

Also by Julie Grossman

A DUE VOCE: THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF RITA HAMMOND
(edited with Ann M. Ryan and Kim Waale, 2003)

Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir

Ready for Her Close-Up

Julie Grossman

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As that famous philosopher Dr. Seuss said, "When you are in Love you can't fall asleep because reality is better than your dreams." In that spirit, I dedicate this book to sleeplessness and to Phil and Sophie.

Introduction

"No One Mourns the Wicked"

In Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946), Devlin (Cary Grant) casts Alicia Huberman (Ingrid Bergman) as a "femme fatale," unable to imagine "that a woman like [her] could ever change her spots." Formerly promiscuous, and sullied by reputation, as well, because of her fascist, recently deceased father, Alicia bears the burden of Dev's judgment and mistrust throughout their sadomasochistic courtship. While the ambiguity of Dev's and Alicia's roles has been recognized by critics such as Donald Spoto (who felicitously refers to Dev as "Prince Not-So-Charming" and Alicia as "Snow Beige" [155]), Alicia's victimization by Devlin, her exploitation by the government men who use her as a pawn to seduce the strangely vulnerable fascist Alex Sebastian (Claude Rains), and her weary resignation to becoming the "fatal" woman, don't tend to register in critical discussions of the film as part of a larger pattern of misreading women in film noir.

Indeed, despite the iconic image of Norma Desmond from *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) claiming that she is "ready for her close-up," from which this study's subtitle is drawn, critics have yet to examine the alleged "femme fatale" in all her complexity. This study undertakes to wear away at the category of the "femme fatale" figure in order to elicit a more nuanced and sympathetic reading of the women too easily branded as "femmes fatales," not only in film criticism but also in popular cultural commentary on sexualized and/or highly intelligent and competent women.

As much film criticism has rehearsed, film noir has been understood in a feminist context in two central ways: first, as a body of texts that give rise to feminist critique; and second, as a celebration of unchecked female power. Laura Mulvey's analysis of the male gaze, first published in *Screen* in 1975, was central to feminist discussions of film noir's

potential misogyny. Such insights contributed to larger conversations about cinematic structure, gender representation, and film noir, circling around issues of identity, identification, fantasy, and objectification, and focusing on the extent to which film noir is a "male sphere" and the "femme fatale" figure a projection of male desire and anxiety, an expression of misogyny best expressed by Janey Place in her essay in the first volume of E. Ann Kaplan's *Women in Film Noir* (1978): "Men need to control women's sexuality in order not to be destroyed by it" (reprinted in 2nd edn, Kaplan, 1998, 49). The view that film noir addresses or critiques patriarchy is shared by other feminist film critics, and evolves out of feminist claims in the 1970s (and since) that the "femme fatale" is a projection of postwar male anxiety about changing or ambiguous gender roles.

The extent to which women in noir figure as projections of male desire and anxiety is familiar to us, in large part as a result of the excellent psychoanalytic work on film noir done by feminist film critics and theorists, such as the essays represented in E. Ann Kaplan's indispensable *Women in Film Noir* (1978; 1998), some of the essays in *The Book of Film Noir* (1994), edited by Ian Cameron, Frank Krutnik's *In a Lonely Street* (1991), Mary Ann Doane's *Femmes Fatales* (1991), and the essays collected in Joan Copjec's *Shades of Noir* (1993). However, I want to suggest the limits of psychoanalytic readings which seek to abstract representations of men and women from the social world. While the analysis of Oedipal projection has enriched our understanding of film noir immensely, it has also, over time, resulted in a fixation on the "femme fatale" figure and has stalled fuller understanding of the ways in which class and gender function as crucial factors in representations of women in noir.

My project seeks to turn critical attention away from spectator and gaze theory and the idea of the "femme fatale" and toward examination of narrative, social psychology, and the mise-en-scene in film noir movies that, I argue in this study, reveal that a large majority of the so-called bad women in noir are not demonized in the films in which they appear and are very often shown to be victims: first, of the social rules that dictate gender roles and, second, of reading practices that overidentify with and overinvest in the idea of the "femme fatale."

The continued debate concerning whose fantasy, male or female, is engaged by film noir (central to Copjec's *Shades of Noir* and discussed at some length in the Introduction to the new edition of Kaplan's *Women in Film Noir*) generalizes narrative and images in relation to types, such as the "femme fatale" and the "hard-boiled" male protagonist. Even to

argue, as Kaplan does, that "film noir offers a space for the playing out of various gender fantasies" (1998, 10), developing Elizabeth Cowie's emphasis on the multiplicity of identifications possible in viewing film noir, can elide female stories and the social contexts presented in these films that are so central in generating their meaning and that often determine the fatalistic or traumatic tone of the films. Invoking the framework of fantasy broadens the purview of film noir to an extent that close analysis of the films and their expression and critique of social psychology are neglected, and the conventional values associated with roles such as the "femme fatale" and "hard-boiled" male protagonist are reaffirmed.

Clearly the "femme fatale" is a product of cultural ideation, but this for me is a starting point of analysis, rather than a concluding psychoanalytic insight that leaves the category of the "femme fatale" intact. Fantasies of women are sociohistorically based and thus affected by the position of women in any given historical moment. As Claire Johnston has rightly said, "the myths governing the cinema are no different from those governing other cultural products: they relate to a standard value system informing all cultural systems in a given society" (408). The ambitions and desires of women represented in film noir may express universal psychological factors, but they're surely deeply social, as well. Most "femmes fatales" are sexual, but that's not their main appeal—if it were, *Sunset Boulevard's* Norma Desmond wouldn't be the central figure in film noir that she is. It is the leading female's commitment to fulfilling her own desires, whatever they may be (sexual, capitalist, maternal), at any cost, that makes her the cynosure, the compelling point of interest for men and women. Film noir movies work to identify their tough women as victims whose strength, perverse by conventional standards, keeps them from submitting to the gendered social institutions that oppress them. It is the dialog between their perversity and their power and these films' illumination of modern women, *femmes modernes* (a phrase I return to repeatedly in this study), that fascinates film viewers.

My concern is that gaze theory has overemphasized women as objects and has mystified their role as social agents because of its reliance on unchanging and unchangeable models of spectatorship, whose schematic approach to the structure of the film fails to take the context and the content of individual films sufficiently into account. While psychological and psychoanalytic readings of film noir do make sense of context in many cases (for example, I contrast two applications of psychological views of borderline personality in Chapter 3), broader

attention paid to the social formation of gender represented in these films provides, I think, a crucial context for finding meaning in film noir. When I make reference to projection and fantasy throughout this study, I mean to ground my claims in gender psychology and social distributions of power rather than psychoanalytic structures embedded in cinematic form.

The second feminist view of film noir that has dominated film criticism celebrates the "femme fatale's" unbridled female sexuality and/or female independence. The films, Elizabeth Cowie has said, "afforded women roles which are active, adventurous and driven by sexual desire" (Copjec, 135). The dangerous women in film noir are lawless agents of female desire, rebelling against the patriarchal relegation of women to the domestic sphere where they are deemed passive and valued only in relation to their maternal and wifely vocation.

In Kaplan's first volume of *Women in Film Noir* (1978), alternatives to standard readings of the "femme fatale" as misogynist were explored, such as the thesis that the "femme fatale" is not just misogynist projection but an instance for women of female independence that is powerful because it is "mysterious and unknowable" (Gledhill, 1978, 122). The "femmes fatales" threatens to transgress patriarchy. In this view it is the lack of context provided for the actions of the most recognizable "femmes fatales" (and there are few, I maintain), such as Kathy Moffett, Brigid O'Shaughnessy, or Phyllis Dietrichson that constitutes their transgressive power (a good thing), as opposed to the domestication of the "femme fatale" in *Klute* (1971), Gledhill's target, in which Bree Daniels is disempowered by being subjected to clinical investigation.¹ Bree's power is, Gledhill argues, psychologized away, suggesting an anti-feminist model in "normal" domesticated woman. I think that the film's ending is more ambiguous than this reading suggests; however, Gledhill's interest in the value of the opaque "femme fatale" remains compelling, as an alternative way of understanding the positive value of the "femme fatale's" role as rebel (e.g., I wouldn't want Bridget Gregory from *The Last Seduction* [1994] in my life, but as a representation of unvanquishable, unrapable woman, and in some cases, a symbol of vengeance against male control,² she offers a symbol of freedom and power that may be culturally constructive).

On the one hand, I situate myself in connection with the latter group of critics, who see film noir as subversive in its representation of gender. I align myself with Jans Wager, Elizabeth Cowie, and Helen Hanson, who question the notion that noir is primarily a "male preserve" (Cowie, 125), and instead see these films as engaging women's desires

for social and sexual power. On the other hand, however, there are problems with the view of the "femme fatale" as inexorable. The fascination and excitement engendered by the "mysterious and unknowable woman" (Gledhill, 122) institutionalizes the presence of the "femme fatale" in film, which has serious consequences for readings of film noir and cultural attitudes toward female power. An overemphasis on the "femme fatale" has not only resulted in a misreading of many film noir movies, but has fed into cultural and critical obsessions with the bad, sexy woman, which inevitably become prescriptive and influence cultural discourse about female agency in counterproductive ways. In the end, the opaque powerful woman persists in objectifying female experience: the "femme fatale" is a symbol of fears about absolute female power, not a representation of complex female experience, which I see as lacking in most popular images of women, but which is often present in connection with film noir's women. *Klute's* Bree Daniels is psychologized perhaps not as a matter of lost power (and failed transgressiveness) but as a valuing of women's lives.

There is an alternative to the inaccessibility model (the mysterious and opaque woman) for feminist criticism, which demands a fuller understanding of noir women's many-sided experience and which might pave the way for us to learn from their victimization within patriarchy, their difficult conscious and unconscious choices, and their high intelligence. Rather than promoting images of women that emphasize their spirit and unknowable power, and rather than promoting images of women that rely on their bodies, finally, we need to illustrate the contexts that inform women's experience. I want to suggest some of the reasons why we've grown accustomed to identifying film noir's "femme fatale" without examining these contexts that inform her presence in film noir, by doing just that: examining the settings—social, psychological, political, physical, and geographical—that define her experience, which is, I want strongly to suggest, a far better thing to define than "woman" herself.

This study seeks to modify the tone of feminist discussions about film noir's women by reorienting our attention to the narrative, social contexts, and mise-en-scene that show the relationship between women's powers and the limits placed on them by social rules. Both the view of the "femme fatale" as misogynist projection and the view of the "femme fatale" as opaque yet transgressive female force emphasize her status as object or symbol (as object of scorn or as the mysterious and opaque "other" that threatens to destroy the male subject). My aim is to adjust our focus on film noir and gender so that we illuminate these women's narratives rather than mystifying women as objects or images.

Because of the heavy focus feminist and non-feminist criticism has placed on the "femme fatale" figure, film criticism's and popular culture's preoccupations with the "femme fatale" have dominated discussions of film noir and have adversely affected popular debates about the representations of women and female experience. Staring at women in noir, viewers and critics fixate on the "femme fatale," a term that is less critical than hysterical and causes us to neglect a full examination of the gender politics and social psychology that undergird these films. As Helen Hanson has recently said in *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film*, "the 'femme fatale' has cast an imaginative shadow over the period" (14). Hanson's reorientation of our attention to female subjectivity introduces a new and much-needed correction to feminist studies of film noir, focusing on narrative rather than image. What this opens up for us is a way of conceiving of representations of women in film noir which more precisely accounts for the social psychology introduced in these films. This study seeks to understand why critical and popular discussion of the "femme fatale" has swamped careful readings of women and gender in film and attempts to suggest a more nuanced way of reading women in noir.

There are interrelated cultural, textual, and generic problems that beset readings of noir. First, there is an internalized preoccupation on the part of viewers and critics with role modeling as the foundation for feminist discussion. Such narrow understanding of what is feminist—characters who are recognizably activist, who model behavior that we imagine might empower women in the "real world"—short-circuits attention to the patriarchal social scripts presented in film noir. In other words, a female character may not in herself be feminist, but her story may be. A good example might be Louise Brooks as Lulu in *Pandora's Box* (1929), who is systematically read by viewers seduced by the film's title in terms of the mythifying image of Pandora, which keeps us from sufficiently articulating the sources of Lulu's tragedy: a social script written by patriarchy that Lulu is unaware of; a social psychology that does not allow Lulu to pursue her desires without punishment. Instead of reading Lulu we gaze at her and mark her as destructive, as "femme fatale."

What happens to Lulu happens to others. A recent book review by Manohla Dargis, film reviewer for *The New York Times*, invokes typical stereotypes of women in film. Days after calling attention to the limited female presence in the very best American films made recently (in a glowing review of Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* [2007]), Dargis reviewed Jeanine Basinger's *The Star Machine* (2007), taking

Basinger to task for her romantic view of the Hollywood star system. Dargis demystifies Basinger's sentimental recounting of Hollywood's classic stars, such as Lana Turner, but recasts Turner in analogously mystifying terms, calling her, in reference to Cora Smith in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), a "poisonous honey pot": "[Lana Turner] plays a slutty goddess in [*The Postman Always Rings Twice*], a poisonous honey pot, and all she has to do is look lovely and sexually available, which she does by gently parting her pretty plum lips . . . you don't believe a word she says. She's a beautiful lie." Despite the nice phrasing of the last sentence, the reading does more for enhancing ideation surrounding the "femme fatale" figure than it does for glossing the film, which, in my view, presents a more complicated role in Cora Smith than this language allows for, a particular point I'll revisit in Chapter 2. In her review of *There Will Be Blood*, Dargis says in a significant aside, "(Like most of the finest American directors working now, Mr. Anderson makes little on-screen time for women.)." There is, as Dargis notes, scant attention paid to women in the great-American film about "the failure story," Orson Welles's description of the subject of *Citizen Kane* when Welles discussed whether or not the film was based on the life of William Randolph Hearst (Mulvey, *Citizen Kane*, 80). Complicated narrative for women commands little attention, as compared with representations of failed men (American icons such as Hearst or Scorsese's Jake LaMotta) because of the cultural dominance of gender myths surrounding the idea of female agency. The mystification of women as "poisonous honeypot[s]" is one example of why we don't tend to engage a more detailed and nuanced reading not only of female characters but of the narrative contexts (reflecting social realities) that inform and in some cases determine their choices. Film viewers and film critics and scholars make judgments about the appropriateness of representations based on role modeling and already established images of women that are canonized. We look for ameliorative models of feminist representation. If the characters don't optimistically role model for viewers, the representation fails as a feminist narrative.

This is exemplified by Diane Waldman in her review of *Positive Images* in Patricia Erens's edited volume, *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism* (1991). For Waldman, *Positive Images*, an interdisciplinary catalogue of texts about sex roles, offers a limited idea of what "positive images" might mean. Waldman cites instances in which Artel and Wengraf (the authors of the catalog) invoke narrow criteria for making judgments. One example is the catalog's entry on a feminist film about a woman, "Janie Sue," who lives on a farm but doesn't "succeed": "The authors

seem to fault the film for leaving us with a sense of struggle or process instead of supplying the inevitable 'happy ending'" (15). Such resistance to complex representations of female experience, seen as falling short because they don't represent female success (defined very narrowly) or as anti-feminist because they show women unable to transcend the social and cultural forces that limit or oppress them, leaves little room for compelling discussions about female agency and its relationship to society and culture.³ As Andrew Britton has said in his discussion of women in noir:

It is not necessary to formulate "positive images" of female strength, resistance or independence in order to produce a narrative that criticizes patriarchy from a woman's point of view, and many works of the greatest dramatic and ideological power have chosen instead to represent the tragic waste or perversion of a woman's struggle for autonomy and self-definition in the context of an implacably hostile and oppressive culture.

(214)

In keeping with this lack of rigor in examining the variety of contexts in which images of women and female experience can be read, we complacently absorb the images of women that seem to conform to the familiar types, such as the "femme fatale," that hold sway in our mental landscape—Turner's "poisonous honeypot."

The mythifying social gaze we direct at women can be seen in very different kinds of cases, in examples of women seeking position and power who don't neatly fall into readily available categories, such as Hillary Clinton; and in examples of women whose actions readily call forth familiar language that codifies their meaning in the culture. The latter can be seen in the surprising language used (primarily by the Italian press) to describe the "character" of Amanda Knox, the Seattleite accused in 2007 of murdering a British student while studying abroad in Perugia: Knox, with her "icy blue eyes" (Fisher, *NYT*, November 13, 2007), was said to be a "Manhunter, insatiable in bed." "She lives," Italy's daily paper *Corriere della Sera* declaimed, "only for pleasure." Amanda Knox either killed the poor woman, or she did not, but the language of the "femme fatale" seems remarkably accessible as a way for the media to package her as a source of excitement and lurid entertainment. Carla Bruni, too, has drawn media attention for her reputation as "Maneater." That the label spans across circumstances ranging from college students accused of murder to ex-models who believe in polygamy

suggests the extent to which such language infects our way of talking about female agency more generally, a point the misogyny unearthed by Hillary Clinton's presidential candidacy surely demonstrates.

The volcanic commentary on Clinton dehumanizes her and at the same time mythifies her as something Other that must be contained, as is demonstrated in the writing on a T-shirt promoted by a popular website: "Life's a bitch, why vote for one? Anti-Hillary '08." American political culture (versus popular culture) shares, to some extent, the misogyny directed at Hillary Clinton. Unable to abide the fact that Clinton doesn't conform to the stereotypes the culture comfortably projects onto women (domestic and maternal or sexual), Clinton-haters attack her on both grounds, such as in the Facebook group, "Hillary Clinton: Stop Running for President and Make Me a Sandwich," or another, "Hillary for President. She Puts the C—in Country." About the Internet fervor surrounding Clinton, C. J. Pascoe, a research sociologist with the Digital Youth Project at Berkeley's Institute for the Study of Social Change, says, "the broader society ignores the implications of the conversations being conducted on these sites at its peril" (qtd. in Tilove). Attempts to contain Clinton's influence reflect, as Pascoe suggests, a "feminist icon who stokes male insecurities about changing gender relations."⁴

Clinton's history of violating the conventional role of "wife"—first wife, first lady—established her as a New Woman, a transgressor, in cultural discourse in the 1990s. In 1992, she claimed on CBS's *Sixty Minutes* that "I am not sitting here as some little woman standing by my man, like Tammy Wynette," and professed that same year that she "could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas," but instead pursued her professional ambitions and entered public life.⁵ During the presidential primary campaign, Clinton was called shrill by MSNBC, the network that also compared her "look" at Obama during one of the debates as "the look, the look toward [Obama], looking like everyone's first wife standing outside a probate court" (Seelye and Bosman, *NYT*, June 13, 2008). Indeed, like popular commentary surrounding the New Woman—see the sketch of the "tigress" New Woman in Conrad's 1895 sketch in Figure 0.1⁶—and the women in noir, the intense ideation surrounding Hillary Clinton reflects the resurgence of misogynist discourse during times that provoke gender distress: late-Victorian feminisms; post-World War II shifts in gender roles ("the dislocation," as Krutnik nicely puts it, "of men from their former sense of being the prime movers of culture" [64]); and the prospect of a woman "leading the free world." Following Clinton's "non-concession speech" on June 3, 2008,



Figure 0.1 Conrad sketch, ca. 1895. Lilly Library, Bloomington, Indiana.

The Guardian's Michael Tomasky raged that Clinton's speech was "emasculating."⁷ Specific appropriation of the idea of the "femme fatale" in connection with Clinton may be seen in Chris Matthews's reference to her as a "she-devil" (Seelye and Bosman, *NYT*, June 13, 2008), but is best reflected in similarly overdetermined remarks made by journalist and former speech-writer Peggy Noonan, who says about coverage of Hillary Clinton:

Deep down journalists think she's a political Rasputin who will not be dispatched. Prince Yusupov served him cupcakes laced with cyanide, emptied a revolver, clubbed him, tied him up and threw him in a frozen river. When he floated to the surface they found he'd tried to claw his way from under the ice. That is how reporters see Hillary. And that is a grim and over-the-top analogy, which I must withdraw. What I really mean is they see her as the Glenn Close character in "Fatal Attraction": "I won't be ignored, Dan!"

(Noonan, 2008)

NPR's Ken Rudin also compared Clinton with Glenn Close's character in *Fatal Attraction*—"She's going to keep coming back, and they're not going to stop her" (Seelye and Bosman, *NYT*, June 13, 2008). In a discussion of the relative bias of *The New York Times's* coverage of Clinton, Clark Hoyt, the "Public Editor," observed particularly the vituperative attacks on Clinton in the editorials of Maureen Dowd, the "relentless nature of [Dowd's] gender-laden assault on Clinton." Hoyt noted

Dowd's invocation of a "femme fatale" figure in her "language painting [Clinton] as a 50-foot woman with a suffocating embrace, a conniving film noir dame."⁸ In the same way, such entrenched cultural ideation about female power makes it hard for viewers to respond to films that present nuanced portraits of women without branding them either as, or in relation to, the "femme fatale" figure.

Another problem that obstructs our critical understanding of women in noir is based on textual misapprehension: the privileging of gazing at images rather than reading narrative in film, a natural consequence of film scholars' social and theoretical orientation to film. Greater attention to mise-en-scene, narrative, and context, I want to suggest, serves feminist understanding of women in noir more fully, since, first, the ways in which these films contextualize female independence and desire (classically marked as the workings of the "femme fatale") illuminate the subversiveness of the representation of gender in film noir and, second, the shift from focusing on woman as image may help to sharpen reading practices that have been obscured by the mystifying gaze at the "femme fatale."

Excessive attention to the "femme fatale" has functioned, in exclusionary ways. Steve Neale observes that a narrow conception of genres results in flawed judgment when it comes to reading films and film history. So too, I want to suggest, does a narrow focus on the "femme fatale" figure close off fuller discussion and understanding of the multidimensional representation of women in noir:

The problem—or at any rate the problem for *noir's* proponents—is that the systematic application of many of the criteria they have advanced as definitive tend either to necessitate the exclusion or marginalization of films and genres generally considered as central, or else necessitate the inclusion of films and genres generally considered as marginal. This in turn has knock-on effects for those who ascribe a socio-historical significance to *noir*, or who wish to explain and interpret its ideological features and functions.

(Neale, 153)

As Neale observes, canonical noir attributes (such as the "femme fatale") appear in films linked to other genres; these features, I want to add, take on a different tone when related to other genres, as in the "woman's picture," as I'll discuss throughout this study in connection with "marginal noir," such as *Whirlpool* (1949), *The Damned Don't Cry* (1950), and *Crime of Passion* (1957). At the same time, many films canonically noted for their inclusion

of the "femme fatale" are deeply interested in the portrayal of female desire, ambition, and victimization in culture and society. Neale's work is important in its prodding us to reimagine genre in more flexible terms to attain better clarity about film history and the social and ideological work done in and by Hollywood film. Although Neale is here discussing film noir as genre, I think the point about applying categories narrowly can be usefully applied to our treatment of the "femme fatale." Analogously to the way that Neale is concerned about the arbitrary construction of film noir as a genre, the category of the "femme fatale" "tends to homogenize" the role of women in 1940s and 1950s Hollywood film (3).

One of the concerns guiding this project is that generally in film studies, what has been lost to some extent in the drive for theoretical rigor is sufficient attention to nuance and complexity in tone and narrative. A rich analysis of film may be further compromised, as suggested above, when films under investigation are defined in strict generic terms, adding another layer of theoretical apparatus. As film scholarship in the 1970s strove for relevance, it focused increasingly on defining cinematic structure, on making universal theoretical claims that justified a practice of sustained academic inquiry. Over time, this has resulted in an erosion of close readings; often, a dull level of generality presiding in discussions of the tone, narrative, and meaning of individual films.

I hope to model in the chapters that follow a critical analysis of film noir that might help to revitalize close readings in film studies, but that also explores the role of film noir in producing, sometimes in conserving, and, as I believe is very often the case in the best readings of film noir, in changing and revising cultural norms. While Philip Kemp is certainly right when he says that "film noir can be seen as a riposte, a sour, disenchanted flip side to the brittle optimism and flag-waving piety of much of Hollywood's 'official' output of the period" (86), I believe that the searing tone of film noir carries with it an ethical force, a kind of activism that I think Sylvia Harvey alludes to when she discusses the "absent family in film noir" in Kaplan's *Women in Film Noir*:

The absence or disfigurement of the family both calls attention to its own lack and to its own deformity, and may be seen to encourage the consideration of alternative institutions for the reproduction of social life. Despite the ritual punishment of acts of transgression, the vitality with which these acts are endowed produces an excess of meaning which cannot finally be contained. Narrative resolutions cannot recuperate their subversive significance.

(Kaplan, 1978, 33)

It isn't just the "subversive significance" of noir that constitutes what I am suggesting is the ethics of noir. The ethics of film noir lies, as I'll discuss more fully in Chapter 5, in its rich modernist representation of human loss; its portraits of social alienation; its analysis of the cultural game-changers that have particular and acute consequences for women; and its registers of failures of communication and longing for meaningful activity. In poetic and expressive language and image, film noir confronts the vacancies of human experience in a psychosocial world. Such confrontation is less "sour," in Kemp's words, than tough, provocative, and, finally, socially constructive, rather than apolitical or pessimistic.

In "A Brief Essay on Optimism," by Pierre Kast, a piece that originally appeared in *Positif* in 1953, Kast responds to an essay by Kanapa which

clarifies and sums up a campaign, which has been going on for several years now, against the "morbid" and the "pessimistic" and the "apolitical" in the cinema, a campaign fought on two fronts: an intense search for anything smacking of decadence in films as well as a fanfare to celebrate whatever they contain of an optimistic nature.

(Palmer, 44).

Kast argues against the prevailing notion that movies about despair threaten the culture and film art. Kast's essay looks forward to Frederic Jameson's idea that a film that reinstates bourgeois values comforts those who wish to maintain the status quo.

[it] reassures the spectator, puts him to sleep, persuades him of the objective existence of the optimistic ideas therein expressed, proves to him the legitimacy and the endurance of the established order, which he rejoins exiting the theater.

(Kast, in Palmer, 46)

Kast focuses his remarks on film noir a little later in this short essay:

Now it seems the noir detective film, a genre that suffered historical liquidation, should be for the theorists of optimism one of the great enemies of the cinema, whereas the genre's liquidation itself is incredibly meaningful. It is not only that William Wyler has gone from *The Best Years of Our Lives* to *Detective Story*, but even the subject itself of *All the King's Men* has been redone from an optimistic point

of view by Gerald Mayer, a new director, former official employee of the MPAA in Europe, in his film *Sellout* (1951).

(Palmer, 48)

Kast argues an important position, that film should unsettle viewers and upset prevailing views. Given film noir's abiding interest in offering up the contradictions of human experience in society, Kast's quotation of Engels is apt:

The novelist perfectly fulfills his function, when through a faithful representation of existing social relations, he destroys conventional illusions about the nature of those relations, shakes up the optimism of the bourgeois world, forcing it to doubt the endurance of the existing order, even if he does not indicate a solution, even if he does not, in any obvious way, take sides.

(qtd. in Kast; Palmer, 49).

Film noir performs this function, casting uncertainty and prodding reflection on the instability of psychosocial relations.

More recently, in his chapter on "Politics and Censorship" in *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*, James Naremore identifies Paul Schrader as well as Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward (by way of their entries in *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*) as examples of those putting forth the view of noir as apolitical and existentially dark (103). Naremore later in this chapter distinguishes between the "cynicism and misanthropy" of one strain of noir, mentioning Hitchcock and Wilder, and the socially activist films of Welles and Huston, leaning toward "humanism and political engagement" (125). In my mind, Paul Schrader, whose film credits across the decades include *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Raging Bull* (1980) (screenwriter), as well as *Affliction* (1997) (director), doth protest too much. The rich and fascinating focus in his films on gender psychosis constitutes their important contribution to the history of film noir. Then, too, while I understand Naremore's observation concerning the cynicism of Hitchcock's and Wilder's view of humankind, many of Hitchcock's and Wilder's films, as I hope to show in this book, depict the traumas of gender ideation and represent with sympathy the failures of men and women to thrive in society. Such traumas speak directly to the haunting modern and contemporary stories of loss, privation, and desire that film noir seeks to illuminate.

Film noir reflects changes in sociocultural conditions, just as other texts signal what is happening in society and culture and the

transformations in attitudes toward gender from one historical period to the next. In Chapter 4, I coin the term *Victorinoir* to account for Victorian literature's dark and apprehensive representations of modern transitions in social relations. In this chapter, I focus mainly on proto-noir anxieties about female empowerment in late nineteenth-century literature. *Victorinoir* poet/novelist Thomas Hardy prefigured the tone of film noir, however, as well as some of its narrative patterns, when he said in "In Tenebris II," "if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst" (l. 14). In some ways, Hardy's line evokes the "femme fatale," since we can, I believe, garner a "better" understanding of the psychosocial expectations that compose the idea of the "femme fatale" by taking a "full look" at the counterproductive effects of maintaining the centrality of this concept.

Few critics and viewers see film noir as earnest at its core. And yet, I believe that, as critics and viewers, we are ready for a close-up on the psychosocial worlds presented in film noir. We need to look more closely to see beyond superficial appearance and examine what the mirror casts back, in all its complexity. We might then move past a surface cynicism to find not only (in Kent Jones's words about Edgar Ulmer's 1945 *Detour*) "the ultimate corrective to Hollywood gloss" (qtd. in Isenberg, 21), but also a deeply affecting mode of engaging the difficulties of humans in society.

This project is organized into two parts. Part I, comprised of Chapters 1, 2, and 3, undertakes a general discussion of misread women in original-cycle film noir. Chapter 1 attempts to reorient our attention to film noir's women in terms of sympathy and argues generally that the presence of the "femme fatale" in film noir is drastically overstated. The analysis in this chapter focuses on close readings of major and marginal film noir, attempting not only to suggest the vastness of interest these films show in the richness of female experience and the poverty of their opportunities, but also to explore the intermittent arbitrariness of generic typing of these films that often translates into generic typing of the women within them (good girl/bad girl).

Chapter 2 will revisit the general subject of misunderstood women in noir, but with an accent on the critical frames and diagetical and extra-textual misprisions that have contributed to cultural obsessions with the "femme fatale." This chapter will demonstrate the process by which misunderstood women in noir are categorized as "femmes fatales" by

the men whom they encounter, who project fantasies onto women with disastrous results. For many of these men, and in most classic film noir, men's solipsistic projections onto women—men reading women as "femmes fatales" when they are not—result in trauma and often death. Chapter 2 also suggests the extratextual repetitions of "femme fatale" ideation, projections that film critics make onto the women in noir that serve to further canonize the "femme fatale" figure.

Chapter 3 will address film noir's "mad" women: the women allied with or characterized as the "femme fatale" figure who have personality disorders. The "crazy" women I address in this chapter, Ellen Berent in *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945), Louise Howell in *Possessed* (1947), Ann Sutton in *Whirlpool* (1949), and Annie Laurie in *Gun Crazy* (1950), are all victims of gender bias, or their stories reflect the consequences of severe cultural limitations placed on women. The films themselves, all made within a five-year period immediately following the conclusion of World War II, delineate the contexts for these women's actions and behavior. Their mental illnesses are a result of the lack of affirmation and validation women are portrayed as receiving in society, and their status as murderesses and "femmes fatales" must be reoriented to a wider discussion of the sympathies they elicit and the men and social institutions that are defined in these films as unresponsive to their needs, unresponsive to their powers, and uninterested in their desires.

Part II looks backward to Victorian narrative and forward to a contemporary film, David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001), to suggest the persistency of problematic cultural attitudes toward female agency, and the continual resurgence of representation grappling with anxiety about female agency during times of change in gender identities. I argue that there are important parallels between Victorian representations of gender and film noir's expression of gender anxiety. These repetitions in the representation of female power, as well as continual misreadings of such representations, strongly suggest the resurgence of backlash in understanding female ambition and empowerment during times of social change and female advancement. Such recurrence in image and narrative patterns also reflects strong continuities in the artistic and aesthetic treatment of women and gender. The end of Part II, my analysis of *Mulholland Drive*, offers an instance of deconstructing the backlash and backward glance of gender politics and instead suggests a nuanced means of imagining female agency in the context of openness, vitality, and receptivity.

More specifically, in Part II, Chapter 4 explores parallels to film noir's representation of gender in Victorian fiction, which can usefully serve

as a kind of prehistory for film noir, since the negotiations and anxieties about female power and agency so crucial to these films are prefigured in late nineteenth-century *Victorinor* representations of women and gender. This chapter will also suggest a transition and historical link between late-Victorian narrative and film noir in silent film's so-called vamp figure, a Janus-faced female agent, evoking the cultural language of the Victorian vampire to mask the social concerns of women seeking independence and autonomy. Just as I argue that readings of women in noir need to take fuller account of the contexts delineated in and by the films that help us to explicate female experience, so too do we need to situate film noir in a broader history of representations of women that gives us insight into the relationship between text and context, and film and gender roles in society. An analysis of the cultural reemergence of strong victimized women read as "femmes fatales" in literature and film reveals a distinct relationship between moments of backlash against female social advances and cultural resistance on the part of women attempting to better position themselves. These transformations and repetitions in representation of the *femmes modernes* can help us to recognize these patterns and examine how they are received in contemporary culture.

Chapter 5 tries to reimagine the "femme fatale" figure as a tool for understanding gender and culture rather than as a fixed object of investigation and fascination. *Mulholland Drive* (2001), David Lynch's noir film about Hollywood, I will argue, alludes to the misreading of women in noir while it deconstructs that process. Referencing *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) in its self-consciousness about genre and the victimization of women in Hollywood, Lynch's film provides a more nuanced, deeply affective reorientation to representations of female experience. *Mulholland Drive* models in its perceptive contemporary reception of the "femme fatale" figure a more constructive use of the "femme fatale" as a critical tool for understanding gender and culture.

This study aims to pursue models of textual interpretation that see women in noir as victimized by hyper-masculinized men and as attempting to break free of victimization and redefine the terms of living within patriarchy. The cynical noir style is appropriate not only, as is canonically noted, to attend to the angst of the hard-boiled male protagonist, but also to tell women's stories, which can be characterized as traumatic and tragic. These stories need to be foregrounded and understood more fully as the central concern of the films.

In an essay that posits film noir's "femme fatale" as a modern tragic figure, Elizabeth Bronfen discusses the noir hero's misrecognition of

the "femme fatale's" claim to tragic subjectivity. Bronfen addresses film noir's viewers and critics, who

read the femme fatale either as an embodiment of threat or as a textual enigma and, in so doing, avoid actually seeing her as separate not only from the fantasies of the noir hero, but also from any critical preconceptions informing one's reading of a given text.

(114)

Bronfen takes as her subject Phyllis Dietrichson, one of the very few (I would argue) "pure" "femmes fatales" in film noir, thus reinforcing our critical tendency to equate the unequivocally dangerous women in noir with all of the complicated female characters in these films. However, the appeal to readers to "recognize her as a separate human being, exceeding [Neff's] appropriation of her and, in so doing, exhibiting an agency of her own" moves us in an interesting and productive feminist direction, I believe, since it suggests avenues for reimagining female presence in film noir as meaningful and as multifaceted. "What would it mean," asks Bronfen,

for us to put a stop to the series of turnings away which revolve around the "femme fatale," to abdicate the gesture of fetishism, which supports the refusal to see her as a separate human being and the refusal to accept her difference?

(114)

It would mean, I submit in this project, a more sustainable freedom for women, since such freedom rests with understanding female experience, in all of its variety, complexity, struggle, and vitality, that expresses itself in so many unique ways at different times in women's lives, in film, fiction, and reality.

Part I Rereading Film Noir

1

Film Noir's "Femmes Fatales": Moving Beyond Gender Fantasies

In her essay "Professions for Women," Virginia Woolf says, "It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality" (1988). Nowhere is this insight truer than in the culture's preoccupation with the "femme fatale," a figure I want to identify as a phantom, an illusion and myth that I wish not so much to kill, but to deconstruct as a category that feeds cultural gender fantasies. Feminist film critics have long recognized the ideological power of the "femme fatale": first in terms of her role as a projection of male fear and desire; later, as a politically forceful symbol of unencumbered power. I want not only to extend emphases by critics such as Christine Gledhill, Elizabeth Cowie, and Jans Wager on how noir speaks to women but also to show the striking extent to which "femmes fatales"—seductresses whose desires and malevolence are seemingly unmotivated—don't in fact exist in the noir movies in which so-called bad women appear.

Film noir's lead female characters predominantly demonstrate complex psychological and social identity, resisting the spectator's habit (traced in criticism and cultural responses) of seeing past her by treating her as opaque (thus a screen on which to project male fears and desires) or of fixing on her as a thing, a dangerous body, to be labeled and tamed by social roles and institutions.

This chapter will point to the dearth of film noir's actual "femmes fatales," evil women whose *raison d'être* is to murder and deceive, focusing instead on films in which the "femme fatale" is presented in terms of exigency. That is, I want to call attention to the *many* female characters in original-cycle noir who are shown to be limited by, even trapped in, social worlds presented as psychotically gendered. Exigency for most so-called femmes fatales moves these women to express—in aggressive physical and verbal gestures—an insistence on independence,

which is then misread as the mark of the "femme fatale." Readings of and references to the "femme fatale" miss the extent to which her role depends on the theme of female independence, often misconceiving her motives and serving mainly to confound our understanding of the gender fantasies that surround these so-called bad women. Such myths are perpetuated now both by film criticism and popular culture.

Indeed, critics have settled in their discussion of women in noir on the few female characters who conform to the notion of the quintessential "femme fatale" (as she is represented by Phyllis Dietrichson [*Double Indemnity*, 1944], Kathie Moffett [*Out of the Past*, 1947], and Brigid O'Shaughnessy [*The Maltese Falcon*, 1941]), who then define the category. This has two significant consequences: first, these few really bad women draw all of the attention; second the construction of a false binary opposition between "femmes fatales" and other women means that the large majority of female characters in noir whose roles are inflected (multifaceted and interesting) are placed into the category of "femme fatale" without close attention paid to the complexity of the character. Steve Neale argues against the exclusivity of genre conception—for example, the gangster picture being defined in terms of "a series which seems to consist, as usual, of just three films, *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, and *Scarface*" (78). So too the "femme fatale" figure is constructed around several characters who then define and, I would argue, prescribe, the role.

Such is certainly the case with Cora Smith (Lana Turner) in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946). Cora is hailed as one of the central film noir "femmes fatales," but the film's presentation of her is considerably more complicated than is allowed by the label. With Phyllis Dietrichson, Cora was recently dubbed "two of the ['femme fatale']s most powerful screen incarnations" (Spicer, 91), and yet Cora is shown by the film to be desperately confined. This is represented most forcefully in the scene in which Nick tells her that she will be moving to Northern Canada to take care of a half-paralyzed sister of Nick's. All of Cora's hopes to "be somebody" are dashed. She's trapped. Certainly this is an important part of Cora's story. Her subjectivity, powerfully emphasized as she walks, stunned and defeated, up the stairs after the scene just alluded to, is utterly elided, however, by insisting on her being a "femme fatale."¹

Critics and critical history have selected for the "femme fatale" and canonized these women. Current critics and popular culture have then inherited a tradition that they don't really question but rather assume: Bad women are "femmes fatales" and there will be a "femme fatale" in film noir movies. The inflexibility of the category of the "femme fatale,"

despite feminist attempts to problematize and complicate the label and its various contexts, leads viewers typically to take a "Where's Waldo" approach to the "femme fatale": "She's not a real 'femme fatale!'" "She didn't kill anyone"; or "She's not very attractive." Such exclusivity in understanding the "femme fatale" stalls discussion of the complexity of her represented experience, which almost always involves a woman trapped by the narrow categories on offer for understanding female social and sexual lives.

Many film noir movies lend subjectivity to the independent women called femmes fatales, depicting the psychological motives for becoming, or acting the role of, the "femme fatale." While these motives are often clearly linked to the social conditions of women in postwar America, the depiction of "femmes fatales" frequently attributes an "inner life" to these women which allows us to read them as sympathetic characters; these films depict "femmes fatales" as inevitably growing out of repressive social milieus. As actress Elizabeth Scott, best known for her noir performances such as in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946), *Dead Reckoning* (1947), and *Pitfall* (1948), has said,

the *femme fatale* . . . was always the person, in most of the films that I did, who had the greatest understanding. She knew life better than most females of the era. She knew that life could be good and life could be bad, she knew what was right and she knew what was wrong, but . . . there were certain things she had to do.

(Noir Reader 3, 195)

Samuel Fuller echoes Scott's remarks when he talks about the blindness and hypocrisies surrounding perceptions of Kelly, the sympathetic prostitute in Fuller's *The Naked Kiss* (1964): "When [the townspeople] find out about her past, everybody assumes she's guilty as hell." "You do what you do," Fuller adds, "out of necessity" (*Noir Reader* 3, 48).² Fuller points up the two-pronged difficulty for women represented in film noir. To preserve itself, patriarchal culture projects images onto women that perpetuate a binary opposition of good girl versus "femme fatale." Attempts to assert independent existence and to live beyond or to escape such projected gender fantasies then upset patriarchal order and cause it to redouble its efforts to categorize these women as deviant.

This process of projection, female resistance and assertion of subjectivity, and patriarchal reinforcement is fully demonstrated in Edgar Ulmer's *Detour* (1945), particularly in the representation of the film's most compelling female character, Vera, played by Ann Savage.

As James Naremore says, "ruthlessly hard and half-crazed," Vera "makes every 'femme fatale' in the period look genteel by comparison" (149). Tania Modleski has called Vera "one of the most ferocious persecutory *femmes fatales* in the history of cinema" (qtd in Isenberg, 62). However, *Detour*, reflecting on modern ambivalence toward empowered women, offers a commentary on the construction of woman in terms of bifurcated images of good and evil. For example, the protagonist Al Roberts (Tom Neal) says in a voiceover, as he looks at a profile of Vera:

I got the impression of beauty: not the beauty of a movie actress, mind you, or the beauty you dream about when you're with your wife, but a natural beauty, a beauty that's almost homely because it's so real. . . . Then suddenly she turned to face me.

The shock of recognition deflates high-grounded solipsistic projections about women. As in Mark McPherson's struggle in Otto Preminger's *Laura* (1944) to translate his obsession with the image of Laura into mastery of the woman herself; as in Scotty Ferguson's desperate struggle in *Vertigo* (1958) to maintain his ideation of Madeleine in the face of the real Judy Barton, in this scene in *Detour*, the "folksy" portrait of Vera gives way to a disappointing and threatening reality: "Then suddenly, she turned to face me." The film *Detour's* concern with the ideal versus the real, leaving out the complexity of the actual experiences of individuals that inform or complicate their gender roles, is also emphasized in Al's later voiceover:

If this were fiction, I would fall in love with Vera, marry her and make a respectable woman of her. Or else she'd make some supreme class-A sacrifice for me and die. Sue and I would bawl a little over her grave and make some crack about there's good in all of us. But Vera unfortunately was just as rotten in the morning as she'd been the night before.

This overdetermined presentation of fictional positions on women, all of which deny her complex identity which might allow for empowered subjecthood, help to explain Vera's shrill demand to be seen for who she is. Like other honest vamps (one thinks even of the most fatal of femmes, *Out of the Past's* Kathie Moffett, who says to Jeff Markham, "I never pretended to be anything but what I was. You just didn't see it. That's why I left you"), Vera is motivated by exigency.

As Andrew Britton says, for Vera, dying of consumption, "every word and action is designed to convince Al that she can do exactly what

she likes with him ('I'm not through with you by a long shot!') (179). Later, Vera says of the plan to steal Haskell's inheritance, "For that kind of dough, I'd let you cut my leg off." As the desperation of this remark suggests, I think Naremore is right when he notes that while Vera is "sullen" and "dangerous," she's also a "sympathetic figure" (149). This strangely mixed treatment of Vera is apparent in her language, "cracking like a whip," as Britton says, full of a desperate desire to claim agency in a culture that habitually denies women their subjectivity. While in simple generic terms Vera is an absolutely unambiguous "femme fatale," the nature of her presence in the film is more complex than is allowed by simply referencing her as the film's "femme fatale."

Because the yoking together of sexuality, evil, and powerful women seems to me an insufficiently addressed habit in viewing film noir, I want to propose a modified perspective that builds on the work of feminists who suggest that female viewers find grounds for empathy in understanding the "femme fatale." For fully engaged readings of film noir, I will argue, need to confront the simulacral fantasies that not only surround the "femme fatale" but that generate ideas in the culture that have very material effects. By shifting our nomenclature, for example, to talk about these trapped women as "hard-boiled females," or, simply, modern women, *femmes modernes*, rather than strictly as "femmes fatales," we can see more clearly the ongoing force of binary oppositions in the presentation of gender in contemporary culture and we highlight film noir's aim to destabilize gender categories.

The predominance of the idea of the "femme fatale," I've been suggesting, profoundly shapes our viewing of all women in film noir. This keeps us from recognizing not only the complex levels of female subjectivity but also the extent to which women are trapped in social roles they can't change, or how they are trapped particularly into performing the role of "femme fatale" that then perpetuates ideation surrounding these women. Says cynical Dev to Alicia in *Notorious*, "Dry your eyes, baby; it's out of character." These traps, prefigured in late-Victorian narrative, as I will argue in Chapter 4, most often take the form of simple opposition and dichotomy.

Such is the case in Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat* (1953), in which the inspiring wife, Katie Bannion, is destroyed by the Lagana underworld and the criminal taint of the city, the public realm. In introducing his BFI book on *The Big Heat*, Colin McArthur comments on the starkness of the difference in tone between Dave Bannion's life at home (Figure 1.1) and his visit to "The Retreat," the seedy bar in which he finds Lucy Chapman (Figure 1.2). McArthur juxtaposes stills of these



Figure 1.1 Domestic Bliss: Jocelyn Brando and Glenn Ford as Katie and Dave Bannion in *The Big Heat* (BFI), © 1953, renewed 1981 Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. All rights reserved. Courtesy of Columbia Pictures.



Figure 1.2 Lucy Chapman (Dorothy Green) and Bannion at "The Retreat," *The Big Heat* (BFI), © 1953, renewed 1981 Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. All rights reserved. Courtesy of Columbia Pictures.

opposite worlds (the caption reads "Counterpoint: 'the bright friendly world of Bannion home . . . ' . . . and the bleak world of The Retreat.'" [8]). When Dave Bannion leaves the comfort of domestic contentment to follow a lead on Duncan's death, the radical shift in Bannion's affect can be seen as the character, played by Glenn Ford, dons his hat. The film abruptly shifts its attention from Dave's domestic banter with his wife Katie—"Tha's good steak"—to Bannion's detached suspicious detective-speak in the bar—"Lucy Chapman here?"

In the interview that follows, Bannion shows contempt for Lucy: he reads her categorically as "femme fatale" because she works at "The Retreat" and because she has been involved in adultery with Duncan, one of Bannion's detective colleagues who has just committed suicide. Bannion, like most noir protagonists, has only two categories for women, perfect wives and corrupt women on the take. He mistakenly places Lucy in the latter category and by misreading her motives and character contributes to events that lead to her brutal murder. Bannion thus stands in for the unwitting film noir viewer who repeats this pattern almost obsessively by ignoring the often nuanced presentation of women's experience in noir.

Lang makes this point clearly when he shows Lucy's face in close-up as she reacts, wounded, to Bannion's tough-speak accusation, "What's the angle, Lucy?" Lucy says, in a broken and poignant reply, "Me?" and we are made alert to Bannion's summary blindness to her. Such failure of vision, a common theme in noir, not only looks forward to Bannion's disgusted dismissal of Debby Marsh (Gloria Grahame), thug Vince Stone's girlfriend ("I wouldn't touch anything of Vince Stone's with a ten-foot pole," says Bannion callously), but also anticipates *Chinatown's* Jake Gittes's naïve and at the same time brutish categorization of Evelyn Mulwray as the unambiguous betrayer. Jake's mistake in interpreting Evelyn Mulwray as a "femme fatale," and the cynical mistrust that undergirds his reading of her, contributes, of course, to events that lead to Evelyn's gruesome death and the horrible exploitation of her daughter/sister Katherine by the malevolent patriarch Noah Cross (John Huston).³

In her discussion of women in 40s films, Molly Haskell has suggested the close relation between the habit of reading women as image and the particularly dichotomous nature of these images of women:

It is not the evil in women, but the mutual exclusiveness of good and evil that we resent, since it is a way of converting women from their ambiguous reality into metaphors, visitations of an angel or a devil.⁴

(199)

While on the one hand Haskell's comment critiques the binaries that cause misogyny, her alternative paradigm of "ambiguity" seems problematic, since "femmes fatales" aren't really ambiguous any more than any complex human subject is ambiguous—ambiguity becomes here another virtual space ready to be filled by projected ideation. Still, Haskell's analysis is important, as she goes on to quote Barbara Stanwyck's comment on women in Preston Sturges's noir comedy *The Lady Eve*, that "the best aren't as good as you think they are, and the bad ones aren't as bad . . . not nearly as bad." In her excellent book *Fast-Talking Dames*, Maria DiBattista makes a similar point about Sturges's film:

[T]he film allays the anxieties that it has itself aroused about the designing woman, the seductive Eve, by assuring us that Jean and Eve, the good (who isn't as good as we want) and the bad (who isn't as bad as we think) are joined in the middle distance.

(323)

We might contrast this acknowledgment of the complexity of female experience with the exchange in *Out of the Past* (1947) between good-girl Ann and noir protagonist Jeff Bailey/Markham, as they discuss "femme fatale" Kathie Moffett: Ann says, "She can't be all bad—nobody's all bad," to which Jeff replies, "She comes the closest." What so many film noir texts demonstrate in contrast is the hard-boiled reality of female experience, as these so-called femmes fatales struggle to assert a power the male protagonists deny them.⁵

Through its rehearsal of binary oppositions, film noir criticizes gendered divisions of space, a strain of commentary important to look at, given contemporary culture's continuing obsession with defining social spaces as gendered (e.g. Spike TV, Super Bowl half-time shows, and the bland anodyne role modeling endorsed on Lifetime, in "chick flicks," and at Oxygen.com). Film noir has always shown the destructive nature of these boundaries by demonstrating what happens when women cross these lines: they become a severe threat to dominant male culture. Rita Hayworth's famed striptease performance of "Put the Blame on Mame" suggests the misogynist branding of women who deviate from their role as it is prescribed by cultural binary oppositions. In *Gilda*, Johnny Farrell can't abide Gilda's verbal, psychological, and sexual power over him. He reacts so violently and cruelly to her (comparing women to insects, for example) that the movie enacts in the story the annihilating process of "putting the blame on Mame." A psychotic extension of this invective

against the woman for deviating from a role designed and mastered by conventional male power is seen in Cable's speech at the end of *Klute* (1971). Cable (Charles Cioffi) is here speaking to Bree Daniels, the call girl he blames for inciting him to become a murderer:

There are little corners in everyone which were better left alone. . . . You're too warped to do anything with your life, so you prey upon the sexual fantasies of others. There are weaknesses that should never be exposed. But that's your stock in trade: a man's weakness. And I was never fully aware of mine until you brought them out.

Bree Daniels is a "femme fatale" place-holder in *Klute*; her role, as it is seen by the psychotic Cable, invites comparison with the many other victims of projections onto women in film noir, as in the case of *Taxi Driver* (1976), where the potential for absolute derangement in viewing women alternately as angel and whore is explicitly demonstrated by Travis Bickle. Travis, played by Robert De Niro, idealizes Betsy (Cybil Shepherd)—who first appears as a vision in white, as Kathie Moffett did in *Out of the Past*—only to categorically devalue her several scenes later as "just like the rest." After Betsy rejects Travis when he takes her on a date to a pornographic film, he shouts that she is "going to die in hell like the rest of them." Later in the film, Travis once again shows his inability to adopt a more complex reading of female experience when he ignores the reality of 12-year-old Iris's troubled life (as played by Jodie Foster) in order to save her from prostitution and degradation. The film shows the dramatic bifurcation in Travis's view of woman (innocent or evil) in his absurdly beatific encomium to the young prostitute as he cups her face in his hand: "Sweet Iris."⁶

Feminist film critics have recognized that male protagonists in noir hold responsibility for their fates, but this insight hasn't led viewers to see fully the implications of these observations: mainly, that the presence of the "femme fatale" in film noir movies is drastically overstated and almost exclusively the result of male projection, as may be only truly obvious in the extreme case of *Klute*, as cited above. However, film noir is ripe with suggestions that the "femme fatale" is a projection of male gender psychosis and the women labeled as "femmes fatales" are often struggling to escape this projection.

The point is exemplified in Maria Elena Buszek's discussion of the 40s pin-up "Varga Girl." During World War II, the modern woman, the American *femme moderne*, struggled with working alongside men in the public sphere, taking new note of "the power and problems that

their sexuality posed in relations with their male counterparts" (215). Citing Filene's *Him/Her/Self* (163), Buszek comments that "women were often blamed for the 'distraction' they posed in the workplace and forbidden from wearing sweaters or form-fitting clothing" (216). The changing social position of women at home had implications for the female image abroad, in the instance, for example, of women who were often painted on Army bombers during World War II:

Archival images of World War II bomber art include dozens of bombers on which Varga Girls appeared, menacingly dubbed "The Dark Angel," "Double Trouble," and "War Goddess" One bomber pilot wrote *Esquire* to testify that "the Varga beauty stenciled onto his bomber made a German pilot come within gun range for a better look."

(212)

As much as film noir movies may extend sympathy toward the male crisis of identity after the destabilization of gender roles occurring in America during WWII, these films also suggest, more subversively still, the trap that society lays for women whose beauty and power are thought, as Cable's speech decries, to exploit "a man's weakness." The women labeled the "femme fatale" are the "fall guys" for men and are branded as evil, as potentially deceptive, even before they speak.

In *Laura* (directed by Otto Preminger in 1944), a movie that examines the habit of casting women as a priori "femmes fatales," Lydecker and McPherson worry throughout the film that Laura will betray her lovers. But the film presents its concern through these men's obsessive ideation, provoked, in McPherson's case quite literally, by Laura's image. The bullying Lydecker makes the point as he reveals that "the way [Laura] listened was more eloquent than speech," ratifying the idea of the good woman as the silent woman, as the image, as the portrait. "What difference," Laura says to the interrogating McPherson, "does it make what I say? You've made up your mind I'm guilty." Because McPherson has become infatuated with the portrait of Laura in this film—McPherson identifies Laura herself with the painting of her—her actual appearance disorients him into casting her as a "femme fatale" (Figure 1.3). Characterizing this disorientation, Slavoj Žižek has said, the "'real' Laura emerges as a non-symbolized fantasmatic surplus, a ghostlike apparition" (Copjec, 220).

The fantasmatic, however, threatens to be contained as Laura becomes appropriated and consumed by male desire, like the Duke's

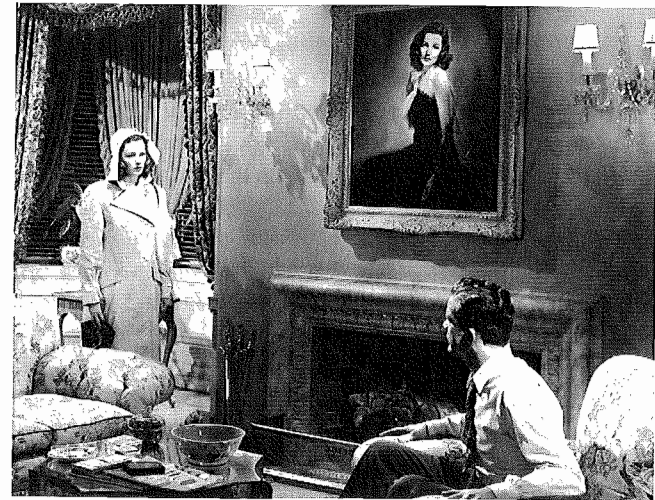


Figure 1.3 Laura (Gene Tierney), McPherson (Dana Andrews), and the image in Laura © 1944 Twentieth Century Fox. All rights reserved. BFI.

wives in Robert Browning's 1842 dramatic monologue "My Last Duchess," a proleptically noir poem that critiques the Duke's projection of masculine power onto women. The poem exploits the term "object," presenting the Duke's wives as portraits/images ("That's my last Duchess painted on the wall" [l. 1]), as well as goal and possession: "his fair daughter's self . . . is my object" (ll. 52–3). The poem explains violence against women as the result of male projection, offering an interesting analogy to the representation of male protagonists in noir. Further, the poem dramatizes a moment in which a male suitor (the Duke) assumes that his auditor (the agent of his next wife's father) will make the same interpretations he does, just as, I am suggesting, the poem's readers and *Laura's* viewers should not be sharing the perspective of the dominant male characters within the narrative. Indeed, *Laura* pushes us to make judgments on the men around Laura. As Angela Martin has pointed out, the expected role of Laura as this film's "femme fatale" is undermined by the film's insistence that Laura's mystery is entirely a result of male projection:

Laura only expresses *anything* of the "femme fatale" inasmuch as that is projected through the behavior of the men around her. . . . Laura herself becomes a silent and still (painted) image during her long weekend absence, which gives the other characters limitless space

to recreate her in their own terms. . . . But it is the male characters whose shadows are thrown; it is the male characters who produce "the fatal": Laura just brings out what is already there (which is, of course, the real female crime in film noir).

(213, 214)

As in *Laura*, the introduction of woman via portrait or image is common in noir: Diane Redfern, the real murdered victim in *Laura*, is only seen in the film in a photograph; in *The Woman in the Window* (1944), Professor Wanley (Edward G. Robinson) is seduced into noir reverie by a painting of a woman he sees in a store window; our first image of Joyce Harwood in *The Blue Dahlia* (1946) is in a photograph on her husband's desk; Mona Stevens, the victimized so-called femme fatale in *Pitfall* (1948), is also first introduced to us as a photograph in a modeling portfolio. That these women appear at first as photographic or painted images strongly suggests their initial status as images coined by male desire, "derealized" in Mary Ann Doane's terms (*Femmes Fatales*, 146), in the service of male fantasy.

The logic of film noir deconstructs the dichotomies that structure these gender fantasies. I am suggesting that we take this insight further to question the elevation of the "femme fatale" that results from these projections of desire. While feminist film critics have discussed at some length the nature of these projections, we haven't sufficiently inferred from these analyses the problems with relying on the "femme fatale" as the main figure in film noir. We become passive and dependent on what we think we already know about women, which evokes a "femme fatale" before the narrative unfolds. This model of reading women is, I've been arguing, outlined in the films themselves, as is demonstrated in a scene from George Marshall's *The Blue Dahlia* (1946).

Early in *The Blue Dahlia*, Johnny Morrison (Alan Ladd) says thank you and goodbye to the at-this-point anonymous woman (later identified as Joyce Harwood, played by Veronica Lake), who has picked up this disappointed war veteran in LA and driven him from the dark, rainy city to sunny Malibu. Johnny says, "It's hard to say goodbye." Lake's character responds, "Why is it hard to say goodbye? You've never seen me before," to which Johnny replies, "Every guy's seen you. The trick is to find you." A remarkable instance of the process of transforming a woman into only an image of generalized male desire for the perfect woman, Joyce Harwood exists absolutely in Johnny's mind. A real woman couldn't ever live up to the preexisting image of Joyce as angel.

In *The Blue Dahlia*, there is thus a kind of inevitability in the fact that Johnny Morrison turns on Joyce when he discovers she is married to

her estranged husband Harwood, played by Howard Da Silva. Deviating at all from Johnny's ideal image of her, Joyce Harwood becomes immediately suspect. Whereas before this discovery, Johnny has placed her on a pedestal, after the discovery, he dismisses her as "baby": "See you later, baby," he says (as he effectively abandons her), invoking by so doing a conventional verbal marker for sexualized woman. Joyce is even, late in the film, iconographically linked to Helen Morrison, who most nearly evokes the "femme fatale": on the one hand, Helen is an adulteress who drinks, smokes, has accidentally killed her baby, and dresses in gold lamee; on the other hand, before Helen is murdered, she not only leaves clues to help Johnny discover her murderer, but her explanation of her life while Johnny was away evokes a sympathetic portrait of the *femmes modernes* struggling while their husbands were at war, a portrait made more complex by Johnny's threats to "make" Helen stop drinking. When Joyce Harwood repeats Helen's earlier habit of picking petals off the blue dahlias, Joyce is symbolically linked to Helen, the film's ostensible dangerous dark woman. In being allied with Helen, Joyce joins the ranks of women brutally dismissed by those such as Harwood's sidekick, who says about women, "they're all poison sooner or later."

Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954) reveals the anxiety about female power that produces such ideation. Vienna, played by Joan Crawford, demonstrates a mannishness that elicits a comment from her employee Sam (John Carradine), which is striking not only for its response to gender anxiety but for its transparency in exposing this anxiety: "Never seen a woman who was more a man: She thinks like one, acts like one, and sometimes makes me feel like I'm not." Such direct commentary would be easier to take in and understand as part of a larger interpretive pattern, if viewers weren't so focused on what they expected to see in film noir. With a more sustained habit of attending to the logic of the narrative, we see clearly these films' exposure of the ideological contradictions in the dominant culture's regulations of gender.

A critique in noir films is thus leveled at the continuing cultural reading of women as a projection of male desire or fear: as domestic muse or "femme fatale," as two-faced, like Debby Marsh, Gloria Graham's character in *The Big Heat*, whose face, after Vince Stone (Lee Marvin) scalds her with coffee, is literally bifurcated—grotesque burn scars on one side oppose perfect angelic beauty on the other. As the fallen woman, she must die, but because she sacrifices herself so that Bannion can solve the crime and avenge his wife's murder, Lang's final shot of her is of the unscarred, angelic side of her face. Although the film in this shot seems to want to choose one side (angelic female

savior) over the other ("femme fatale"), what the movie has shown rather methodically are the violent, even fatal, consequences of trying to define these poles as essential, and as essentially opposed.

Film noir puts pressure on these oppositions by imagining the crossing of borders, transgressions of gender roles. Such associations force a confrontation with trauma, repressed in mainstream film and culture as socially intolerable. As Vargas says in *Touch of Evil* (1958), "All border towns bring out the worst in a country." Vargas himself is complicit in the division of realms, segregating the "real Mexico" from its borders, isolating Susie in the wrongly judged "safe" zone of the Mirador Motel, but the film itself reveals the callousness and potential destructiveness of forging and maintaining segregated psychosocial domains.

Film noir movies demonstrate the violent consequences of cultural oppositions, mainly enforced according to gender, by suggesting that the violent underbelly referred to in noir is itself caused by the culture's division of complex human experience into strictly circumscribed opposing realms. Further, noir reveals the ways in which structuring experience according to these dichotomies may result in palpable cynicism that keeps us from addressing social illnesses. An example might be the famous concluding lines of *Chinatown* (1974): "Forget it Jake. It's Chinatown." But it's not just Chinatown; it's Jake's blindness and his cynicism that keep him from believing, and believing in, Evelyn Mulwray. *Chinatown* shares *The Big Heat's* condemnation of failures of vision. These films argue for a gray view of the world that recognizes and responds sympathetically to the complexity of human experience; the logic of their stories calls attention to these failures of vision, suggesting an alternative model of sympathetic engagement to understand film noir narrative.⁷

Other noir films, such as *Phantom Lady*, *The Blue Gardenia*, *The Damned Don't Cry*, and *The Naked Kiss* challenge viewers' expectations of strict oppositions by placing the would-be "femme fatale" in the role of subject, *femme moderne* and hard-boiled female protagonist. Following this model of gender destabilization, *The Phantom Lady* (1944), Robert Siodmek's bizarre adaptation of a Cornell Woolrich novel, introduces a male lead who is utterly emasculated: hearing that Scott's wife laughed at him, the cop says glibly, "Nothing makes a man sorer than that . . . making a patsy of you, eh?"; later in the scene, Scott begins to tear up, saying "I thought guys didn't cry." In this film, woman takes on the role of "seeker hero," as Michael Walker notes (Cameron 110–15). Carol Richman notably appropriates the male gaze in a way that unsettles Laura Mulvey's positioning of the spectator as inevitably male.⁸ To intimidate

him into helping her solve the murder, Carol literally stares down the bartender, to the point where he runs from her into oncoming traffic and dies. Throughout the film, Carol role-plays, demonstrating the resourcefulness, flexibility, and aggressiveness of the *femme moderne*. Despite some neat ideological closure, *Phantom Lady* suggests the subversive potential of the hard-boiled female protagonist.

The insistence on the "femme fatale" as a bad female object of fascination or investigation not only causes us, as I've been arguing, to misinterpret female roles in film noir and to perpetuate unhealthy ideation in popular culture, but also leads us to draw arbitrary borders between genres whose intersections are compelling and important, as Steve Neale's work has shown and as Janey Place has noted. An overreliance on categorization results in the "suppression of those elements which do not 'fit', and . . . exclusion of films which have strong links but equally strong differences from a particular category" (Place, 39).⁹

Conventions of genre can serve to segregate stories of women, as Elizabeth Cowie has pointed out, when she argues against the location of film noir as "male melodrama" by critics such as Maureen Turin and Frank Krutnik. Cowie favors an "[examination of] the melodrama in film noir in order to overturn this rigid sexual division, not to affirm it" (Copjec, 130).¹⁰ So, too, I think that analysis of narrative similarities across genres not only models a plasticity in genre conception but also serves to break down the segregation of female stories into generic compartments. *The Damned Don't Cry* (1950) for example, is deemed melodrama, a woman's picture, but the main character shares a great many qualities with the "femme fatale," if we look at that figure from a feminist perspective. As in film noir, the ostensibly melodramatic *The Damned Don't Cry* also destabilizes gender categories, as well as genre categories, since its title screams melodrama. In fact, the film not only presents a noir hard-boiled female protagonist but also unequivocally presents the "femme fatale" as a construction of male anxiety and projection.

Echoing the beginning of the better-known Joan Crawford noir vehicle *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *The Damned Don't Cry* begins with Ethel Whitehead not only trapped in the role of oppressed mother and housewife but, more significantly, victimized by the misogynist ramblings of her father, who manages to convince her husband Roy that "You'll never do enough for her." When her son is killed, Ethel decides to follow the lead of independent male loners from Sam Spade to Shane, telling Roy, who insists that he's "done the best he could," "Well it ain't good enough." The social roles that might afford Ethel something like the power and

independence available to male heroes are limited to modeling and prostitution, but Ethel insists on her right to determine her life. As she says to her emasculated suitor Marty Blackford: "You're a nice guy, but the world isn't for nice guys. You gotta kick and punch and belt your way up cuz nobody's going to give you a lift. You've got to do it yourself. Cuz nobody cares about us except ourselves." "The only thing that counts," says this hard-boiled *femme moderne*, "is that stuff you take to the bank, that filthy buck that everybody sneers at but slugs to get."

The desperation of Ethel Whitehead's speech notwithstanding, the language is also that of the canonic hard-boiled male protagonist ("You gotta kick and punch and belt your way up cuz nobody's going to give you a lift"). However, when a man makes this kind of speech, the myth he upholds is that of the male loner, like Chandler's detective, who minds the mean streets "a lonely man" (Chandler, qtd. in Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen*, 33). We can expose the ideologically conservative cast of this gesture by simply pointing out that the male loner figure is never really alone. In fact, he's supported by a network of homosocial relations. The men work together, or at least believe in one another, like the family of men in Chandler's *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), or the existential partnering of Neff and Keyes in *Double Indemnity* (1944), or the possibly sexual bond between Ballen and Johnny Farrell in *Gilda* (1946). In all of these cases, the men have one another, and the "femme fatale," like the Mame in *Gilda*'s song, takes the blame, becomes the debased object of investigation: the inevitable by-product of a system that has constructed the "femme fatale" as a projection of threats to the homosocial fabric of society.

The point is well exemplified in Sam Spade's bizarre speech at the end of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). Although Spade has shown utter contempt for Miles Archer when Archer was alive, and although Spade is obviously in love with Brigid O'Shaughnessey, he shows a sort of intense aloofness in describing the code he must live by, that demands his turning Brigid in:

When a man's partner is killed he's supposed to do something about it. It doesn't make any difference what you thought of him. He was your partner, and you're supposed to do something about it. And, it happens we're in the detective business . . . well, when one of your organization gets killed, it's bad business to let the killer get away with it. Bad all around. Bad for every detective, everywhere.

While there is clearly a rationale for holding Brigid accountable for the murder, the strange, almost autistic delivery of the speech suggests a

dissociation of affect that comes across as problematic—as rigid, as cold, and as an indication of the threat of losing control that Spade faces throughout the narrative. Spade's discipline defines his masculinity, in stark contrast to "the fat man" (aptly named Gutman) and the gay man (the "exotic" Cairo). Here, however, such discipline plays as perverse, as Spade's further explanation for turning Brigid in strongly suggests:

Maybe I do [love you]. Well, I'll have some rotten nights after I've sent you over, but that will pass. If all I've said doesn't mean anything to you, then forget it and we'll make it just this: I won't because all of me wants to, regardless of consequences, and because you counted on that with me, the same as you counted on that with all the others.

The ironic tone here—the allusion to "some rotten nights"—resets the power dynamic, ending the narrative with Spade's recovery of his invulnerable stance as the "man [who] must go who is not himself mean"—except, I'm suggesting, he's a little mean. Despite Brigid's guilt, Sam Spade is a psychological bruiser. He is, as Naremore says, "an unusually ruthless hero" (53). Spade sleeps with Archer's wife, showing almost as much contempt for her as he obviously held for her husband, Miles. And he sleeps with Brigid, as Jake Gittes does with Evelyn, only in the end to turn her over to her doom (although Jake is unwitting, and Spade is all-knowing). *Chinatown* is tragic and traumatic because Evelyn is an innocent victim; but *The Maltese Falcon* is disturbing, in psychosocial gender terms. As is the case with its protagonist, Spade, the film's "slickness" is belied by the brutality necessary to maintain his masculine code. Indeed, as Effie says to Sam, "You're too slick for your own good."

In contrast to the hard-boiled detective, for whom the homosocial bonds uphold masculine codes of honor, the toughened *femme moderne* is truly alone, as Mae Doyle is, in *Clash by Night* (1952). "Home," she says, "is where you come when you run out of places." Mae Doyle's expectations for domestic contentment are diminished to the point that what she finds most attractive in Jerry is that he's a man "who isn't mean and doesn't hate women."

Similarly, for Ethel Whitehead in *The Damned Don't Cry*, life is fundamentally about exigency: *The Damned Don't Cry* focuses in part on the limitations placed on Ethel's life ("Don't talk to me about self-respect. That's something you tell yourself you got when you got nothing else."). The film then portrays Ethel's aggressive response to these

limitations ("All I can think of are the years I've wasted. . . . Well I want that time. I want it desperately. I'm going to drain everything out of those years there is to get."). The film shows Ethel taking on the role of "femme fatale," but such status, the story lays bare, is a direct result of her limitations based on gender and social roles and her hard-boiled response to those limitations—both of which are presented, for the most part, sympathetically. In conventional film representations of women, there is little complex awareness of a role for woman as strong and oppressed, even though this is surely a more apt description of modern women struggling for independence. Ethel, a *femme moderne* who aggressively struggles to define her own understanding of freedom and empowerment, may be seen as a "femme fatale." However, Ethel Whitehead's noir identity is obscured according to the classifications on offer in discussions of classic Hollywood films. *The Damned Don't Cry* calls forth the label "woman's picture," which defines female space but not in a way that fosters new imaginings of female power. Indeed, the labeling serves to cordon off female craving for independence as something "other" than the more meaningful tough work of noir, which has tended strongly to take for granted the integrity of only the male protagonist's selfhood.

In *The Damned Don't Cry*, the men read Ethel as a "femme fatale," as Dave Bannion does Lucy Chapman in *The Big Heat*. Racketeer George Castleman says to Ethel (who also role-plays, as the utterly invented wealthy socialite Lorna Hansen Forbes), "You're so used to lying and cheating and double-crossing, you can almost make it seem good." While George is the one who induced Lorna to seduce Nick Prenta, George physically attacks her when she does so: "Pass out keys to all your friends," he says bitterly. Meanwhile, Nick, whom in the end Lorna is trying to protect, calls Lorna a "dirty tramp." When, at the end of the film, the reporters go to Ethel's home to cover the story of Prenta's and Castleman's deaths and the mystery surrounding "Lorna Hansen Forbes," they wonder about Ethel Whitehead's future: "Well, it must be pretty tough living in a place like this." "Tougher to get out. Think she'll try again?" "Wouldn't you?" With this feminist gesture, the narrative provocatively ends with a strongly sympathetic tone toward Ethel's plight and status as a hard-boiled female protagonist.

Another hard-boiled female protagonist appears in Sam Fuller's bizarre *The Naked Kiss*, released in 1964. In this film, Kelly (played by Constance Towers) transforms from outcast prostitute to town heroine. After the town turns on her and then restores her image when she is vindicated for her murder of the town philanthropist hero (when it is

proved that he was in fact a psychotic pederast), Kelly says at the end of the film, "They sure put up statues overnight around here, don't they."

This is the cultural landscape that film noir, in its most subversive gestures, questions. The narrative of film noir, carefully attended to, incites a consideration of the interplay between real human experience and gender expectations that are wedded to a logic of binary opposition.

Movies like the ones I've discussed in this chapter take noir viewers to task for their approach to the "femme fatale." In 1974, *Chinatown* revealed the tragic implications of looking for a virtual rendering of one big containable idea of woman, as Jake Gittes, slick as he is, has no means for sympathetically imagining, thus processing, the complex victimization of Evelyn Mulwray. The seemingly mutually exclusive categories evoked by "she's my sister, she's my daughter" give way to the film's plea to develop a more compassionate set of responses to the complex brutality of real human experience. *Chinatown* reveals the tragic implications of reading women as one thing or its opposite. However, this is the challenge of the paradigm of the "femme fatale": ideation surrounding Evelyn Mulwray, for example, must confront the real complex experience of Evelyn Mulwray, and there must be a critical viewer present to identify the confrontation and draw insights from its presence. Such an exchange between the active viewer and critic, sensitive to the network of expectations surrounding the "femme fatale" and the nuanced presentation of her experience in most film noir movies, will certainly constitute a more productive model for reading film noir.

Finally, Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia* presents a clear case of the productive value of deconstructing the "femme fatale" as a category. As E. Ann Kaplan says, "While the male discourse tried to define Norah as a *femme fatale*, we see rather that she is a victim of male strategies to ensnare her for something she did not do" (87). Such insights are the fruits of questioning the "femmes fatales" as a given. Following in the steps of Kaplan and Cowie, as both question the notion that noir is primarily a "male preserve" (Cowie, 125), I want to shift emphases from assuming a shared understanding of "femmes fatales" to engaging critical insight into the logic of the narrative and character development of particular texts. At that point, we can broaden our understanding of how social roles and gender fantasies (of men and women) intersect with and within film noir.

Film noir strongly indicates the problems that remain in our cultural imaginings of and about women. For all the feminist critique that has re-viewed attitudes toward gender and sexuality and for all the feminist

attention that has been paid to the "femme fatale" as projection of male fears and desires, we remain as a culture confused about and ambivalent toward the status of women and whether or not the arrangement of cultural experience in terms of gender is empowering or merely essentializing, thus limiting our imagination of the roles that women can play in the world. I believe that the ongoing construction of gendered spaces in culture hasn't been resolved and that the continuities between pre-feminist, modern, and contemporary culture haven't been adequately explored. Film noir offers a window through which we see this continuity. However, we need to reframe the "femme fatale" not as a given but as a critical apparatus for helping us to understand the limits of social roles and cultural fantasies about women.

In her collection of essays *Women in Film Noir*, E. Ann Kaplan argues that *The Blue Gardenia* is different from other film noirs, "reversing the situation in most noir films, where women are seen only within the male discourse [whereas] here that discourse is demystified through the fact that Norah is allowed to present herself directly to us" (85). In some sense defining the women in exceptional noir films who aren't really "femmes fatales" begs the issue, since the comparison depends on an a priori "femme fatale" which is drawn from the many films that, read closely, reveal the absence of a "femme fatale": she exists as an effect of problems in the culture, not as a thing in herself. Kaplan says that *The Blue Gardenia* presents "the confusion and alienation of women in a male world" (81). I suggest that this logic pertains far more widely in film noir, permeating the representation of so-called femmes fatales, than we are able to discern because of our preoccupation with categories of representation that are fixed and independent of experience rather than evolving critical tools.

Excerpt from *Laura* © 1944. Courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox. Written by Jay Dratler and Samuel Hoffenstein and Betty Reinhardt. All rights reserved.

2

"Well, aren't we ambitious": Desire, Domesticity, and the "Femme Fatale," or "You've made up your mind I'm guilty": The Long Reach of Misreadings of Woman as Wicked in American Film Noir

In this chapter, I want to focus more sharply on the misreadings of women, first by the men whom they encounter within the films, and second, by film viewers and critics who then perpetuate, and eventually institutionalize, these misreadings. The first part of my title comes from an early scene in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, the film adapted from James Cain's novel and directed by Tay Garnett in 1946. *Postman*, featuring John Garfield as Frank Chambers and Lana Turner as Cora Smith, remains a central text in the original-cycle of film noir movies made in the postwar period. In the scene from which my title is drawn, Frank sarcastically responds to Cora's declaration about the Twin Oaks, the roadside diner where she lives and works with her drunken but seemingly innocuous husband Nick. Unsatisfied, Cora has ambition: "I want to make something of this place. I want to make it into an honest to goodness—." Frank, a drifter who comes to the diner answering a "Man Wanted" sign, interrupts Cora's speech, "Well, aren't we ambitious." At that point Frank claims her expression of desire as his own, and kisses her, as the music swells.

Frank's dismissal of Cora's ambition represents a common rejection by characters in film noir of women's subjectivity, their desires and dreams for richer (fuller and more productive) lives. Instead, film noir's male protagonists project their own desires and fears onto women, which often results in casting psychologically three-dimensional, albeit hard-boiled, female characters as "femmes fatales." This process explains the second part of my title, quoted earlier in Chapter 1 and taken from the scene in Otto Preminger's *Laura*, in which Laura accuses Mark McPherson of just the kind of projection that is, I believe, in play when we talk about representations of women in noir (Figure 2.1).