Lynch similarly collapses the distinction between law as a protective, positive institution and lawlessness. *Blue Velvet* insinuates Frank's illegal activities are facilitated by corruption within the local police force, and despite the potential to read this scenario as a police sting operation, the film never fully resolves conclusively that the man in the yellow jacket, and possibly even Detective Williams himself, are not in collusion with Frank. At the very least, the local police appear more concerned with the economic structure of Frank's criminal activities than with the human toll of his violence.

Distrust in the power of law to contain or even oppose the social threat of criminality and violence is yet another feature that anchors Lynch's work to the classic *noir* film. Early writings on the genre identify,

⁵³Nicholas Christopher, *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City*, (New York: Free Press, 1997) 180.

⁵⁴*Ibid*, 179-80.

If police are featured, they are rotten - like the inspector in *The Asphalt Jungle* or the corrupt hard case portrayed by Lloyd Nolan in *The Lady in the Lake* - sometimes even murderers themselves (as in Otto Preminger's *Fallen Angel* or *Where the Sidewalk Ends*). At a minimum, they let themselves get sucked into the criminal mechanism, like the attorney in *The File on Thelma Jordan*.⁵⁵

In *Twin Peaks* the total failure of the law is apparent in the character of Wyndham Earl, the maverick FBI agent, turned serial killer. Earl is dangerous specifically because of his access to the skills and knowledge of the law enforcement community. Throughout the series, the unorthodox actions of the FBI highlight an uneasy distrust of their clandestine methodology and sinister wisdom. In the final episode, BOB migrates from the dying Leland Palmer into the clean-cut protagonist, Agent Cooper, signaling a more pervasive encroachment of evil into the dominant social structure of the justice system. BOB's migration from the literal father to the figurative patriarch of the law re-enforces the notion of corruption at every level of the social world, from the most foundational unit of the family to the most powerful institution of the state.

Structurally, BOB's movement from Leland to Agent Cooper is also important because it undermines closure and resolution within the text and undermines the spectator's faith in the sympathetic masculine protagonist. BOB's capacity to move from host to host renders him uncontainable; clearly constructing a disruption the narrative is incapable of reconciling. Importantly, BOB's transformation into Agent Cooper further implicates the spectator in that it signals a downfall of a protagonist the audience has been

⁵⁵Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, "Towards a Definition of Film Noir," from *Panorama du Film Noir Americain* (Les Editions de Minuit, 1955) rept in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1995) 21.

encouraged to trust. This disruption, because it challenges the spectator's assumptions, has the potential to denaturalize not only the specific protagonist of the text, but also the conventional sympathetic protagonist of mainstream narrative cinema itself.

By repeatedly collapsing distinctions between conventional oppositions, Lynch undermines constructed definitions of good and evil, and makes space for a more systemic reading of social relations. While conventional mainstream narrative cinema has traditionally located relations of good and evil within specific binary scenarios, Lynch constructs an inextricable link between good and evil at every level of the social structure of his films. In doing so, his work fails to provide safe, cathartic resolution for the spectator. According to Fred Pfeil, the multileveled suspicions generated by the film produce a spectator response of:

...fundamental distrust, less the suspicion that we have not got to the bottom of this yet than the full-blown paranoia that there may be no bottom here at all.⁵⁶

According to Maria M. Carrion, this de-stabilization disrupts the conventional process of reading the film text. Escaping the unifying, authoritative voice of the traditional detective narrative, *Twin Peaks* once again refuses its audience any easy, passive catharsis.

Comparing the program to the labyrinthine fiction of Jorge Luis Borges, Carrion suggests:

...it is *Twin Peaks'* potential for constant substitution of identities that helps the reader create a network of connections that do not depend only on a mechanical, passive, chaining process of isolated

⁵⁶ Fred Pfeil, "Home Fires Burning: Family *Noir* in *Blue Velvet* and *Terminator 2*," *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993) 237.

It should be noted that Pfeil departs from a progressive reading of Lynch's film and contemporary *film noir*, generally, favouring instead an interpretation of such works as ultimately conservative postmodern *pastiche*.

data from these different perspectives.⁵⁷

Blue Velvet further undermines the ease with which the spectator is conventionally drawn into association with the protagonist by creating dis-ease around the voyeuristic gaze traditionally endorsed by mainstream narrative cinema. Sandy's remark, "I don't know whether you're a detective or a pervert" signals an implicitly self-reflexive connection between the two, given that the film is already established as an investigative narrative, focussed on the act of detection. By initially aligning the spectator's access to the narrative with Jeffrey's point of view, the film specifically implicates the spectator in its critique,⁵⁸ exposing the spectator's complicity in the *voyeurism* of the mainstream narrative filmic apparatus generally. *Blue Velvet* accomplishes this by displacing the pleasurable and controlling act of looking with a distinct dis-ease which relegates the *voyeur* to a passive position. In part, this dis-ease is a result of the non-static gender positioning of the gaze within the film text. Barbara Creed suggests that one of the significant disruptions within *Blue Velvet* is specifically the atypical masochistic positioning of the Jeffrey/Spectator point of view, which signifies a departure from the conventionally controlling, sadistic male gaze of mainstream narrative cinema⁵⁹.

⁵⁷ Maria M. Carrion, "Twin Peaks and the Circular Ruins of Fiction: Figuring (Out) the Acts of Reading," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 21.4 (1993) : 242.

⁵⁸ For a discussion of how *film noir* has been used to problematize voyeurism, see: Barry Maine, "Rotten to the Core: Voyeurism in the Detective Film," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 61 (1985) : 106-116.

⁵⁹ Barbara Creed, "A Journey Through *Blue Velvet*: Film, Fantasy and the Female Spectator," *New Formations* 6 (1988) : 97-117.

It should be noted that, despite certain useful observations, I find Creed's analysis in this particular article to be mired in Freudian Psychoanalysis to the extent that her reading of the film

In addition, *Blue Velvet* subverts the conventional gendering of subject/object gaze relations with Dorothy's assertion of control through her command, "don't look at me."

In her review of the film, Tracy Biga suggests:

Blue Velvet offers a case study in how women watch men and how the relation of a person looking and a person looked at may depict formulations other than control and power. [...] An ordinary cinematic subject (boy solves mystery and wins girl) is presented not as something natural and fulfilling, but in a dark, multileveled--we might even say twisted--way, encouraging the spectator to question his/her reactions to this standard material.⁶⁰

Beyond these tendencies to undermine the spectator's conventional relationship to the film text, Lynch's work shows a progressive tendency to undermine the "ideological safety valve" function through which mainstream narrative film seeks to resolve and appease the social tensions it represents. In part because of a tendency to undermine conclusive knowledge and in part because the works begin from such a disrupted point, the conventional return to equilibrium becomes a mute possibility in Lynch's work. The universe of his films is too deeply corrupt to produce any semblance of a happy ending.

Of *Blue Velvet*, Fred Pfeil suggests the film presents a narrative,

whose recuperations of patriarchal order are riddled with artifice and suspicion, and eroded by a mode of skewed hyperobservation that simultaneously fills and estranges, exceeds and evacuates the conventional terms in which such narratives used to be couched.⁶¹

Twin Peaks does not even pretend to resolve the contradictions, issues and plot-lines it

constitutes not so much an analysis as it does a case of "reading in", which far exceeds the conspicuous Oedipal references of the text.

⁶⁰ Tracy Biga, "Blue Velvet," *Film Quarterly* 51. 1 (1997): 44.

⁶¹Pfeil, 252.

constructs. Although it poses as an investigation of the question, "Who killed Laura Palmer?" it does not end with the solution of the murder. Instead, it continues, becoming increasingly dissipated and convoluted, until we are left totally uncertain who, what and where BOB is, and more importantly, who, what and where BOB is not.

Lynch further undermines the potential for resolution or closure of the tensions his films invoke by destabilizing a static reading of the film text through the use of deliberate artifice. This artificiality functions in a self-reflexive way, challenging the possibility of effective closure. In undermining closure, these works undermine the happy consciousness ideal common to most mainstream narrative cinema.

in the closing image of [Blue Velvet], the reunion of Dorothy with her kidnapped child, seems to achieve total closure. But it is transparently ironic, a ridiculously happy ending to the smalltown life of a nuclear family. The symbolic order of the 'normal' world has been shown by Lynch to be a mere sham and can never really be fully restored.⁶²

This self-conscious attention to artifice binds Lynch's work to *film noir* and the process by which it undermines conventional strategies and codes of representation. According to J.P. Telotte, *noir* films of the classic era distinguished themselves from other, more conventional genres in that, "they began to call attention to the artificial, constructed, and ultimately fantastic nature of much that passes for reality - and realism - in both American culture and the American cinema."⁶³

Because *Blue Velvet*, like all of Lynch's work, establishes a state of disruption from

⁶²Betsy Berry, "Forever in my Dreams..." 89.

⁶³J.P. Telotte, "The Fantastic Realm of Film Noir: *Kiss Me Deadly*," Wide Angle, Vol 14, No.1 (January 1992) 16.

the very beginning, the potential to restore equilibrium is impossible. Order cannot be restored, because order never existed. And the *naivety* of Jeffrey and Sandy's faith in the happy ending only underscores the hollow, artifice of narrative resolution. According to Biga:

by virtue of its [the film's] power, quirkiness, and difference, particularly in the realm of tone, the established romantic couple that is presented in the end cannot be taken for granted.⁶⁴

The irony of Sandy and Jeffrey's persistent faith in resolution is made all the more poignant in the juxtaposition with the image of Dorothy who, according to the soundtrack, "still can see blue velvet through [her] tears." Far from supporting the false closure presented by Sandy and Jeffrey, the film's insistence on Dorothy's version privileges the subjective experience of the victim over the detached authoritative control of the masculine protagonist/detective and the conventional mainstream narrative's tendency to suture and abstract contradictions in a manner that renders them safe. In the end, it is Dorothy, the film's apparent victim, whose voice is given validity, while Jeffrey and Sandy are merely the willing dupes of happy consciousness.

The ideological significance of lovers living happily ever after lies in the unspoken, and usually invisible, metamorphosis that is implied to take place at the end of every happy ending. By means of this metamorphosis lovers are transformed into fathers and mothers, into families. This magic circle of transformation is broken in film noir which, in presenting family relations as broken, perverted, peripheral or impossible finds itself upon the absence of the family.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Biga 49.

⁶⁵ Harvey 25.

Through these consistent refusals to perpetuate a traditional narrative endorsement of happy consciousness ideology, Lynch challenges the conventionally proposed universality of such a paradigm. Through a barrage of surreal, macabre and often deeply disturbing images and scenarios, his films undermine the often pacifying function of the "Our Town" tradition within mainstream narrative cinema, replacing it, instead, with a persistent recognition of the pervasiveness of the institutionally corrupt and morally bankrupt "Town Without Pity."

Chapter Three

"Smarter than the man in every way:" feminism, female frustrations and the *femme fatale*

While *film noir* can be read progressively by focussing on the critical challenges it posits to dominant institutions and codes of representation, a more specific investigation of how the *genre* operates progressively in relation to gender necessarily requires an evaluation of how *film noir* represents women. Understanding how the *genre* departs from other mainstream narrative film necessarily requires a more specific examination of the key female figure of the *noir* world, the *femme fatale*. Within the literature on *film noir*, and in particular within feminist scholarship, the figure of the *femme fatale* looms large. Often, she has been read as a problematic female figure whose construction as a threatening outsider to the patriarchal norm of the film text ultimately legitimates her eventual narrative containment through domestication or outright annihilation.⁶⁶ Janey Place summarizes this reading as the assumption that,

The ideological operation of the myth (the absolute necessity of controlling the strong, sexual woman) is thus achieved by first demonstrating her dangerous power and its frightening results, then destroying it.⁶⁷

To a certain extent, this reading is substantiated by a number of classic and contemporary

⁶⁶See Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁶⁷Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir," *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1980) 45.

noir films. Women in the classic *noir* universe have often been punished or annihilated for their transgressions against patriarchal institutions, yet, as the previous two chapters illustrate, this containment is not necessarily total, and the ruptures *film noir* exposes in the seams of patriarchal institutions and signifying practices pose considerable and potentially progressive challenges to dominant institutions and practices.

More contemporary examples of the *genre* have often replicated this tension between containment and transgression. One such example is Roman Polanski's 1974 film *Chinatown*, in which the enigmatic Evelyn Mulwray is simultaneously blinded and annihilated by the shot of a police revolver. Despite the violence of her death, the film elicits a sympathetic reading of Evelyn's crime, which is no more than an attempt to protect her daughter from a corrupt, incestuous and murderous patriarch who carries with him the full weight of the legal, political and economic sphere. Likewise, even the preservation of the patriarchal nuclear family at the core of Adrian Lyne's reactionary film, *Fatal Attraction*, is problematic and artificial in light of the film's conflict between the discourse of the traditional masculine protagonist which vilifies the "career woman," and a more sympathetic reading of Alex, which recognizes her desire for respect and her refusal to be discarded. Although I share Susan Faludi's view that this film is ultimately reactionary, her attention to the tensions generated by competing visions of the film at the production stage raises complications in reading the film, which manifest themselves in differing interpretations by male and female spectators.⁶⁸

⁶⁸Susan Faludi, Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women, (New York: Anchor, 1991).

According to Mary Ann Doane, despite the *femme fatale*'s ostensibly misogynistic function as a "symptom of male fears about feminism,"⁶⁹ the intentions of the producers of the film text and the apparent strategies of the text itself are necessarily complicated by the subjective interpretation of the spectator,

...the representation [of the *femme fatale*] - like any representation - is not totally under the control of its producers and, once disseminated, comes to take on a life of its own.⁷⁰

Fatal Attraction, like the *noir* domestic "comedy" *The War of the Roses*, was able to generate debate in living rooms and lunch rooms across North America not because it engendered a static reading, but because men and women often read it very differently. This difference is not a function of biological essentialism, but of the different locations occupied by men and women within patriarchal society and the differing interpretations and understandings of that society these locations produce.

According to Tania Modleski, the act of interpreting filmic representations of women is problematized not so much by the structures imbedded in the text itself as by the limitations of the critical framework through which it is interpreted. In *The Women Who Knew Too Much*, she argues, "there are many questions that I think begin to look very different when seen by a woman."⁷¹ And, according to Elizabeth Cowie, a reassessment of women in *film noir* needs to also consider the limitations of existing scholarship and the

⁶⁹Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, (New York: Routledge, 1991) 2-3.

⁷⁰*Ibid*, 3.

⁷¹Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much*, (New York: Routledge, 1988) 14.

role scholars have played in framing *film noir* within a patriarchal film historical tradition which accords primacy to those *noir* films which privilege masculine, if not misogynist narratives and themes. Cowie suggests that by looking beyond the narrow confines of macho, hardboiled canonical examples such as *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *The Blue Dahlia*, and others, we can find a *film noir* tradition which offers the female spectator and feminist theorist an opportunity for a more progressive interpretation.⁷²

When a broader range of *noir* films is considered, I contend that the *femme fatale* offers a strong and empowered representation with which/whom the female spectator can sympathize and identify. Furthermore, this pleasure is bound not only to the strength of the *femme fatale*, but also to the way she can be seen to embody contradictions around women's tenuous location within patriarchy. According to Jackie Stacey's findings on female spectators' impressions of women in films of the classic *noir* era, even in films where strong women were punished or domesticated, "the qualities of confidence and power are remembered as offering female spectators the pleasure of participation in qualities they themselves lacked and desired," suggesting a discrepancy between narrative strategies of containment and the female spectator's interpretations of the text.⁷³

⁷² Elizabeth Cowie, "Film Noir and Women," *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London and New York: Verso, 1993) 121-165.

While I agree with Cowie's call for a reassessment of the canonization process, I find her lack of attention to sexism within the mechanisms of film production disappointing. Expanding the canon to include more "woman friendly" texts does not implicitly negate sexism within those texts which currently comprise the canon.

⁷³ Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*, (London: Routledge, 1994) 158.

While the contemporary *femme fatale* is by no means a universally progressive figure, this chapter investigates two recent *films noir* in which the *femmes fatale* offer particularly empowered and active representations of women. Most importantly, these films, *Body Heat* and *The Last Seduction*, present the spectator with strong and deadly women characters who, far from being contained, prevail and persist beyond the narrative resolution which designates the limits of the text. Jeremy G. Butler argues that the *femme fatale* appeals to feminists, specifically, because,

She provides one of the few instances in American cinema in which the woman is strong and sexually independent. She manipulates and uses men rather than performing as the victim or plaything.⁷⁴

While these films function progressively, in part, because of their strong female characters and the failure of both narratives to contain them, *Body Heat* and *The Last Seduction* are also progressive in that they undermine conventional relations of power common to mainstream narrative cinema. Because they subvert the gendered subject/object relations of masculine activity and feminine passivity, they re-order the positioning of the film spectator in such a way that it is the male spectator who is cast in the masochistic position of identification usually reserved for the female spectator.

Not unlike the work of David Lynch, both films are primarily located in small town America, again emphasizing the corruption of commonplace, "ordinary" individuals and institutions and deconstructing the relations of power upon which they are founded.

Although the two films are different from each other in many ways, they share certain

⁷⁴Jeremy G. Butler, "Miami Vice: The Legacy of *Film Noir*," Journal of Popular Film and Television 13 no.3 (Fall 1985) 130.

similarities in their representation of the *femme fatale* and of gender relations more generally. *Body Heat's* director, Lawrence Kasdan, articulates this thematic concern as an attempt to negotiate tensions around women's roles in society. In an interview with Todd Erickson, Kasdan suggests the women's liberation movement and response to it:

...created an atmosphere during the seventies where there was this same distrust of women that the guys returning from World War II had when they wondered where their women had been at night while they were away fighting the war.⁷⁵

In contrast to more reactionary contemporary erotic thrillers, including *Fatal Attraction*, *Body Heat* and *The Last Seduction* stand out as examples of *film noir* in which the negotiation of gender roles ends not in the punishment of the female character, but in the triumph of her efforts to retain her autonomy in the face of would-be possessors, who seek to domesticate and dominate her. In doing so, both films legitimate Sylvia Harvey's progressive reading of the *genre* as a disruptive subversion of mainstream narrative convention. According to Harvey:

...the ideological safety valve device that operates in the offering of women as sexual commodities, breaks down in probably most of these films, because the women are not, finally, possessed.⁷⁶

Both *Body Heat's* Matty and *The Last Seduction's* Brigit resist efforts to make them over into the ideal servile wife/partner and reject the confines of the traditional family. Far from resorting to conventional or stereotypical female behaviours, both

⁷⁵ Todd Erickson, "Kill Me Again: Movement becomes Genre," *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996) 313.

⁷⁶ Sylvia Harvey, "Woman's Place: The Absent Family of *Film Noir*," *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1980) 27.

characters actively subvert expected norms of femininity thereby calling attention to its limitations. Specifically, they resist masculine control over two key aspects of their lives: their sexual identity and their economic identity. Janey Place argues that the *femme fatale's* control over her own sexuality constitutes an expression of power which is unique to *film noir*, which "stands as the only period in American film in which women are deadly but sexy, exciting and strong."⁷⁷ Furthermore, as Belinda Budge suggests, there is an additional level of pleasure in the *femme fatale* whose "sexual power is closely meshed with her socio-economic power: she does not need men."⁷⁸

Attempts to control the sexual and economic activities of the *femmes fatales* are divided, in both *Body Heat* and *The Last Seduction*, between the competing interests of male characters. While their male lovers represent efforts to domesticate and sexually possess them, their husbands represent efforts to dominate them financially. This polarization of masculinities functions in much the same way as the dynamic Christine Gledhill identifies in her analysis of *Klute*:

The two sides of the forties private-eye stereotype's attitude to women - romantic idealisation, and embittered accusational disgust - have been split here between two characters, representing complementary faces of patriarchy faced with the problem of female sexuality.⁷⁹

⁷⁷Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir," *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1980) 54.

⁷⁸Belinda Budge, "Joan Collins and the Wilder Side of Women," *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*, eds. Lorrain Gamman and Margaret Marshment (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1989) 106.

⁷⁹Christine Gledhill, "*Klute* 2: Feminism and *Klute*," *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 121.

Like the erotic triangles of *Twin Peaks*, these films demonstrate the disempowering false choice between the "stern masculinity of Apollo" and Dionysian femininity of the kinder, gentler patriarch who "kills women softly."⁸⁰ However, while *Twin Peaks* merely identifies this false choice, the *femmes fatales* of *Body Heat* and *The Last Seduction* reject the entrapment of this position entirely.

Not only do Matty and Brigit refuse to choose between the forms of containment offered by competing male characters, but - through their actions - ultimately subvert these strategies of containment completely by effecting the containment of the male characters. It is not the *femmes fatales* whose mobility is restricted by domestication, nor whose threat is eliminated through annihilation. It is their lovers who are immobilized through incarceration and their husbands who are annihilated.

Body Heat and *The Last Seduction* reaffirm for the male and female spectator alike that a strong woman cannot be kept down. Moreover, they enact - for the gratification of the female spectator specifically - retribution in which those specific efforts to oppress and control the *femme fatale* are avenged. For the female spectator, who endures a social context in which her sexual and economic well-being is precarious and imperiled, the subjective experience of patriarchy provides a backdrop against which the fantasy of revenge may be intensely gratifying. In her analysis of the *noir* films of Alfred Hitchcock, Tania Modleski observes,

one can find pleasure in acknowledging and working through one's

⁸⁰Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism, 15th Anniversary Edition*, (Boston: Beacon, 1990) 69.

anger, especially when that anger has long been denied or repressed. This is a pleasure Hitchcock's films repeatedly make available to women. [...] While most critics attribute this interest to a sadistic delight in seeing his leading ladies suffer, and while I am even willing to concede this point, I would nevertheless insist that the obsession often takes the form of a particularly lucid expose of the predicaments and contradictions of women's existence under patriarchy.⁸¹

In this sense, *Body Heat* and *The Last Seduction* can be seen to function as the ultimate fantasy of patriarchal transgression for the female spectator. For, despite popular sensationalism around real-life events in which a woman severs her husband's penis in retribution for marital rape or sets fire to her abuser while he sleeps, the sensation is not that such things happen, but, perhaps, that they don't happen more often. And that they don't happen more often is undoubtedly more a result of their legal consequences than of innate feminine passivity. As such, the immensity of the gratification inherent in a narrative in which the woman subject to patriarchy not only "gets even" but "gets away with it" cannot be calculated, but should certainly not be overlooked or underestimated.

Although, like Faludi, Christine Holmlund concludes that the female revenge narrative of 1980s killer woman films is ultimately reactionary inasmuch as it is morally reprehensible, she accounts for its audience appeal within a patriarchal context in which cultural representations of the victimization of women are the norm,

What critics did see - and, for the most part, liked - in these films were their capable, attractive female characters. [...] A great many reviewers - and not just those who called themselves feminists -

⁸¹Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much*, (New York: Routledge, 1988) 27.

liked seeing women characters fight back.⁸²

As a feature of these two films, "getting away with it" not only caters to the fantasies of the female spectator, it also subverts the conventions of the closed text. Failure to effect closure in these films means not only that the *femme fatale* gets away with the crime, but that she gets away from the conventional signifying practices of mainstream narrative film which normally function to define and contain her. Because the *femmes fatale* of *Body Heat* and *The Last Seduction* exceed the limits of the text, they call attention to the inadequacies of the text as a system of signification capable of articulating "woman." The open text serves as an important source of pleasure for the female spectator and is a common feature of cultural products, including the soap opera, which primarily address women. Belinda Budge examines this specific intersection between the *film noir femme fatale*, the soap opera heroine and the female spectator in an analysis of *Dynasty*. Like *Dynasty's* spider woman, Alexis, whose containment is undermined by the endless narrative of the soap opera form, Matty and Brigit's *to-be-continuedness* in the final frames of *Body Heat* and *The Last Seduction* reassures the spectator they will fight "on and on and on."⁸³

Yet another way *noir films*, generally, and *Body Heat* and *The Last Seduction*, specifically, undermine patriarchal systems of meaning is through the characterization of

⁸²Christine Holmlund, "A Decade of Deadly Dolls: Hollywood and the Woman Killer," *Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation*, (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1994) 146-147.

⁸³Belinda Budge, "Joan Collins and the Wilder Side of Women," *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*, eds. Lorrain Gamman and Margaret Marshment (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1989) 109.

the *femme fatale* as an unfathomable mystery or enigma the male characters are incapable of deciphering. Rather than interpreting this representation within psychoanalytic tropes of either absence or *jouissance* - both of which envision her beyond signification - I would suggest that her unknowability points not to the impossibility of the female subject, but to the limitations of masculine discourse to articulate female subjectivity. In this sense, the enigmatic woman may be read not as an erasure, but as the articulation of a defensive and/or strategic position. This interpretation acknowledges the feminist proposition that within, and not simply despite, the gaps, silences and erasures of patriarchy, women have exercised survival, if not resistance.

Just as the blank spaces and monumental circles which punctuate the inventory of women's weapons and strategies of resistance in Monique Wittig's *Les Guerilleres*⁸⁴ can be seen to signify women's omission and silence within patriarchal discourse, so too may the *femme fatale*'s unknowability, which constitutes her perceived threat to the patriarchal social matrix around her, number among her strategies of resistance. Wittig writes specifically of this potential to resist from within the omissions of patriarchy's systems of signification in the passage:

Whatever they have not laid hands on, whatever they have not pounced on like many-eyed bird of prey, does not appear in the language you speak. This is apparent precisely in the intervals that your masters have not been able to fill with their words of proprietors and possessors, this can be found in the gaps, in all that which is not a continuation of their discourse, in the zero, the O, the perfect circle that you invent to imprison them and to overthrow

⁸⁴Monique Wittig, *Les Guerilleres*, trans. David Le Vay (Boston: Beacon, 1971).

them.⁸⁵

Furthermore, the unknowability of the *femme fatale* poses a serious disruption to the power/knowledge relations implicit in the objectification of woman at the level of the image. By limiting access to her ultimate significance within the film text, the *noir* film undermines total knowledge of woman through the controlling investigative gaze of objectification. As Mary Ann Doane argues, "the woman confounds the relation between the visible and the knowable at the same time that she is made into an object for the gaze."⁸⁶

In both *Body Heat* and *The Last Seduction*, it is specifically the controlling attempts of the male characters to signify/articulate the *femme fatale* in order to possess her that precipitate their demise. The reckless desire to know as a means of possession is summarized in Mike's whine, "I like you Wendy; I would like to know things about you." Both Ned and Mike, respectively, believe that they can or do possess total knowledge of the *femme fatale*, based on a narcissistic reading of her as the reflection of their own ultimate desires. While Ned sees Matty as the embodiment of his desire for "Pinehaven," Mike sees Brigit as an opportunity for "a new set of balls." By seeing the *femme fatale* as an extension of themselves, they are blind to the autonomous internal processes through which she instigates their destruction.

Conventional relations of knowledge and power are further undermined by the

⁸⁵Monique Wittig, 114.

⁸⁶Mary Ann Doane, Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis, (New York: Routledge, 1991) 103.

structural ordering of events in the two films. In *The Last Seduction*, Mike and Clay's ability to know or learn anything is rendered immaterial to the plot or the interest of the spectator because it is not their perspective around which the development of events is organised. In this film it is Brigit, the *femme fatale* herself who is the protagonist. This feature, in and of itself, represents a clear departure not only from most mainstream narrative film but even from most *film noir*:

It is unusual for film noir to have a female protagonist narrating her own story; in *Mildred Pierce* Mildred's story is revealed as duplicitous, thus foregrounding the work of repression involved in narrative resolution.⁸⁷

By casting the *femme fatale* as the protagonist, the film asserts her agency and the primacy of her perspective. And, unlike the fractured and fragmented point of view which characterises the perspective of the conventional masculine-protagonist *noir*, Brigit knows what is happening and remains in control of the action throughout the entire film.

Body Heat, by comparison, is structured around a trick. Although it establishes itself as a conventional male protagonist driven film, Ned's knowledge and power turn out to be a red herring. Despite Ned's function as the protagonist, the film undermines its own attempts to align itself with his perspective by revealing clues to the audience which Ned misses, and by casting him as a passive, unsympathetic character. For the male spectator to identify with Ned requires a leap of masochism which disrupts the conventional gendering of the gaze. By subverting our understanding of who is directing the action of

⁸⁷Pam Cook, "Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*," *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1980) 73.

the narrative, the film disrupts the active/passive paradigm described by Mulvey.⁸⁸

Because this subversion is imbedded in the final plot twist, the expectations of the audience are challenged and the spectator is shown the fallacy of conventional active/male passive/female discourse. To an extent, the passivity with which both Ned and *The Last Seduction's* Mike greet the events and direction of their lives is indicative of the disempowerment common to the male protagonist in *film noir*. According to Place,

the noir influence is evident in the murky moral confusion of the male characters and in their ability to control the direction of the narrative.⁸⁹

The anti-heroic protagonist of *film noir* emerges as a function of the genre's existential pessimism that the *noir* world is "devoid of the moral framework necessary to produce the traditional hero."⁹⁰

Although Ned and Mike are similar to the anti-heroic protagonist of classic *film noir*, they do not entirely fit that model because, unlike most classic *noir* protagonists, they are not so much distracted from a quest to make meaning/to detect as they are without any quest whatsoever. Unlike the *noir* anti-hero who is "the paradoxical combination of a man of character who is also a failure,"⁹¹ Ned and Mike are simply

⁸⁸Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6-18.

⁸⁹Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir" 41.

⁹⁰Robert G. Porfirio, "No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the *Film Noir*," *Sight and Sound* 45, no. 4 (Autumn 1976) rept. *Film Noir Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 1996) 83.

⁹¹John G. Cawelti, "*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films," *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed Gerald Mast, et al (New York: Oxford, 1992) 500.

failures. Mike's inability to act, despite his belief that he is "bigger than this town," causes him to invest all potential for activity in Brigit. Similarly, Ned is merely standing idle watching his "history burning up out there" while sublimating his ambitions into sexual conquests. For Ned, the double entendre of the "big score"⁹² is not something to be actively pursued, but something that simply walks out of the hot summer night into his waiting arms. Ned's inability to do "whatever is necessary," along with his professional mediocrity and anachronistic pick-up lines, wardrobe and hang-outs codes him as a static fixture in a world of progress. The banality of Ned's universe, as epitomized in Peter Lowenstein's remark, "I had a dream last night so boring it woke me up," functions as a stark contrast to the mobility and action Matty represents.

Matty is not only capable of doing "whatever is necessary," but of actively working toward "the big score." Ned's statement that killing Edmond is the "only way" they can get what they want identifies his inability to conceive of earning the lifestyle to which he aspires. For the female spectator, this presents a sharp contrast to the work Matty does to earn Edmond's money. As the representation of a woman under patriarchy, Matty's state of indenture and sexual servitude, through which she fulfills the contractual spousal expectations of her husband may be clearly interpreted as evidence of Matty's job. The financial "big score" as pay-back and retribution for intolerable patriarchal oppression is similarly identified in *The Last Seduction* when Brigit tells Clay, "it's mine; you hit me." Importantly, the contradiction between greed and revenge is invoked as a gendered variant

⁹² Marina Heung, "The Big Score: Work and Survival in the Films of Lawrence Kasdan," Michigan Quarterly Review 24 (1985): 553.

between male and female characters, underscoring a different relation to the economic realm.

Despite Ned's lazy contention that Edmond's death is "the only way," he insists that they "must never say he deserved it." Yet, to the female spectator, the juxtaposition of Ned's admonishment with a scene in which Edmond belittles Matty's intelligence and boasts of the violent extremes of his proprietorship over her sexuality, clearly indicates that Edmond actually does deserve it. A similar sentiment is echoed in Brigit's pitch to telemarket murder to disgruntled wives, "the guy deserves it; think about his poor wife."

Ned's failure to grasp that it is Matty who is the active agent of the narrative signals the inherent contradiction around which the *femme fatale* is constructed. As a visual representation of woman, within a patriarchal cultural context, the *femme fatale* carries with her the baggage of objectification, yet in her activity she problematizes the comfort with which the spectator is commonly encouraged to objectify the image of woman. In short, she elicits objectification only to denaturalize it:

Women in *film noir* are viewed through the eyes of men who measure their worth according to sexist and oppressive standards. The contradiction rests in threatening women's roles that victimize the male heroes and undermine the patriarchal order.⁹³

Both *The Last Seduction* and *Body Heat* demonstrate the limits and dangers of the objectification of woman. The fate of the male characters serves as a warning to the spectator that the *femme fatale* is more than that, and an underestimation of her subjectivity can be a deadly miscalculation. Edmond Walker underestimates his wife's

⁹³Dale E. Ewing Jr., "Film Noir: Style and Content," Journal of Popular Film and Television, 16, No.2 (Summer 1988) 65.

subjectivity in his suggestion that there is no point trying to explain things to her, but, for the female spectator, Matty's sarcastic response, that she is too dumb, because she's a woman, constitutes a nod to the contradictions women face under patriarchy. Matty's response betrays that she is not an object, but knows she is expected to be one.

A reading of the *femme fatale* as object of the gaze is complicated in *film noir* by her tendency to dominate the visual composition of the frame and control camera movement,⁹⁴ most evident in *The Last Seduction's* introduction of Brigit's character and in *Body Heat's* final image of Matty. In the way both films foreground her sexuality, the *femme fatale* comes to represent not a passive object but an active signifier of desire.

According to Budge,

...if her dress defines her as a woman of desire, this is true in both senses of that phrase: she is desirable, but she is also desiring.⁹⁵

Similarly, Brigit's abilities to change her identity, evade private detectives and frame Mike are all connected to an assumption that, as a woman, she is logically a victim. Because the audience knows, all along, that Brigit is not the victim, but the active agent driving the events of the narrative, the film challenges the assumptions of the male characters.

Furthermore, *The Last Seduction*, like *Body Heat*, connects the male characters' assumptions about the specific *femmes fatale* to their general views and assumptions about women.

By the time Mike and Ned meet Brigit and Matty, both films have established the

⁹⁴Place, 45.

⁹⁵Budge, 109.

relationship their male characters have with women. Ned is clearly established as a womanizer, who leers at and harasses the women he encounters at the coffee shop on a daily basis. Similarly, Mike and his drunk friends are first introduced in an explicitly misogynistic conversation about women. By establishing these two characters as men who view and treat women as contemptuous and disposable objects of pleasure, the potential to read them as sympathetic romantics who simply fell for an evil lover is undermined. Their eventual downfall, instead, can be read as a containment of the sexist ideology they represent.

In the same way that the subject/object distinction between the apparent (to the spectator) and perceived (by the male characters) reading of the *femme fatale* articulates the contradictions faced by women under patriarchy, so too does the doubling or splitting of the *femme fatale* graphically illustrate the schizophrenia of competing visions and versions of femininity and woman's place. In an analysis of the convergence of *film noir* and feminist concerns in the 1990 film *Presumed Innocent*, Amelia Jones argues,

The new woman's films can be interrogated, then, for the ways in which they fail to produce a coherent femininity and consequently fail to seduce their well-educated, upper-middle class audience into viewing these renovated traditional roles as "natural."⁹⁶

Matty, in assuming Mary Ann's identity simultaneously merges two selves into one and splits one self into two. Similarly, Brigit's alternate identity of Wendy shows how one woman is differently interpreted by different male characters. Although the predominance of doubles and reflections as an iconic feature of *film noir* has been read as evidence of

⁹⁶Amelia Jones, "'She Was Bad News': Male Paranoia and the Contemporary New Woman," *Camera Obscura* 25-26 (Jan-May 1996) 299.

"recurrent themes of loss or confusion of identity,"⁹⁷ or as a signal of the "self-asorbed narcissism"⁹⁸ and "duplicitous nature"⁹⁹ of the *femme fatale*, this doubling or splitting can also be read as a fracturing or conflicted identity, which underscores competing discourses of femininity. According to Modleski,

We might say, following on de Lauretis's insight, that women's experience in patriarchy is expressed not in the oedipal tragedy, nor in any myth which functions to "reconcile the individual and the collectivity," but rather in a more Hegelian conception of tragedy - of narrative in general - which stresses conflict and the *irreconcilability* of various imperatives facing the individual.¹⁰⁰

For the female spectator, this fracturing may be read as an affirmation of the tensions between an internal sense of self as subject and an externally imposed mandate of self as object. *Matty and Brigit* can be read as literally split in two by the contradiction between female subjectivity and patriarchal objecthood with which the female spectator is all too familiar, not simply as a woman subject to patriarchy, but specifically as a female spectator of mainstream narrative film. As Modleski goes on to argue:

A "conflictual" narrative of the sort I have been describing, functions not to integrate the individual into the social order, but to express women's experience of lived contradiction in patriarchy and thus is likely to elicit the kind of "dialectical" response that several feminist film theorists have insisted is characteristic of the female

⁹⁷Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir*, (New York: Da Capo, 1981) 89.

⁹⁸Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir," *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London; British Film Institute, 1980) 47.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much*, (New York: Routledge, 1989) 65.

spectator at the cinema.¹⁰¹

In this tendency to replicate the position of the female spectator and to expose the contradictions she must navigate, the *femmes fatales* of *Body Heat* and *The Last Seduction* can be seen to legitimate the perspective and experiences of the female spectator. More importantly, because their actions occur and make sense within a context of patriarchal oppression, these films offer the female spectator the seldom represented or acknowledged pleasures of revenge, female superiority, strength and self-empowered sexuality.

By exposing and exceeding the boundaries of traditional representations of women, these *femmes fatales* present a visual, structural and narrative critique of patriarchal practices of representation, while simultaneously offering an alternative which is affirming and pleasurable to the female spectator. According to Stacey, in doing so, such representations offer the female spectator an opportunity to escape, identify, and transform her image of woman and of herself:

I liked seeing strong, capable and independent types of female characters mostly because I wished to be like them.¹⁰²

Or, to quote Matty and Brigit, respectively: "knowledge is power," "don't fuck with my image."

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Stacey, 154.

Chapter Four

"Sisters are doin' it for themselves:" *film noir*, female fascination and gender transgression

Film noir's potential to serve as a vehicle for critical challenges to patriarchal institutions and practices, and its representation of the *femme fatale* as a strong, independent, sexually aware female character, offers numerous sources of pleasure for the female spectator. In addition to these features, there is one other component of specific contemporary *noir* films that lends itself to a progressive feminist reading. Specifically, within a certain range of recent *noir* films, it can be argued the opportunity to transcend oppressive patriarchal practices is contextualized within the framework of women's community, sisterhood and solidarity. Although the *femme fatale*, as I have identified, offers an opportunity to anchor *film noir's* critique of patriarchy to a specific female figure, the progressive potential of her transcendence is somewhat limited in that she is often constructed in isolation. While she can be seen to challenge mainstream patriarchal institutions, practices and structures, this challenge is often that of one woman alone against a corrupt system.

In contrast, the recent *noir* films *Diabolique* and *Bound* offer the female spectator a pleasurable challenge to patriarchy that is anchored to, and foregrounds the importance of, women's community and women's relationships with other women. Both films show that women can challenge patriarchy not simply as isolated individuals, but through the co-operation, companionship and strength derived from other women. In doing so, both films

challenge not only the oppressive practices of patriarchy, but the limitations of static gender identity forged on the binarism of sexual difference. Not only do these films assert the power of female sexuality, but they articulate female sexuality outside of the narrow confines of heterosexuality. This chapter provides a reading of *Diabolique* and *Bound* which addresses how these films articulate successful transcendence of patriarchy, negotiate relations of trust and solidarity between women, subvert the male gaze, and articulate a more complex notion of sexual identity.

Because *Bound* (explicitly) and *Diabolique* (implicitly) foreground sexual fascination between women as a source of resistance and pleasure for the female spectator, a discussion of sexuality necessarily plays a key feature in this analysis. As such, it is important to clarify that, although I view the relationships represented in *Bound* and *Diabolique* as differing points on a "lesbian continuum,"¹⁰³ my intention is to articulate a transgressive set of gender relations and a way of rethinking female community and sexuality. It is not, however, my intention to idealize lesbianism as the ultimate expression or extension of feminism. This clarification is not a disavowal of the significant contributions of lesbian feminist thought and action, but an acknowledgement that such an idealization would constitute a problematic act of exoticizing a sexual other. As Jane Gaines warns,

As erotic minority sexual practices are mined for breakthroughs in

¹⁰³ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow, et al (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983) 192.

feminist theory, there may be a tendency to idealize them.¹⁰⁴

Gains further examines the oversimplification implicit in an attempt to define feminism,

...in terms of proximity to the patriarchy [which] inverts the mainstream sexual hierarchy and invites a kind of purity test in which lesbians are the only women who remain undefiled.¹⁰⁵

Rather than arguing lesbianism as the truest or ultimate expression of feminist resistance to patriarchy, my intent, in analyzing these two films, is to show how they problematize not heterosexuality *per se*, but a heteronormative presumption of gender relations. For, as Michel Foucault argues, oppressive gender relations, though formulated on the gender difference and relations between male and female are, by extension, carried over into the oppressive gender relations of sexualities as well.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Monique Wittig suggests, "the category of sex is the political category that founds society as heterosexual."¹⁰⁷

Film noir poses a potentially useful vehicle for the expression of resistance to the hegemonic determination of normative relations of gender and sexuality, specifically because of the tendencies I have previously identified, which undermine the conventional representational practices of the mainstream, classic realist text. Annette Kuhn identifies

¹⁰⁴Jane Gaines, "Feminist Heterosexuality and Its Politically Incorrect Pleasures," Critical Enquiry 21, no. 2 (Winter 1995) 391.

¹⁰⁵Ibid, 407.

¹⁰⁶Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990).

¹⁰⁷Monique Wittig, "The Category of Sex," in The Straight Mind And Other Essays, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) 5.

film noir's potential to challenge the codes and conventions of mainstream film as a function of the formal and narrative excesses of the genre which undermine their ability to contain women:

This excess often centres precisely on the inability of the narrative to cope fully with the woman-question. As a genre, film noir is, historically speaking, very much a part of dominant cinema and yet at the same time it contains the potential, within its own characteristic narrative structure, to subvert the textual organizations of dominant cinema.¹⁰⁸

In this departure from the syntax of conventional Hollywood narrative and stylistic/formal codes, *film noir* can be seen to problematize and undermine the naturalizing function of the "reality effect" in most other mainstream film. Gaines argues:

If classical realism produces heterosexuality as natural and normal, it is hardly the ideal vehicle for a representation of *feminist* heterosexuality, which rejects normality and refuses its advantages.¹⁰⁹

For these reasons, I have selected *Diabolique* and *Bound*, as specific *noir* films which undermine the heteronormality of mainstream narrative film and work to re-articulate a different set of social relations between and among women. In both films, the central narrative action is driven by female characters and, unlike much conventional mainstream film, the points of view privileged are those of female characters. This grants both films a narrative perspective informed specifically by gender. Additionally, because both films seek to explore gender relations beyond the conventional heterosexist binarism of masculine/feminine, *Bound* and *Diabolique* frame the subversion of conventional

¹⁰⁸ Annette Kuhn, Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema (London: Verso, 1993) 35.

¹⁰⁹ Gaines, 404.

gender roles within the broader realm of gender politics and sexual identity. In doing so, they simultaneously identify and disrupt intersecting systems of domination which function to maintain rigid definitions of gender as a broad category. This challenge is foundational and far reaching, in that it acknowledges the depth and scope of gender oppression and challenges the role it plays in all other social organization.

Like *Body Heat* and *The Last Seduction*, *Bound* and *Diabolique* focus on a shift in the consciousness and definition of female characters faced with a choice between abusive misogyny and a transgression through greater self recognition. However, these films depart from those discussed in the previous chapter by explicitly linking this transgression to empowering connection with other female characters. Each film, in its own way, articulates a relationship between gender oppression and compulsory heterosexuality, while simultaneously positing an alternative. Structurally, both films undermine the common narrative formula of the erotic triangle formulated upon the woman as a mere referent or object of exchange between competing male characters¹¹⁰. In doing so, these films not only refuse the position of woman suggested within such a formula, they eliminate the dependence on a central referent of desire entirely. In short, they do not simply replace male with female, they refute the objectified, dehumanized position and function of the common love interest which characterizes the convention of the erotic triangle. The male character, although seeming to constitute a third side, is eliminated - not through competition between the remaining two sides - but through collaboration

¹¹⁰Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Gender Asymmetry and Erotic Triangles," Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire, (New York: Columbia UP, 1985) 21-27.

between two women characters, against an oppressive male character.

While my reading of *Bound* focusses on the film itself, my reading of *Diabolique* as a progressive text is informed by, though not directly engaged with, intertextual considerations arising from the key points at which the film departs from the original 1955 French film upon which it is based. Without entering into an exhaustive comparison between the two versions of *Diabolique*, it is useful to recognize that the remake's substantial departure from the original in its representation of gender establishes it as a more progressive text, which is specifically concerned with a renegotiation of gender relations. Specifically, the newer version constructs the detective character as female and sympathetic to the criminality of the two principal female characters, it refutes the heterosexual coupling of the original ending by killing the husband and leaving the wife and mistress alive, rather than killing the wife and leaving the husband and mistress alive, and it implicitly sanctions the women's crime by declining to punish them within the law. The refusal to punish the women, in both *Diabolique* and *Bound*, structures the films as open texts, which, as previously identified, undermines the mainstream tendency to punish women who transgress the boundaries of patriarchy. As in *Body Heat* and *The Last Seduction*, a central pleasure for the female spectator of *Bound* and *Diabolique* is the successful transgression, or "getting away with it." However, *Bound* and *Diabolique* vary from each other in the way they frame this outcome and, in doing so, represent differing means of delivering a similar message.

While *Bound*'s conclusion of the unconventional happily ever-after lesbian couple riding off into the sunset is implicitly connected to the successful bond between two

women, *Diabolique* is less upbeat in its final resolution of the relationship between Mia and Nicole. By juxtaposing Violet and Corky's successful escape with the image of the empty closet, stripped of its contents of the stiletto heels and fashionings through which the film signifies Violet's "bind," *Bound* comes full circle from its establishing sequence to assert a connection between the happy ending women's solidarity and the successful outing of Violet. The signifiers of Violet's compliance with her own oppression (the shoes) are gone, and with them is gone the bound and gagged closeted lesbian of the establishing sequence. The enactment of a successful bond between the two women thus determines their ability to transcend their patriarchal bind.

Diabolique also permits its two female characters to get away with their crime, by submitting Nicole and Mia's actions for judgement by the detective, Shirley, who views their murder of Guy as justified. In this, *Diabolique* situates itself within *film noir's* tendency to emphasize the discrepancy between law and justice. Because she is, like the traditional *noir* gumshoe detective, outside the formal structure of the law, Shirley is not beholden to a rigid legal structure which insists on punishment. Shirley's ability to determine what is just in Mia's case is also, arguably, connected to her gender identity. Openly disdainful of patriarchy, Shirley appropriates the power/act of detection, and applies it within her own extra-systemic context. The gesture of punching Mia in order to establish self defense shows that her loyalties are not to the patriarchal institution of law, but to the broader, more progressive goal of justice. Her loyalty is to the woman escaping patriarchal victimization, and not to the man, who is the legal victim of homicide. Shirley's more complex vision of victimization is implicit in her remark "it's not your fault, it's

men...testosterone...they should put it in bombs." Although essentializing and not an especially useful structural critique, this comment, and others like it, codes her character as a critic of patriarchal behaviours and demonstrates her understanding of the relationship between conventional masculinity and violence.

Constructing the detective as a female character is, in itself, a progressive feature of the film. By appropriating the act of detection, and ascribing this function to a female character, the film subverts the conventional positioning of the male detective as the site of the coalescence of meaning. Because *Diabolique* positions the woman as detective, as maker of meaning, the film undermines the need to *solve* the mystery of woman, and instead clears the way for the woman as detective to *re/solve* the narrative tensions of the text.

Despite the successful execution of the crime, *Diabolique* ends less optimistically than *Bound* in its resolution of the relationship between the principal female characters. Unlike Corky and Violet, Nicole and Mia fail to reach a point of trust that allows their relationship to survive the stress of eliminating the male character who has victimized them. *Diabolique* serves as a feminist cautionary tale which highlights the need to move further beyond *status quo* gender relations. This feature of the film makes *Diabolique* a compelling case study, specifically because it portrays the betrayal, and inability of the couple to move far enough outside patriarchal norms as a tragic consequence, and not as a recuperation or punishment.

The issue of trust between women is a central concern in both *Diabolique* and *Bound*. By exploring this issue, the films, each in their own way, articulate and negotiate

the patriarchal barriers to women's community and the way isolation from other women undermines resistance. Even though *Diabolique* undermines the female characters' trust in each other, it functions progressively by framing this mistrust as the consequence of the lingering influence of the abusive husband/lover and the complex pressures of patriarchy on the women's lives. Mia and Nicole's relationship becomes a casualty of their loyalty to patriarchy, their failure to take the leap of faith into a truly transgressive feminist paradigm. Nicole cannot be true to Mia because she is still not free of her masochistic loyalty to Guy, while Mia must overcome her pre-existing loyalties to the church, the covenant of marriage, and socially mandated femininity which renders her weak, dependent and passive, in order to break free of the oppression in her life.

In this sense, *Diabolique* codes Mia and Nicole as two differing models of overcoming patriarchy, in which Mia's strategies are ultimately legitimated and Nicole's are rendered untenable and problematic. While Mia demonstrates true faith in the potential for women's community through her trust in Nicole and Shirley, Nicole represents the problematic consequence of playing a "boy's game." Nicole's attempt to co-opt a masculine way of being is undermined by the film and ultimately depicted as an invalid strategy of resistance. In its conclusion, *Diabolique* asserts that it is Mia and not Nicole who has the strength to eliminate Guy and the oppressive practices he embodies. Not only is Mia empowered in this gesture, but Nicole is depicted as a tragic figure who warns the female spectator of the consequences of taking up "the master's tools."¹¹¹

¹¹¹Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider*, (Freedom CA: Crossing Press, 1984) 110-113.

Nicole's final expression of regret for her poor choices appears genuine and constitutes a *denouement* not only for her character, but for the spectator as well. The initial appeal of her tough facade erodes, as she loses that which matters most to her, her relationship with Mia. By coming to this resolution, the film cautions the female spectator of the consequences for women who allow themselves to be divided by loyalties to men.

In contrast, *Bound* negotiates the issue of trust between women to a more positive conclusion. In doing so, *Bound* not only presents an affirmation of women's community, it subverts the masculine bias of classic *film noir* which frames the *femme fatale* as an untrustworthy character. This subversion depends upon the fact that the film is not about Caesar's point of view, but Corky's.

Bound works because it self-consciously manipulates generic characteristics and ultimately binds the trust of the viewer with Corky's.¹¹²

The question of who Violet will betray is also a crucial part of the film's negotiation and deconstruction of established gender identities. As a *femme fatale*, Violet's betrayal of Caesar is conventional within the *noir* genre, yet because Corky is the film's protagonist, Violet's non-betrayal of her is somewhat exceptional and functions to transcend the all-pervasiveness of isolation deceit and paranoia within the genre.

Bound, in fact, spends considerable time negotiating the trustworthiness of the *femme fatale*. In contrasting efforts by both Caesar and Corky to determine Violet's trustworthiness *Bound* challenges the possibility of determining fixed gender identities. By

¹¹²Jean Noble, "Bound and Invested: Lesbian Desire and Hollywood Ethnography," *Cineaction* 45 (February 1998) 34.

ultimately privileging Corky's relationship to Violet over Caesar's, the film asserts an understanding of the complexity of sexual identity which is grounded in gender commonality, rather than gender difference. Through this process of negotiation, *Bound* raises Violet's contested sexual identity as an emblem of how bisexuality is framed within polarized debates of gender politics. As a bisexual character, Violet arouses not only the interest but also the suspicion of both the heterosexual and homosexual communities established by the film. Corky's fear that Violet may betray her is directly associated with Corky's lack of certainty about Violet's gender identity. Corky persistently questions the sincerity of Violet's gender identity and questions her ability to assert a lesbian identity for herself.

Corky's suspicion of Violet's sexuality is anchored to her experience with a previous partner who "fucked her," landing her in jail. Her fear of Violet raises the threatening instability of bisexual identity. Corky's choice of women in the lesbian bar establishes her predilection for *femme* partners, and her tale of the disastrous consequences of her previous relationship invokes a discourse which proposes the "passing" woman as dangerous, because the freedom/fluidity of such an ambiguous gender identity allows for the possibility of deception. Because Violet proves herself trustworthy to Corky, in the end, the film disrupts this distrust of the *femme* lesbian character, and in turn gender politics which dismiss both *femme* and bisexual female sexual identities as less genuine than *out/butch* identities. As Jean Noble points out in her analysis of this film:

Violet's resignification of *femme fatale* into powerful *femme* simultaneously redresses similar misconceptions in lesbian and lesbian-feminist discourses about the supposedly mimetic

relationship between heterosexuality and butch-femme sexual practices.¹¹³

The necessity of Corky's insistence on an *apparent* lesbian identity is directly challenged by Violet, who tells her, "I know what I am. I don't need to have it tattooed on my shoulder." This challenge calls into question a basic assumption of the relationship between appearance and reality, both Corky's and the spectator's. As in the case of the *femme fatale* of *Body Heat* and *The Last Seduction*, this tension between what is and what appears again creates a space for acts of resistance from a place of undetectability, while simultaneously affirming the importance of Corky's more overt resistance.

This tension around dis/appearance and in/visibility also forms the core of Caesar's misapprehension of Violet and enables the circumstances which precipitate his demise. Like Corky, Caesar is uncertain about Violet, yet the complexity of her gender identity is invisible to him. For Caesar, Violet's relationship with Corky remains a "love that dare not speak its name" even when he discovers them together in the apartment. In this scene we see how narrow Caesar's perception of sexuality is, through the shift in his behaviour once he realizes Corky is a woman. His initial aggression dissipates upon recognizing that Corky is not, as he had suspected, another man. Caesar's misperception of the sexual dynamic between Violet and Corky can be read as his self-centred hetero-patriarchal perception of Violet, and his proprietary view of her sexuality. Although he seems to register that Corky is a lesbian, Violet's sexuality is clearly not questioned in his interpretation of the situation, because *his* relationship to Violet is heterosexual. Caesar,

¹¹³Jean Noble, 37.

as representative of the patriarchal male, universalizes his own experience of Violet's sexuality.

Corky, who 'looks' and is marked as queer, isn't *the* threat to the heteronormative family; Violet, on the other hand, *is* a threat precisely because she doesn't look the part.¹¹⁴

Instead of recognizing the actual location of Violet's desires, Caesar attempts to enact the conventional erotic triangle by anchoring his jealousy to Johnny. When he ransacks Johnny's apartment looking for the money, a clearly visible picture with the word "stiletto" hangs askew behind Caesar. Overcome by a heterosexist fixation on Johnny, who, like Caesar, fetishizes the shoe which marks Violet as feminine, Caesar fails to register that this femininity is askew. Even when Caesar hears the phone ringing in the next apartment, proving Violet's collusion in the theft of the money, he assumes his rival in the next apartment is Mickey, another man. Until confronted with the physical evidence of the out lesbian, Caesar cannot name, nor even suspect Violet's betrayal. Again, *film noir* demonstrates that aspect of woman which man has rendered invisible proves his demise.

The relationship between resistance and in/visibility is raised not only within the narrative of *Bound*, but also through the film's structural realignment of the gaze. When Corky and Violet meet, their attraction is conveyed not through gesture, but through looking. Violet and Corky's first encounter in the elevator is marked not by physical or verbal interaction, but by an exchange of looks. Because this gaze is exchanged between women, and because Caesar remains oblivious to the look, the gaze is articulated as a

¹¹⁴Jean Noble, 40.

site/act of resistance in a way that exceeds the narrow formulation of gaze theory by traditional psychoanalytic feminist film scholarship, such as Mulvey's. Contrary to Mulvey's central premise that the gaze can only ever objectify woman,¹¹⁵ the appropriation of the gaze by female characters in *Bound* clearly signals the potential for the gaze to function as both an assertion of female subjectivity and as an act of resistance. Ultimately, the shortcoming of Mulvey's formulation is its heterosexist entrenchment in the psychoanalytic binarism of sexual difference. While functional, her theory provides no space for non-heterosexual spectatorship. Admittedly, because her focus is the dominant reading produced/encouraged by the textual apparatus of the film itself, Mulvey does not engage with the potential for *any* kind of oppositional spectatorship or reading against the grain. However, more importantly, as *Bound* demonstrates by exceeding the confines of her formulations, her theory also leaves no opportunity for the progressive text to disrupt or reformulate the gaze. From the perspective of devising feminist film praxis which is not isolated by the limited audience of non-narrative film, this limitation within her theory constitutes a somewhat disempowering oversight.

The appropriation of the gaze by *Bound's* female characters constitutes an act of resistance which has implications beyond this specific film text. At the same time, it functions, within the film itself, to assert a pleasure in looking which is open to both the female characters and female spectator. Because the film asks that we identify with Corky's point of view, it actively encourages the spectator to acknowledge and derive

¹¹⁵Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, Vol. 16, no.3 (1975) 6-

pleasure from the gaze shared between the two women¹¹⁶. Importantly the film clarifies that this gaze is not a look *at*, but a look *between* women. Far from merely placing Corky in the conventional position of the masculine character, it depicts what Jackie Stacey has articulated as the "phenomenon of fascination between women."¹¹⁷

Through the negotiation of Violet's sexual identity within a context in which she is simultaneously understood as heterosexual and bisexual through competing definitions of her by different characters, the spectator sees Violet through both the heterosexual male gaze of male characters and the arguably less objectifying, more complex lens of Corky's point of view. *Bound* gives the spectator an opportunity to experience a more complex gaze politic than that proposed by Mulvey, and one which opens up infinitely greater space for the pleasurable gaze of the female spectator, in a way that is not merely reading against the grain, but reading with the sanctioned, encouraged look of the progressive text itself. As Stacey points out, there is a pleasure in this looking which is not necessarily or exclusively bound up in the erotic, but rather one which allows for a wide range of positioning among female spectators according to individual subjectivities and relationships to images of woman and images of self in relation to these images:

What interests me about these films is the question of the pleasures for the female spectator, who is invited to look or gaze with one female character at another, in an interchange of female fascinations. This fascination is neither purely identification with

¹¹⁶On this point, I disagree with Jean Noble's assertion that the gaze is used simply as a signifier of Corky's masculinization, specifically because the gaze is not possessed exclusively by Corky, but by both women characters.

¹¹⁷Jackie Stacey, "Desperately Seeking Difference," *The Female Gaze*, eds Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1989) 114

the other woman, nor desire for her in the strictly erotic sense of the word.¹¹⁸

Stacey also opens up additional space for addressing the politics of the gaze in relation to other axes of identification, including sexuality, in her rhetorical enquiry:

If we do argue that women differ from men in their relation to visual constructions of femininity, then further questions are generated for feminist film theory: do all women have the same relationship to images of themselves?¹¹⁹

This exploration of fascination between women and the differing relationships women have to feminine ideals assumes a central role in *Diabolique's* negotiation of gender identity as well. Although the film does not explicitly construct a sexual relationship between the two female characters in the same way *Bound* does, the intimacy of their relationship is implicit within the dialogue and the film's emphasis on the "look of fascination" between the women. Through physical gestures such as kissing, embracing and stroking each other's hair, the film establishes an intimate relationship. The potential of a sexual relationship is raised by Nicole's suggestion that she and Mia claim to be lovers to legitimate murdering Guy. This possibility is further implied in Guy's question, "Was it a lonely week, or did you two keep each other company?" and in the videographer's comment, "Twenty bucks says they killed him...dykes." Although the film does not absolutely confirm an explicitly lesbian relationship, it raises the issue of attraction between Nicole and Mia which situates their relationship within Rich's "lesbian

¹¹⁸Ibid, 115.

¹¹⁹Ibid, 119.

continuum."¹²⁰ Although the film ultimately refutes the success of relationship, this failure is not a vilification of the lesbian relationship, but an articulation of Nicole's reluctance to move beyond a patriarchal way of being.

Another problem raised by *Diabolique* is the divisiveness of jealousy among women. Nicole is divided from Mia not only by her continued allegiance to Guy, but by her distrust of Shirley, which signals Nicole's refusal to enter women's community. While Mia trusts Shirley and finds comfort in involving her in the search for Guy, Nicole sees her as a threat, not only to the success of the plot(s) between herself and Mia and herself and Guy, but also, on another level, to her relationship with Mia. Unlike Mia, Nicole cannot expand the circle of two into a wider notion of solidarity, and, in her possessiveness of Mia, mimics Guy's territorial masculinity. Nicole's distaste for Shirley implies a broader distaste for feminist discourse, which Shirley invokes in several instances. Her disdain for Shirley's refusal to wear a prosthesis sets up a juxtaposition between Shirley's comfort with female bodies, "as is" and Nicole's entrenched loyalty to the hegemonic (ideal) female body, which further established her loyalty to patriarchal discourse.

Although Shirley's somewhat 'butch' appearance and anti-male comments code her as a lesbian character in a very stereotypical way, *Diabolique* ultimately endorses Shirley in its conclusion. This endorsement of the implicitly lesbian character is bound up in the film's endorsement of Mia's methodology over Nicole's, and affirms the film's legitimation of women's community. Unlike the conventional use of the overt lesbian character to

¹²⁰ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality, eds. Ann Snitow, et al (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983) 177-205.

disavow the possibility of sexual attraction between principal female characters¹²¹, Shirley re-enforces the possibility of a lesbian relationship between Mia and Nicole, as underscored by Nicole's jealousy. Although the film does not definitively establish a lesbian relationship between Mia and Nicole, it also does not disavow this relationship. Within this lack of distinct resolution, the film endorses Mia's identification with the women's community and nascent feminist discourse Shirley embodies, and negates Nicole's resistance to this identification.

Bound, in contrast, offers a more direct negotiation of identity. Within its establishing sequence, the film foregrounds the tension between out and closeted sexualities. The image of the closet and the bound and gagged lesbian character is accompanied by a dialogue preoccupied with choice. Violet tells Corky, "You made a choice once," and Corky responds "what choice," as the visuals linger on Violet's neatly shelved stiletto heels. The juxtaposition of what is seen and what is heard creates a web of signifiers in which the referents are woman, bound, high heels, (no)choice, closet. This sequence immediately and explicitly articulates a connection between women, oppression and mandated gender identities. Woman, within the logic of this web, is bound by a femininity, which is articulated here and throughout the film in direct relation to fashion and appearance - to pass or not to pass. Not only is she bound by normative expectations of femininity, but by the normative expectations of heterosexuality. In questioning the possibility of choice, Corky simultaneously asserts the inevitability of one's "true" sexuality

¹²¹Vito Russo, The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies, (New York: Harper and Row, 1981) 88-89.

and the imposition of mandated heteronormative sexuality. Violet's closet, and what we see and hear there establishes the dilemma of woman under hetero-patriarchy.

Bound further articulates women's entrapment within patriarchy in the parallel it established between heterosexual relationships and incarceration. Corky's first delivery of the line, "five years is a long time" identifies the five years that Corky spent in jail. Her second use of this statement, when Violet tells her that she has been with Caesar for five years clearly implies that Violet's relationship with Caesar translates into a five year sentence. Unlike Violet, however, Corky is "out" in the sense that she has done her time and is no longer incarcerated. Violet is not "out" but is still serving her time, doing "five to life." The central struggle of the film thus becomes for Violet to get "out," not only in the sense that she must get free from her "sentence" with Caesar, but she must also get "out" of the closet.

While there is a great deal more that can be written about both *Bound* and *Diabolique*, particularly on this issue of gender politics and sexual identity, it is clear even from this somewhat limited investigation that both are rich, layered texts which offer numerous sources/sites of pleasure to a female spectator. More importantly, within the scope of this thesis in its entirety, these films serve as valuable examples of how *film noir* can be and has been used to assert a more progressive set of gender relations than has been previously considered by critics of the *genre*. By reaffirming the importance of women's community and women's solidarity as strategic devices in overcoming patriarchal oppression, these *noir* films show how the *genre's* pessimistic tendencies and institutional critique can be used to articulate empowering feminist challenges to dominant institutions

and discursive practices.

In doing so, *Bound* and *Diabolique* offer feminist film praxis an opportunity to conceive of generic narrative cinema which is constructed not only around progressive content, but which simultaneously engages with and works to subvert existing tendencies within mainstream narrative film. As such, these films demonstrate *film noir's* potential as a site of production not only for specific texts which offer pleasurable and empowering representations and scenarios to a female audience, but which also contribute to a more active engagement with problematic aspects of the *genre* and form within which they are constructed. In essence, they show how *film noir* can be used to both critique and transcend patriarchal film praxis.

Miles to go before we sleep: conclusions, caveats and future directions

While this thesis demonstrates that *film noir* can be interpreted as a progressive *genre*, the work itself is necessarily provisional. Although the handful of specific *noir* films discussed comprise a starting point or foundation for a more progressive articulation of gender relations, there is still much ground that can and must be covered within the *genre*, both from the perspective of film practice and film theory. *Film noir's* progressive dynamics do not stand alone, rather, they can be seen as potentially worthy components of transgressive feminist film praxis to come.

Film noir's progressive potential lies in the *genre's* tendency to critique and problematize patriarchal institutions, structures and practices as a function of its generally anti or extra-institutional perspective. In addition, *film noir's* construction of the *femme fatale* as a strong female character who challenges and subverts the oppressive confines of patriarchy serves as a useful model for a more progressive representation of women, women's issues and women's strategies of resistance. In the instance of the specific films *Bound* and *Diabolique*, the contemporary resurgence of *film noir* can also be seen as an opportunity to further expand the *genre's* ability to challenge status quo social relations, by creating a space in which to express both women's community and the complexity of gender and sexuality.

All of these elements suggest *film noir's* potential, which this thesis has set out to illustrate. However, by virtue of the inherent limitations of the specific scholarly focus of this work, there is necessarily more to *film noir* than merely this exploration. *Film noir*,

although progressive in the specific films cited and within the parameters of the specific considerations of gender with which this work is concerned, still has a long way to go in other areas. Reactionary elements within the *genre*, and even within the specific films discussed in this work, persist and must be addressed and overcome before *film noir* can be said to function in a more holistically progressive way.

Some of the concerns which this work has not addressed, but which must be addressed or overcome in feminist revisions and revisitations of *film noir* include the *genre's* representations of race and class, and the visual representation of women in *film noir*.

As bell hooks points out, foregrounding the need to overcome gender oppression as a primary or exclusive goal is an effacement of the "interlocking systems of domination,"¹²² which characterize our society. Although an analysis of gender oppression and the role representation plays in this is important, equally important is a consideration of how such practices simultaneously enact oppressive racial and class relations, among others. Obviously, progressive representations of gender are not the sole determinants of a progressive text. No matter how positive a film's representation of women, if it replicates and naturalizes oppressive relations of race and class, it is still a potentially reactionary text.

This thesis does not, for example, address contemporary *noir* films which primarily and directly engage with issues of race. Films like *Devil in A Blue Dress* and *A Rage in*

¹²²bell hooks, Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1989) 21.

Harlem present a reworking of *film noir* which potentially addresses race in a more progressive way.¹²³ Yet, in the same way that progressive gender relations do not necessarily make for a progressive representation of race relations, these films, while potentially progressive in their representations of race, are not necessarily progressive in their representations of gender. The rupture between these two streams is something feminist film theory and praxis must address.

In the case of the specific films discussed within this thesis, the invisibility of race or class as issues can be read as problematic. Although these films engage with issues of gender oppression, by isolating gender oppression, they miss the opportunity to fully explore and transgress relations of domination. In fact, by failing to engage with other forms of domination, even the most progressive gender representations run the risk of engaging in a replication of oppressive practices.

In *Twin Peaks* and *Blue Velvet*, for example, Lynch's construction of the racially homogenous small town renders racial and ethnic diversity almost invisible. Yet, in the few instances of non-white characters in Lynch's work, his representations are potentially problematic. The obviousness and excess which can be seen to function progressively in Lynch's construction of gender relations functions rather differently, or not at all, in his construction of race. Lynch clearly invokes and foregrounds racial stereotypes in both *Twin Peaks* and *Blue Velvet* and, although he calls attention to the obviousness of these types, it is questionable whether this obviousness constitutes a critique.

¹²³Manthia Diawara, "Noir by Noirs: Toward a New Realism in Black Cinema," *Shades of Noir*, Ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993) 261-278.

Is Hawk, the First Nations "Tracker" police deputy of *Twin Peaks*, an affirmation of native culture and traditions, or a replication of the discourse of the "noble savage?" Does Sheriff Truman's relationship with Josie Packard subvert boundaries around interracial dating or reaffirm the exoticization of Asian women? Do the "Amos and Andy" employees in Mr. Beaumont's store establish equal opportunity employment and racial diversity, or are they a revisitation of cheap minstrel show stereotypes and infantilized portrayals of African Americans? Lynch's work, unlike much mainstream film, cannot be said to unconsciously replicate white supremacist assumptions of social organization, but the meaning we are meant to read from his characterizations of race is obscure enough to be troubling.¹²⁴

Similarly, *The Last Seduction* invokes racist discourse as a signifier of the limitations of the racially homogenous small town of Beston. The narrow presumptions of white America are ridiculed in the film by the amazement the locals show that a black man is looking for Brigit/Wendy and the ease with which the police accept her version of the detective's death. Their acceptance of her version is consistent with white supremacist patriarchal discourse around the preservation of white womanhood. Because the viewer knows Brigit's version of events is a lie, we see how ridiculously easy it is for the police to apply racist assumptions. In turn, this sequence of events subverts the idea of the black man as threatening to the white woman. Or does it?

While *The Last Seduction* appears to attempt a progressive disruption of racist

¹²⁴Sharon Willis, "Special Effects: Sexual and Social Difference in *Wild at Heart*," *Camera Obscura* 25/26 (January/May 1991) 275-295.

tropes, the scenario of sexual fascination based upon an exoticized racial other and absolute difference raises certain problems. For one thing, the annihilation of a black character is difficult to read as a triumphant transgression of white supremacy. In addition, by pitting a white female character and concerns of gender oppression against a black male character and concerns of racial oppression, the film ostensibly limits articulation of the interconnection between gender and racial oppression.

The somewhat ambiguous meanings or readings of representations of race in *film noir* point to the *genre's* engagement more generally with the contradictions of the social context in which it is produced and consumed. In the last scene of *Mildred Pierce*, Mildred and Bert step past two women scrubbing the floors of the courthouse/police station, as they walk into the sunrise. Does this gesture signal Mildred's, and in turn, the film's lack of awareness and sensitivity toward issues of class? Or does it serve as a reminder of the perpetuation of class struggle? Is the film effacing class as an issue to be addressed, or is it telling the spectator there is more to be done?

Similarly, are representations of race in works like *Twin Peaks* and *The Last Seduction* calling our attention to an ongoing struggle against oppressive practices and representations? Or are they merely replicating oppressive practices and representations? The key question comes down to the extent to which these films can be seen to function politically. Are the representations of race, of class, and even of gender in *film noir* engaging in critical, self-reflexive parody, or do they fall into the category of pastiche, representation without clear critical, political function?

Again, we must return to the spectator and the theoretical and interpretive context.

Theory is a product of our efforts to make sense of our personal and societal relationship to the world in which we live. How we come to formulate a particular theoretical perspective is tied to the cultural context in which we exist and the relationship between culture, cultural products and our interpretation of them. *Film noir* can, as this thesis demonstrates, be read progressively through a theoretical framework which is explicitly informed by feminism. This means not only that a feminist investigative template can be applied to *film noir*, but that *film noir* has a relationship to the female spectator, as reader, as interpreter, as theorist, which relies upon a recognition of contradiction.

In representing the power of seduction, is *film noir* recognizing or reaffirming the "beauty myth"? The answer is both. In this contradiction *film noir* speaks to the female spectator of the limited and contradictory power of women and women's sexuality under patriarchy. Similarly, while potentially ambiguous relations of race and class are open to various interpretations which range from reactionary to progressive, perhaps the ambiguity is itself a recognition of a social context informed by differing discourse and positions in relation to race and class.

Film noir may not be showing how to overcome a racist, sexist, classist society, but it acknowledges that one exists. And while this takes us only a certain distance on a road toward transcending oppressive relations of race, class and gender, acknowledgement, recognition and articulation are nonetheless on that road, and a part of that struggle. Finding more effective ways to make even more overt and unambiguously progressive use of *film noir* is an ongoing project. But, as this thesis demonstrates, it is underway and it shows promise.

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