

ISAE - SUPAERO

# Femmes fatales in films noirs

An overview of femmes fatales and insanity in classic films noirs



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2015-2016

## Introduction

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“Film noir” is an expression first used by the French critic Nino Frank in 1946 to describe Hollywood latest trend back in those days: crime dramas that featured cynical characters and sexual innuendos. It is usually considered that the classic film noir style period spans from 1941 to 1957 – though earlier and later productions could very well be deemed “films noirs”.

In 1928, cinema stopped being a silent art. Because of the technical restrictions of sound pictures, filmmakers did not have the same freedom about camera movements, light arrangements, close-ups, etc., as they had at the end of the silent era. All of them had to learn their craft all over again. Gangster movies in the thirties were among the first widely successful sound films. *Scarface*, directed in 1932 by Howard Hawks, was one of the first to make innovative use of sound. The charismatic Paul Muni portrayed the lead character in *Scarface*, a vicious and ruthless Chicago gangster who slaughters his way to the top and received praise for its performance from both audiences and critics. *Scarface* paved the way for other gangster films, which became a popular genre in the thirties. Other successful movies followed, led by prominent stars such as James Cagney (*The Public Enemy*, *Angels with Dirty Faces*, *The Roaring Twenties*) and Edward G. Robinson (*Little Caesar*, *Outside the Law*), two of the most influential actors ever. Humphrey Bogart was, at the time, a small time actor who portrayed supporting roles as gangster – and was repeatedly gunned down by the likes of Cagney and Robinson. However, he rose to stardom by acting in John Huston’s 1941 movie *The Maltese Falcon*, which is considered to be the first classic film noir.



Figure 1 - Humphrey Bogart and Mary Astor in *The Maltese Falcon*

*The Maltese Falcon* had all the elements that would later become typical film noir features: a complex, convoluted plot, a rough, cynical private detective and a beautiful, but deadly damsel in distress. The film also made artistic use of light and shadows to create a shady, mysterious atmosphere. *The Maltese Falcon* quickly achieved great success among both the press and the people, becoming a classic piece. Some earlier

movies, such as *They Drive by Night*, a 1940 Raoul Walsh drama featuring George Raft and Ida Lupino, are now considered films noirs, but *The Maltese Falcon* was the first major production associated with the newly invented style. Film noir was born: often a crime or drama motion picture displaying cynical characters bathing in a romanticized atmosphere heavily inspired by German expressionists from the twenties. Many more movies followed, until Orson Welles closed the “classic” film noir period in 1957 with his *Touch of Evil*.

Films noirs depicted very dark stories, with lots of crimes and violent deaths. They set their action in the most hazardous ghettos of huge metropolises, in grim places where the law has no power and where people settle their matters with guns and bullets... or on the pillow. The femme fatale is the queen of this grim world to which she belongs. Her feline smile, smoking good looks and cold behavior are a façade to hide her true personality: an uncertain woman with an unstable mind and a propensity for insanity and murder.

## Part 1: The femme fatale, a movie character

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### DEFINITION

Along with the “private eye” character, the femme fatale is one of the most prominent figures of the film noir style. According to the film database IMDb, 578 films noirs were released between 1940 and 1960, with 75 of them being associated with the plot keyword “femme fatale”, making it one of the most common plot devices in this kind of movies.

The femme fatale is one of the most popular movie characters ever. Through the years, the term “femme fatale” has become very common in both films and literature – as well as in every day life. Searching “femme fatale” on Google gives more than 14 million hits, with a huge diversity of results, including a news article about a glamorous Israeli model turned soldier, deemed a “femme fatale”. From the temptress Delilah to the romanticized spy Mata Hari during the First World War, femmes fatales have always been part of our cultures, literature and arts. The femme fatale is defined as a very attractive woman, who uses her charms to seduce men and bring them to their doom. She is depicted as lying and deceitful, and does not hesitate to use weapons and poisons. Though they are essentially associated with evil characters, the femmes fatales can and have also been tragic heroines.

### THE FEMME FATALE IN MOVIES

#### Ancestors of the film noir femme fatale: the vamps from the silent era

The history of the femme fatale in movies did not start with films noirs, even if it was where they had their most glorious representations. First movie characters of women with dubious morality can be traced back to the silent era, from as early as 1915. In Frank Powell’s 1915 movie *A Fool There Was*, the American actress Theda Barra portrays “the vampire”, a highly attractive woman who seduces men and abandons them after ruining their lives. The male protagonist, a devoted father and husband played by Edward José, cannot fight the irresistible attraction he feels for the temptress, and quickly falls to his doom. The film popularized the word “vamp”, used to describe women whose beauty and sexuality represent a danger to men, and cemented Theda Barra’s status as one of the first film “femmes fatales”.



Figure 2 - Theda Barra in *A Fool There Was*

During the silent era, other actresses were known for portraying strong, free and dangerous females, notably Pola Negri, Louise Glaum and, in her early roles, Myrna Loy. Even the famous Greta Garbo had the chance to play a vamp who ruins the bonds between two brotherly friends. These attractive women were opposed to the classic representation of women as naïve, supportive and soft characters, usually portrayed by actresses such as Janet Gaynor, Mary Pickford or Lilian Gish. Interestingly, “femmes fatales” were often foreigners, women from eastern Europe or Asia possessing an exotic beauty and a glamorous aura. The femme fatale comes from the outside, she is a stranger, a threat to the good, “domestic” wife: in Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau’s 1927 *Sunrise*, one of the most acclaimed silent movies, a temptress from the “city”, Margaret Livingston, seduces a man from the country into murdering his wife (Janet Gaynor). Temptresses from the silent era were the ancestors of femmes fatales. They were usually cold, self-assured women coming from foreign places and using their exotic beauty and dangerous sexuality to threaten the stability of classic marriages.



Figure 3 - George O'Brien and Margaret Livingston in *Sunrise*

### The Marlene Dietrich era

In 1930, Austrian-born director Josef von Sternberg went back to Europe after a brief career in Hollywood. Von Sternberg had directed the 1927 *Underworld*, one of the very first gangster films, which is often cited as an inspiration for films noirs. His latest American film, *Thunderbolt* (1929) was a commercial failure. Von Sternberg hence accepted an invitation to shoot a movie in Berlin. While selecting his actors, he discovered the then-unknown Marlene Dietrich and offered her the main role in his 1930's piece *The Blue Angel*. The film was shot simultaneously in German and English and told the story of an extremely strict teacher (Emil Jannings) who falls for a cabaret singer (Dietrich). The revered figure of the professor – one of the most esteemed and honored citizen in town – is slowly crushed by the young lady. Madly in love with the singer, the professor is devastated by her behavior, and turns into an alcoholic wreck. The professor has – literally – become a clown and dies alone in a terrifying ending.

The film enjoyed a huge success and instantly made a star of Marlene Dietrich. She moved to Hollywood with von Sternberg, and the two of them made six other movies together. In all of them, she played the parts of strong, independent women who do not hesitate to use their charms, beauty and sexuality as weapons to

get what they want. In that extent, she presages many of future femme fatale roles. In most of their movies, however, it is interesting to notice that Dietrich is the heroin; if her behavior is sometimes questioned and condemned, her motives are ultimately respected.



Figure 4 - Marlene Dietrich in *The Shanghai Express*

In *Blonde Venus*, for example, Marlene Dietrich poses as a married mother who resorts to prostitution only to pay for her husband's expensive medical treatment. In *The Scarlet Empress*, portraying a fantasized Empress Catherine II of Russia, Dietrich seduces powerful and influent nobles to save herself from a mad husband and his adulterous partner. Their last common movie was released in 1935. *The Devil is a Woman*, adapted from a novel by Pierre Louÿs, features an extremely seductive young woman, Concha Perez, who is unable to content

herself with one man. All the men who have known her fall under her charm, relinquishing everything, even their honor, for a chance to spend a few minutes with her. She was the last, and perhaps most influential of Marlene Dietrich's strong, dangerous women. The von Sternberg and Marlene Dietrich movies were influential, both in terms of aesthetics (von Sternberg was known for his masterful use of light and his outlandish atmospheres) and characters: Marlene Dietrich's roles fed later films noirs writers inspirations for femmes fatales.

### The femme fatale in film noir

The idea of the femme fatale as a film noir character became increasingly popular in the early forties. It was the likes of Ida Lupino (*They Drive by Night*, 1940), Barbara Stanwyck (*Double Indemnity*, 1944) or Claire Trevor (*Murder, My Sweet*, 1944) who made her a force to reckon with. During that period, there were as many different femmes fatales as films noirs. Or were there? One of the popular film noir characters is the private eye. Perhaps the most famous of them all was Philip Marlowe, a hard-boiled, cynical yet always incorruptible investigator originally invented by author Raymond Chandler, whose writings were often adapted as film noir screenplays. Marlowe appeared in no less than six different films during the noir period, and four others from 1969 to 1978 – including two remakes. Femmes fatales are not much different from the private eye; even if they came with different names and faces, they usually shared lots of characteristics which enabled spectators to identify them instantly.

In the setting of any movie, there are three main axes to develop a character: her background, her motives and her actions. They act according to their motives, which can often be explained by their past, by what happened to them before the movie starts. Femmes fatales are no exception to the rule. They tend to behave

the same way in films noirs, which means they usually have the same motives, and share same backgrounds. In this study, I will focus on the setting on the femme fatale: what is her story? Where does she come from? How does her past influence her present situation? These developments will give me insights to understand why the femme fatale has a tendency for insanity, and, ultimately, as to know why spectators love her.

#### THE FEMME FATALE'S BACKGROUND: A GRIM PAST

##### A quick note about flashbacks

In movies, the motives of a character are dictated by their present situation, which itself comes from a background story. Such a story can be told during the film using flashback, a common narrative design in film noir. For instance, the movie would open with an investigator asking questions to someone who knows more than they would tell, but ends up telling the whole story. Flashback is a practical device for introducing characters who were evoked by the other protagonists, but not shown. In 1944, Austrian-born filmmaker Otto Preminger – though usually known for not using flashbacks – introduces Laura, portrayed by Gene Tierney, in his eponymous film noir. Laura was murdered, and everyone talks about her, arousing the curiosity of the viewer. Preminger then uses flashback to finally show Laura. In *Laura*, the conversations between Gene Tierney's character and her benefactor Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb) help the viewer understand the setting of the film and the case. Other prominent films noirs featuring femmes fatales make an important use of flashbacks to create the plot: in *Out of the Past* (1947), Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum) tells his past affair with a femme fatale, Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer) to his girlfriend Ann (Virginia Huston). In *Detour* (1945), much of the story happens in flashback.



Figure 5 - Dana Andrews and Gene Tierney in *Laura*

##### Poverty and lack of money

All this emphasizes the importance of the background for a prominent character such as the femme fatale. As I said earlier, femmes fatales often share the same kind of background stories. The first, and perhaps most essential characteristic is their shady, terrible past. They always had to overcome problems in various forms, which led them to become the women they are. There are three main characteristics which are commonly associated with femme fatale backgrounds, each of them having a different and nefarious effect

on the character, making her more prone to turning insane or resorting to violence. The first one is the lack of money during childhood.

Films noirs often depict characters living in the “underworld” of gigantic metropolises. Common types of places include squalid neighborhoods where unemployment and criminality is high, and where people spend their nights drinking in some shady bars and cabarets. Such places make ideal locations for gamblers and mafias. Some of the most well-known films noirs use those locations: *The Set-Up*, a 1949 Robert Wise movie starring Robert Ryan and featuring match-fixing in underground boxing. Films noirs characters were often born and grew up in the same neighborhood where the action takes place in the movie: they come from the district and have led a life of poverty. In *Body and Soul* (1947), the male lead and his girlfriend are both originally from a sordid neighborhood and actually try their best to get out of the ambient misery. Other places depicting poor areas are traditionally associated with film noirs: docks (*Night and the City*, 1955), deserted parts of town (*Where the Sidewalk Ends*, 1950). In all cases, the characters have their roots in poor neighborhoods and lived a childhood without money. It is interesting to notice that, even though they want nothing but escape from their birthplace, they are usually still living there when the movie starts. The lack of money is one of the most common and essential motivations for femmes fatales.



Figure 6 - Richard Widmark in the grim underworld of London in *Night and the City*

### Parents-daughter relationship

The second characteristic also relates to childhood, but revolves more around the parents-daughter relationship of the femme fatale. In film noir, femmes fatales often come from remarried or single-parent families: either divorced parents (*Mildred Pierce*, 1944) or widowed fathers (*Angel Face*, 1952). This lack of a father (or a mother) figure has a negative influence on the young daughter. It can take several forms, all of them causing long-term problems to femmes fatales. Being raised by one parent only might trigger a desperate lack of affection and a need for protection of some sort.

Also, it is important to say that femmes fatales are often broken women, who suffered dreadful deeds in their past. In the twenties, various scandals tarnished the image of the then very young industry of motions pictures. In 1921, the young actress Virginia Rappe died as the result of heavy drinking at a party in Los Angeles. The famous comic actor Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle was then charged with the rape and murder of



Rappe, but was later found not guilty. Those affairs led to the creation of the Motion Picture Production Code, or Hays code, of censorship, which would be in strict application from 1934 to the mid-fifties. The code imposed restrictions to what was possible to display on screen, and directors had to be careful not to feature too suggestive poses, languages or relationships. In order to comply with the production code, writers and directors had to use implicit hints to suggest rather than say. Films noirs, which often played with “risqué” themes: violence, adultery and sex, required such narrative devices. For example, in *Double Indemnity*, the Billy Wilder’s 1944 masterpiece, dialogues are sprinkled with sexual innuendos. Due to the restrictions of the production code, it was not possible for directors to state explicitly that a character was raped, either before or during a movie. Actually, one of the first film to make a crude use of the word was *Anatomy of a Murder*, a courtroom drama directed by Otto Preminger. The film was released in 1959, two years after the end of the classic film noir period. Still, during the noir cycle, subtexts of rape are present in a significant quantity. It could even be explicit, like in Orson Welles’ *Touch of Evil* (1957), where Janet Leigh is supposedly raped by some mobsters. However, most of the times, there is only suspicion and tacit allusions that such dramatic events happened to the would-be femme fatale, thus marking her for life.

All femmes fatales do not share those characteristics. Some come from upper class backgrounds, and sometimes, nothing at all is known about their past. Still, it is meaningful to realize that there is a significant number of them who share one or several of those distinctive features. This grim background, this shady and sometimes dreadful past have immediate consequences on the “present situation” of the femme fatale. Her “present situation” is known and defined at the beginning of a movie: marital situation, money, acquaintances, etc. The next step is to study to what extent her background influences her situation, and, from that, how this makes her prone to lunacy.

#### A DULL AND GRIM PRESENT SITUATION WITH LITTLE PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

There are, of course, many different initial contexts for femmes fatales in film noir. However, a pattern exists, with a distinctive set of common features, which can apply to many of them. In this part of the study, I will focus on finding those features and see how they relate to the background characteristics of the femmes fatales.

Movie characters are shaped by their past. In the specific case of femmes fatales, their past is often so grim and dreadful that it has marked them for life. Even if they are not completely broken, they still suffer from the consequences of this past: their first and unique goal is to try to find a way to cope with those dreadful events so that they never have to deal with them again. In order to achieve that goal, femmes fatales try to find a situation that brings them what they crave: stability, money, protection, affection.

#### A convenient marriage

Starting from there, we get the first idea of how things might go wrong. On the one hand, would-be femmes fatales are very young women desperate to find a comfortable situation, and, on the other hand, they live in the dangerous world of films noirs where people constantly prey on each other. Vicious, rich and powerful men with a lust for young and beautiful girls loom around the corner, ready to lure the future femme fatale

into a trap. Since the unstable and fearful young femmes fatales are desperate to achieve some stability, they do not think twice before marrying those older men. At first, this grants them everything they want and have ever dreamt of. Their husbands put them in big, beautiful mansions and bribe them with expensive clothes and jewelry. They are introduced into high society, have their own cars, henchmen and can, for the first time, enjoy some kind of security. Most of these men are not evil people and some even treat them kindly. However, the femme fatale quickly realizes she has withdrawn her independence and freedom, and comes to despise her protector and her life. In film noir, this is a very common initial setting: a young and attractive woman is stuck in a loveless marriage with an older man – often a cripple of some sort – when the male lead, always more exciting and significantly younger, arrives. Then, there are two variants: in one case, the husband is a naïve, kind man genuinely in love with the femme fatale, and in the other case, he is an old cynical figure who hates his wife and considers her a trophy. In both cases, their relationship with the femme fatale is sour.



Figure 7 - Ida Lupino and Alan Hale in *They Drive by Night*

*They Drive by Night* is one of the first films noirs. It is a 1940 film directed by Raoul Walsh starring George Raft, Humphrey Bogart and Ida Lupino. In the movie, Alan Hale portrays a fat joyful middle-aged man at the head of a truck firm married to a younger woman played by Ida Lupino. Though Hale's character likes his wife, he neglects her and she has come to hate every aspect of his personality. In 1947, Orson Welles released *The Lady from Shanghai*, a classic starring Rita Hayworth, himself and Everett Sloane. In this film noir, Hayworth plays the young wife of Sloane, a rich and crippled lawyer

who despised her. He makes fun of her in public and plays with her, trying to drive her to commit adultery with a younger man, portrayed by Welles himself, knowing that she cannot leave him. Both *They Drive by Night* and *The Lady from Shanghai* display a common initial situation in film noir: a loveless marriage between the femme fatale and her protector, a man she hates for what he represents. In film noir, the husband embodies the failures and weaknesses of the femme fatale; he represents the realization that no matter how hard she tried, she cannot escape her past and will never be happy. She is dependent on him for her money, her home and her safety, and, if she were to leave him, she would return to her former miserable life.

This grim realization makes the femme fatale's situation all the more unbearable. She married at a very young age someone she was not in love with. That marriage enabled her to gain the money, affection or protection she had craved so desperately. However, she quickly ends up hating her present life: she does not love her husband, and, very often, he does not love her either. Despite all her material commodities, she enjoys no freedom and is completely dependent on her partner: would she leave him, she would return to the same sort of sordid life she left. It makes the femme fatale feel like a lion in a cage, not knowing what

to do and losing any hope of finally reaching happiness. Her prospects are almost as grim as her past: the femme fatale is a character with no future.

### An outside solution: the male lead character

The femme fatale's initial situation, in movies, will be solved however by the arrival of the male lead character. His appearing in the life of the femme fatale serves as the trigger for the main plot, and will bear heavy consequences. The male lead possesses a set of common features that makes him attractive to the eyes of the femme fatale: he is brave and ambitious, and often has little moral doubts. As I said earlier, the only motivation the femme fatale pursues is to escape her grim past with money or affection. The arrival of the male protagonist represents a chance for her to leave the new life she has come to hate (her husband and her lack of freedom), while keeping all the advantages that came with it: wealth, love and protection. At the beginning of a film noir, the femme fatale is on the brink of breaking. The arrival of the male main character is the final motivation for her to act. He represents her only way out: she has nothing to lose and uses all her weapons to get him.

In *They Drive by Night*, Ida Lupino's character is craving for love and affection. Though her husband says he likes her, he spends most of his time running his firm, drinking heavily and having great fun with all his friends who find him a most happy man. When he makes George Raft his second in command, Lupino, who is infatuated with the young man, decides to do what it takes to get him. She expects, as Raft is ambitious, to lure him with money. In *The Lady from Shanghai*, the situation is more complex. Rita Hayworth is desperate to run away from her husband, and sees a solution in Orson Welles' character: she tries to seduce him to attract him into her web. In another film noir classic, *Out of the Past*, Jane Greer's character, Kathie Moffat, swears to Robert Mitchum that she loves him, so that he would help and protect her. As they see in younger men a solution to escape their present situation, femmes fatales try to conquer them with seduction, possibly resorting to other means (money, blackmail), if they resist them. However, by acting this way, the femme fatale also triggers her own inevitable downfall.

The femme fatale never had things easy. She had to overcome a terrible past, which has often been highlighted by a poor childhood, the loss of a parent, physical or sexual abuse. In order to escape from that past, she got herself an apparently comfortable situation, as quickly as she could, without thinking twice. However safe, wealthy and adored she can be, she despises her new situation because she feels it traps her in a prison where she cannot escape what she is fleeing from her past. In films noirs, the arrival of a younger man with ambition and courage will be the final blow delivered to the femme fatale: as she sees in him her only way out, she sentences herself to a final punishment, and triggers her eventual fall. In the next part, I will discuss the process of the femme fatale turning insane. I will show how her past makes her more prone to lunacy, how her present situation puts her on the brink of madness, and how her final actions end up ruining her reason.

## Part 2: The process of going insane

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### AN INITIAL MENTAL FRAGILITY

#### About insanity

Before starting to think about the reasons drove made the femme fatale “insane”, it is necessary to define carefully what “insane” means, in terms of femmes fatales in films noirs. Insanity can be defined as: “A deranged state of the mind usually occurring as a specific disorder (as schizophrenia)”. In films noirs, insane femmes fatales will be defined as characters losing their nerves and temper following some actions happening during the film, making them behave in an extremely irrational way. It will often manifest itself as a growing paranoia, and, ultimately, a murderous frenzy. When characters seems to act “normally” at the beginning of a movie and end up showing those symptoms, they are “going insane”.

Etymologically, the femme fatale is called that because she usually is deadly to men: charms lures them, seduces them with her femininity and her sexuality and ends up having them killed – or killing them. In the Billy Wilder’s 1944 *Double Indemnity*, we are introduced to a character who might be the ultimate femme fatale, Phyllis Dietrichson. Her name, “Dietrich-son”, pays homage to Marlene Dietrich’s movie characters and instantly gives insights into the character: it is a hard-sounding pronunciation, and Phyllis is “Dietrich’s son” and not “daughter”, meaning she is as ruthless as a man. Phyllis Dietrichson is the ultimate femme fatale: she toys with men, seducing them and using them for her own interest before destroying them. She has all the weapons a femme fatale possesses: beauty, brains and a total lack of respect for the law or the morality. Though, despite all her cunning and strength, in the end, she loses her grip on the situation, loses her control and her temper.



Figure 8 - Barbara Stanwyck as Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*

With that in mind, the next step of the study will focus on the link between the troubled past of the femme fatale and her propensity for “going insane”. How does the difficult, and sometimes dramatic, events a femme fatale suffered as a child affect her as a grown-up woman, and how does that alter her capacity to think and behave normally?

## The parents' fault

Let us remember the three main characteristics commonly found in the femme fatale's background: first, the lack of money during childhood, second, growing up with one parent only, because of the divorce or death of the parents and third, physical or sexual abuse suffered during childhood. All three have various consequences on the femme fatale's mind that will make her more prone to turn insanity. In *Mildred Pierce*, a Michael Curtiz film with Joan Crawford and Ann Blyth, Mildred Pierce is a divorced woman who lives with her two daughters. She loses the youngest to pneumonia and starts spoiling the second, Veda. Veda becomes increasingly materialistic and selfish and eventually turns up to be the murderous-type, mentally-ill femme fatale. Veda suffers from the consequences of a modest childhood (her mother had to work as a barmaid to earn enough money for her daughters) and of having grown up with only one parent.



Figure 9 - Ann Blyth in *Mildred Pierce*

The lack of a father figure, and the fact she was overprotected and spoiled by her mother, who had nothing left in life but Veda, made her into a narcissist young woman who thinks everything is due to her. In the book *Women in Film Noir*, Pam Cook highlights the necessity for a female would-be femme fatale to have a father: it is because of her lack of a father figure that Veda's sexuality is troubled and that she uses it to blackmail people. In Otto Preminger's *Angel Face*, Jean Simmons plays a young woman who was raised by her widowed father. She loves him beyond reason, and hates her stepmother nearly as much. This excessive and exclusive affection progressively makes her more and more

paranoid, and, eventually drives her insane. She thinks up elaborate plans to kill her stepmother, whom she sees as a threat to her overly close relationship with her father. She has convinced herself that her stepmother hates her and tries to seduce Robert Mitchum into helping her with her criminal deeds. Money is of no interest to Jean Simmons' character, but, as she grew up so close to her single father, she sees everyone close to him as a terrible menace for her.

Some femmes fatales have something broken inside. They had to overcome abuse they suffered during their youth, which irremediably damaged them. Because of that, it is more difficult for them to trust people: they have a tendency for suspecting everyone and not letting their guard down. This impossibility for the femme fatale to trust other people has direct consequences on both her social life and her mind. As she is unable to open up to people, she appears cold and distant. By doing so, she alienates herself from the rest of society, makes no friends and stays alone. This aggravates the feeling of being caged outside, in a world which does not need her and does not like her. Furthermore, being left alone allows her more time to give way to her thoughts. The femme fatale is much of a dreamer. Combining this with the fact that she suspects everyone is after her, this vicious circle makes her more and more likely to suffer from mental disorder such as paranoia.

In the process of femmes fatales going insane, there are three steps. First, they have to be pushed on the brink of doing the mental swing. In order to achieve that, all the work is done before the film, or during the film by using narrative devices such as flashbacks. The femme fatale's background will create her "state of mind", and give her characteristics which make her prone to go mad. The second step is then to make her realize her situation is so bad that she has no future. She comes to hate her present life and her mind will start to wander.

## A PRECARIOUS SITUATION

### Starting situation and trigger element

As we have seen, the femme fatale is a character with one heavy problem (her past) and one goal: finding a solution to escape it. As a hasty and nearly desperate character, she does not think twice before acting, and quickly finds a solution to her most immediate problems. In most cases, she does so by marrying an older man who brings her safety, money and affection. However, she soon realizes that her situation does not suit her. Because of her anxieties, she cannot make friend and finds herself trapped in a prison she built herself.

There are two different situations in film noir. In some cases, at the beginning of the film, all the femme fatale's behavior is already set: all her past, her way of dealing with it and realizing she cannot stand her current situation happened anymore "before" the film starts. This is what happens in *Double Indemnity*, for example. The main male character, Walter Neff, portrayed by Fred MacMurray, is an insurance broker. At the beginning of the film, he meets Phyllis Dietrichson, the femme fatale played by Barbara Stanwyck, at her home while attempting to sell her some insurance policies. The arrival of Neff will represent the final trigger Dietrichson needed to carry out her plans. We do not know about her past, but it can be inferred she comes from a poor family: she indeed married her husband for his money, has come to despise him, but does not want to lose all his wealth. The minute Neff enters her home, he knows everything is wrong with Dietrichson. Her husband is a cripple twice her age, and she makes no secret of her hatred for him. The movie starts with the trigger element: at the beginning, the femme fatale has already realized there is no future for her and has already designed her plan. In *Gun Crazy*, a film noir directed by Joseph H. Lewis and released in 1950, the femme fatale, portrayed by Peggy Cummins, has never dared to take actions before meeting the male lead, who is her "soul mate". Once she meets him and they fall in love, she is finally ready to go illegal and commit crimes.



Figure 10 - Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray in *Double Indemnity*

## Drama films noirs

In film noir, the femme fatale can also progressively realize how rotten her situation is. The initial situation might not be a very happy one, it is usually less dramatic a setting than in *Double Indemnity*. In very dark films noirs, such as *Double Indemnity* or *The Lady from Shanghai*, all characters belong to the underworld and have very little morality: they are mostly all bad, malicious people. It is perhaps sometimes more interesting to find out that in other films noirs, characters actually are “regular” people living the most ordinary and boring lives. Such films noirs usually follow a classic drama plot, dealing with social subjects such as ambition and work: generally, it is about the rise of one character, often the male lead, who will be confronted to future issues (troubles with powerful figures such as rotten politicians or mafia boss, or an encounter with the femme fatale). In all the following, I will refer to these as “drama” films noirs, in opposition to “crime” films noirs which often develop police plots. Incidentally, it is interesting to notice that this reversed kind of plot also exist. In 1949, director Max Ophüls released *The Reckless Moment*, a film noir in which the main character is a family woman, portrayed by Joan Bennett. Bennett, a mother of three, is supporting her family while her husband is away, and has to deal with issues such as a playboy seducing her young daughter and a mafia mobster trying to blackmail her: she plays the role of a strong female with a daughter victim of a seducing, conniving man.



Figure 11 - Joan Bennett in *The Reckless Moment*

In drama films noirs, situations from the daily life are depicted, and the femme fatale seems, at first, to be a regular character amongst the rest of the cast. However, she will, progressively, come to hate her current situation. The film will present her with an enumeration of several successive events which will make her feel more and more animosity for her life. It also gets worse and worse: the consecutive events are more and more serious, starting with small everyday life details and ending with “dramatic” offenses which eventually break any hope of reaching happiness for the femme fatale in her current situation.

Such a pattern exists, for example, in *They Drive by Night*, which can be considered a drama-film noir. The film is built on a rise-and-fall structure around Joe Fabrini the character portrayed by George Raft. Originally a truck driver, Fabrini is an ambitious man with big dreams of becoming independent and finally having his

own truck company. On his way up to the top, he encounters Lana, played by Ida Lupino, a former flame of his. Lana is married to a much older man, Ed, and their relationship has become sour. Following a classic scheme, the movie displays the breaking-up of Ed and Lana's marriage through a series of events, which parallel the evolution of Lana's state of mind. At the beginning of the movie, Lana does not like her husband: she often talks down to him and is bored with his lack of ambition. She is, however, still married to him, and perhaps she still, deep in her heart, hopes they can get along. Obviously, their relationship is not going to improve, and actually gets worse and worse as the movie unfolds. Lana shows her distaste for her husband more openly in both words and gestures. The director, Raoul Walsh, uses both content and style to emphasize how sour the relationship is becoming, as well as the state in which Lana gets herself. Her words are harsher, her face constantly becomes more disdainful and she rejects Ed when he wants to hug or kiss her. The fatal blow comes during a party Ed and Lana attend: while she loathes his heavy drinking, Ed quaffs till he cannot straight up anymore. Lana is ultimately repelled by her husband, and realizes they have reached a situation she cannot bear any longer. Faced with that dreadful realization, she decides to act to free herself from the prison and the absolute hate she now feels towards her life.

### Exploring the fear of loss

The three main goals which are pursued by the femme fatale are safety, money and affection. Ida Lupino in *They Drive by Night* illustrates how the situation she got herself in, by marrying a man she originally did not love, is affecting her mind. Due to her main preoccupations, which are to have nice clothes and to live in luxury, it can be inferred that she was raised without money, and was looking for a rich man to marry. Lana Carlsen illustrates the case where the femme fatale mind is affected by a situation she rushed into and now regrets. In films noirs, there is also a common feature femmes fatales have: the fear of loss.

We have established that most femmes fatales do not like the situation in which they are at the beginning of the movie. However, leaving their predicament (which often means, their husbands) means they would have to return to a previous state, which includes poverty and squalor. To the femme fatale, this is unthinkable. The fear of losing everything they have worked so hard to achieve is too dreadful for them to bear. This situation can be seen as an unstable balance: on the one hand they loathe their present situation and their husband, but, on the other hand, they are too afraid of the consequences of leaving him.

As the femme fatale feels cornered, her behavior will become peculiar and she will hence contemplate dramatic actions such as murder. *Leave Her to Heaven*, a film noir from 1945 features a case a femme fatale going insane and illustrates the craving for affection and the fear of loss. The movie, starring Gene Tierney, Cornel Wilde and Jeanne Crain, was shot in technicolor – a rarity among films noirs, which were known for their creative use of black and white atmospheres. It features a young woman, portrayed by Gene Tierney, who just lost her father to whom she was extremely close. While in mourning, she meets a young writer, played by Wilde, and quickly falls for him. They get married, but it becomes increasingly clearer that Tierney's character is of an extremely jealous nature, being unable to stand Wilde taking a liking to anybody but her. Becoming more and more paranoid as the movie unfolds, Tierney sees terrible threats in other people, believing they want to take Wilde away from her. This paranoia drives her utterly insane and



ruthless, as she does not hesitate to orchestrate the drowning of her young crippled brother in law to keep him away from Wilde.



Figure 12 - Gene Tierney in *Leave Her to Heaven*

*Leave Her to Heaven* illustrates the mental swing of a femme fatale into a murderous frenzy (she even ends up killing herself to accuse her sister of murder and prevent her from getting Wilde), motivated in part by her past and by a terrible fear of loss. Gene Tierney's character grew very close to her father, developing a close bond to him, and his death was a huge blow to her. When he died, she suffered from a terrible lack of affection, and transferred all that consuming love onto Cornel Wilde's character. Losing Wilde would mean having to grieve for her father once more, and she cannot accept that. By developing this unreasonable affection, Tierney's character creates her own world and identifies outsiders as enemies she must destroy before they take her husband away from her. Similarly, the movie uses a three-units rule and shows a gradation: first, she wants to isolate herself with Wilde in a remote cabin in the mountain. Then, convinced she cannot compete with Wilde's brother for his affection, she decides to drown him. Finally cornered after all her wrong decisions and the suspicions of her family, she kills herself in such fashion that her sister would be accused of her murder. The movie offers a perfect illustration of how a femme fatale growing up too close to one of her parents eventually becomes insane because of her unbearable fear of losing everything.

### The sweet taste of revenge

As I have said, the femme fatale is a victim. Her past is very heavy to bear: she had to go through a lot, which included growing up in squalor and sometimes suffering abuse from other people (often men, but it might be society in general), but, progressively decided that she could not stand her suffering any longer. In film noir, the femme fatale's goal is often to get some kind of revenge for the deeds she suffered in her past. In *Gun Crazy*, Annie Laurie Starr explains to her lover, Bart, that she "has been kicked around all her life", and that now is "the time to start kicking back". The two of them are expert marksmen who initially decide to rob stores to get the money to support their lifestyle. But, in the end, Bart realize that what drives his wife is her appetite for action and revenge: she is angry against the rest of the world, mainly because of whatever

it was she had to overcome in her past. When he tries to reason with her, she lets him see how much she suffered and how she thinks society has done both of them wrong, as she declares that “it’s time they start paying you back”, after he tells her about his own past. When challenged or defeated, the femme fatale is also a sour loser: she cannot accept it and reacts more and more impulsively. In drama films noirs, the realization that she has lost will often drive her to action, and rush her turning from sanity to madness.

## THE TURNING POINT

So far, I have studied the different reasons that leave the femme fatale on the edge of insanity. Femmes fatales usually are vulnerable characters who go through a turmoil of emotions during films. They had to confront and overcome very grim events in their past and hence tend to be more mentally fragile than other characters. In haste and without thinking much about their future, they have found themselves a situation in which they have money and relative safety, but later realize they have no prospects and no freedom. For fear of losing everything they craved for, femmes fatales are eventually pushed to the limit and feel cornered. However, in most cases, femmes fatales are ultimately incapable of deciding whether to cross the line and go on with whatever plan they might have designed. They lack inspiration and motive to finally decide to perpetrate the deed. This last and final motive will be provided by the timely arrival of the main male protagonist. In crime films noirs, he is the private eye, while in drama films noirs, he is more of a regular guy who finds himself at the wrong place at the wrong time.

## The scheme

It is interesting to notice that the femme fatale often designs her scheme. She does not need any man to do the thinking: she is the brains, and sometimes even the arms. In the process of the femme fatale turning insane comes the step when she designs her own scheme. Her first idea is not the perfect plan; usually, it is more of a thought that comes to her mind – and first frightens her. In *Angel Face*, Jean Simmons’s character starts thinking about parting ways with her stepmother, but does not seem to act seriously about it. She tries to “murder” her by opening the gas valve in her room, but this attempt had so little chances of success that it could be considered only a timid trail, some way for Simmons to feel the ground. However, as she grows more confident, her attempts become serious, and her plans, deadly. Similarly, in *Leave Her to Heaven*, Tierney might have murderous thoughts about her brother in law, but does not carry them out before being convinced there is no other way. However, shortly after having this first idea, the femme fatale designs her real plan. It always involve murder: her sick mind does not enable her to think about anything less extreme.

In crime films noirs, plots are often very intricate, with complex ramifications. Most characters know more than they would tell, and clues are slowly discovered by the characters as spectators discover them too. Two of the most emblematic films noirs of the classic period were notable for their extremely complicated plot: *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep*. In *The Maltese Falcon*, Sam Spade a private eye, played by Bogart, is hired by a stunning – and dangerous – brunette, Brigid O’Shaughnessy (Mary Astor), to find her missing sister. However, this is only the cover to a more complex case, since there is no sister. People are after a famously expensive statuette, the “Maltese falcon” and most of the characters Spade encounters have at least two identities and changed sides more than once. *The Big Sleep* is a 1946 film directed by all-times

great Howard Hawks starring Humphrey Bogart and his real-life spouse, Lauren Bacall. The movie was adapted from a novel by Raymond Chandler. It features the famous detective, Philip Marlowe. Marlowe was originally hired by general Sternwood to investigate people blackmailing his younger daughter, Carmen. He soon realizes the story is much more complex. *The Big Sleep* has a convoluted plot with many layers and lots of characters. Hawks himself seemingly declared that he had not understood “much” about the plot, and only tried to make each scene “as interesting as possible”. Both movies feature a femme fatale. In *The Maltese Falcon*, Brigid O’Shaughnessy shoots Sam Spade’s partner in cold blood. In *The Big Sleep*, Lauren Bacall is Vivian Sternwood, the general’s elder daughter, and an archetypal femme fatale who seduces Marlowe. In both movies, they are central figures, knowing much more about what is going on than the detective himself. The complexity of the plot can be seen as mirroring the crafty brains of the femmes fatales. The more elaborate the plot seems, the cleverer the femme fatale is. Her plans are complex and can only have been designed by a highly intelligent mind.



Figure 13 - Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall in *The Big Sleep*

In drama films noirs, however, plans are often less subtle. The femmes fatales tend to act on instinct, relying more on gut feelings than on patiently designed plans. As they act on impulse, they have to think fast and adapt to the situation, which they do more or less successfully. This is particularly meaningful in the case of the femme fatale going insane: she usually acts on a hunch, and is almost instantly tormented by her actions. In *They Drive by Night*, Lana Carlsen originally does not plan to murder her husband. But, disgusted as she is by his drinking, she decides to kill him in the garage while parking their car. The murder is not carefully prepared, and is executed on a sudden impulse. In drama films noirs featuring femmes fatales with a propensity for insanity, schemes and plans are very often not as carefully crafted as in crime films noirs, where the complexity of the plot only matches the cleverness of the femme fatale. However, the same parallel can be drawn between the scheme and the mind of the femme fatale. Her plans are usually conducted out of a sudden frenzy, and have no logic behind them. They have lots of flaws and drawbacks, and are essentially meaningless and absurd. They were not designed in order to attain a possible gain, which is the case in crime films noirs; they are just the final disillusion and foolish gambit of a sick mind.

## The trigger

In drama films noirs, however, the femme fatale hesitates before acting. The key element that will finally push her into action manifests into her meeting with the male lead character. His arrival comes at a timely moment: it very often coincides with the realization that the present situation of the femme fatale cannot last, and that something has to be done. Moreover, meeting the leading man and acknowledging his potential represents a unique chance for the femme fatale: for the first time, she might be able to find a solution to keep her freedom while keeping her money or affection. Femmes fatales behave differently with male leads according to their needs. As we saw, there are three different things femmes fatales crave: money, love and protection. If they are motivated by money, femmes fatales usually see in male characters a way to remove the hurdles standing in their way. Their scheme consists, most of the time, in killing their husbands in order to inherit their money – so that they do not lose everything by leaving them. The main male character is then seen either as a tool to perform the deed (if the femme fatale is too afraid to kill her husband herself) or as a scapegoat to be accused by the police if anything goes wrong. In order to do so, the femme fatale usually tries to seduce the male character, by promising love and a share of the money. The most prominent example is *Double Indemnity*, in which Barbara Stanwyck entices Fred MacMurray into killing her husband to get the insurance money. Stanwyck's femme fatale swears to MacMurray she loves him, but is only using him as a weapon to commit the crime, as she might be unable to do it herself.



Figure 14 - Ida Lupino tries to seduce George Raft in *They Drive by Night*

However, when motivated by love or a need for affection, femmes fatales tend to act differently. The male protagonist is no longer a tool: he is, himself, the reward the femme fatale seeks. Her actions will revolve around the idea of seducing him, either through her sexual appeal, or by offering him something he cannot get by himself. In films noirs drama, male characters are often ambitious young men seeking fortune, typically in the American-dream fashion. Femmes fatales perceive that ambition and will often offer male characters their help to get money or promotion at work. In *They Drive by Night*, Lana Carlsen (Ida Lupino) is infatuated with Joe Fabrini

(George Raft), Lana's husband second in command. She offers herself to him, but he rejects her, explaining that Ed has always been decent to him, and he would not want to harm him. Since she cannot seduce him, Lana murders Ed, propelling Joe to the head of the firm. According to her twisted logic, such an operation, as it benefits Ed, should make him more attracted to her. In Otto Preminger's *Angel Face*, Jean Simmons's motivations might be less straight-forward. The young girl seems to be in love with Robert Mitchum, to whom she offers money so that he can live his dream. However, it is unclear whether she wants him, or just sees in him a tool to kill her stepmother and keep her father for herself. Meeting the male lead is the last thing which convinces the femme fatale to take action, which she often does impulsively. Unfortunately, she is usually terrible at judging people, and while she is convinced her actions will win over the male

protagonist, they actually result in the exact opposite. People are terrified of her, and she makes another significant step to madness.

### The ending

Once the femme fatale has made the shift, there is no turning back. Her past has broken something in her mind, her present situation has put her on the brink of insanity, and her meeting with a man coming from outside her social circle has finally convinced her to act. Unfortunately for her, she does everything wrong, alienates herself from everyone – even her partner – and ends up insane and alone. In order to emphasize the mental shift in the femme fatale, film directors use common devices, both narrative and cinematographic.

The depiction of insanity in film is a frequent thing, which has created many important masterpieces throughout film history. From the 1922 German film *Dr Mabuse, der Spieler* to recent movies such as *Shutter Island* or *Black Swan*, film directors have always found the descent to madness of a character to be an engaging basis for a story. There is one movie in particular from 1960 which illustrates the mental struggle of a character in a very visual way, to which the influence of films noirs can be tracked. Directed by one of the greatest film directors ever, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, *Suddenly, Last Summer* is a closed-door drama featuring the aging Katharine Hepburn and the young Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor. Taylor portrays a young girl who has been through harrowing emotions and is being treated in an institution. In one of the film's final scene, Taylor delivers a stunning monologue during which Mankiewicz aims his camera at her face to capture all her emotions. Taylor does an impressive job with her face and her voice during the scene, her eyes and her tone highlighting her inner conflict with madness.



Figure 15 - Elizabeth Taylor in *Suddenly, Last Summer*

Most films noirs featuring femmes fatales do not present the delicate balance between sanity and madness as Mankiewicz, but still use similar devices to illustrate how femmes fatales alienate themselves in their insanity. *They Drive by Night*, there again, is the best example. After killing her husband, Lana Carlsen feels more and more insecure. She cannot put up with the feeling of guilt and regret that threatens to overcome

her. In order to illustrate her going insane, Ida Lupino works with her voice and her facial expressions. Her big eyes are often wide open, making her look dazed and confused. She has incoherent words and uses a higher pitch for speaking. In addition to Lupino's performance, Walsh uses the recurrent symbol of doors, reminding Carlsen of the garage doors and her crime, to emphasize her paranoia and growing insanity in dialogues.

By perpetrating the unforgivable, the femme fatale dooms herself, and the realization of her doom comes as one last shock. This is the last step in her going insane: she realizes she is doomed, and then tries to bring down with her as many people as she can. In *They Drive by Night*, when Lana Carlsen realizes that Fabrini loves another girl and that she has killed her husband for nothing, she gives herself up to the police and accuses Fabrini as her accomplice, in an attempt to bring him down with her. In *Angel Face*, upon understanding they will never be happy together, Jean Simmons propels the car over the cliff with Robert Mitchum on board. And in *Out of the Past*, when Jane Greer understands that Mitchum has double-crossed her, she goes mad and shoots him before attempting to force a police roadblock, resulting in her death. Despite all her tricks and cunning, there can be no escape for the femme fatale, who could ultimately not overcome the dread of her past, and was actually doomed from then.



Figure 16 - Jane Greer and Robert Mitchum's last moments in *Out of the Past*

## Part 3: Despite her insanity, we love her

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Femmes fatales in films noirs bring all sorts of problems, not only to themselves, but also to everyone close to them. They make a habit of disliking their relatives, parents and partners, while having trouble entertaining even the most basic social relationships. Nevertheless, one of the characteristics of the femme fatale is that, no matter what, she still possesses a huge power of attraction. Why is that so? How is it possible that someone so obviously troubled still holds such a magnetic appeal? Now that I have established the different reasons that could disrupt the femme fatale's mind and studied the chronological process of her turning insane, I will focus on her power of attraction: how does it show, and how is it affected by her psychological state?

### THE FEMME FATALE IS LOVED IN SPITE OF HER INSANITY

#### Angel face

It is a fact that people fall for the femme fatale. This is actually one of her biggest weapons: being able to seduce men into doing almost everything. There are several common features that explain her appeal and why people fall for her so easily.

Of course, first of all, the femme fatale is young and beautiful. Her exquisite features are her first, main and most important assets. Very often, men only need to look at her to fall under her charm. In *I Wake Up Screaming*, a 1941 film noir, and in *Laura*, the main male characters are police officers who quickly fall in love with supposedly dead women only visible in pictures. In *Laura*, the investigator is so fascinated by the full size painting of the young woman that he needs to visit it often. Male characters always feel attracted to femmes fatales because they have that beauty, or classy charm, which distinguishes them from other women. For instance, Rita Hayworth as the femme fatale in *Gilda* and *The Lady from Shanghai* is described as “alluring” and “gorgeous”. Ava Gardner's role in Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* and Peggy Cummins in *Gun Crazy* are deemed as “beautiful” while Jean Simmons is “sensuous” in *Angel Face*. But, more importantly, femmes fatales are a dangerous combination of beauty and brains which makes them all the more attractive.



Figure 17 - Laura's painting in Laura

## Fragility

One of the reason men fall for the femme fatale so easily is because of her fragility. It is essential to notice that the femme fatale is a very complex character: in appearance, she is a very strong woman, with the will to do everything it takes to achieve her goals. But, more often than any other character, she is prone to showing her uncertainty and her weaknesses. Of course, the femme fatale hates herself for her weaknesses, but she has also learned how to use her fragility as a tool to lure men into courting her. Her fragility comes from her past. As we previously discussed, the femme fatale had to cope with a difficult background, made mostly of poverty and abuse. All these trials have left her a marked woman with many problems. It is notably manifest she finds it difficult to trust people and to have social relationships, but also feels a desperate need for affection and protection. This fragility has a tendency to attract male lead characters, since they feel compelled to protect the helpless or distressed people. In many films noirs, the male character is introduced to the femme fatale as a hero or a brave man with heroic deeds.



Figure 18 - Rita Hayworth and Orson Welles in *The Lady from Shanghai*

Sometimes, they even bond after the male protagonist rescues the femme fatale from some harm. In *The Lady from Shanghai*, the male character, Michael O'Hara (Orson Welles) saves Elsa Bannister (Rita Hayworth) from a couple of thieves. This tendency to protect the weak and the helpless comes from the silent era, where the male characters were particularly attracted by child-like women. One of them in particular has a close kinship with femmes fatales from the noir era. In the twenties, Louise Brooks was one of the first

film “flappers”, young women from the Roaring Twenties who showed disdain for “acceptable” behaviors of those times. In her films, Brooks portrayed young and attractive women who were both very innocent and terribly attractive, sometimes driving men mad. Brooks is perhaps most famous for her two roles in Georg Wilhelm Pabst’s movies: *Diary of a Lost Girl* and *Pandora’s Box*, which were strong inspirations for films noirs femmes fatales. In films noirs, men feel attracted to femmes fatales in part because they look fragile and unsure, in need of protection. The feeling of being able to defend and protect someone in need touches them and their ego.

What is maybe more interesting is to realize that in films noirs, male characters often tend to love the femme fatale and feel an irrepressible attraction for her even if she is insane and he knows it. It might even be what draws him to her.



## THE FEMME FATALE'S INSANITY IS THE REASON FOR HER SUCCESS

### Exploring the thrill of danger

In all sorts of media and particularly in film history, dangerous women always have had a compelling appeal. People tend to be attracted to danger, as it represents an alternative to their ordinary, boring daily life. In the silent era, for example, “good women” in the sense of “good wives” would always be opposed to the temptresses, the seductresses, the “vamps”. The struggle between the everyday wife and the femme fatale is almost always lost by the second, since men almost always come back to their wives, but the appeal of danger is too strong to be ignored. In Murnau’s *Sunrise*, for example, the male character is bored with his dull wife, a peasant from the country, and loses his head when he is with the lady from the city, a temptress that represents danger and excitement. If people are more attracted to dangerous women than to ordinary girls, it is also because they know that they are flirting with danger: the thrill of being consciously at risk is highly attractive. In crime films noirs, male protagonists, which are often private detectives, cannot help but fall in love with the dangerous femmes fatales who revolve around the case they are investigating. In an almost masochistic fashion, they chase the femmes fatales and react to their solicitations, consciously rushing into a trap. In *The Lady from Shanghai*, the main character, Michael O’Hara, has known all along that Elsa Bannister is an extremely dangerous women. His first words to the spectator express his disillusion about their relationship. The minute he had entered her life when he rescued her from a bunch of thieves, he knew he was making a mistake. Still, this did not prevent him from following her, getting hired on her ship and seeing her on a daily basis. Although O’Hara is intimately convinced Bannister will be his doom, he simply cannot stop chasing her. Being around dangerous women is attractive for men because it gives them just a slight taste of danger. The femmes fatales are characterized by a duality between beauty and danger: they indeed are extremely attractive, but above all, the fact they are dangerous make them even more irresistible. In *Gun Crazy*, for example, circus fair owner Packett introduces the marksman Annie Laurie Starr as “beautiful and dangerous” and “lovely and deadly”. However, for some films noirs protagonists, it is more about conflict.



Figure 19 - Peggy Cummins in *Gun Crazy*

Male characters in films noirs are often depicted as smart fellows with a quick brain and a good dose of courage. In drama films noirs, they are usually ambitious young people eager to prove themselves and make a fortune, while in crime films noirs they are often private detectives or cynical policemen who like to think they are more intelligent than most people. These people are never as good at doing their jobs as when challenged by worthy opponents. This is usually where the femme fatale enters the game. She meets the male character and then seduces him, or because she wants him, either because he will serve her as a tool to achieve her goals. The male protagonist is very well aware of the danger, and is all the more excited by it. Then starts a wrestle between the two characters. The femme fatale will eventually betray her partner in crime and he knows it. However, especially for crime films noirs characters who spend their lives living on the edge, the most interesting part for the male character is to try to make the most of their relationship, while of course remaining alive. In *Out of the Past*, Robert Mitchum's character is besotted with Kathie Moffat even though he knows her to be extremely dangerous. When his newest girlfriend tells him that "she can't be all bad", his only answer is "she comes the closest". But even upon this realization, Bailey continues to get involved in the Moffat case, as if he could not get away from it. More probably, Jeff Bailey is a character who loves fighting, and he has found in Kathie Moffat the only opponent worthy of his intelligence and craft. Although he loves his young and innocent friend, he simply cannot forget the times he spent with Moffat, and even if they constantly fight, he concludes, resigned: "we deserve each other".

### The fire within: an irresistible passion

As I described on the second part of this study, femmes fatales have a tendency, especially in drama films noirs, to act "on a hunch". They do not spend time making careful decisions, and act impulsively with very little worry about the consequences. While this has a tendency to make them more prone to going insane, as they often regret their actions, it also makes them profoundly human. Femme fatale characters are excessive in everything they do. They have suffered too much, need too many things and love too much. In drama films noirs featuring mentally disturbed femmes fatales, there is a constant characteristic they share: they are not characters of reason, but passion. It is, seemingly, this passion that attracts male characters to femmes fatales.

In *Out of the Past*, Moffat is always excessive about everything, especially towards the end of the movie, when she starts killing everyone who is bothering her. However, she never resigns to a situation and never accepts her defeat. Kathie Moffat is a character of passion, who is always in a rush and never stops. Compared to his nice, but dull girlfriend, it is understandable that Jeff Bailey shows more interest for the flaming and deadly Moffat. Despite her terrible past and all the problems she might be facing, the femme fatale seems to have a passion for living that inspires men. In *Gun Crazy*, a young man, Bart Tare, has a long-lasting fascination for firearms. His life changes when he meets the sharpshooter Annie Laurie Starr at a circus fair and falls for her. She then convinces him to go bank-robbing with her. In the movie, Tare is immediately attracted by Starr's vitality and strength, and the two share an interest for weapons. Despite being a decent man with a strong moral sense, Tare cannot resist Starr's attraction and inner fire, which have completely captivated him.

More than any other film noir character, the femme fatale is profoundly human. She has her weaknesses and went through a lot of difficult times when she was young. She might be crafty and capable of designing elaborate plans, but she also makes tragic mistakes. More importantly, she has very basic needs: the safety of a home, the affection of a loved-one and the protection of money. By such, she differs a lot from other film noir characters. The private detectives are often too cynical or too indifferent to their lives to be real. They belong in the fantasized world of rear-corridors, backdoors and smoky alleys of the big cities people dream of and want to see in films. They are pure movie characters who are “too perfect” in certain aspects to belong to real life. The femme fatale on the other hand has a lot of deficiencies. She is never as self-assured as the private eye. She makes mistakes. All she wants, in the end, is happiness. Of course, she possesses a set of fantasized characteristics. She is wonderfully beautiful and terribly immoral. But, nevertheless, the femme fatale is one of the most realistic film noir protagonists, and maybe this is why people have loved and still love her so much.

### THE FEMME FATALE... TO SPECTATORS

#### A glamorous evil icon

There is no doubt that movie characters love the femme fatale. They simply cannot resist her attraction, partly because she is delicate and fragile, but also because they love her inner fire, her passion and her spark of madness. However, the case can also be tackled from another angle. What if the success of the femme fatale comes from the attraction spectators feel for the silver screen dangerous lady?



*Figure 20 - Lauren Bacall in To Have and Have not*

More than any other character, the femme fatale embodies the film noir period. She is a glamorous icon which cannot be dissociated from the golden era of Hollywood. From the late twenties to the early sixties, American cinema has known a prosperous period usually nicknamed “the golden age of Hollywood”. This “classic” period was a time of creation and success that has never been approached since. During this era, noteworthy films were released in many genres: screwball comedy, western, courtroom drama and film noir. All these genres had their key characters, recognizable figures that would appear in most genre movies. Though, if John Wayne is perhaps the most emblematic western actor of all times, and if

the likes of Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn achieved worldwide recognition in comedy, the film noir femme fatale is best known as a character: she is not related to an actress in particular. Of course, some actresses were famous for their portrayal of deadly film noir dames, but the femme fatale got recognition as a character, rather than a typical part for a given performer. She is one of the most prominent symbols of the golden era of Hollywood, and, as such, an inspiration for all spectators who are nostalgic of these times.

Even during the noir period, she was already one of the most beloved characters in film. The femme fatale appealed to spectators because she represented a perfect combination of sexiness and danger, as well as personifying a “human” character with her strengths and weaknesses they could relate to. The femme fatale is a tragic heroin, being a victim as much (if not more) as a villain. She had that fire inside, and was an extremely exciting character. People tend to like dangerous, or even slightly evil characters, especially in movies, because they are much more “fun” than straight, timid, paragon characters. In the 1949 King Vidor’s movie *Beyond the Forest*, for example, Bette Davis portrays a married woman of a small country town who has an affair with a rich man from the big town. She loves money and expensive things, which her husband – a doctor – cannot get her. She is a femme fatale, motivated mainly by money, and stuck in a marriage with someone who has no ambition. Bette Davis, one of the most famous actresses of all times, was notably known for playing strong and independent women, and also played her share of “bad girls”. Davis was the main attraction of *Beyond the Forest*, and the promotion campaign had only one motto to attract spectators: “Nobody is as good as Bette when she is bad”. This attraction to femmes fatales of the silver screen might explain the huge success enjoyed by movie stars such as Marilyn Monroe: she was, in many regards, a real-life femme fatale.

### Real life femmes fatales



Figure 21 - Marilyn Monroe

Marilyn Monroe was born Norma Jeane Mortenson in Los Angeles in 1926. Her mother was suffering from psychological issues, and her father was unknown. She was raised by several foster families during childhood, and suffered sexual abuse from foster fathers during this period. She first married at the age of 16 in 1942, and started modeling at the end of the war, when she was noticed by photographer David Conover. Monroe posed for pinup photos in the late forties, and was discovered by Ben Lyon, who, at the time, was working for Fox. She soon started to appear in movies. She appeared in *All About Eve*, the Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s 1950 Oscar-winning masterpiece and achieved stardom in 1953 with her roles in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *How to Marry a Millionaire*. After a few less successful films, she renewed with success in 1955 with Billy Wilder’s *The Seven Year Itch* and starred in 1959 in the acclaimed *Some*

*Like it Hot*. Throughout her career, Monroe was known for playing the “dumb blonde”, a naïve and not very clever bombshell, sometimes even unaware of her own power of attraction.

It is remarkable to observe how much Marilyn Monroe’s career and personal life seem to follow the pattern I have established about film noir femmes fatales. It all started with her childhood, which was very grim: she lacked a father and a mother figure, she suffered abuse... and she escaped her situation by marrying a man at a very young age so she would not be forced to go back to the orphanage. Marilyn Monroe was also extremely famous for her looks and embodied, maybe better than anyone else in the history of cinema, the image of the “sex-symbol”. She is well-known for her infamous affairs, notably with the Kennedy, her flirtatious personality and her roles in films in which she would always portray extremely sexualized characters. Unfortunately, she is also famous for her tragic destiny: her lifelong pursuit of happiness, her divorces and her untimely death, in 1962, at the age of 36. Her death, most likely a suicide, also contributed to her immense recognition, as she remains, even now, one of the best known actresses ever, and one of the most prominent pop culture icons.

Marilyn Monroe comes closest to a “real life femme fatale”, having had to overcome a difficult past and never succeeding in achieving happiness in her personal life. She had her weaknesses and her strengths, which included her extremely sexualized appearance and character. One of the most beloved and successful – she was top of the box-office for nearly a decade – actresses ever, she might be the most obvious answer to the question: why do spectators love femmes fatales?



Figure 22 - Louise Brooks

In the whole history of film, other actresses have embodied the image of the “real life femme fatale”, though none is nearly as famous as Monroe. It is striking to notice that many of them had to go through the same kind of troubles femmes fatale usually do in film noir. Louise Brooks, the most recognizable face from the twenties, played two femmes fatales for Pabst in the late silent era. She had a difficult childhood, being raped by a neighborhood predator, an event that marked her for life. Brooks career ended at the beginning of the sound era, and she led a miserable life before being ultimately rediscovered in the fifties. The unforgettable face of Laura, Gene Tierney, also had her share of trouble. She suffered from various nervous breakdowns and had to be committed to institutions several times. All these actresses,

who played femmes fatales on the screen, suffered from similar issues in real life, adding to the legend of their characters. Rita Hayworth once claimed about her husbands that “they fell in love with Gilda and woke up with me”. If the femme fatale had so much success among spectators, it also comes from their most famous performers, whose personal lives were almost as legendary as their characters’.

## Conclusion

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The femme fatale embodied the myth and the glamour of the classic era more than any other character from the golden age of Hollywood. As the central character in film noir – either crime films with convoluted plots or drama movies featuring rise-and-fall stories –, she was often vital to the success of movies.

The femme fatale is a victim. She is a victim of her past: she was often brought up in a poor neighborhood and had to live without money. She had to witness the separation – or death – of her parents and suffered from a terrible lack of affection. Even more dramatic, she was the victim of male predators, who abused her while she was young. All those dreadful events have had a significant influence on the woman she has become. In order to cope with the difficulties of her past, she hastily rushed into a seemingly more stable situation which brought her the money, protection or even affection she had craved so much. Unfortunately for her, that new situation has soon begun to feel like a cell, alienating her from other people and depriving her from her freedom. She now realizes that she has no prospect for the future. This feeling of being caged, in addition to the numerous grim events she suffered during childhood have progressively brought her on the brink of insanity. Her meeting with a special man will finally drives her to action. She does not know him, but he embodies everything she thinks she needs: ambition, courage, and, sometimes, youth. He can be her savior, sometimes by himself, sometimes without even knowing he is being used. However, all the plans she carefully designed fail one after another and eventually drive her utterly and irreparably insane.

The femme fatale was a tragic heroin. In most films noirs, she had no chance of success : she was doomed from the start. This “fact” that the femme fatale ultimately had to lose – or die – historically served one purpose: to make sure that the film complied with the Motion Picture Production Code, which stated that criminals had to be punished by the end of any movie. None of them could get away with murder. However, it also gave another aura to the femme fatale, some kind of tragic destiny which made her even greater. She was doomed from the start, but she tried nonetheless, with all her flame, her passion, her heart. Even if she was immoral, and contemplated dramatic actions, no one could deny the femme fatale her will and courage. This relentless energy she possessed is what made her so irresistible, and explained why people loved her so much.

Femmes fatales are some of the most popular characters ever in our culture. There always were femmes fatales in literature, paintings and films. Femmes fatales come from all parts of the world and are found in all religious texts, in all sorts of books and in all kinds of movies. They represented a dangerous – but exciting – sort of women, whose sexuality and independence were threats to a society mainly ruled by men. Of all these deadly dames, the femme fatale in the American classic film noir is perhaps one of the most famous and enthralling. More than just a stereotypic character, she is one of the representations of a golden era of cinema, an age of glorious and captivating productions in motion pictures such as we might never know anymore. The film noir femme fatale has become a legendary icon, associated with tragic heroines and mysterious, mythical real-life performers. And, in the end, maybe this is why they still fascinate us so much.

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