

The Visual Sensualities of the Femme Fatale in *Double Indemnity* and *Blade Runner*

Paris Homeak

The femme fatale is bound to film noir, a stylized genre that emerged in the 1940s and is characterized by its thrilling detective storylines focusing on crime and corruption. Film noir is distinguishable by its narrative strategy and visual style of implementing chiaroscuro lighting to create harsh shadows that cover the faces of morally ambiguous characters. Classic film noir is considered to have emerged in the early 1940s and peaked in popularity in the late 1950s. It has since undergone a transition recognized as postmodern neo-noir, which persists in contemporary culture. The femme fatale is a crucial film noir character, a seductive and mysterious woman that draws the male protagonist down a path of deceit and destruction for her gain. Fluck (2001) reinforces the existence of certain social attitudes of the time, creating this character as a need to cope with the ever-changing position around sexuality and gender roles and the pleasure of the male gaze. Over time the portrayal of the femme fatale archetype went beyond its classical characterization by exploring the intricacy of the film noir genre as it grew into postmodern neo-noir in the 20th century. Although the modern femme fatale remains influenced by the classical depiction, the changing attitudes towards gender roles and women in contemporary noir offer a more complex and respected portrayal of female characters that go beyond the male gaze with the traditional film noir genre.

The classic femme fatale has an attractive appearance, often accentuated by luxurious clothing, furs, excess makeup, and a captivating presence. Her beautiful appearance reinforces the seductive and oversexualized portrayal that lures in her male victims. Once the femme fatale successfully victimizes herself and receives support from the lonely male protagonist, she relies on her intelligence and mysterious allure to control him. In Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), the femme fatale is Phyllis Dietrichson, played by Barbara Stanwyck. According to Loyo (1993), from her first appearance, Phyllis is constructed as a fetishistic sign with her long blonde hair and close-ups drawing her beauty and mystery. She instantly gains the attention of the male protagonist Walter Neff, played by Fred MacMurray, when he enters her home looking for her husband, and she steps out at the top of the stairs in a towel (Wilder, 1944). His attraction for her continues when they sit in the living room, and he is enticed by her dress revealing her legs, high heels, and ankle bracelet; he compliments, "That's a honey of an anklet you're wearing Mrs.

Dietrichson" (Wilder, 1944, 00:10:10). Phyllis is noticed for her physical appearance and then evolves to become even more attractive when she reveals her confident yet vulnerable nature through conversation to the ego-driven Neff. The interactions between Neff and Phyllis reveal "her objectivization, Neff both depersonalizes her, attempting to gain control over her and transforms her into a fetishist image, which becomes his narcissistic projection" (Loyo, 1993, p.179). The objectivization of the femme fatale is often the sought-after trait of having a woman adored by others for her beauty and the male in control of fetishizing her to his desires. Throughout *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944), Neff seemingly controls the scheme of insurance fraud and murder and ultimately controls Phyllis. Later, she reveals she was always one step ahead of him and deceived him from the beginning. Phyllis is a classic example of the femme fatale of traditional film noir through her traits of deceptive intelligence, seductive allure, and lack of empathy that make her a compelling and dangerous woman. These traits often get abandoned by the postmodern femme fatale surpassing the confines of the male gaze within the traditional film noir genre. Only the beauty and enticement of mystery remain with the new esteemed women, who are represented as persons rather than objects to control.

These advanced traits of the contemporary femme fatale explore retaining the archetype of appearance while subverting traditional noir conventions related to gender and the female societal position. The traditional gender role is described by Sobchak (1998) as being confronted with these strong-willed and sexually active females in film noir who often challenge the dominant Hollywood conventions of representing women. The outcome of Hollywood's response to women on screen was meeting in the middle, where the femme fatale is still recognizable but emerges with a new position in society. In the postmodern neo-noir *Blade Runner* (1982), directed by Ridley Scott, the femme fatale Rachael, played by Sean Young, is similar to her predecessor in appearance. Aróstegui (1994) reviews Rachael's tight-fitting suits, excessive make-up, and 40's hairstyle as analogous to her role as a seductive femme fatale. Being highly influenced by the classic look of characters like Phyllis in *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944), it is also comparative in creating an uncertain nature concerning the hero. The protagonist in *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), Rick Deckard, played by Harrison Ford, reinforces this connotation by being cautious of her antagonistic attitude upon their first meeting. Although Rachael is recognizable by classic visuals, her postmodern neo-noir evolution is, "instead of being unstable, deceptive, undependable, and ultimately deadly, Rachael is responsible for Deckard's moral salvation and escape from the urban setting" (Doll & Faller, 1986, p. 92). Once Rachael discovers the truth regarding her identity, she leaves her destructive role of the femme fatale and transforms from seducer to seduced by saving Deckard's life at Leon's hands. From this, he believes he owes her and returns the favour by refusing to turn her in if she runs away and becomes a rogue cop (Scott, 1982). Rachael's character signifies a departure from the traditional portrayal of the femme fatale in film noir because of her new complexity, making her more than just a one-dimensional character but fully

integrated with fears, hopes, and loss of identity. The character transition is associated with the growth of the contemporary femme fatale and affects the relations with the male protagonist being more focused on mutualism. Rachael becomes a victim of the futuristic society, allowing her relationship with Deckard to be more than just sexual fetishism, offering a multifaceted and revered portrayal that challenges the relationships in traditional film noir.

The sexual fetishism and portrayal of women in classic film noirs were affected by the genre emerging in the post-World War II era. During this time, many challenged gender roles because the patriarchal society struggled with many women in the workforce. Harvey (1998) explains that this new sense of social and economic independence after the war fostered fears of male displacement and unease, which filtered into the figure of the femme fatale. One can challenge that these men simply wanted to return from war trauma to the comfort of their everyday routine that women now took over. Although the social confusion of men wishing to reinforce their roles as household breadwinners went beyond regaining comfort and led to the depiction of women on screen as either passive victims or dangerous temptresses in hopes of reclaiming their masculinity. In *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944), Neff often views Phyllis primarily as a sexual object despite her being married. However, he also sees her as a tool to achieve his other desires by plotting to kill her husband and collect the insurance money (Wilder, 1944). The classic femme fatale being charming and beautiful is more desirable when she expresses vulnerability, where the protagonist can use her as a pawn in his game or feel masculine by protecting her. Spicer (2018) mentions the direct challenge of the film noir narrative on the postwar consensus that women should fulfill the roles of wife and mother. The classic film noir preoccupation with evil and corruption demonstrates the social conviction that women who abandon their expected roles are only present as the submissive girl next door or a manipulative femme fatale instead of a homemaker. "The femme fatale as criminal and double portrayed in noir cinema consequently reveals less about the divided nature of woman than about male identity in transition" (Hales, 2007, p. 236). The idea that led to the creation of the femme fatale was a narrative controlled and operated by men arguably fearful of the transforming gender roles. In postmodern neo-noir, the social factors regarding the femme fatale on the screen change and present a profound shift in societal perceptions of gender roles and women that challenges preconceived notions and fosters a greater sense of respect.

The femme fatale of the late 20th century in postmodern neo-noir is alike in being tethered to the persistent stereotypical gender roles and the patriarchy of male desire to sexualize and control. Contrarily, the contemporary female character is more likely to be independent and self-reliant, often playing a central role in the narrative by having a much more in-depth character development beyond being labelled as the manipulative seductress that Phyllis from *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944) exemplifies. The social influences towards this growth correlate to the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, paving the way

for greater awareness around gender inequality and how the female audience wanted to view women on screen. Rachael's character of the femme fatale in *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) outwardly interacts in a male world where she works for Eldon Tyrell, played by Joe Turkel, and is interrogated by Deckard (Scott, 1982). In the beginning, Williams (1988) believes Rachael to embody the traditional cinematic hierarchy between man as a "bearer of the look" and the femme fatale as his object (p. 236). While Deckard initially treats her as nothing more than an object used for his purposes, their relationship evolves with time. The postmodern style of the female character goes beyond this initial notion of objectivity, and Rachael reveals herself to be capable and able to hold her own in a conversation with Deckard. The argument is that Rachel's femme fatale story relies on her not being human and instead being a replicant prototype. Yet, Rachael goes through her narrative as she struggles with her identity and place in the society that created her, giving a more layered and complex character arc regardless of her humanity (Scott, 1982). Thus, despite the introduction of hybridity with science fiction themes of technology, the character exhibits traits of an actual human being and a more evolved femme fatale. Murray and Schüler (2007) suggested that the neo-noir femme fatale depicts a victim rather than a wrongdoer. It also becomes more common for her to break free from the moral enforcement of crime *always* pays in the traditional noir ending. The postmodern approach grants the femme fatale a chance to connect to her classic mentor while exploring traits that offer women a more nuanced and diverse representation as they undergo a profound transformation that defies conventional norms of the previous decade. This evolution results in a depiction that challenges traditional expectations and expands the limitations of the classic film noir genre, shaping the postmodern neo-noir era of empowered female protagonists who reclaim agency within their narratives.

In film noir, a genre distinguishable by its black-and-white cinematography of low-key lighting of the urban environment runs rampant with corruption, the femme fatale emerged. The classic femme fatale is a character that has existed for decades, rooted in the legacy carried on by the successor in postmodern neo-noir through her appearance. At the same time, the modern femme fatale is evolving from the archetype to the changing attitudes of society regarding gender roles resulting in a more intricate and adaptable portrayal of women, offering the narrative to explore the female experience in modern film noir. The original femme fatale's beauty and charming allure can be attributed to Barbara Stanwyck's performance as Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944). Her appearance influences the look of the femme fatale in postmodern neo-noirs almost forty years later, seen in *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) with Sean Young playing Rachael as she meets Deckard in a tight dress and heels with perfect hair and

makeup. Both eras of film noir objectify these women by their appearance and facilitate the male protagonist's attitude towards them and their fetishistic desires. However, the changing societal attitudes from the post-World War II era to the late 20th century pushed the boundaries of this character existing beyond her appearance and introduced more complex traits such as a narrative focus on her fears, changing morality, and independence. The postmodern femme fatale evolves from the classic seductress and can avoid immediate punishment. She often operates in a world where the odds are against her and she struggles to survive. While the femme fatale is comparative through appearance, social influences have affected this noir film character to grow with postmodern neo-noir through the narrative.

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