

**TRANSGRESSING  
WOMEN**

*Space and The Body  
in Contemporary  
Noir Thrillers*

*By*

JAMALUDDIN AZIZ

# Transgressing Women



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**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Space and The Body in Contemporary Noir Thrillers,  
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This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-3662-1, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3662-3

In Loving Memory of My Late Parents

Aziz Bin Mohammad  
1945-2007

Solehah Binti Abu Bakar  
1948-2011



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book owes its existence to Dr. Lee Horsley, whose continuous support goes beyond my PhD years. I was also greatly helped by the members of the English and Creative Writing Department (lecturers, support staff, and fellow students) at Lancaster University while trying to finish my research. Special thanks to Professor Lynne Pearce who guided me through my thesis writing class. Her meticulous way of evaluating research works has always been my inspiration to achieve the highest standard in academic publication. Many thanks to my friends at CSP for their help in making this book a reality.

Moral supports were given by my kindest of friends that I made throughout my journey. Special thanks to Fatimah and Zabeda Abdul Hamid, Shy Kuo Wong and Han Lin (Mr. And Mrs), and Victoria Wang, Shakila Abdul Manan and Hajar Abd Rahim (from USM), for being there and for listening. My appreciation also goes to my friends and students at University Kebangsaan Malaysia. I am extremely grateful to my dear friend, Paul Chamber, for proof reading, suggestions, and valuable friendship. My gratitude also goes to the late Mrs. Joan Nicholson and her wonderful family, and my neighbours (Gill and Philips) for treating me like family. I must not forget my dear friend Zarina Othman and her family for allowing me to use their space when I need to. Special mention should go to the late Roy Anderson, my friend and a father figure, whose book inspires me. To David J. Griffiths, thanks for putting me back on track.

Though my parents do not get see the publication of this book, their love keeps me awake in the wee morning to make sure that this book would be ready for publication. My ultimate thank you will be for my mother and father, Solehah Abu Bakar and Aziz bin Mohamad, for their unconditional love, patience, support and prayer. A bouquet of zillion thanks is for my Mustaqim and Norhayati Hamzah. I am grateful to my siblings (Kak Long, Na, Pi, Yi and Yeo) for their understanding and love.



## INTRODUCTION

Because, tough talk or not, ramming the probe in, pretending to go into it from the company angle or however I played it, there was stuff going on here I didn't understand, and my stomach was telling me it was no good.  
—James M. Cain, *Jealous Woman*, 1992, pp.36-37

The protagonist in Cain's *Jealous Woman* is blasé about the danger that he is in, and this world-weary awareness is the translation of his existential anxiety and angst, which evoke noir's inescapable sense of determinism. Such an uncontrollable force constitutes a noir credo and this is articulated by a male noir protagonist's sense of entrapment in the world of crime that he is driven into, a world that is governed by a bleak, pessimistic, and delusional vision that inevitably foreshadows his doomed ending. So important is this force to the conceptualisation of the noir genre that it is often reified at both structural and iconic levels. At the structural level, this force is manifested by noir's convoluted narrative style and plot. Many classical noir narratives, especially in such canonical noir films as Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) and Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946), are told by using a flashback technique. This technique serves to create a sense of alienation and at the same time to reveal, in the case of the latter film, a miasma of double crosses that Swede was involved in. At the iconic level, both the doomed male protagonists and the duplicitous femmes fatales form an aesthetic that alludes to the noir genre's ideological contradictions. While the male protagonist's inescapable fatality is often the reflection of his own greed and dubious morality, the annihilation of the femme fatale is rooted in her failure to absorb these ideological contradictions (as opposed to the good woman's willingness to assume patriarchal gender roles), which is rather expected as femmes fatales constitute the embodiment of a male fantasy, serving unconscious male anxieties; hence, creating a noir sense of ambivalence. The male protagonist and femme fatale's status as iconic figures in the noir tradition has been widely discussed, but I am more interested in the portrayal of other female characters that are constructed as the genre undergoes continuous and various subversion and expansion, and whose construction is informed by contemporary theories such as postmodernism and post-feminism.

While a considerable amount has been written about a male protagonist and a femme fatale—two iconic figures in the noir tradition—little attention has been given to other female characters, especially the ones that are formed as a result of the genre's development. Even though the traditional femme fatale figure is occasionally referred to throughout my analysis, the main objective is to delineate these 'other female figures' that have also been affected by, and inhabited, the corrupted noir world. To manage this, my analysis, in effect, concentrates on two crucial thematic focuses germane to gender and cultural studies, viz., narrative and space, and the body or self, foregrounding their relevancy and applicability to the theorisation of cinematic and literary noir. The decision to use these thematic focuses is influenced, informed and motivated by my interest in pulling together an eclectic collection of neo-noir texts that may sufficiently encapsulate wider temporal and critical indicators. These temporal and critical indicators are central in contemporary cultural theories such as postmodernism and post-feminism, along with other theorisations of gender and the noir genre, which means that my analysis is drawn from the classical noir examples and will then arrive at the neo-noir sub-genre, and to the latest phenomenon in the genre called 'future noir'. I will argue that the coupling of an interest in the representations of these other women with neo-noir conventions will facilitate the effort to categorise as well as understand the new branch of neo-noir texts written or directed by both male and female authors. With their distinct features the characterisation is important. From my point of view this is long overdue, not so that a new label or name can be attached to it or to show whether or not the texts subvert or challenge the old conventions, but rather so it can be used to discuss and correlate the characters with some contemporary feminist struggles and issues concerning the representation of women in literary and cinematic noir. Eschewing as far as I can the debate on what a 'feminist text' or a text labelled as such is, the overarching and unifying factor of my book is the noir genre itself.

My book reflects my interest in the representation of the other female characters from noir to neo-noir texts in both film and literature. I should perhaps emphasise here that my book is not an attempt to argue whether the noir thriller is a genre, a movement, or a cycle. I find myself agreeing with more contemporary critics (like James Naremore) who find this argument 'tiresome', and that we should move on. The noir thriller has moved beyond the obstacle or impasse of finding its definition: one (including the non-academician) can now easily distinguish whether a text is a noir text or not, especially due to its extensive turn into a marketing label that attracts its own aficionados. However, what is more relevant for

me is to delineate the ideological and conventional shifts from noir to neo-noir, and this can be done by looking at the varied representation of female characters in the development of the noir genre itself. The central thread linking the chapters is the attempt to explore noir conventions beyond their generic boundary, venturing into the other genres, exploring texts created by a process of generic fertilisation. This is evident both in the eclecticism of the texts selected and the themes explored.

In brief, I consider classical noir a genre; this means neo-noir and future noir are its natural extensions or sub-genres, that is, a creative variation and subversion of the classical noir period. I find myself comfortable with the definition of a genre employed by Martin Rubin, who argues that '[a] genre is a set of conventions and shared characteristics that have historically evolved into a distinct, widely recognized type of composition within an art form.'<sup>1</sup> To a certain extent, even though treating noir as a genre often demonstrates a dependency on a set of formulaic features, the chief difference lies, as Paul Cobley opines, in the idea that '[w]hile formula is demonstrable, then, its reception is less easy to define. Genre, in contrast to formula, is concerned precisely with the issue of how audiences receive narrative conventions'.<sup>2</sup> The noir genre, both cinematically and literally, is always about the audience's reaction (as demonstrated by, among others, its complicated narrative that creates a sense of complicity in the audience), especially because of its brooding mood and atmosphere, cynicism, and critical edge. This very recognizably bleak and pessimistic vision first motivated many French critics to name the post-war American 'hard-boiled' stories they found in early 1945 the 'serie noire or "dark series"'.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, when a batch of American crime films that was based on the series appears, maintaining its grim portrayal of American criminal underworld and society in general, the term 'film noir' was coined. Due to the common noir narrative at that time that deals with the failure of the returning war veterans to adapt to the changing society, which is rooted in the radical change in gender assignments due to economic changes and demands, critics of the noir genre were quick to label film noir misogynistic. The feelings of alienation and isolation experienced by these war veterans are translated into noir existential despair and generalised angst; and the source of blame seems to coalesce most insistently around the financially independent and sexually charged women.

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<sup>1</sup> *Thrillers*, 1999, p.3

<sup>2</sup> *Narrative*, 2001, p.213

<sup>3</sup> R. Barton Palmer, *Hollywood's Dark Cinema*, 1994, pp.7-8

Historically, this deep-seated fear of women's freedom in the noir tradition is mutated into a blame on their economic, moral, and sexual independence, as embodied in the femme fatale figure—a woman who, sometimes not through her fault, represents a threat to the male protagonist's virility. It quickly became clear to the critics of the genre that the femme fatale is portrayed as insubordinate by the style, atmosphere, and vision of a noir text, marking the genre's increasing interest in annihilating her subjectivity. Her presence in the narrative represents the destabilisation of masculinity, which adds to 'the experience of alienation, fragmentation and inconsistency that characterise both film noir and neo-noir'.<sup>4</sup> As 'the entire history of American genre film could be traced on the bruised and besieged white male body',<sup>5</sup> her annihilation, therefore, is ideologically driven. Many studies have been carried out on the femme fatale figures in film noir. Little, however, has focused on the representation of the female characters in both literary and cinematic noir. One of the reasons for this, as Lee Horsley has argued, is that 'the femme fatale is a stereotype more prevalent in *film noir* [original italic] than literary noir'.<sup>6</sup> Frank Krutnik's *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre and Masculinity*, for instance, concentrates on the 'classical' Hollywood cinema, paying little attention to the female characters available during that period. E. Ann Kaplan in the new edition of *Women in Film Noir* addresses the lack of 'feminist perspectives on film noir, or perspectives dealing with women at all'.<sup>7</sup> Kaplan's observation also illuminates the fact that even less research has been carried out that combines the study of the literary and cinematic female noir figures. This book aims to redress the balance by combining the study of the representation of the female characters in both literary and cinematic noir and neo-noir, paying particular attention to how noir and neo-noir conventions can be used to give meanings to their characterisations.

In addition to combining the study of cinematic with literary noir, this study also treats and explores the neo-noir sub-genre outside of its American context. This treatment is crucial as part of my evidence that the neo-noir sub-genre, with the influence of postmodernist culture, has expanded beyond the temporal and spatial references of the post-World War II American society. It seems natural for the noir genre's socio-political critics of society to go through some creative variations, namely neo-noir and future noir sub-genres, while maintaining the meta-discourse

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<sup>4</sup> 'E. Ann Kaplan, 'Introduction to New Edition', *Women in Film Noir*, 2000, p.1

<sup>5</sup> Manohla Dargis, 'Pulp Instincts', in *Action/Spectacle Cinema: Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Jose Arroyo, 2000, p.120

<sup>6</sup> *The Noir Thriller*, 2000, p.10

<sup>7</sup> 2000, p.5

of its critical edginess and doomed vision. These sub-genres, often generated by noir's blatant honesty and persistent critical enquiry into the dark side of human nature, are in themselves a site for contested cultural ideology. Woody Haut in *Neon Noir*, for example, asserts that:

Though neon noir fiction reflects the warp and woof of society, it rarely does so to the point of negating the inner workings of the genre or of exposing itself to political categorisation. While most contemporary noirists maintain a grip on the moral centre of their fictional world, others demonstrate a more flexible relationship. Responding to a crime-ridden, economically extreme, and morally uncertain culture, the latter carve out narratives that manoeuvre between fiction and replication, self-reference and artifice.<sup>8</sup>

Haut's view alludes to neo-noir's affinity with a postmodern take on the genre, highlighting the noir genre's adaptability and malleability. The sustainability of the constitution of the noir genre is evident in its sub-genres, and 'what links the 40s and 90s', according to E. Ann Kaplan, 'is the political and social sense of something amiss in American culture—a sense of drift, of pointlessness, political helplessness, and of inaccessible and hidden power creating generalised angst'.<sup>9</sup> Although Haut and Kaplan are talking about noir's critical edge that relies on a maelstrom of political and social events specifically in America, the genre has evolved beyond its geo-political boundaries with noir texts mushrooming outside the American context. The expansion beyond the American context is also possible because of the nature of the neo-noir text itself, which is defined based on temporal rather than spatial specifications. Richard Martin, for instance, sees this transformation and link as a natural part of generic progression:

Where seventies neo-noir which in itself constituted an investigation and critique of the noir form—was characterised by a thematic revival of the latter-day films noirs of the fifties, and eighties neo-noir tended towards a visual pastiche of what was perceived as a classical noir style, nineties neo-noir offers an eclectic mix of all that has gone before, a self-consciously ironic palimpsest informed by knowledge of the history of the film noir genre from its inception in the forties to its revival in the sixties and continuing evolution through the seventies and eighties.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> 1999, pp.11-12

<sup>9</sup> 'Introduction to New Edition', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.1

<sup>10</sup> *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls*, 1997, p.117



Martin's observation highlights neo-noir's concern with style, mood, and theme. These are important in characterising neo-noir texts, indicating that neo-noir has become a signal of the postmodern moment—a moment beyond generic boundaries. This link has enabled my analysis to include some British noir texts, for example Nicholas Blincoe's *Acid Casuals* and Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game*.

The first section of this book concentrates on the central issue surrounding a feminist view of space, demonstrating how noir's tendency to destabilize the dichotomy of privacy and publicity can have progressive effects on the female characters. The general assumption regarding women's association with private space (hence their subordination in patriarchy) is explored by looking at two types of narratives, viz., serial killer narratives and revenge narratives. Chapter one explores the serial killer narratives in relation to female characters and noir conventions by focusing on the dynamics of the discourse of space with gender assignment. By using Donald W. Ball's sociological terms, privacy is defined as 'one's ability to engage in activities without being observed by non-involved others', and publicity as 'the observability of these activities by others not directly involved'.<sup>11</sup> I also use the term space and place interchangeably, arguing that they share the same point of confluence in the way a character finds meanings in his or her identity. To facilitate my analysis, I found the definition given by feminist geographers, Karen Lury and Doreen Massey, to be useful in understanding the meaning of space. Space in the serial killer narratives, I discovered, means three varying types of proximity: one, between the serial killer and the victim; two, the serial killer and the detective; three, the serial killer and society. In this chapter, I return to the question of how liberating these female characters are especially when they are studied in relation to the serial killer narratives and noir or neo-noir conventions. As serial killing is seen as a way of oppressing women, this chapter also tries to show how noir conventions help to subvert and appropriate the private/public paradigm, and to illustrate how this affects the construction of the neo-noir female characters. Lastly, by juxtaposing the female characters in literary noir with its cinematic counterpart, I hope to illustrate that the literary noir woman is usually and largely more progressive than her cinematic counterpart.

Chapter two explores revenge narratives by tracing the link between a male avenging figure in the noir tradition and a femme fatale in the urban milieu that they inhabit. Building upon examples taken from male

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<sup>11</sup> 'Privacy, Publicity, Deviance and Control', *Pacific Social Review*, 1975, p.260

avenging figures in the classical noir tradition, I would like to show that, unlike typical revenge narratives, noir revenge narratives are defined by the avenger's existential despair. Two principal questions of this chapter are: one, how do noir's masculine traits affect the representation of these female avengers?; two, what are the similarities and differences between female avengers in noir and neo-noir texts? To answer these questions, I begin by looking at the failure of community and the failure of agency to understand the motivations behind the female avenger's actions. This chapter also revisits the debate surrounding the idea of gaze as masculine; my focus, however, is on the question of how the process of centering and recentering a female protagonist within the narrative—as theorised by Mary Ann Doanne—alludes both to the noir genre's tendency to disorient the audience and to the ways of foregrounding the theme of alienation and isolation. This chapter also looks at how the appropriation of agency is formed as a result of the postmodern take on female subjectivity, marking her status as a hybrid.

The second section of this book focuses on the representation of the 'female' body/self in neo-noir texts. Chapter three sets out to study and chart some of the transgressive female characters with regard to the representation of their self/body in neo-noir texts. The emphasis on the postmodernist dissolution of modernist subjectivity is central to my analysis in this chapter, producing one of the fundamental questions of this chapter: Is gender difference relevant now? My major interest in analysing the effects of generic mutations on the representation of these women in neo-noir texts leads me to explore how the traditional notion of the feminine, as the antithesis of the masculine, represents lack or the irrationally absent body in this sub-genre, is challenged. It also revisits the debate surrounding the association of woman/feminine with nature, that is, an association that consigns her to a victim role. I suggest the employment of a postmodernist critical perspective to show how its 'expression of ontological rejection' of a unified self, as suggested by Scott McCracken, can facilitate our understanding of the hybrid status of these female characters. My other concern in this chapter is to investigate how a noir female character 'metamorphoses' into a neo-noir subject as the genre is hybridised. Concomitantly, in this chapter, I am also interested in looking at the representation of the 'female' transgressors and their link with the female self as expressed within the neo-noir context. I propose that the female self and desire in neo-noir texts can be analysed especially in association with its spatial clues, which can be traced in her body. My interest is in looking at neo-noir texts that deal with desire as the female characters' main impulse, and in showing how these characters' status as

transgressors can result in the deconstruction and destabilisation of the gender binary.

This chapter is further divided into the following sections. The first section looks at the notions of desire and transgression. I begin by proposing that neo-noir texts' status as a postmodernist cultural production, which defies any form of homogeneity, enables these hybrid female characters to find their own voice. In order to understand the ideological impulse of the Western binary system that consigns women to the status of the object of male desire, I invoke psychoanalysis to provide the background for the formation of this structure of desire in noir texts. This brings me to the theorisations of identification and gaze, which the noir genre is known to destabilise. The second section of this chapter looks at Judith Butler's theory of performativity, arguing that the fluidity of gender definition in postmodernist texts facilitates the formation of a hybrid subject. I argue that the theorisation of gender as performative signals a boundary crossing by the female characters through their performance of gender roles, which then gives them liberatory voices.

Chapter four takes this book a step further from the performative gender roles discussed in chapter three by looking at the representation of the female body in the future noir sub-genre, focusing on the interface between human and machine. One of the major enquiries of this chapter is to investigate the effects of human/machine interface on the status of the female characters, demonstrating the way the ontological uncertainty inherent in noir texts can further complicate the binary opposition between human and machine. This I hope will also reveal the varying degrees of interface that can be liberating and influential to these female characters. By applying the concept of generic hybridisation, I would like to show how and why the amalgamation of genres affects the representation of gender and identity, which in turn is crucial in defining a human within postmodern conditions. By doing this, I hope to be able to trace a variety of female characters in the future noir sub-genre, usually in cyberpunk narrative. This chapter asks: what happens when it is the human body itself that betrays or undermines the traditional definition or constitution of a human being?

This chapter continues with the exploration of the terms cyberpunk, cyberspace and a cyborg. I venture into cyberpunk territory to further investigate the dissolution of the humanist subject through the man/machine interface. This section seeks to answer the question: If a cyborg is a hybrid whereby gender differences are dissolved, how do I define a female character? The main objective of this section is to consider the female perspectives on cyberpunk, especially on the cyborg figure in

the context of future noir. I would like to find out how a female cyborg figure can be a liberating symbol for women, a point supported by feminist critics like Donna Haraway. In order to understand the treatment of the post-human female characters in cyberpunk narrative, I look at post-apocalyptic women and the doppelganger narrative. In the post-apocalyptic women section, my major enquiry is related to the theme of primitiveness and how the lack of a straightforward conceptualisation of the man/machine interface produces a different psychoanalytically informed question: what happens to the female characters after the collapse of the Law of the Father? The doppelganger narrative, on the other hand, offers another perspective on cyborg imagery.

I return to the notion of female desire and fatal sexuality in the next section, focusing on the characters who inhabit or embrace virtual reality. This section seeks to establish how the loss of agency and individual autonomy are linked with cyberpunk's use of virtual reality as a metaphor for a female body and desire. This section is further divided into two sub-sections: one, a brief look at the exegesis of virtual reality; two, an analysis of female-authored texts. Its aim is to find out whether or not these female authors have succeeded in reforming, parodying or appropriating the cyberpunk sub-genre in an effort to liberate their female characters from the constraint of patriarchy. Building on Lee Horsley's analysis of the male characters in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Rudy Rucker's *Software*, I ask, how relevant is this analysis to the female characters? The final concluding section of this chapter looks at two texts written and directed by female authors, Pat Cadigan and Kathryn Bigelow, respectively, questioning whether or not their representations of female characters are progressive or regressive.



## CHAPTER ONE

### SERIAL KILLER NARRATIVES: THE TROUBLE WITHIN AND WITHOUT

'He never did anything about it till the first Mrs Nirdlinger died. It happened that one of those children was related to that Mrs Nirdlinger, in such fashion that when that child died, Mrs Nirdlinger became executrix for quite a lot of property the child was due to inherit. In fact, as soon as the legal end was cleared up, Mrs Nirdlinger came into the property herself. Get that, Huff. That's the awful part. Just one of those children was mixed up with property.'

'How about the other two?'

"Nothing. Those two children died just to cover the trail up a little. Think of that, Huff. This woman would kill two extra children, just to get the one child that she wanted, and mixed things up so it would look like one of those cases of negligence they sometimes have in those hospitals. I tell you, she's a pathological case."<sup>1</sup>

Unlike many classical noir novels that feature the iconographic femme fatale, whose seductiveness and sexuality spell personal trouble and existential dilemmas to the doomed noir heroes, James A. Cain's *Double Indemnity* extends her fatality by portraying her as a cold blooded serial killer. In brief, Mrs. Nirdlinger,<sup>2</sup> whose murderous scheme includes framing the male protagonist, an insurance agent Neff, to kill her husband for monetary reasons, is also a serial killer who has brutally killed some innocent children for the same purpose. Money, ostensibly, is her motivation to kill. This account, however, does not divorce her from the psychoanalytic discourse of madness. 'Frequently,' argues Frank Krutnik, 'the woman is ultimately revealed to be a pathological case, her deviance and dissatisfaction set beyond the boundaries of rational explanation,

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<sup>1</sup> James Cain, *Double Indemnity*, in *The Five Great Novels of James M. Cain*, 1985, p.317

<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Nirdlinger is Mrs. Phyllis Dietrichson's name from her previous marriage. This reference only takes place in the novel and not the film.

recuperated as madness';<sup>3</sup> encapsulating classical noir's connection with psychoanalysis. This madness finds its expression in Lola's suspicion that Phyllis has 'a look in her eyes', and is followed by the death of her mother who was purportedly murdered by Phyllis. In the Oedipal paradigm, Phyllis is a castrated figure who is aptly killed at the end.

The serial killer narrative is not a strange or new phenomenon in the noir tradition, but it usually centres on the idea of women as victims of the crime. American tough gumshoes or egregious vigilantes such as Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer are also bordering on serial killers in their strategies to solve their cases—the victims, however, are mostly women. Lee Horsley views Hammer's 'vigilantism' as leaning 'towards right—rather than left-wing views', which implicitly promotes 'a macho conservatism',<sup>4</sup> foregrounding the symbolic function of his violent action and angry personality. Serial killers function as social commentators who therefore can have either a right-wing or left-wing view. However, they take a step beyond verbal commentary by actually killing their opposition. Jim Thompson explores this narrative in *The Killer Inside Me* with the male left-wing serial killer protagonist, Lou Ford—a deputy sheriff, using the first person narration to foreground his subjectivity. Even though Lou's victims are both males and females, his motivation to kill women is largely psycho-pathological; that is, a recurrent impulse and pattern that hark back to his childhood trauma, using the woman in his past as a scapegoat.

Mine had started back with the housekeeper [Helen] [...] she *was* woman to me; and all womankind bore her face. So I could strike back at any of them, any female, the one it would be safest to strike at, and it would be the same as striking her.<sup>5</sup>

The impulse and pattern are also palpable in the classical cinema like Robert Siodmak's *The Spiral Staircase*<sup>6</sup> that explores this phenomenon, with its cinematic representation of a serial killer in a Hitchcockian style noir thriller. The female victims in the film are chosen due to their physical disabilities, and the female protagonist, Helen Capel, is a mute servant in a mansion where the killer actually lives with his invalid and domineering mother. Even though Helen is the central character, the point

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<sup>3</sup> *In A Lonely Street*, 1997, p.141

<sup>4</sup> *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.110

<sup>5</sup> Jim Thompson, 'The Killer Inside Me', in *Jim Thompson's Omnibus*, 1995, p. 142

<sup>6</sup> 1946

of view of the film is dominated by that of the serial killer, Professor Warren, calibrating her as both the object of his and the audience's gaze. Helen's muteness is also ideologically determined, indicating the film's effort to deny her full and complete subjectivity. These examples illuminate two interlacing ideological structures of serial killer narratives in the classical noir tradition; that is, the woman is almost always the victim and the victimisation is already prescribed by the Western binary system. A female serial killer character and/or a narrative involving a female serial killer, in effect, are rarely explored.

Therefore, considering the period in which the novel *Double Indemnity* was written and the way it was transformed for the silver screen, the quotation above unveils an important assumption about why the serial killer part of Phyllis is obscured from the cinematic narration. The obscurity in the representation of the femme fatale (and this is supported by B. Ruby Rich's suggestion that 'the early *femme fatales* [sic] had no explanation for their relentless pain or greed')<sup>7</sup> reveals that by divulging Phyllis's background, as a person or as a serial killer (as mentioned in the novel), the film version runs the risk of not only breaching the infamous Hay's Production Code<sup>8</sup> but also providing her with a history or subjectivity, constructing her as a sympathetic character. Besides, the expectation that the femme fatale will finally be punished is a crucial ingredient in pleasure an audience derives from her role as the embodiment of male fantasy. In canonical noir, subjectivity is largely permissible only to the male protagonist, a sympathetic fall guy whose flaw in judgement overrides the flaw in his character, living a life engulfed by noir pessimism and determinism. In effect, the serial killer femme fatale in *Double Indemnity* is enough evidence to show that while at the zenith of its classical period, a noir novel's transgressive narrative may dare to venture into the nadir of post-war America's morality. Its elision from the silver screen also exemplifies the extent to which Hollywood is allowed to explore this narrative, reflecting the typical puritanical or 'American right-wing'<sup>9</sup> view that governed the Hays committee. The transgression of the femme fatale is considered morally subversive, perverse, and dubious; therefore punishable usually and especially by death. This, in short, demonstrates that Hollywood then is more interested

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<sup>7</sup> 'Dumb Lugs and Femme Fatales', in *Action/ Spectacle Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Jose Arroyo, 2000, p.130

<sup>8</sup> Frank Krutnik argues that the film *Double Indemnity* represents the workability of the compromise between 'Cain's fiction and the representational restrictions of the Production Code' (*In A Lonely Street*, 1997, p.137)

<sup>9</sup> James Naremore, *More Than Night*, 1998, p.96



in the destructive and obsessive relationship between a male noir protagonist and the transgressive femme fatale than in the subjectivity of the femme fatale itself.

The lack of interest in female subjectivity in canonical noir stems from a woman's status as an embodiment of 'male fantasy',<sup>10</sup> that is, the antithetical trait of the Western dualism that categorises man as the rational being. In a typical noir narrative such as in films like *The Maltese Falcon*<sup>11</sup> and *Out of the Past*,<sup>12</sup> gender assignments are ideologically driven, amounting to femmes fatales being subjects of the investigation and male protagonists being the investigators. At the level of ideological symbolism, the portrayal of an independent woman as duplicitous alludes to her fatal sexuality, referring not only to post-war America when a woman's financial independence posed a threat to male economic resourcefulness, but also to the noir genre not solely a masculine form. Film noir, as feminist critics argue, is not a masculine form *par excellence*, and therefore is potentially subversive in that manner, allowing 'the playing out of various gender fantasies',<sup>13</sup> and in this case, it permits the female character to freely roam the public sphere. However, it is in the very subversiveness of the noir narrative that lies conveniently the very conservativeness of its own ideological motif, emphasising the femme fatale's duplicity and the ensuing comeuppance as the ultimate result of her independence. Freedom, it seems, is only an illusion. Phyllis in *Double Indemnity* and Kathie in *Out of the Past* are noir iconic femmes fatales whose eventual death is both ideologically and principally prescribed by the Western schism, highlighting the collective fear of female supremacy. Christine Gledhill argues that,

Rather than the revelation of socio-economic patterns of political and financial power and corruption which mark the gangster/thriller, film noir probes the secrets of female sexuality and male desire within patterns of submission and dominance.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Janey Place, 'Women in Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, E. Ann Kaplan, ed., 2000, p.47

<sup>11</sup> Dir. Henry Blake, 1941

<sup>12</sup> Dir. Jacques Taurneur, 1947

<sup>13</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, 'Introduction to New Edition', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.10

<sup>14</sup> 'Klute 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.28

When Walter Neff tells Phyllis that ‘I wonder if you wonder’ in the flashback narrative technique, he forecloses her subjectivity, setting her as a site to be explored and investigated—a demonstration of what he imagines to be his dominance. Lou Ford, in the final moment of his life as well as the novel, reflects on his actions without wanting to succumb to defeat. He naturalises his crime by de-alienating himself from society with his own set of values (‘All of us that started the game with a crooked cue [...] that meant so good and did so bad [...] All of us. All of us’);<sup>15</sup> demonstrating the ubiquitous noir unsettling and satirical ending.

What can be drawn from the representation of these female characters is that in the noir tradition women as embodiments are traceable in the psycho-sociological divisions that associate women with privacy and men with publicity, foregrounding the topographical assignment of gender category. The gendering of this topography defines the ideological pressure that hence creates a signature boundary that these women should traditionally adhere to, and transgressive female characters like Kathie and Phyllis are therefore punishable under patriarchal rules and ethics. These in turn reward Ann and Lola—the redeeming figures in *Out of the Past* and *Double Indemnity*, respectively—by freeing them from any burden of the crime, as long as they stay loyal to the societal expectations of a woman. Ironically, it is the femme fatale, and not the redeeming woman, who achieves the iconic status in the noir tradition, signifying noir fascination with the display of her dangerous sexuality. The typical ending in which femmes fatales like Kathie and Phyllis are killed by gunshots essentialises and spectacularises their dead and violated bodies, foregrounding the body politics at play. This compulsive and covert fascination with femmes fatales’ violated and dead bodies is related to what Mark Seltzer calls ‘encounters with *exhibitions* of catastrophe’,<sup>16</sup> that in this case their bodies function ‘as spectacle or representation of crisis, disaster, or atrocity’.<sup>17</sup> Seltzer’s argument also points to the positioning of the violated and injured female body inside the public arena, an important part of what he terms as ‘America’s wound culture’,<sup>18</sup> which concurrently illuminates the collapse of the polarity of gender difference in such a culture.

A scarred and disavowed female body unremittently and publicly on display is part of the proliferation of the body and machine culture, which significantly highlights the links the female body has with a crime scene. The fascination, or I should say the ‘love-hate relationship’ with the ‘open

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<sup>15</sup> Jim Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me*, in *Jim Thompson’s Omnibus*, 1995, p.160

<sup>16</sup> *Serial Killers*, 1998, p.35

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8

wound', is attributable to the origin of the male fear of the female vagina itself, that is, a stigma of a castrated female body in the Oedipal trajectory. Having forsaken its mythological status, this fear of the 'open wound' in machine culture is now being centrally treated, referring literally to the opening of an injured and lacerated female body.<sup>19</sup> A female body is therefore less a metaphor for space and is now more metonymically relevant. Both, in effect, define its role as a victim in a criminal act and place it in the crime scene itself. A wounded female body is now associated with the identification of the site where private desire and public interest collide, a place where the demarcation of gender assignment is finally dissolved. What is disturbing is the fact that the collapse of this boundary is still actually at the expense of a female body and life, confirming her status as a victim. In the context of film noir, femmes fatales' erotic representation devolves on a disavowed body that normally ends up, as Phyllis and Kathie demonstrate, being a compulsive public spectacle of atrocity outside the sanctity of a home. Both of them are killed on the road, marking the restriction of their freedom outside the confinement of a home as the freedom that they seek stops male protagonists from achieving their absolute masculinity in the public arena. The public spectacle of femmes fatales' disavowed bodies is also titillating; thus irreversibly establishing its link with the eroticisation of the crime and crime scene itself, explaining and delineating part of what Mark Seltzer termed as 'pathological public sphere', that is, the shifting of the boundary between the interior and the exterior.

'The stylistic gloom of film noir,' argued Dale E. Ewing Jr., 'afforded an appealing paradigm of disorder [...] which is a breeding ground for all sorts of irrationalities and fears'.<sup>20</sup> This is another explanation for the 'pathological public sphere', and its detailed expression lies in formulaic noir visual styles: 1) dark and distorted shadowy figures, chiaroscuro lighting, and jarring camera angles; 2) sleazy, "of the shadow" and close up shots of the femme fatale to magnify her physical beauty, seductiveness and duplicity. The first helps to define the mood and atmosphere of the film, usually as a form of visual expression symbolic of the psychological make up or milieu of the brooding male protagonist. The second calibrates fatal female sexuality with a crime scene, magnifying both her socio-economic independence and her (sexual) dominance. The mise-en-scene

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<sup>19</sup> E. Ann Kaplan in the 'Introduction to New Edition' of *Women in Film Noir* also points this out. However, she admits that this issue needs to be pursued elsewhere. This is one of the points of departure that I am taking here (2000, p.12)

<sup>20</sup> Dale E. Ewing, Jr., 'Film Noir: Style and Content', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 1988, p.63

of film noir is therefore important in ‘the production of a certain mood—angst, despair, nihilism—within which are rearticulated perennial myths and motifs such as the deceptive play of appearance and reality, the eternal fascination and destructiveness of the *femme fatale*, the play of salvation and damnation’.<sup>21</sup> To a great extent, in the neo-noir cinematic representation that deals with serial killer narratives, the waiving of these formulaic visual motifs marks the shift in gender roles, or role reversal. Kaplan, for instance, argues that in neo-noir films of the 1990s, ‘the gender roles are reversed: the serial killers fulfil the role of the *femme fatale vis-à-vis* the female heroine as well [...]’.<sup>22</sup> One of the most important effects of this role reversal is the dissolution of gender demarcation, which consequently affects the relationship between gender and the crime scene. In the context of noir novels, Jim Thompson is known for the succession of male serial killer/psychopath protagonists that he created in the fifties through the mid-sixties like *Savage Night* (1953), *The Nothing Man* (1954) and *Pop.1280* (1964).<sup>23</sup> Thompson is ‘self-consciously modernist [...] and his best known novels, far more radically unsettling’,<sup>24</sup> evoking the ‘darkness’ which according to James Naremore, ‘was central to modernist art of every kind’.<sup>25</sup> This chapter, in part, will look at some of the female characters who are involved in this role reversal, or the lack of it, in serial killer narratives and how they and their roles are affected by the changing gender topography. The central question it asks is: how liberating are these female characters?

In embryo, this chapter explores the serial killer narrative in relation to female characters and noir conventions by focusing on the dynamics of the discourse of space with gender assignments. This analysis is important since serial killer narratives in both novels and films are rarely seen from noir's point of view, foregrounding the complex conflation of both the narrative and noir's mood and style. I believe that this will highlight some significant issues pertaining to the representation of the transgressive female characters in the changing landscape of gender assignments. I would suggest that the symbiosis can be seen in noir convention, with their unsettling and disturbing endings, blurring of the binary opposite of victim

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<sup>21</sup> Christine Gledhill, ‘Klute 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism’, in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.27

<sup>22</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, ‘Introduction to New Edition’, in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.12

<sup>23</sup> Lee Horsley’s list of some of Jim Thompson’s novels that deal with a psychopathic male protagonist (*The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.122)

<sup>24</sup> Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.121

<sup>25</sup> *More Than Night*, 1998, pp.170-171

and perpetrator, and daringness to venture into the darker side of human nature and the underworld; that is, their long term relationship with elements of realism. This is placed in dialogue with the debate surrounding privacy and publicity, which as I see it, can provide a useful channel to the understanding of serial killer narratives. As serial killing is also about invading a private space, the texts can be paradoxical and counter-reactive to feminist struggles to bring privacy into publicity, foregrounding the close affinity that serial killer narratives have with the debate surrounding the issue of privacy and publicity. Therefore, the conceptions of privacy and publicity are used as a theoretical framework for my analysis of these texts.

The serial killer narrative in a typical Hollywood narrative has not been challenged as far as noir conventions are concerned. Since it is one of the characteristics of noir conventions to have an unsettling ending, this means that only noir vision can genuinely capture the essence of the heinous crime, or give voice to the conventionally marginalized character. It is one of the purposes of this analysis to actually demonstrate how noir conventions employed can enhance the effect of the representation of serial killers and female characters in literary and cinematic texts. This chapter also includes texts written or directed by women in an effort to see how or in what manner these texts support or challenge the myth surrounding serial killers. What I am also trying to illustrate is that the literary noir woman is usually and largely stronger and more liberated than her cinematic counterpart. In addition to looking at the female leads, my analysis will also cover marginalized female characters in both literary and cinematic texts. Hopefully, my argument will illustrate that the images of women, despite their positive portrayal, in this kind of narrative are constructed images that are working against liberal feminist struggles, foregrounding the conflict in the struggle for gender equality and how this conflict is manifested in crimes against women. This understanding can be achieved by exploring how the myth surrounding the serial killer shapes or challenges the obsession with privacy and its conflicting existence with public life.

### **From Metaphor to Metonymy**

And in our attempt to understand serial killers, we inevitably create myths about them—works of fiction that may superficially portray the serial killer as the ultimate alien outsider or enemy of society but which simultaneously

reflect back upon society its own perversions, fears, and murderous desires.<sup>26</sup>

Myth and legend are forms of oral traditions that highlight the collective fear and anxiety of society, which often, ironically enough, work as disseminators of those very fears and anxieties. One of the core functions of these oral traditions is their role as a ‘social caution’ or ‘cautionary tale’; a social mechanism that uses the scapegoated Others—the unknown, alienated, monstrous, deplorable, larger than life and to a certain extent metaphysical beings, like the undeads or phantom figures—as social margins that reflect the epistemological pressure of the society. In Peter Ackroyd’s *Dan Leno & The Limehouse Golem*,<sup>27</sup> for instance, the fear of the unknown serial killer is projected into a mythical ‘object of horror’,<sup>28</sup> that is, any monstrous figure such as the Golem. Ackroyd interweaves his Gothic-style anti-*bildungsroman* first person narration with an investigative narrative embedded in the formal discourse of a court trial, which concomitantly affirms the status of the serial killer as a mythical or legendary figure. The serial killer, in this myth-making tradition, is a metaphor for something else, and that something else can be any literal or psychogenic threat faced by society.

The creation of these mythical or legendary figures is imperative and necessary, both as a way of projecting the society’s collective fear outside its own constitution and as a way of signifying a boundary marker that should not be transgressed. The Other, in this context, has to be situated outside, not inside the society itself; it has to bear the burden of the irrational, and usually for that reason possesses ‘supernatural-like’ ability. It has to live or inhabit the realm beyond the boundary marker—the *outré-mer*—and its occasional infiltration into the society is seen as a portentous disease or plague, an ominous threat to the ostensibly stable and sane world. Though serial killer narratives can be traced back in the Gothic

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<sup>26</sup> Philip L. Simpson, *Psycho Paths*, 2000, pp.1-2

<sup>27</sup> Ackroyd’s resembles the Maybrick case in which James Maybrick, a Liverpool cotton merchant, was poisoned by his own wife, Florence. The similarity is based on a diary that was allegedly signed by the sobriquet Jack the Ripper and resurfaced in the early 1990s (Colin Wilson and Damon Wilson, *A Plague of Murder*, 1995, p.xv) He also uses real cases like the young Marr family in Ratcliffe Highway (Wilson and Wilson, p.36 and Ackroyd, p.208) to add credibility to his story.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *Dan Leno & The Limehouse Golem*, 1998, p.4

vampire figure, like Dracula or vampires<sup>29</sup> in the Eastern European oral and literary traditions, it has been made in/famous in modern times by the notoriously mysterious Jack the Ripper—a figure who is a staple of the study of serial killers, as all the articles that I have come across never fail to mention his grotesque sobriquet. Killing five London prostitutes in 1888, Jack was nicknamed after his ritual of mutilating and removing the organs of his murdered victims. It is the ‘notion of the Ripper’s immortality’, argued Jane Caputi, that ‘is perhaps the most dominant motif of the entire myth’.<sup>30</sup> The Jack the Ripper story is a prototype for the figure of the serial killer, providing key semantic references and vocabulary to serial killer narratives and conventions, such as the schism of women as victims and men as perpetrators, the elusiveness of the murderer figure, and the seemingly arbitrary relationship between the killer and the victim. Jack the Ripper’s legendary status also informs the way the phenomenon is dealt with, allowing contemporary critics to vivify the contemporary discourse of representation in both fictional and non-fictional accounts of the serial killer. The ‘historical yet enigmatic personage’<sup>31</sup> Jack the Ripper also signifies the critical impasse in the absolute separation between fictional and non-fictional representations, as a great deal of both is informed by each other. Jane Caputi argues that ‘[f]act and fiction are blithely blurred; the reality of genocide is overshadowed by mass fascination with the personality of the killer’.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, what a serial killer story with a female serial killer like *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* does is to destabilise the seemingly monolithic masculine generic convention of serial killer narratives in which women are eviscerated, foregrounding the omnipresent gender issues and politics in this kind of narrative. Since in Ackroyd’s novel the serial killer is a woman, the fascination with her personality as suggested by Caputi also means that she is a person with history—a full subjectivity that is often denied in literature. By using literary and cinematic noir texts, this chapter sets out to demonstrate and illustrate how the literary and

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<sup>29</sup> There is no denying that eponymous Dracula or many other vampire figures pose some epistemological debates that are related to serial killing. This is mainly due to the fact that their victims are turned into the undeads after the ‘killing’ takes place. Nonetheless, Richard Dyer in ‘Kill and Kill Again’ (*Action/Spectacle: A Slight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Jose Arroyo, 2000), did include the vampire of Dusseldorf, albeit in passing, in his discussion of the serial killer.

<sup>30</sup> *Age of Sex Crime*, 1988, p.26

<sup>31</sup> Patrice Fleck, ‘Looking in the Wrong Direction: Displacement and Literacy in the Hollywood Serial Killer Drama’, *Postscript*, 16(1997), p.37

<sup>32</sup> *Age of Sex Crime*, 1988, p.200

cinematic constructions of the serial killer challenge or subvert the myth surrounding serial killer narratives, foregrounding gender issues like the texts' ideological dominance and the evisceration of women. I will come back to this in the later part of this section.

In the 'machine age',<sup>33</sup> 'the serial killer has very quickly become an eminently marketable form of contemporary folk legend', 'their ilk slowly metamorphosing into immortal (and profitable) cultural icons'.<sup>34</sup> As a cultural icon, the serial killer is both a personal and public/national tragedy, a consistent reminder of the cultural wound that it stands for. The change in the serial killer's epistemological status also alters its functions in the contemporary popular imagination, turning it from a metaphor for the Other into a metonymy for social trauma, or cultural wound—an obligatory mirroring of social decadence. Mark Seltzer asserts that:

By 1900 something strange and something new appears on the scene. The wound, for one thing, is by now no longer the mark, the stigma, of the sacred or heroic: it is the icon, or stigma, of the everyday openness of every body. This is a culture centred on trauma (Greek for wound): a culture of the atrocity exhibition, in which people wear their damage like badges of identity, or fashion accessories.<sup>35</sup>

The mass media is partly responsible for the public display of the private wound, 'disclos[ing] an erotics at the crossing point of private fantasy and public space'.<sup>36</sup> This in effect not only desensitises the public to the images of torn and violated bodies but also to a certain extent reveals the serial killer as 'a fetish in public culture',<sup>37</sup> foregrounding the shift in the semantic apprehension of serial violence.

The publicity that serial killers receive is phenomenal; thus, giving them the status of a celebrity or to be precise, a cult figure. Richard Dyer observes that 'it's clear that humans have always loved seriality [...] However, it is only under capitalism, that seriality became a reigning principle of cultural production'.<sup>38</sup> With its new metonymic status, the

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<sup>33</sup> This is to borrow Mark Seltzer's phrase that he uses to describe 'the era of the Second Industrial Revolution' also known as 'the information society' or 'digital culture' and also the 'Discourse Network of 2000' (*Serial Killers*, 1998, p.17)

<sup>34</sup> Philip L. Simpson, *Psycho Path*, 2000, p.2

<sup>35</sup> *Serial Killers*, 1998, p.3

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31

<sup>37</sup> Carla Freccero, 'Historical Violence, Censorship, and the Serial Killer: The Case of *American Psycho*', *Diacritics*, 27(1997), p.48

<sup>38</sup> 'Kill and Kill Again', in *Action/Spectacle: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Jose Arroyo, 2000, p.145



serial killer represents a new kind of obsession, which James A. Fox and Jack Levin in *Overkill: Mass Murder and Serial Killing Exposed* observed:

Actually, there are several reasons why serial killers are pursued by adoring women. Some groupies may be attracted to their idol's controlling, manipulative personalities. A Freudian might attempt to trace this attraction to a woman's need to resurrect her relationship with a cruel, domineering father figure. At least a few killer groupies strive to prove that their lover is a victim of injustice. These women's fight for "right" gives their otherwise unfulfilling lives a strong sense of purpose.<sup>39</sup>

The above quote reveals a very disturbing attitude towards criminals or jailbirds in Western society. However, it also highlights the psychology of a nation that is trying to come to terms with its historicity—the 'free-love past' of the 60s, the '*laissez-faire* attitude of a generation weaned on sex'<sup>40</sup> of the 70s, and the 'me-decade' with 'greed is good'<sup>41</sup> of the 1980s. The 90s is the period of enlightenment that derides the previous decades with its sensationalized representation of violence. B. Ruby Rich notes that the '90s [...] is a time of intensely politicized violence [...] individualized'.<sup>42</sup> She also argues that in contrast to

[t]he old days of communism, it used to be said that capitalism thrived by using 'crime' to direct public attention towards lone villains and away from the criminal functioning of the free market [...] Today, the genre of neo-violence seems tailor-made to fit that analysis.<sup>43</sup>

The existing mentality as advocated by Andy Warhol's version of '15 minutes of fame' also plays a crucial role in apotheosizing the serial killer figure. As some of the serial killings are sexual in nature or sexually

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<sup>39</sup> 1994, p.11

<sup>40</sup> Robert Conrath, 'The Guy Who Shot to Kill: Serial Killers and the American Popular Unconscious', *Reveu Francaise D'etudes Americaines*, (16)1994, p.140

<sup>41</sup> Nick James uses this quote from Oliver Stone's film *Wall Street* (1987) as a way of lassoing the decade in which Stanley Kubrick's film *A Clockwork Orange* was produced with the context in which Mary Harron *American Psycho* is taken from. ('Sick City Boy', *Sight and Sound*, 2000, p.23)

<sup>42</sup> 'Dumb Lugs and *Femme Fatales*', in *Action/Spectacle Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Jose Arroyo, 2000, p.129

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

motivated,<sup>44</sup> Jane Caputi tries to explain this, arguing that '[t]he mythos of sex crime plays not only upon the monstrous imagination, but also on the heroic',<sup>45</sup> marking 'the ascendancy of the serial killer to mythic/heroic status'<sup>46</sup>—a crucial point that is explored in serial killer/psychopath narratives in noir crime novels like Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*, and in films like Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Mary Harron's *American Psycho*.

Serial killing is almost an American phenomenon: though its population makes up only 5% of the global population, according to Conrath,<sup>47</sup> 75% of global serial killers come from the United States of America. Carla Freccero laments that 'the "deformation" of the American Dream [...] is located not in the corrupt government or economic institutions that exploit us, but in an individual'—embodied by 'a popular American figure of dementia' like the serial killer.<sup>48</sup> The statistic reveals the fact that although the serial killer is no longer a mythical figure, its phenomenon is still surrounded by myth. It should then be understood that the myth of contemporary serial killer figures has been technologised in the form of mass duplication of their visual images, compelled by the fascination not only with wounded bodies in machine culture, but also with the serial killers themselves. This marks the shift in the epistemological status of the serial killer; the evidence that though the serial killer now inhabits the realm of the real, its functions may remain symbolic. The formation of these technologically promulgated serial killer images is rather ironic; while it concretises the murderer's figure, it also concurrently demystifies its existence. Mark Seltzer provides apt adjectival expressions that are rather oxymoronic like 'abnormally normal', 'the mass in person', 'statistical person', and 'stranger intimacy',<sup>49</sup> to describe this irony. Richard Dyer gives a right-winged explanation to this irony:

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<sup>44</sup> Robert Ressler indeed 'coined' the term 'serial killer' due to 'the increasing number of American multiple sex killers—like Albert DeSalvo, Ted Bundy, [...] etc.]' (Wilson and Wilson, *A Plague of Murder*, 1995, p. ix)

<sup>45</sup> Jane Caputi, *Age of Sex Crime*, 1988, p. 50

<sup>46</sup> Jane Caputi, 'American Psychos: The Serial Killer in Contemporary Fiction', *Journal of American Culture*, (16)1993, p. 101

<sup>47</sup> Robert Conrath also lists England as the second highest producer of serial killers in the world. His statistic reveals that 120 out of 150 condemned serial killers reside in the USA ('Pulp Fixation', *PARADOXA*, 1995)

<sup>48</sup> Carla Freccero, 'Historical Violence, Censorship, and the Serial Killer: The Case of *American Psycho*', *Diacritics*, 1997, p. 48

<sup>49</sup> *Serial Killers*, 1998, pp. 11, 18, 39, 40, respectively.

Serial killing [is] facilitated by the anonymity of mass societies, and the ease and rapidity of modern transport, to be bred from the dissolution of the affective bonds of community and lifelong families and fomented by the routinisation of the sexual objectification of women in media.<sup>50</sup>

Dyer's observation proves that the fallacy in such an observation lies in the oversimplification of the fact, which ineluctably generalises serial killing as a direct effect of visually stimulating images of women in mass media. Of course this is not true, though most cases are related to women as sex objects, John Wayne Gacy's victims are boys and his crime is an example of paedophilia, or in this case an oppressed homosexuality. Dyer's theory in effect is merely a more modern adaptation of Jack the Ripper's myth—again, evidence that is borne out of stereotype.

The media fuelled construction of the serial killer sometimes reinforces its mythical status, providing a repository of representations that can be dramatically and romantically exaggerated. Fictionists manipulate the mystery surrounding serial killing and a serial killer to create interesting and to a great extent stereotypical characters. M. D and L.L Kellcher note that:

One of the myths that has been perpetuated by the press of popular media is that serial murders are invariably and exclusively committed by men. This myth is particularly rampant in the entertainment industry, which produces a seemingly limitless litany of male serial murderer movies, which vary widely in their adherence to truth and reality.<sup>51</sup>

The quotation above underlines the fact that the dialectic of serial killing is very much influenced by the complex intertwining of both fiction and non-fiction. It also suggests that the myth of serial killers particularly in terms of their gender is the result of unscrupulous stereotyping of male serial killers in popular media. Kellcher's argument reveals the direct consequence of the popular imagination with regard to serial killing, consigning woman to the victim role, and assigning man as the perpetrator, endorsing the long tradition of victimising women in Western cultural tradition and specifically serial killer narratives. A serial killer figure then fulfils his symbolic function of subordinating women.

Though the factual information about the serial killer informs the literary construction of a serial killer, the contemporary serial killer as a

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<sup>50</sup> 'Kill and Kill Again', in *Action/Spectacle: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Jose Arroyo, 2000, p.144

<sup>51</sup> *Murder Most Rare: The Female Serial Killer*, 1998, pp.x-xi

literary construct is portrayed as more human than monstrous. Philip L. Simpson argues that '[t]he serial killer nevertheless achieves legendary status, largely through clever textual strategies that relocate the monstrous face behind the human one'.<sup>52</sup> As a literary construct, the attention to the psychology and action of the serial killer is reminiscent of the interest in the psychology of the pulp hero who walks down the mean street. In classical noir texts, male noir protagonists are psychologically bruised by economic and social changes. But noir is also a socio-cultural documentation, parody, and criticism of the middle class white male; therefore, a prominent part of the myth surrounding a serial killer is that the serial killer is also a white male. Manohla Dargis's assertion that 'an entire history of American genre film could be traced on the bruised and besieged white male body'<sup>53</sup> is a reflection of this. As a parody, it also evokes a certain moral ambiguity, which is normally achieved by using a subjective point of view, i.e., first person narration or a close third person narration. Lou Ford in *The Killer Inside Me*, Tom Ripley in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*<sup>54</sup> and Jame Gumb in the novel *The Silence of The Lambs*,<sup>55</sup> are some of the examples of serial killers who, despite their pathological and grotesque killings, are sympathetic characters. They are the mirrors of a collapsed society, the victims of circumstances, and individuals whose faults lie elsewhere. Arguably, Phyllis Dietrichson's character in the novel (of *Double Indemnity*) is more sympathetic than that in the cinema, partly because of her more apparent subjectivity.

This is in contrast to the cinematic representation of serial killers in which the force of evil is usually defeated by the feel good factor of Hollywood productions. In *Kalifornia*,<sup>56</sup> for instance, the *uber*-hunk of the decade, Brad Pitt, camouflages his pin-up persona to appear with a brain-dead junky-type look in his role as a serial killer—a look that is important as the personification of evil, hence his eventual death. In *Virtuosity*,<sup>57</sup> Russell Crowe plays a 'nanotech syntactic organism' with combined memories of serial killers and mass murderers, but he is far from heroic, as the main protagonist who has to fight him is a tragic victim, and especially because he is the Oscar winner and crowd pleaser Denzel Washington. When the serial killer appears 'normal' like Peter Foley in Jon Amiel's

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<sup>52</sup> *Psycho Path*, 2000, p.3

<sup>53</sup> 'Pulp Instincts' in *Action/Spectacle: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Jose Arroyo, 2000, p.120

<sup>54</sup> Patricia Highsmith, [1955] 1999

<sup>55</sup> Thomas Harris, 1991

<sup>56</sup> Dir. Dominic Sena, 1993

<sup>57</sup> Dir. Brett Leonard, 1995

*Copycat*,<sup>58</sup> his gentle voice and dimple-sweet smile are nothing but creepy, signifying what Seltzer calls 'abnormally normal', a 'condition' that facilitates his mobility into his escape road. Even in an Independent film like *Memento*,<sup>59</sup> Leonard Shelby, played by Guy Pierce, is an ostensibly sympathetic amnesiac noir protagonist who turns into a serial killer out of his lust to avenge the murder and rape of his wife. However, his motive is highly dubious, as it is revealed later (or at the beginning as the plot moves backward) that he signs Teddy's death warrant by incriminating him as his wife's murderer and rapist. Before writing down the information that incriminates Teddy, Leonard asks him: 'Do I lie to make myself happy? In your case Teddy, I will'. He jots down Teddy's car-registration number that he uses earlier on in the film to kill him. In the tradition of an amnesiac noir protagonist, Leonard is not as innocent as he looks and sounds.

The key to serial killer narratives is in the notion of seriality itself, that is, the reliance on the pattern often used by the serial killer as its *modus operandi*. Generally speaking, criminologists, fiction writers, and film directors, even though varied and disparate in their interests, approach the subject matter by looking at the recurrent pattern of the serial killer's behaviour. The term 'serial killer' was coined in the mid-1970s by Robert Ressler, the cofounder of the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit (BSU),<sup>60</sup> to identify the pattern of multiple killing that was rampant then. Pattern, in effect, creates a stereotype that eminently informs serial killer narratives, or as Mark Seltzer puts it, 'The distinction between fact and fiction and between bodies and information vanish, along the lines of an identification without reserve',<sup>61</sup> that in the literary and cinematic sense, contributes to the formation of a postmodern serial killer. For instance, the knowledge about the serial killing pattern is also manipulated in *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer*.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> 1995

<sup>59</sup> Dir. Christopher Nolan, 2000. *Memento* was in a competition at Sundance Film Festival in the year 2001

<sup>60</sup> Mark Seltzer in *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* cites that Ressler's story of the profilers in his fiction *Whoever Fights Monsters* relates his character with Blake's and Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon*. Ressler defines the term serial killer as "the internal competition between repetition and representation (2000, p.64)

<sup>61</sup> *Serial Killers*, 2000, p.16

<sup>62</sup> Dir. John McNaughton, 1986

Henry: If you shoot somebody in the head with a forty-five every time you kill somebody, it becomes like your fingerprint, see. But if you strangle one and stab another, one you cut up and one you don't, then the police don't know what to do. They think you're four different people. What they really like, what makes their job so much easier, is a pattern. What they call *modus operandi*. That's Latin. Bet you didn't know any Latin.

Henry is a self-aware postmodern subject that parodies the construct of the whole serial killing phenomenon. The importance of understanding this pattern is also accentuated in *The Silence of the Lambs*, in which the knowledge of serial killing is manipulated by Dr. Hannibal Lecter to eventually gain his independence. Though a fiction, it manipulates the famous psychological profiling technique employed by criminologists in identifying a serial killer by looking at the pattern left behind at each crime scene. *The Silence of the Lambs* is intriguing as a literary and cinematic piece due to this combination.<sup>63</sup> In short, the non-fictional account of a serial killer's pattern does inform and is responsible, to a certain extent, for the creation of a fictional serial killer.

In cinema, serial killer narratives reached their 'golden era' in the late 1980s to the 1990s as proven in the number of productions of serial killer films by Hollywood. It should be partly held responsible for providing the platform to stage the representation of the serial killer as a glamorised person or personage. If taken as the simulacrum of the American society, Hollywood is able to set the mood and interest of contemporary Americans. It is not a coincidence that serial killer films were ubiquitous during this period as proven by the birth of the most critically acclaimed serial killer film of all time, that is *The Silence of the Lambs*,<sup>64</sup> which in turn spurred the production of others like *Copycat*, *Citizen X*,<sup>65</sup> *When the Bough Breaks*<sup>66</sup> and *The Killing Jar*.<sup>67</sup> The box-office status of *The Silence of the Lambs* is an indication of the American preoccupation with serial killers. Serial killing, as I see it, is one of the penultimate products of the aftermath of the American dream gone awry. The visceral conflict of

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<sup>63</sup> The character Jack Crawford is modeled after a criminal profiler with the FBI, John F. Douglas. Douglas's suggestion that 'To understand the criminal, you have to study the crime' is a typical tenet in criminal profiling technique (Joanna Coles, 'Walking in the Shoes of Serial Killers', *The Times*, 2000, p.35). James Gumb is also modeled after a real life serial killer called Jeffrey Dahmer.

<sup>64</sup> Dir. Jonathan Demme, 1991

<sup>65</sup> Dir. Chris Gerolmo, 1995

<sup>66</sup> Dir. Michael Cohn, 1993

<sup>67</sup> Dir. Evan Crooke, 1996

American individualism is then attributable to the giant symbol of capitalism–Hollywood.

As a symbol of American's capitalism and consumerism, Hollywood provides the means to satiate the nation's hunger for entertainment. Hollywood is a microcosm of American society's attitude towards crimes and criminals, as mentioned by Dargis in tracing the pulp culture who argues that 'in Hollywood, sociological changes and a slackening production code created an atmosphere in which an American New Wave could thrive'.<sup>68</sup> Even though some critics like Jane Caputi astutely claim that 'despite the reigning cliché, fiction about serial killers constitutes anything but "escapist entertainment"',<sup>69</sup> Hollywood as an entertainment machine ineluctably commercialises the whole serial killing business. The love-hate relationship with Hollywood, the oscillating feelings between confirmation and denial of the obsession with the serial killer figure, highlights the kind of closeted case of perverse interest.

The 'kind of closeted case of perverse interest' brings my discussion back to Ackroyd's novel *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*. Ackroyd's strategy is to differentiate private space and public desire, and ultimately to protect the sanctity of the home, that is, a heterosexual or patriarchal organisation of society. There are two important polarities in this novel: private space and public desire. The failure in private space is expressed by public desire, while at the same time creating a sense of enigma by constructing a serial killer character who blends extremely well with social construction. She uses her dexterity as part of a mythic dimension or supernatural ability usually attached to a mythical Gothic serial killer figure like Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Like other Gothic novels, *Dan Leno & The Limehouse Golem* locates female subjectivity at the centre of the investigation, and uses the mystery surrounding the investigation as a means of usurping her subjectivity. Ackroyd achieves this by using distinct multiple discourses for the narrative solution, and two of them are: 1) a court trial; 2) the investigation of the serial killer. It is through the crime that the 'serial killer' commits within the domestic sphere, that is, by poisoning her husband, that she is finally 'caught' and punished. This shows that failure at the domestic level annihilates public desire.

It would be facile to assume that a narrative solution like that can offer such an easy interpretation. In contrast to the traditional male Gothic narrative, the centring of a female ruse as a male serial killer in *Dan Leno*

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<sup>68</sup> 'Pulp Instincts', in *Action/Spectacle: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Jose Arroyo, 2000, p.118

<sup>69</sup> 'American Psychos: The Serial Killer in Contemporary Fiction', *Journal of American Culture*, 16(1993), p.101

destabilises the whole ‘masculine’ myth surrounding the serial killer figure. Ackroyd manages to do this by reconstructing the myth of Jack the Ripper itself, the ‘founding father’ of serial killer narratives. Noir’s shared origin with the Gothic also allows the centring of the female character, which is not novel in this kind of narrative as exemplified by femme fatale figures in the tradition of noir pulp fiction. The classic femme fatale figures like Mrs. Nirdlinger in Cain’s *Double Indemnity* carry a great import in the unfolding of the plot, in spite of the lack of her own voice. One crucial contemporary feminist’s agenda is foreground female heroism, and in the case of the serial killer narrative, involves the appropriation of female agency. This concern is reflected by the production of female/feminist serial killer texts like Helen Zahavi’s *Dirty Weekend*.<sup>70</sup> By giving subjectivity to this kind of figure, the myth of the serial killer narrative is subverted. This chapter is aimed at destabilising and challenging the masculine form of the myth and seeing how the construction of the serial killer in cinema and literature helps to do so. In *Double Indemnity*, the male narrator laments, ‘I have killed a man, for money and a woman. I didn’t have the money and didn’t have the woman. The woman was a killer, out-and-out, and she had made a fool of me’ (p. 298). A fool he is indeed.

### **“I’d Rather Be A Fake Somebody Than A Real Nobody”:<sup>71</sup> Private Desire and Public Fantasy**

Since the crime of Jack the Ripper in 1888, sexual murder has emerged as a mythicized criminal genre and, concomitantly, as a ritual of male sexual dominance. The ritual hammers home its meaning through the most dire physical symbolism—the displayed, frequently tortured, mutilated, and murdered female body—an image which haunts this culture and this Age.  
—Jane Caputi, *The Age of Sex Crime*, 1988, p. 6

Serial killing has its place in a public culture in which addictive violence has become not merely a collective spectacle but one of the crucial sites where private desire and public fantasy cross.  
—Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, 1998, p. 1

What connects Caputi with Seltzer ten years on is the fascination with the display of a violated body in the public arena. The key of Caputi’s

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<sup>70</sup> 1992

<sup>71</sup> This is taken from the screenplay of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (Nick James, ‘My Bloody Valentine’, *Sight and Sound*, 2000, p.16)



contention is that the display of the violated female body in public functions both as a symbolic annihilation and as a ‘functional phallic terrorism’<sup>72</sup> on female subjectivity. Although Seltzer’s argument encompasses the human body in general, the catastrophic crossing between ‘private desire and public fantasy’ points to the subjugation of female desire and fantasy—crucial ingredients in female historicity. This perpetual fascination with an injured and mutilated (female) body, as I have argued earlier, relates closely to Seltzer’s notion of ‘wound culture’. I would argue now that this fetishism with the serial killer, the wounded body and seriality is a patriarchal strategy of reversing the liberal feminist’s slogan ‘The Personal is Political’,<sup>73</sup> replacing it with ‘The Political is Personal’—the first is centrifugal and the latter is centripetal. If, as Landes argues, the feminist’s slogan testifies that ‘a feminist movement moves in two directions, placing the gendered organization of both public and private space at center stage’,<sup>74</sup> the serial killer phenomenon reverses these directions, disrupting gendered organization by bringing public violence into private space. This reversal can also be seen as a backlash against female liberation and a flagrant effort to demarcate the boundaries of patriarchy. In effect, the serial killer phenomenon is about re-negotiating or perhaps re-claiming private and public boundaries, again hiding female subjectivity from view as a result.

The disorganisation or reorganisation of gendered placement can be seen as a counter-attack on private desire for its disruption of the public sphere. In Western dualism, privacy is linked with femininity/female and publicity with masculinity/male: therefore, an attack on private desire can be seen as a symbolic attack on the female. ‘In feminist writings,’ argues Landes, ‘the private sphere first figured as a site of sexual inequality, unremunerated work, and seething discontent’.<sup>75</sup> This discontent is well documented in serial killer narratives, foregrounding the issue of sexual domination inherent in the paradigmatic narratives of matricide or femicide, a theory generated from Freudian psychoanalysis. There seem to be ‘hierarchical lines’ of victims in the serial killer’s tradition—women, children, homosexuals and men of colour—that according to Jane Caputi, indicate that serial killings ‘are crimes of political import, murders rooted in a system of male supremacy’.<sup>76</sup> Noir as a transgressive genre sees these

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<sup>72</sup> *Age of Sex Crime*, 1988, p.2

<sup>73</sup> Joan B. Landes, *Feminism*, 1998, p.1

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> ‘American Psychos: The Serial Killer in Contemporary Fiction’, *Journal of American Culture*, 1993, p.102

'hierarchical lines' as another myth; therefore, subverting and appropriating the 'hierarchical lines' to de-mystify the myth by constructing serial killers who are not male, white and middle class as theorised by Caputi. Serial killer narratives in the noir tradition usually construct serial killer characters based on some media-fuelled images of serial killers, creating certain expectations, only to challenge the very images and expectations at the end. Classical noir's affinity with psychoanalysis, along with its masculinist ideological domination, usually consigns women and femininity to the role of a victim.

In Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the character Tom Ripley is a palimpsest of homosexual pathologies, the point that is made more explicit in the film version by Anthony Minghella in 1999. Tom Ripley's schizophrenic or psychopathic male protagonist is made 'feminine' by his 'madness' and ability to masquerade/act gender roles. In addition to the fact that in psychoanalysis, 'madness' or any aberrantly perverse tendency is associated with femininity, his ability to masquerade or act or play a gender role is also associated with the 'feminisation' of his body or subjectivity. Juliet Blair avers, 'Acting and role-playing have been associated with feminine duplicity, [...] characteristics polarised as female in our culture'.<sup>77</sup> So, when Tom Ripley expresses his discontent, 'I'd rather be a fake somebody than a real nobody', he is verbalising the feminine discontent, the position of disadvantage that he is assigned to and tries to walk out of, creating his own 'class, moral and national identity'.<sup>78</sup> His optimism is delusional, which according to Lee Horsley, is 'the standard' for the noir protagonist's vision of American Dreams.<sup>79</sup> His 'feminine' private desire, when modulated into public fantasy, turns into murderous acts, disrupting the patriarchal order of the society. Tom Ripley may seem to go unpunished, but the very idea that he can get away with his crime and continue to live with his tormented soul is the punishment in itself, symbolic of femininity as an eternal victim in patriarchal world.

In serial killer narratives, the notion of privacy and publicity is embedded in the theorisation of space and identity. In sociological terms, 'privacy is [...] one's ability to engage in activities without being observed by noninvolved (sic) others; publicity is the observability of these

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<sup>77</sup> 'Private Parts in Public Places: The Case of Actresses', in *Women and Space*, ed. by Shirley Ardener, 1981, p.205

<sup>78</sup> Anthony Channell Hilfer, "Not Really Such a Monster": Highsmith's Ripley as Thriller Protagonist and Protean Man', *Midwest Quarterly*, 25(1984), p.364

<sup>79</sup> *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.199

activities by others not directly involved'.<sup>80</sup> This means that it is possible to obtain privacy in public space, and that privacy involves a degree of agency. Since women in literature and cinema are associated with the notion of 'seeing women', an idea considered to be 'provoking attention to her sexuality',<sup>81</sup> women's identity and agency are then predicated rather narrowly on their sexual prowess or the lack of it. Women, indeed, according to Gill Plain, 'fucked their way into the narrative [...] and they have done so through an explicit articulation of desire'.<sup>82</sup> In effect, in cinema and literature, one's ability to identify with one's space usually warrants one's privacy, hence a more stable identity. Highsmith's Tom Ripley is an example of an anachronistic noir protagonist, an alienated individual stranded in 'this village being so lonely'.<sup>83</sup>

Space is significant in the study of serial killer narratives because it relates to the ideological motives of the texts. Georges Benko provides comprehensive summaries of the meanings of space:

Space can be apprehended as a category and as a material reality. For philosophers it is a principle of understanding, one of the forms of knowledge, a tool of theory on a level with time, to which of course it is linked. Sociologists consider space in a double light, as a product of society and as a factor of social production. In its relationship with space, by the work of present and past generations, humankind creates places. For their part, anthropologists have concentrated their attention on the most qualified spaces, to which they ascribe a triple function: identificatory, relational and historical.<sup>84</sup>

In the noir thriller tradition, the time-spatial relationship is crucial in establishing frissons relating to a criminal act and its investigation, foregrounding the competing ideological dominance of the text. There is a competing and ominous ambient between the male protagonist and the femme fatale, sometimes between the femme fatale and the nurturing woman, and sometimes among the three of them. In film noir, this competition is often represented in the claustrophobic visual style and

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<sup>80</sup> Donald W. Ball, 'Privacy, Publicity, Deviance and Control', *Pacific Sociological Review*, 18(1975), p.260

<sup>81</sup> Juliet Blair, 'Private Parts in Public Places', in *Women and Space*, ed. by Shirley Ardener, 1981, 205

<sup>82</sup> *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body*, 2001, p.247

<sup>83</sup> 'The Talented Mr. Ripley', in *Crime Novels*, compiled by Robert Polito, 1997, p.229

<sup>84</sup> 'Introduction', *Space and Social Theory: Interpreting Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. by George Benko and Ulf Strohmayers, 1997, p. 23

technique. For instance, in the film *The Killers*,<sup>85</sup> in one of the flashbacks when Swede and Lily are attending a party, Kitty's—the femme fatale—presence immediately steals the scene. The screen, which Kitty initially shares with Swede and Lily, is gradually dominated by her. In the scene, Swede's fascination with Kitty is highlighted by him moving closer to her whilst she is performing near the piano, leaving Lily fading in the background. This kind of screen domination in film noir connotes power and domination, and also an arresting obsession the noir protagonist has with the femme fatale. However, this kind of cinematic space is often referred to as physical space. At another and more profound level, space can also be mental room granted to the character—usually manifested as flashbacks. In cinema, space can also be highly technically defined as 'simply the frame within which a subject is located, and twenty-four of these frames pass before our eyes every second'.<sup>86</sup> For the purpose of this analysis, cinematic space will be taken as shots in which the characters are framed and their actions are held, as demonstrated by the example taken from *The Killers*. In addition to that, space and place are used interchangeably, sharing a point of confluence in the way a character seeks to define his or her identity.

In serial killer narratives, space usually means three varying types of proximity: 1) between the serial killer and the victim; 2) between the serial killer and the detective; 3) between the serial killer and the society. In the first instance, the serial killer narratives use the proximity between the serial killer and the victim as an effort to demystify the myths surrounding the arbitrary relationship between them. In the films *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Se7en*,<sup>87</sup> for instance, the proximity between the serial killer and the victim usually provides an insight into their seemingly arbitrary relationship. By understanding the serial killers' motives, they are therefore portrayed as considerably more human than in the factual account. The second type of proximity is often used as a dramatic device, particularly responsible for establishing frissons and dramatic irony. In many serial killer stories, the identity of the serial killer is not withheld, locating the tension and pressure on the investigator's shoulders to 'outwit' the serial killer. Noir conventions further exacerbate the proximity between the serial killer and the investigator, blurring the dichotomy of the

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<sup>85</sup> Dir. Robert Siodmak, 1946

<sup>86</sup> Wolfgang Natter, 'The City as Cinematic Space: Modernism and Place in Berlin, Symphony of a City', in *Place, Power, Situation, Spectacle: A Geography of Film*, ed. by Stuart C. Aitken and Leo E. Zonn, 1994, p. 15

<sup>87</sup> Dir. David Fincher, 1995

hunter and the hunted. In the film *Copycat*,<sup>88</sup> for instance, Dr. Helen Hudson's status as a victim and 'the ultimate target' of the serial killer results in her effort to help the investigation by carrying out part of the investigation herself, turning her from the hunted into the hunter too. The third type of proximity parallels what Mark Seltzer categorises as 'stranger intimacy', giving the serial killer a '*chameleon-like quality*'.<sup>89</sup> Building on the sociologist George Simmel's theorisation of this strange form of intimacy, Seltzer argues that serial killers 'make visible the disorders of similarity and identification, and the latent violences',<sup>90</sup> and yet their 'who also is far, is actually near' status allows them to melt into place. Most serial killers of this type are 'psychologically' known as 'the thrill-motivated' and 'tend to be a sociopath (or antisocial personality), someone with a disorder of character rather than mind'.<sup>91</sup>

The varying types of proximity articulate the relationship between space and the notion of privacy and publicity. Privacy and publicity are related to how the serial killer and other characters like the victim and the investigator try to define their boundaries. For that reason, the relationship between space and the notion of privacy and publicity is identifiable as a form of identity formation, whereby the characters try their best to 'protect' their own space. Transgression in terms of boundary crossing is usually followed by the disruption of that order and the failure in forming one's identity. One's refusal or resistance to transgression and disruption is significant in determining whether the character is a willing participant of an event or not, a victim or perpetrator. The act of transgression in a cinematic sense is often embodied in the theorisation of gaze and voyeurism, which will be dealt with in the analysis sections.

The victim's torn body, the crime scene and the proximity or the distance of the serial killers are all related to the ability to identify one's own space. The vulnerability of the victim's body is a sign that privacy, if invaded, subverts normality. In some serial killer stories, the crime scene is made invisible, the victim's body is normally disposed of somewhere else. In both cinematic and literary stories such as *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Kiss the Girls*<sup>92</sup> and *When the Bough Breaks* the victims' mutilated bodies are dumped to conceal the whereabouts of the serial killer. This also means that, even though a serial killer invades someone else's space, he is still respecting and expecting his

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<sup>88</sup> Dir. Jon Amiel, 1995

<sup>89</sup> *Serial Killers*, 1998, p.42

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p.43

<sup>91</sup> James A. Fox and Jack Levin, *Overkill*, 1994, p.18

<sup>92</sup> Dir. Gary Fleder, 1997

own privacy. His ability to blend within the public scene/sphere but still remain private about his activity evinces his ability to identify with his own space. The victims' failure to identify with their private spaces is indicative of their powerlessness, their lack of identity and subjectivity.

The proliferation of serial killer narratives is a palpable proof that the desire for privacy is often in conflict with public fantasy, and serial killings in these narratives are the mirror of this conflict. An important aspect of this conflict lies in the nature of contemporary Western culture itself, which is overwhelmed by a culture of production-producing whatever is consumable. A human body, that is the most private belonging of an individual, is shown as public property—spectacularised, eroticised and sometimes torn. The mass production of an individual image has created a new obsession with human form, transforming it into a mere image, that is, a consumer item or a commodified product of media frenzy. The boundary between privacy and publicity has hence collapsed. This status and obsession with production is evident, as an illustration, 'in 1991, [when] a California trading card company published its own series of mass—and serial killer cards, spotlighting such infamous criminals as Jeffrey Dahmer, Theodore [Ted] Bundy, and Charles Manson'.<sup>93</sup> It is within this private and public space paradigm that the serial killer finds its demarcation encroaching into someone else's private space. Since serial killing is also seen as a way of oppressing women, this study will look at the construction of female characters in serial killer narratives and show how this paradigm is subverted and appropriated. My analysis of texts will be structured around three main categories: male serial killer and female investigator, female serial killers, and female victims. All of these sections will look at how an obsession with space and place is used in serial killer narratives, exacerbated by noir conventions that create a dark vision and a brooding mood, especially with regard to the representation of female characters. In other words, the quintessential question of whether women in the texts are liberated or victimised will be considered across the next sections.

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<sup>93</sup> James A. Fox and Jack Levin, *Overkill*, 1994, p.6

## Male Serial Killer and Female Investigator

### ‘What Turns You On?’: Investigative Space in *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Copycat* and *Blue Steel*<sup>94</sup>

*The Silence of the Lambs* (henceforth *The Silence*), *Copycat* and *Blue Steel* have a few things in common: 1) The women are the emotional centres of the texts; 2) They involve a hermeneutic process; 3) The female detectives are on the mission of rescuing female ‘victims’; and 4) The serial killers are ‘male’. As discussed earlier, the typical structure of serial killer narratives entails a male protagonist who hunts a male serial killer whose victims are normally women. This prominent structure, which originated from the myth surrounding Jack the Ripper, is regurgitated and developed into a literary tradition. Inevitably, like many other literary traditions there is a creative variation of serial killer narratives, like the introduction of female protagonists who hunt male serial killers. This variation is partly due to the influence of women’s liberation that promotes the image of an active and independent female character. Therefore, serial killer narratives can be seen as transgressive, irreversibly subverting the convention of male detective stories. The serial killer narrative in effect is a site of perpetual ideological struggle, marking the tensions generated by the female investigative figure. In the case of the texts above, the use of the detective structure and the representation of an active female figure highlight two inter-related ideological tensions in such serial killer narratives. One of these tensions is rooted in the triangular relationships embedded in the employment of female investigative figures to track down male serial killers who usually victimise women. Another one can be traced in the clash in the symbolic functions of woman as a strong investigative female figure and as a victim, harking back to the masculine ideology of the canonical noir crime genre itself.

Therefore, the similar ideological conflicts that pervade *The Silence*, *Copycat* and *Blue Steel* allude to the representation of the female characters as investigators. The employment of female detective figures in effect exacerbates the ideological tensions of the texts, marking the shift in their ideological dominance. Active female characters in the noir tradition are usually associated with aberrant or pathological behaviour, which is often embodied in the figure of a femme fatale—or in the words of Simone de Beauvoir the ‘other’—who is paradoxically functioning integrally as an antagonistic force within the narrative. The female investigative figure, by

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<sup>94</sup> Dir. Kathryn Bigelow, 1990

the same token, is also positioned outside patriarchal institutions, hence the ‘other’, as not only an embodiment of male fantasy but also a construct that crucially reinforces its association with space—highlighting ‘the intricacy and profundity of the connection of space and place with gender, and the construction of gender relations’.<sup>95</sup> Kathleen Gregory Klein avers,

Like the criminal, she is a member of the society who does not conform to the status quo. Her presence pushes off-center the whole male/female, public/private, intellect/emotion, physical strength/weakness dichotomy.<sup>96</sup>

The alignment in the epistemological positioning of the female sleuth and the criminal, in this case, the serial killer, mirrors their ontological proximity. It is within this ontological proximity between a female investigator and a serial killer, which reflects ‘the same fierce ideology of the asocial [American] individual’,<sup>97</sup> that the imperative of understanding their spatial relationships lies. Rooted in the relocation of the transgressive female investigators as a parody within the narrative structure, and the demystification of serial killer figures in serial killer narratives, these spatial relationships further highlight their epistemological uncertainties, situating them not totally on the outside but also in the inside of the patriarchal symbolic order. This ambivalence consequently turns them into limbo-figures or hybrid subjects—while it continues to deny them any hegemonic identity and historicity, it nonetheless guarantees them more mobility and fluidity; hence their new form of agency and subjectivity. The subject is now ‘relational and contingent’, ‘always fluid, in the process of becoming, anxious to create and hold on to an identity which is constructed through discourse and everyday actions’.<sup>98</sup> This is the subject that unremittingly and continuously creates space and place, ‘from which individuals can position themselves, and from which they can speak’<sup>99</sup>—the liberation of the identity politics from the patriarchal gender assignment. Theoretically, if the serial killer is the one who creates the space, the female investigator is the one who tries to infiltrate that space. Noir conventions invariably refuse to accept this logic, creating a labyrinthine plot, which is represented by the blurring of the hunter and the hunted schism. One important repercussion of this blurring of a key Western dichotomy is the

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<sup>95</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, 1998, p.2

<sup>96</sup> *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1995, p.4

<sup>97</sup> Philip L. Simpson, *Psycho Path*, 2000, p.73

<sup>98</sup> Linda McDowell and Joanne P. Sharp, eds., ‘Introduction’, in *Space, Gender and Knowledge*, 1997, p.6

<sup>99</sup> Kathryn Woodward, ed., ‘Introduction’, in *Identity and Difference*, 1997, p.14



shift in identification from the murderer to the victim, giving voice to the victim, who usually is a woman, in the serial killer narrative.

In the noir tradition, space bears an iconic status; spatial metaphors invoked by the proximity between the female investigative figures and the serial killers are only part of the theorisation of space in serial killer narratives. The other part is the literal space, that is, the “spatiality” which gives more of a sense of its active agency’.<sup>100</sup> Usually, spatiality is twinned with temporal significance, forming a spatial-temporal relationship in which the dynamic of time and space is continually expanding the narrative space. Within the crime thriller convention, the identification with the spatial-temporal relationship is expressed in the structure of the serial killer narrative itself. The structure, for instance in *The Silence*, follows what Martin Rubin calls ‘*centrifugal* structure—loose, diffuse, tending away from the center’—a structure associated with a detective thriller, that ‘takes more territory, spreads its focus more widely’.<sup>101</sup> Based on this structure, the serial killer narrative within the detective thriller genre covers a wider and more amorphous space that is expanding and difficult to map out. Initially, the relationship between the serial killer and its victims is an enigmatic one until a certain pattern prevails, and centrifugal structure explores ‘the trend that leads into a much larger and more complex web of conspiracy and deception, and the detective and audience become more and more entangled in that web’,<sup>102</sup> which is the narrative trajectory and structure akin to noir narrative.

This spatial-temporal relationship signifies the elements of suspense in the texts, while calibrating the detective figure with the serial killer it also concurrently creates the sense of complicity in the detective and audience as the battle of wits begins. The audience, entangled in the same web, is not in a position of great advantage—although its knowledge is slightly greater than that of the detective, especially concerning the identity of the serial killer. This knowledge is ‘just enough’ as a dramatic device. ‘Just enough’ so that, as Richard Dyer argues, that ‘seriality emphasises anticipation, suspense, and what will happen next?’<sup>103</sup> Philip L. Simpson asserts that

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<sup>100</sup> Linda McDowell and Joanna D. Sharp, eds., ‘Introduction’, in *Space, Gender and Knowledge: Feminist Readings*, 1997, p.3

<sup>101</sup> Martin Rubin distinguishes this with ‘whodunit’ detective plot which uses a ‘*centripetal* structure: concentrated, tightly interconnected, tending toward the center’ (in *Thrillers*, 1999, p.198)

<sup>102</sup> *Thrillers*, 1999, p.198

<sup>103</sup> ‘Kill and Kill Again’, in *Sight and Sound*, ed. by Jose Arroyo, 2000, p.146

Because of its emphasis on ontology and the inability to come to definite conclusions concerning it, the revealed identity of the murderer, which is influx anyway, is not as important to the reader, though obviously still a concern for the characters within the story.<sup>104</sup>

What remains hidden from both the detective and audience alike is usually the serial killer's private space; the location of his *modus operandi*. This also means that the investigator's major task is to read the clues and find out who the next victim will be in a desperate attempt to save her. For example, in *The Silence of the Lambs* (film and novel), *Copycat*, and *Blue Steel*, the identities of the serial killers are not hidden from the audience; indeed, they are revealed at the early stage of the story as a way of juxtaposing serial killers with female investigators, this being a comparison that is imperative in establishing their relationship. With such juxtaposition, the centrifugal structure establishes a plot in which suspense is heightened by allowing the serial killer and the female detective to move in 'a space that is essentially expanding and unbounded, where it is harder for us [the viewers and readers] to get our bearings',<sup>105</sup> which is an important element in noir's disorientating atmosphere and mood. The climax of the serial killer narrative, with a female hermeneutic figure, is not only about saving the last female 'victims'—Catherine Martin (*The Silence*), Dr. Hudson (*Copycat*) and Megan Turner (*Blue Steel*)—, but it also fragments the audience's orientation and position.

On the generic level, the affinity between the noir genre and the Gothic in particular is manifested by the 'sympathetic bond' between the serial killer and the female investigator—a resonance of the 'Gothic romance of doubling'.<sup>106</sup> This manifestation is often translated in the form of the transgression of spatial boundaries and yoked to the power struggle between the female investigator and the serial killer. In *The Silence*, for instance, there are two forms of doubling involved—one is manifested as a romance (Starling and Dr. Lecter) and another (Starling and Jame Gumb) as a *doppelgänger*. Within what I call the neo-romance structure, the romantic link between Starling and Dr. Lecter provides the kind of compromise that yields irrevocable respect between them as alienated individuals—Starling in the male dominated profession and Dr. Lecter in the prison cell. Starling manages to negotiate her professional boundary with help from Dr. Lecter, who in turn needs her veneration and appreciation of his knowledge to avoid any effort to quantify him. This is

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<sup>104</sup> *Psycho Path*, 2000, p.77

<sup>105</sup> Martin Rubin, *Thrillers*, 1999, p.198

<sup>106</sup> Philip L. Simpson, *Psycho Path*, p.80

the knowledge in Foucaultian sense, where power, in Lecter's case, warrants more space for him to manoeuvre. Demme and Harris approach the Starling-Lecter relationship from inside—bleakly compassionate and darkly affective<sup>107</sup>—reminiscent of the romantic vision of Raymond Chandler. It is within this romance that the film derives its noir pessimism. The relationship between Starling and Gumb is more metaphysical and defined by their parallel 'emotional privation'—'loss, abandonment and grief'—and both are 'single-minded, even ruthless, in pursuit of their goal, both defy patriarchal institutions, and both kill'.<sup>108</sup> The doubling not only signifies Starling's struggle to transgress spatial boundaries set by a patriarchal society, but also vivifies the discourse of space and place in the 'battle of wits' between Starling and the serial killers.

*Copycat* seeks to subvert a triangular romantic story reminiscent of the noir tradition (often expressed by the relationship between the male protagonist, the femme fatale, and the loving and caring woman) with the use of parody, and to a certain extent, with a lampoon effect. Subverting the generic conventions of both noir and detective fictions, Dr. Helen Hudson's character embodies the transgression at the iconic and structural levels; this therefore foregrounds the shift in the ideological dominance (as it is informed by the representation of a female investigative figure whose subjectivity is ideologically-driven) and marking the fluidity of her roles, which oscillate between being a victim and an investigator. The ideological perspective that underlies the film is full of cynicism, reinforcing and aligning Hudson who is an expert in serial killers, to the point of making her a serial killer ('Having 20 years of clinical experience. Having serial killer in the brain' and 'I am their pin up girl'). Hence, the touchstone of this cynicism is encoded in Hudson's response to space, that is, her agoraphobia, which is directly dictated by the serial killers who 'hunt' her. With this, the film lampoons the relationship between the investigator and the serial killer, allowing enough room for the latter to tease the former. It is within this 'tease' context, and as the amalgamation of the transgressiveness of her characterisation and the concurrent relationship with the male serial killers (Callum and Peter Foley), that the space in *Copycat* should be understood.

Anger is an added dimension of cynicism in *Blue Steel*, coated with feminist flavour and rooted partly in the romantic entanglement between the female investigator and the serial killer. This anger can also be explained by considering Bigelow's film, a postmodern self-aware text

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<sup>107</sup> In the novel, Starling was once referred to as the 'BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN' by the media for her involvement with Lecter, p.62

<sup>108</sup> Philip L. Simpson, *Psycho Path*, p.92

that concentrates on the very conventions that it seeks to subvert, particularly the noir detective genre. For that reason, although *Blue Steel* seems contrived, it necessarily evokes the elements of postmodern pastiche in its effort to make sense of the power struggle, foregrounding, in effect, the aesthetic of spatiality that is the defining feature of the relationship between the female investigator and the serial killer. *Blue Steel* is a film about style and surface, or the criticism of them. The opening shot of the film demonstrates just this—the magnified image of a gun stylishly blue in colour is the emblem of ‘what you see is not what it seems’. It is a provocative phallic imagery, but the film’s postmodern self-consciousness negates and deconstructs the whole ethos associated with the patriarchal symbolic order, modulating the symbolic gun into a real gun. This is an effect derived not only from moving a female character to the centre of the narrative but also by creating an ambivalent female investigator, the ‘middle of the road’ kind of androgenic figure who is neither inside nor outside the traditional gender prescription. Hence, the ambivalence informs and transforms the film’s ideological perspective as not morally uniform but malevolent, with a prevalent noir atmosphere of alienation. Eugene’s ultimate purpose is to be killed by Megan through her angry reaction and the grand finale of the film in which Megan kills him signifies the role swapping; and this marks a total immersion of her subjectivity in the noir world.

This section investigates this ‘battle of wits’, asking whether or not the private and public divide collides in serial killer narratives, and what effect it has on not only the representation of the female investigator but also her symbolic functions. It will focus on three questions: 1) What are the major differences between the representation of the female investigator in the novel and film, namely *The Silence*, in terms of its spatial relationship? ; 2) How effective are the noir conventions employed in these texts in relation to the struggle for space in this narrative?; 3) How is space being used to liberate or eviscerate female investigators? A close textual analysis of the texts is used to answer these questions, in conjunction with the theorisation of public and private space.

In the novel and film of *The Silence of the Lambs*, Clarice Starling is introduced within a similar spatial context that directly evokes her association with nature. This association, to a great extent, is a subterfuge, which in addition to providing the background of the female investigator is also effective in situating and framing her within a patriarchal institution. In the novel, the first encounter with Starling is when she is about to enter the FBI Academy building from a firing range. The novel constructs her character by drawing a contrasting spatial presence between the natural

context from which she comes and the FBI building that she is about to enter (the emblem of the Law of the Father). A detailed account of her appearance ('She had grass in her hair and grass stains' (p.1)) coupled with the spatial-temporal urgency of her agency inescapably alludes to the thematic concern of the text, that is, the subversion of gender expectation and assignment in this kind of narrative. There is an ominous sense of an imminent power struggle emanating from the scene, enhanced by the contrasting image of grass and the smell of gunpowder ('Her hands smelled of gunsmoke' (p.1)) that evokes an organic as well as metallic sense of the place. In the film, the scene of the first encounter with her is cinematically and mimetically contrived, yet it does not oversimplify and override the intimacy between her and nature. She is shown with agility and mobility, doing physical exercise in a wood in the training ground of the FBI, which inevitably reinforces the idea that she is part of nature. This connection helps her to define space as a site of solitude and multiplicity, with an allowance for the dynamic of a multi-dimensional identity, both dialectical and chaotic. This is possible because, as Doreen Massey argues, a 'space is [...] the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity/difference'.<sup>109</sup> Both scenes are important in dramatising the power and ideological struggles within the texts, and Starling, self-effacing yet determined—reminiscent of Agatha Christie's spinster sleuth Miss Jane Marple—, is clearly invested with an affective filter that helps to define or demarcate the space she has and is willing to compromise.

Rooted in Starling's position as a limbo figure, the space in *The Silence* is therefore constantly negotiated, characterised by the female investigative figure's willingness to compromise her privacy for publicity. This negotiated space alludes to the theme of ineluctable desperation to express oneself through one's relationship with space, as power and liberation are founded and expressed through not only the possession of one's space but also the acquisition of others'. In Starling's case, encoded substantially as an articulation of the psychology of her character, the sense of desperation is derived from another sliver of a more palpable margin in the corpus of space that helps to define or construct the limit of Starling's action and her struggle to both protect her privacy and at the same time infiltrate into the serial killer's private space. This margin is a necessary boundary marker, which paradoxically helps to de-limit Starling's ability to transgress the spatial boundary, allowing her to read the clues given by Lecter and left by Gumb. One may wonder how her position in the patriarchal-driven FBI can be liberatory. The answer lies in

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<sup>109</sup> Karen Lury and Doreen Massey, 'Making Connection', *Screen*, 40(1999), p.231

the extent to which her understanding of this restriction can be modulated into hermeneutic actions ('It simply said FEDERAL INVESTIGATOR—and expired in a week, she noticed' (p. 41)). It also depends heavily on her portrayal as a rookie FBI agent, which despite the supervision from Crawford (the good father) permits her to act on her (female) instinct ('*I do want some help. But most of all I don't want to cry wolf*' [original italic] (p. 48)). Unlike a qualified FBI agent, Starling's position as a trainee means that she is not fully bound by FBI regulations, projecting and allowing her to act (taking into account the fluidity of her subjectivity as an investigator) outside the realm of the Law of the Father ('*Jack Crawford will never let me go down there, but at least I can confirm who's got the ride*' [original italic] (p. 34)). Only within this capacity can she approach the serial killers' space (Lecter and Gumb) with greater intimacy and dexterity, revealing less of her own space and more of the serial killers'. She therefore understands the algebra for the liberation of her space and the acquisition of another's, that is, the more she is able to infiltrate the serial killers' space, the more she can reveal about the serial killer's identity to be able to rescue his female victim. Although her being in the academy reflects the inevitable and conflicting struggles for her own personal space and for general acceptance in a male-dominated profession—the same psycho-social struggles that exist on the opposite side of the same continuum—it is within this noir leitmotif of a desperate individual, which in this case stems from the alienation experienced by Starling as a female trainee officer and the ontological proximity between her and Lecter that the blurring of the binary opposite of privacy and publicity is necessitated, marked by the fluidity of her role as a trainee investigator. In order to solve the case, Starling's mind is calibrated with that of the serial killers', i.e., Lecter and Jame Gumb. This romantic entanglement is mutated into classic existential despair, albeit to a certain extent job-related, revealing Starling's epistemological and ideological affinity with a noir protagonist rather than that of the like of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, not only enabling *The Silence* to invalidate the detective genre's inherent conservatism that upholds law and order, but also foregrounding her subjectivity as a female detective figure.

Far from succumbing to the volatility of her role as a female investigator, Starling uses her vulnerable position as her strength to face the antagonistic forces germinating from the patriarchal organisation of gender roles. In the novel, her arrival into the FBI building is symbolic of the entrapment that she will be dealing with; however, the surrounding phallic symbolisms are gradually contrasted to her stature in order to construct Starling's strong persona ('Starling came from people who do

not ask for favors or press for friendship' (p.2)). Even though the urgency of the meeting with Crawford ('Section Chief Crawford's summons had said *now*' (p. 1)) is ridiculed by the fact that it turns out to be 'not really a job, it's more of an interesting errand' (p.2), Starling realises that '[a] choice was coming, and she wanted to choose well' (p.3). For that reason, she agrees to be Crawford's 'agent' in 'getting' some information from Dr. Hannibal Lecter; an element of voluntary choices that keeps recurring throughout the text. Indeed, when she eventually meets Lecter and is ridiculed by him, Starling becomes aware of the choices that she is able to make, 'discovered that she had traded feeling frightened for feeling cheap. Of the two, she preferred feeling frightened' (p.20). This reveals noir determinism that Starling soon embraces, and Lecter notices her fear but quickly admires her ability to understand his need for veneration; not through a patronising view of his ability, but through a challenging perception of his inability 'to point that high-powered perception at yourself' (p. 22). Starling is perceptive about their mutual vulnerability, and this coeval relationship allows her to negotiate her way into Lecter's space. Starling gradually embraces her role as Lecter's agent and freely acts upon Lecter's laconic confession that, '[m]emory, Officer Starling, is what I have instead of a view' (p.17) by turning his metaphorical space into a literal one. She is seldom conscious of her choices and actions, and this is manifested by her willingness to trade her childhood memory for information on Buffalo Bill. This cause of action is no different from the classic noir protagonist whose 'personal code of justice',<sup>110</sup> resembles more that of the criminals than the police, typifying, for instance, James A. Cain's 'motifs of doubt and trust'.<sup>111</sup>

One of the keys in understanding this negotiation is to be found by looking at the points of view of the texts. The novel is prominently narrated in the third person, a technique effectively used by Harris to establish links among the main characters—Starling, Lecter, Crawford and Jame Gumb—whilst foregrounding the issue of dominance and control. Unlike the traditional detective story during the golden years, in which 'all psychological interest in character is subjugated to serve the interest of the plot',<sup>112</sup> Harris uses the third person narration not only to explore and heighten the psychology of the characters but also to essentially provide

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<sup>110</sup> J. P. Telotte, 'The Fantastic-Realism of Film Noir: *Kiss Me Deadly*', *Wide Angle*, 14(1992), p.14

<sup>111</sup> Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn., 1992, p.401

<sup>112</sup> P.D. James, 'Dorothy L. Sayers: From Puzzle to Novel', in *Crime Writers*, ed. by H.R.F. Keating, 1978, p.74

the sights and sounds of noir ambiance; allowing the characters to translate the act of looking as an expression of power and control. Upon meeting Lecter in his cell for the first time, '[f]or a steep second she [Starling] thought his gaze hummed, but it was only her blood she heard' (p.14). This is the demonstration of Lecter's power and control, which Starling is able to understand and concurrently negotiate by keeping a courteous distance between them. Through the third person narration, which is an enabling gauge of proximity between Starling and Lecter, their mutual association exhibits a deterministic power struggle (that originates from the female detective's investigation) that allows Starling to depart from the 'good father' and engage herself with Lecter, the representation of the anti-establishment figure that helps Starling to construct a space in which she can position herself and from which she can speak. That is the reason why after the first meeting, 'Starling felt suddenly empty, as though she had given blood' (p.23); the same 'emptying experience' that Jim Thompson's Lou Ford goes through, 'I yelled with laughter ... I doubled up, laughing and farting and laughing some more. Until there wasn't a laugh in me anymore' (p.34). Unlike Lou Ford's first person narration, the third person narration not only objectifies Starling's 'emptying experience' but also allows her to assume the position of a victim; hence her ability to identify with other victims, a subversion of the detective genre's portrayal of a heroic protagonist.

The third person narration in the novel illuminates two aspects of Starling's liberation: a liberation that is important in determining her ability to venture into new spaces to solve the crime that she is investigating. First, the third person narration allows her to function as a victim, a position that she uses as an extension of her detective skills. This holds water especially with regard to her relationship with Lecter in which she is made cognizant of her position (Lecter wants Starling to address him as 'Dr. Lecter—that seems most appropriate to your age and station' (p. 58)). Starling's awareness of her position in the Symbolic Order is a surface irony, recognising the existence of a hierarchical structure that she needs to transgress. This is a recognition that not only establishes the symbiotic relationship with Lecter but also marks her departure from Crawford; a recurring theme in the novel. Often translated in spatial terms and usually dictated by the two fathers, this hierarchy works frequently as the deciding factor of where she should be in her investigation. Second, the third person narration allows the multiplicity of points of view to take place, thus negating the classical noir's first person narration that undermines the objectivity of the narration. Unlike the classical noir protagonist's reliance on a 'personal code of justice', which is the result of



his disillusionment of the American Dreams, to solve a crime, part of Starling's ambitiousness is embedded in the realisation of the ontological consistency between her and Lecter; the realisation that she finds it useful for her to negotiate with Lecter and eventually solve the crime, and the third person narration provides the space in which this consistency can be observed by the reader. To be able to understand the oppression that Starling has to endure and the source of strength for her actions, multiple points of view are necessary to not only illuminate but also exacerbate the chaotic environment that she is drawn into. Multiple points of view therefore establish the world that she inhabits as insular, chaotic, self-contained and intransigent (a typical noir landscape), and her retreat into Lecter's space can be seen as a *nepenthe* for her long suffering. Her liberation lies in her ability to let the relationship grow into a therapy session, as she is gradually becoming aware of her need to come to terms with 'the silence of the lambs'.

Like the novel, the film's noir sensibility is enhanced by the third person narration, creating multiple viewpoints that concurrently disorientate the audience. In the opening scene of the film, for instance, the audience is introduced to Starling while she is doing physical training. This scene introduces two competing ideologies: one, the feminist ideology with a strong female character; two, the cinematic subjugation of the female character through a voyeuristic camera angle. This is demonstrated by the way the camera works, that is, it does not parallel her movement, but rather it stalks her. This is a position akin to noir's disorientating and jarring camera angles, thereby implicating the audience by positioning it in the role of a stalker. The way the voyeuristic camera angle foreshadows the treatment of the female protagonist in this film further presupposes the invasion of her most private space, i.e. her memory, by both the other characters and audience alike. The film insists on this invasion of privacy by constructing her as the object of gaze, sparing her few moments on her own. Starling's ambivalent status as a hybrid subject, however, enables (Jonathan) Demme to establish her as the emotional centre of the story, which consequently not only foregrounds her subjectivity but also simultaneously unfolds the narrative. Compounding this is an apt position that allows her to negotiate her way through the narrative, accumulating strength along the way especially by exploiting her ostensible vulnerability to her great advantage. Essentially, when the camera works as her point of view, it entices and aligns the audience into sharing Starling's vulnerability, positioning them conveniently within the pendulum of 'guilt versus pleasure', a common trait of film noir's ability to create complicity within the narrative.

At the level of ideological symbolism, this alignment has a two-tier effect on Starling's characterisation and therefore negates her status as the object of cinematic gaze. One, it is key for the audience to recognise her as a victim, which consequently shifts their identification with Starling from a detective to a victim. Again, also rooted in the hybridity of her subjectivity and emphasised by the noir convention of a bleak mood and atmosphere, the visual effect of an impending menace that is fast enveloping Starling is debilitating to the audience, hampering the audience from obtaining pleasure from their gaze. The flashback of her childhood pain, for instance, her running into a chapel and seeing her dead father in a coffin, is one of the constant reminders of Starling's forlornness, a reminder that is both intimate and melancholic. This level of intimacy inevitably draws the audience closer to her, and this proximity consequently occludes or forecloses any possible pleasure from the act of gazing at her. Two, Starling, as a detective, is able to look straight into the eyes of both the other characters and the audience, challenging the autonomy of the beholders, and this is consistently demonstrated during her interaction or contact with the serial killers, first Lecter and at the end, Jame Gumb a.k.a Buffalo Bill himself. In the scene when Starling and Lecter first meet, there is an exigent yet superficial tension arising from the ostensible hierarchy between them—Starling's effort to look and sound tough and strong, and Lecter's effort to control the meeting. This tension wanes as soon as both of them start to recognise their ontological proximity. Demme uses the close up technique to offer a parallel between the two characters: extolling Starling's character as a detective in a male-dominated world and highlighting Lecter's almost-mantic knowledge of the world of pathology. Indeed, as it is becoming more apparent that the nature of their trade plays around the exchange of spatial dimensions—Starling's private memory for professional acceptance and Lecter's 'memory' for a physical view and freedom—both of them get what they want. These two-tier effects, in short, are latently inter-related, echoing noir's proclivity to destabilise Western dichotomies, in this case the private/public and victim/perpetrator schisms.

Therefore, *The Silence* focuses on the existential relationship between Starling and Lecter to help establish the transference relationship between Starling and Jame Gumb. As I have argued earlier, the relationship between Starling and Jame Gumb is embodied as a doppelganger. As Yvonne Tasker argues:

*The Silence of the Lambs* foregrounds processes of transformation, offering a parallel between its two central cross-dressers, the serial killer Buffalo Bill [Jame Gumb] who is producing a grotesque body suit from the flayed

flesh of his female victims, and Clarice Starling [...], the cross-class cross-dresser who pursues him.<sup>113</sup>

This transformation is encumbered with numerous motives of transference, which ironically provide catharsis for Starling since for her, '[a]t that moment in the night when she knew she had to leave the Academy to hunt Buffalo Bill, a lot of extraneous noises had stopped. She felt a pure new silence in the center of her mind, and a calm there' (p.293). In the noir tradition, there is a need for some sort of redemptive gesture, whether through a reconciliation with law or the detective's very own code of conduct, which makes the transference in Starling's case more internally driven in her quest for liberation and success. Only through this transference relationship can Starling begin to understand the pointer given by Lecter:

*What does he do, Clarice? What is the first and principal thing he does, what need does he serve by killing? He covets. How do we begin to covet? We begin by coveting what we see every day [original italics] (p. 283)*

In terms of noir sensibility, this pointer has deterministic implications and is strongly associated with the transference of authority from Lecter to Starling. At one level, Starling deduces what Jame Gumb covets through his victims, that is, through not only the choice of victim but also through the superficial randomness of his crime. At another level, similar syntactical elements are formed through the parallel processes of transformation shared by Starling and Jame Gumb, which lay the foundation for Starling to realise that she also covets what she sees every day, allowing her to recognise the spatial identity that Jame Gumb inhabits. This is the key to finding out the whereabouts of Jame Gumb's crime location.

The theme of privacy and publicity is also prominent in *Copycat* because the film is structured around not only the interior or internal landscapes—the psychic space belonging to the female protagonist—but also her professional or public space. In addition to prescribing the demarcation of this realm, this structure allows the film to establish the link between the female investigative figure and the serial killer. This link is crucial in understanding the spatial dimension of their relationship, whilst simultaneously foregrounding the psychological despair of the female protagonist. Helen's despair is non-existential but medical (epistemological),

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<sup>113</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Culture*, 1998, p.25

which is unlike the classical noir protagonist's, requiring her to face up to the very anxiety that she is experiencing. This is neo-noir sensibility that is rooted in the portrayal of a sociologically and economically independent female protagonist, a hybrid figure of 'a-heroic noir'<sup>114</sup> who is a victim and perpetrator. Hinging on contemporary anxiety to find its meaning, rather than producing meaning through its anxiety, this film struggles to find its way through the convoluted plot, allowing little room for the female protagonist to escape this despair. By enhancing Helen's despair through her agoraphobia, the noir world outside is shown in a continuous infiltration into her private space, which the film translates as agoraphobia, that is, her anxiety concerning space. At this juncture, we need to ask ourselves: Are the female characters strong female characters? Or are they mere cinematic victims much misunderstood by feminist film critics? What effect does noir sensibility have on the representation of the female characters? To answer these questions, I suggest looking at the film's structure as a parody of the misogynistic investigative narrative, lampooning effectively the relationship among the characters, especially between the female protagonist and the serial killer. The dynamics of the female protagonist's relationship with her space lie in her desperation to protect her private space, which literally means her life. One may ask then, where does the female protagonist find her source of strength in defying the subjugation of her character? I would suggest that the film's desperation and determination in subjugating the female protagonist, particularly through the serial killer's ability to 'tease' her, produces humour that allows her to liberate herself by means of 'curing' herself from her trauma. Humour—whether in the characters' power struggle or the narrative logic—is in effect the means by which the female protagonist manipulates to liberate herself.

Parody, as 'serious imitation of the characteristic stylistic features',<sup>115</sup> is enhanced by noir sensibility to constantly challenge the elements of dualism prevalent in the film. The impact of this parody is shown by the film's postmodern de-construction of gender division that is often expressed in the film's unsentimental revision of the classical model of the investigative narrative, provoking a more ontologically relevant interpretation of the meaning of the text; thus allowing the shift in its ideological dominance. Brian McHale for instance argues that in

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<sup>114</sup> Katharine and Lee Horsley, 'Meres Fatales: Maternal Guilt in the Noir Crime Novel', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 45.2 (Summer 1999), p.371

<sup>115</sup> Lynda K. Bundtzen, 'Thelma and Louise: A Story Not to be Believed', *Communication Review*, 1.2 (1995), p.185

postmodernist texts ‘the epistemology is *backgrounded* [original italic]’<sup>116</sup> (detective fiction is ‘the epistemological genre *par excellence* [original italic]’)<sup>117</sup> to foreground its ontological imperative. Positioning *Copycat* within this context reveals its cynical existential bitterness towards physically/mentally strong female characters, which to a great extent works to accentuate the noir-related ‘fear and anxiety, ambivalence and vulnerability’<sup>118</sup> of the female protagonist. Only through understanding this shift in the film’s ideological dominance, i.e., the emphasis on its ontological implications through its epistemological devices such as the ‘multiplication and juxtaposition of perspectives’<sup>119</sup> etc., can the inherent alignment of the female protagonist with the serial killer be foregrounded. What this consequently exposes is the collapse of the binary system as the internalisation of the anxiety and fear of the female protagonist takes place, creating a sense of complicity that is integral to noir narrative.

The structure of the narrative in *Copycat* if seen from this perspective reinforces the destabilisation of the sense of what is real and what is not. The destabilised realm is central to the narrative, putting the female protagonist within a context in which the plurality or multiplicity of her self can be ambivalently formed. It also highlights the fight for dominance in the text, with the epistemological theme (illusion or reality) contumaciously trying to be present. The task of the female character is to resist this presence, a resistance that is necessary to avoid any investigation of her subjectivity, and she can achieve this through humour. To be able to take this humour further, the female protagonist should, in the first place, recognize and remain at a distance from the serial killer, creating a sort of slippery spatial-temporal gap that is manifested by the blurring of the hunter-hunted schism. In humour, argues Slavoj Žižek, there is a necessary distance in which the subject adopts his/her neutral position, and ‘a person maintains the distance where one would not expect it—he acts as if something which we know very well exists, does *not* exist’.<sup>120</sup> In *Copycat* the combination of both visual and auditory cues in the opening scene, in which the ‘camera’ manoeuvres above some students outside the lecture hall and is accompanied by Helen’s voice giving a lecture, conjures up a dream-like image and movement. Indeed, this onerik image is further strengthened when the camera visually cuts into the hall. It focuses on a magnified image of Helen’s lips on a projector screen, and

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<sup>116</sup> *Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987, p.11

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9

<sup>118</sup> Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.8

<sup>119</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987, p.9

<sup>120</sup> *The Plague of Fantasies*, 1998, p.171

then turns to the 'real' Helen's face standing before the screen. Helen's 'real' face and her projected image on the screen provide a point of juxtaposition between what is more attractive: the image or the 'real'? Yet, the fetishisation of her face and body is sceptical and circumspect. This is the result of her understanding of the distance between her and the audience, and the fragmented image on display works to destabilize the audience's perception. While putting herself on 'display', she deliberately and humorously asks the audience: 'Let me ask you guys something. What turns you on? I mean what really does it for you? Is it the great body? Is it the smile?' Helen realises that the multiplicity and fragmentation of her image can be used to her advantage, and humour is a mode of defence that she uses against her subjugation by the narrative.

One of the effects of the destabilisation of the realm is the blurring of gender identity. Contemporary feminist theorists like Judith Butler (the theory of performativity) and Julia Kristeva (women as *becoming* and never *being* [my emphasis])<sup>121</sup> argue about gender as a social construction, a process rather than a product that foregrounds the fluid nature of gender roles and identities. In *Copycat*, this fluidity facilitates the theme of 'what is shown is not always what it is'. Helen's strong and well-defined facial features when compared to her lipstick-ridden lips challenges and destabilises the portrayal of her 'feminine' disposition and vulnerability. Sigourney Weaver's physically strong action woman status, that she became known for in the *Alien* films, contributes to this ambiguity and ambivalence, defying the commonly held perception of a victim. In other words, her 'masculine' physical attributes are a parody of the generic expectations of a female victim in the classical male detective genre, and therefore her supposedly 'weak' character carries not only a contrasting effect but also a humorous one. This contrasting image is evidence of gender as a masquerade: her over-emphasized red lips work as a façade that dissembles her 'masculine' physical attributes. Therefore, to a great extent, the magnified projection of her face on the screen can be seen as mocking and satirising both the audience and the serial killers alike. This is 'to mime the mimes men have imposed on women', that is the third strategy, as suggested by Luce Irigaray, to battle against patriarchy whereby 'if women exist only in men's eyes, as images, women should take the images back to men in magnified proportions'.<sup>122</sup> The destabilisation of her identity is also evidence of the film's postmodern strategy to foreground the ontological implications of the text.

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<sup>121</sup> Quoted in Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought*, 1994, p.230

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p.228

The implication of this ‘blurring of identities’, argues Brian McHale, ‘tends to destabilize the projected world, and consequently to foreground its ontological structure’.<sup>123</sup> This is evoked by Helen who casually and humorously teases the male students in the audience: ‘Come on it’s only fair after all the time you spent ogling at us’. What this humour does is provoke the male audience’s symbolic humiliation as shown when the hesitant males in the audience finally succumb to her request. Essentially, it destabilises patriarchy, reversing the underlying narrative subjugation by consigning the males in the audience to the role of the Other. Since the serial killer is sitting among them, this symbolic humiliation reminds him of his mother; Helen’s image on the screen can be translated as the image of the serial killer’s mother in the mirror stage in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Stuck and humiliated at the Imaginary phase, the serial killer sees Helen as the mother who has to be castrated so that he can move on to the next stage, the Oedipal phase, in which his heterosexuality is formed and confirmed in the Symbolic. But this time the humiliation is doubled, as not only does Helen’s ambivalent gender identity through a conscious masquerade reflect her celebration of her ‘otherness’, hence mocking the serial killer’s Oedipal journey, an ‘anti-essentialist’ post-feminist perspective renders the notion of a unified self irrelevant or ‘useless’,<sup>124</sup> but also the rejection (or estrangement) comes from her and not him. As a consequence, her humour consisting of the balancing act of a masqueraded femininity carries a liberating effect to her character.

Within this mockery lies the film’s ability to tease the audience and one of the most conspicuous teases takes place in Helen’s lecture. Here Helen actually elaborates on not only the psychology of the killing but also the killer’s *modus operandi*.

The scream of the victim is dead in pain. The act of killing makes him feel intensely alive. What he feels next is not guilt, but disappointment. It’s not as wonderful as he’d hoped. Maybe next time it would be perfect (at this Helen’s lips are brought into focus). And as his determination is built to take another’s life, he plans an obsessive detail. What props he will bring. What knot to tie.

There is an interesting observation that can be made about teasing in this lecture. There is in the background the voice of a woman whose loud laughter is bordering an orgasmic scream just seconds before the lecture begins with Helen’s mentioning the word ‘scream’ itself. The scream

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<sup>123</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987, p.12

<sup>124</sup> Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought*, 1994, p.219

gives a very theatrical and surrealist effect, which inevitably adds humour to what she is saying and about to say. The more light-hearted nature of the lecture that follows supports this observation as she quips by asking the male member of the audience to stand up.

We can have a good look at these guys. Okay ladies, what do you think? Some pretty cute guys, don't you think (*the audience guffaws at the joke*)  
Let me tell you something. Nine out of ten serial killers are males, age twenty to thirty five, just like these.

The male students are turned into spectacles as one by one they are alternately shown with pictures of some notorious male serial killers. The lecture is undeniably an elaborate act in the film's effort to tease the audience. Indeed, at the point when the determiner 'these' is uttered by Helen, the camera wanders on Peter Foley's (William McNamara) face—the copycat serial killer in the film—functioning less as a dramatic irony and more as a joke at our ignorance. Though the identity of the serial killer in this film is not hidden, to introduce him like that is the biggest tease the film can make.

Helen's encounter with Callum in the bathroom illustrates how in the crime thriller the space-time dynamic is significant in understanding the relationship among the characters, especially among the central characters. Karen Lury and Doreen Massey emphasize that 'space and place are [...] useful as a way of understanding how film makes social relationship visible, or how they are articulated through the visual and aural capabilities'.<sup>125</sup> The scene in which Callum is walking towards the camera and the camera alternately shows Helen hanged above the toilet seat foregrounds a sense of urgency as Helen's chance of survival is by the skin of her teeth. Therefore, when Callum takes his own sweet time to walk into the 'camera' and fills the screen with his face—giving him a monstrous look—this inevitably highlights two of the film's crucial ideological motives. One, Callum presents himself as the villain of the story, foregrounding his monstrosity—a gesture akin to the Gothic tradition. In addition to announcing his dominance over Helen, the shot also allows him to be 'the author of views [...]'; but the view of authorship he claims is presented to us, not to someone within the world of the film—and it is our view of him'.<sup>126</sup> In the noir tradition, however, we later discover that the *modus operandi* of the copycat killer is based on Helen's lecture and this

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<sup>125</sup> 'Making Connections', *Screen*, 40(1999), p.232

<sup>126</sup> William Rothman, 'Virtue and Villainy in the Face of the Camera', in *Making Visible the Invisible*, ed. by Carole Zucker, 1990, p.32



puts the hero-villain dichotomy severely under attack, demanding a perpetual revision of the binary opposition. Two, as argued by Rothman, ‘this gesture is also akin to the camera’s suggestions that the act of viewing is villainous’.<sup>127</sup> Rothman further asserts that

Meeting the camera’s gaze, the villain reveals his knowledge of our viewing; this look by which he unmask himself denies our innocence. And what is perhaps most significant about this double-edged gesture is that it appears to be at once a gesture of the camera and a gesture of the camera’s subject. Their gestures appear not only to match, but [sic.] to coincide.<sup>128</sup>

In both instances, noir’s disorientating view is hence provoked, producing a sense of complicity. Afterwards, Callum challenges: ‘Hey! (Helen) Hudson. What do you say me and you have a little fight?’ and then licks his knife in front of the camera. The act of licking the knife, a *bona fide* phallic symbol, is an arrogant display of male sadism, laid out by his fantasy of female masochism. This reveals two important features in the nature of their characterisation: one, Callum’s hetero-masculinity reaches the level of a pawky partisan of patriarchy; two, Helen signifies castration anxiety, showing that patriarchy has to resort to a paroxysm of matricidal actions to reclaim its authority. There is, none the less, recognition of Helen’s authority by Callum as he addresses Helen by her surname, Hudson, which is analogous to, and not a reversal of the relationship between Starling and Dr. Lecter. What this conversely reveals is the revision of the ‘Gothic romance’ in which according to Chris Baldick,

A tale should combine fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration.<sup>129</sup>

In this case, Helen’s life starts to crumble and this is manifested by her agoraphobia, a psychological or metaphorical ‘castle’, that entraps her mercilessly. As a result, as argued by Rosemary Jackson, ‘a loss of the sense of visual control introduces a deep uncertainty concerning identity,

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid. p.32

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> *The Oxford Book of Gothic*, 1993, p.xix

the authority of the self, and the relation between self and world.<sup>130</sup> Since Helen provides the emotional centre of the narrative, her victimisation marks a shift of identification from the perpetrator to the victim, allowing noir's passivity to settle in.

Female alliance is prominent in investigative narrative, illustrating not only how the female characters relate to each other, which is a subversion of the traditional noir's lone and alienated male protagonist, but also how female bonds can facilitate the investigation. In *Copycat*, the theme of female friendship explores the negotiated roles between the two central female figures whilst highlighting their mutual respect for each other's ability. To a certain extent, M.J. Monahan's (Helen Hunter) character is antithetical to Helen—she is smaller in stature, speaks like a little girl, and uses her 'little girl' charm as a policing 'method' of questioning and gathering information. Although she displays such dexterity at shooting (she comments on her partner's (Rueben Goetz) shooting as 'remedial stuff'), she resists evoking the image of a phallic woman. There is such a conscious playfulness in her character that it is apparent that she is masquerading gender (femininity and masculinity), allowing her to be whatever she wants. Her humour is projected as harmless and unthreatening and is used as an extension of her detective skill, enabling her to venture into any space she likes. The ability to appear 'harmless and unthreatening' is reminiscent of Miss Marple whose old age is manipulated to gain access to wherever she wants to be. Monahan is unlike 'the contemporary articulation of 'strong women' in terms of an aggressive sexuality [that] involves a particular kind of objectification and display',<sup>131</sup> and humour is the very instrument that she uses to avoid any form of objectification. Despite their constant arguments, Helen and Monahan complement each other in their efforts to defeat the serial killer: one with the knowledge of serial killing and another with the ability to transgress spatial boundaries. Their humour (for instance when the beleaguered Helen asks Goetz cynically, 'Did she do this wide-eyed little girl routine often? Does it actually work?' and is answered laconically by Monahan who teasingly says, 'Usually') is coterminous with humour in the hardboiled tradition, and empowers them the same way it does male hardboiled protagonists.

The scene that follows Helen and Monahan's first meeting highlights the fact that the private and public boundaries are constantly being negotiated. Public elements are always lurking about trying to infiltrate

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<sup>130</sup> in Peter Messant, *Criminal Proceedings*, 1997, p.5

<sup>131</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Culture*, 1998, p.12

Helen's private space, and their aim is to destabilize the solitude of her privacy. After recovering from her fit, Helen begins to work on the case file left by Monahan. The file provides an irrevocable link between Helen and Monahan, and between Helen's private life and her public interest. *Copycat* represents this link with alternate shots of Helen working in her house and Monahan working in the police department, demonstrating how private and public spaces are stylistically intertwined. The interlocking of binary opposites in effect not only establishes their female bond but also permits the relationship to grow into a symbiosis in which both can equally benefit. The destabilised spatial boundaries, which are rooted in the destabilisation of gender roles, consequently help to redefine the mobility of the female characters, and in Helen's case, allow her to blur the hunter/hunted divide. Although some of the spaces are already intruded upon, the intrusion is not so overwhelming that characters lose theirs completely. Indeed, Helen's main struggle is to keep the serial killer at bay; therefore rendering her protection of her most private space, that is her brain/sanity, possible. Her acknowledgement of the vulnerability of her mental state is significant in both combating her deep-seated fear as well as keeping her sanity intact. This is the threshold of her readiness to move beyond the four walls of her house in order to deal with her fear. On the contrary, Monahan who moves prominently around the police department and crime scenes begins to step into Helen's private home, which can also be seen as an adventure into a domestic sphere. In the film, Monahan's house is never shown, and therefore it can be assumed that the police department is the substitute for her failure in the domestic space—as is made evident by her ex-husband's (Nicoletti) insisting that they get back together. The female characters' mobility is imperative, enabling them to confront the threat posed by the copycat killer, Peter Foley, who is offered more spaces due to his ability to infiltrate someone else's spaces. He is a phantom who roams not only in Helen's mental space but also in the outside world, always at ease with all the spaces he has invaded—the police department, the crime scenes and Helen's house. Besides his physical presence in Helen's home, he also tortuously manipulates Helen's only window of communication with the outside world, i.e., the Internet.

Helen's refusal to let her most private space, i.e., her brain to be invaded is a milestone of her rejection of being a victim of patriarchal society. 'What am I? The lamb tied to a stick here?' cries Helen, refusing to cooperate. The reference to Christian religion (Jesus as the Lamb) here is sublimating, but not without its parody. The reversal of role (i.e., Helen as a female lamb) is an epistemological device used to underline her ontological uncertainty, an apodictic demonstration of the narrative's

conscious effort to undermine and disparage her agency. In this light, Helen's dilemma is both determined and prescribed by the narrative structure, that is, a postmodern entrapment that is akin to neo-noir's stylisation of the surface, and to a certain extent is reminiscent of the classical noir sense of entrapment. The difference is, while the classical noir uses visual style to capture the sense of entrapment (for instance vertical shadow to represent a prison cell) experienced by male protagonists, neo-noir uses visual style as the entrapment itself. This is necessary because as an expert in serial killing and the serial killer, Helen's knowledge empowers her, thus posing a threat to patriarchy. Likewise, working with the police department, i.e., the administrator of the patriarchal law, Monahan's *savior-faire* helps her to obtain certain power and blend well with her male colleagues, conversely embodying a threat to patriarchy. Her 'girlie' method does just that. In *Copycat*, most victims are saliently females, thus showing how this film uses the biblical lamb as the symbol of femicide. Jane Caputi argues that, 'the acceleration of violence of all types against women is a backlash phenomenon, meant to reassert threatened male power and stave off the socially transformative powers of feminism'.<sup>132</sup> This backlash is inherent in the narrative of *Copycat*, almost instinctive in its use of Helen's lecture as the instigator of the copycat killings. Therefore, Foley's role is discernibly important as he is seen as the vehicle for the dissemination of such a value system—a disciple of Callum's mission of femicide.

Foley's goal culminates in his desire for Helen's head, both for its literal and metaphorical meanings. In a literal sense, Helen's head is the anatomical part of her body that Foley needs to re-enact Callum's encounter with Helen in the bathroom at the outset of the film. This re-enactment is a symbolic manifestation of the Oedipal journey, played almost-ritually by Foley as drama exploring a rite-of-passage drama into 'serial-killingdom'. At the metaphoric level, there are two meanings that can be deduced. One, Helen's head epitomises the power struggle between her and the serial killer. Her knowledge of serial killing proves a powerful tool in reclaiming her authority, and her ability to use her brain is imperative not only for her survival but also for the case to be solved. Helen's agoraphobia is a mental state; hence, to 'make' her brain work is inoculating and liberating at the same time. In one instance, Monahan laconically demands, 'I need your brain on duty'. Helen debilitatingly declines by saying, 'No, I am not on duty, neither is my brain'. This shows

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<sup>132</sup> 'American Psychos: The Serial Killer in Contemporary Fiction', *Journal of American Culture*, 16(1993), p.107

that Helen's brain, despite her volatile refusal, is a useful weapon that they have to retaliate and survive. The significance of Helen's brain or head is reiterated in the note left by Foley at one of the crime scenes—'Helen, don't lose your head'. Two, Helen's head has spatial dynamics that, despite her agoraphobia, enable her to access the mind of the serial killer, an infiltration of space that will undermine him. This grants her not only the uncanny ability to seamlessly transgress the hunter-hunted paradigm, but also to own up to her reputation as an expert in serial killing. Therefore, in the final confrontation with Foley, Helen manages to reclaim her status, and hence her liberation from agoraphobia, consigning Foley, verbally, to 'a second class' copycat killer position. With its aftertaste, the ending of the film is representative of a noir conventional ending. Perhaps it is a little bit clichéd but it does have a disturbing effect. In the final scene, Callum is writing a letter to a person whom he calls Conrad, telling him that 'Helen is a collector's item', evoking the sense of absurdity and of not going anywhere, which is an important characteristic of a film noir's narrative. This is encapsulated by Philip L. Simpson's observation of the serial killer narrative:

One of the key metaphors in the serial killer narrative is aimless circling towards specific moments of murderous clarity, then more circling.<sup>133</sup>

*Blue Steel*, meanwhile, starts with a detailed view of a gun rotating on the screen, a phallic symbol of the patriarchal society. The superiority of this phallic imagery is reinforced by the colour blue, signifying its association with the thin blue line of law enforcement. This scene also introduces two important premises of the film. One, Bigelow, who is also a painter, represents the magnified image of the gun as Megan's almost infantile obsession to the extent that it seamlessly mutates her desire into a drive, in this case, a death drive. This marks the film's departure from the traditional detective story to a neo-noir film. Joan Copjec argues that

The inversion that defines the shift from classical detection to film noir is to be understood not in terms of identification, but in terms of the choice between sense and being, or—in the dialect of psychoanalysis—between desire and drive.<sup>134</sup>

Eugene's desire for Megan is a subterfuge, which at the deeper level reveals his drive for death. This explains his inexorable pursuit to frame

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<sup>133</sup> *Psycho Paths*, 2000, p.139

<sup>134</sup> *Shades of Noir*, 1993, p.182

Megan into killing him. Two, the scene also shows the fragmented image of a gun, as opposed to a monolithic image, which reflects the film's ideological motive, that is, the fragmentation of patriarchy. *Blue Steel* seeks to demonstrate this in two ways: one, by employing an androgenic female character to deconstruct the traditional meaning of gender identities; two, by subverting the generic convention of a detective or police procedural film by employing a female investigative figure who hunts a male serial killer. As a neo-noir film, *Blue Steel* is characteristically postmodern, often reflected not so much by its syntactic awareness as by its fascination with visual representation—a postmodern association with the surface. These two ways, in effect, can be understood by looking at the spatial proximity between the serial killer and the female detective, and how noir mood and convention inform the ominous threat facing the female detective.

Even from the outset, the film concentrates on constructing Megan's character as a victim in the world that she inhabits, allowing the serial killer to identify with her. This aligns her character more with the noir protagonist than the heroic detective in the crime genre. Megan's world is full of male chauvinism, and she herself is brought up in a family where domestic violence towards her mother is considered uxorial—part of a wife's duty to accept. Therefore, Megan's victimisation is not only circumstantial but also deep-seated. This is the parallelism that helps the serial killer to immediately identify with Megan, seeing her as his own nemesis. The chaotic world of the city impugns her, and Eugene is the very force of evil personified. He abruptly infiltrates into Megan's private space, bringing more chaos into her already chaotic space. Bigelow's technique of establishing Megan's victimisation is contrived, but is enough to evoke the postmodern tendency of creating illusion by concentrating on the surface. The meaning of a text in a postmodern sense can be understood by compounding this varied representation of the surface. In *Blue Steel*, Megan's chaotic world is therefore associated with the failure of patriarchy to support her, even though she tries to be on its side by becoming a police officer.

Spatial relationships between Eugene and Megan are forcefully interlocked by the first. Following the noir tradition, they meet out of fate, when Eugene happens to be in the shop where Megan killed an armed robber. It is love at a first sight noir style, which in this case, as with Frank Chambers in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, spirals downward thereafter. Eugene's career as a commodities broker reinforces this patriarchal image in the narrative, allowing him to use his money to buy his way into Megan's life. In the first 'date' that he has with Megan, he

impresses her with the kind of place he dines at, allowing the relationship to grow further. In the noir tradition, the 'entrapment' experienced by the protagonist is not due to his naïve-ness, but his failure to make the right judgement. The same fate befalls Megan; her misjudgement is influenced largely by her anger towards the failure of patriarchy to defend her, which consequently opens her personal space up for the external force to enter, i.e. Eugene.

*Blue Steel* therefore uses a female detective figure to gradually deconstruct the ethos surrounding patriarchy. What Bigelow tries to establish is the limpness of the phallic symbols that she employs, allowing Megan to try to live outside that order. On her first day patrolling the city, she killed an armed robber in self-defence, but has no one to support her claim, resulting in her suspension from the force. Her male partner fails to support her argument, due to his need to go to the toilet. The gun that is used by the stickup man falls into the hands of the serial killer, epitomising not only the danger posed by patriarchy but also the mobility of that danger. In addition to that, the missing gun represents the link that the serial killer has created with Megan, a creation that can be seen as the need for patriarchy to reassert itself. However, the gun as a phallic symbol points at the failure of patriarchy to both protect and defend her. Soon bodies are found around the city, with Megan's name engraved on the bullets. Meanwhile her personal life brightens up a bit when she starts dating Eugene, who sets up his initial meeting with her. When Megan realises that Eugene is behind all the shooting, no one believes her, resulting in the death of her best friend. On another occasion, after making love to Nick, Eugene shoots him and then immediately rapes her, highlighting the fact that patriarchy has failed to protect her.

Thereafter, the theme of *Blue Steel* is enhanced, revealing the film's bona fide status as a revenge film. Bigelow seems to be interested in building Megan's character as an angry person, rooted in the domestic violence that Megan's mother has to endure and the failure of patriarchy in ensuring her safety. Eventually, Megan, frustrated and angry, takes the law into her own hands. This is the inconsistency of the film that is often highlighted by film critics, which, in my opinion, can only be understood within noir sensibility. She understands that to be able to stop Eugene from entering her private space, she should kill him. Without her realising, her action guarantees achievement of his ultimate goal that is to be killed by Megan. Noir sensibility allows this to take place, highlighting the genre's refusal to accept narrative closure. Bigelow is very aware of this convention, finding it easier to liberate her female character by allowing her to act as she wants.

## The Female Serial Killer

### Whose Fantasy Is This Anyway? : The Female Serial Killer in *Dirty Weekend* and *The Eye of the Beholder*

Crime Fiction offers avenues of transference not available in 'the real', giving an outlet for women's pain and rage experienced as a result of male violence.<sup>135</sup>

Noir crime fiction is surfeited with the image of a fatal woman, an iconic figure that reflects male angst and insecurity. This image is rooted in the genre's historical and political development—proven by vestiges of Gothic, melodrama, and the detective genre—and informed by Western philosophical, literary, and cultural theories. Many classical noir films and novels like Robert Siodmak's *The Dark Mirror* and James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, respectively, for instance, are informed by (Freudian) psychoanalytic theory that consigns women to the role of 'not men' or as in Simone de Beauvoir's aptly entitled book, *The Second Sex*, foregrounding the binary opposition while occluding issues like deep-seated female oppression and subjugation. Freud's view that 'man fears woman because she is castrated',<sup>136</sup> provides an underlying template from which dangerous women in classical noir texts (films and novels) are generally constructed—phallic women whose images provoke castration anxiety—and therefore require, most of the time, an obligatory annihilation. In that vein, a woman's fatalism in the noir tradition is equally expressed by her duplicity and seductiveness—the modern day Delilah—which fundamentally means 'just being an active woman.' The male protagonist's *devoir* in the canonical noir in effect is either to annihilate or to redeem her.

The amalgamation of 'duplicity and seductiveness' (the play of gender and sexuality) in the portrayal of the fatal woman mirrors the misogynistic Western culture that produces it. Noir texts conversely capture this mirroring with their distinct portrayal of the male protagonist who is devoid of heroism, and a set of narrative conventions and visual stylisations that heighten not only the threatening and ominous milieu that he inhabits but also the mental state that he is in. The consequence of this is the genre's need to find a scapegoat, providing an inoculating balance to the checkered male protagonist. This narrative scapegoat is personified in

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<sup>135</sup> Sally R. Munt, *Murder By The Book?*, 1994, p.206

<sup>136</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 1994, p.127



the figure of a femme fatale, emblematic of Western literary tradition's view of a woman as an embodiment, and in noir's case, of male fantasy. Whether she embodies an external (economical, physiological etc.) threat or is an embodiment of male fear (psychological, psychoanalytical, philosophical etc.) towards the disruptive nature of women with regard to the patriarchal value system, there seems to be an unwritten prescription of how a woman should be represented. Because of her inherent fatalism, the infamous femme fatale's comeuppance is prescribed by the genre, ideologically driven by the genre's desperation to insert and assert male authority. Lawrence Kramer, speaking of women's role as an embodiment, makes a very illuminating point:

A woman may be judged to deserve punishment whenever she steps beyond paradigmatic position; her role as an embodiment is protected from injury by doing injury to her body. A woman may come to deserve such punishment either by affirming whatever features of femininity are stigmatized in her particular milieu or by unmasking the condition of stigma-free masculinity there as an illusion.<sup>137</sup>

Kramer's argument highlights the fact that as an embodiment, a woman is therefore the gauge that is used by patriarchy to measure, demarcate and disseminate its own masculine ideology, reaffirming the oppressive binary opposition prevalent in Western thinking. Unless she conforms to the patriarchal standard, she is deemed punishable.

The noir genre, argue some feminist critics, is not a male genre per se, 'offer[ing] a space for the playing out of *various* [original italic] gender fantasies'.<sup>138</sup> Informed by feminist theories, the link between the neo-noir genre and its classical counterpart is established with the portrayal of a fatal woman. Coterminous with contemporary gender destabilisation, neo-noir texts capture the experience of paranoia, alienation and fragmentation within the figure of a fatal woman, which, unlike the classical noir, is now the emotional centre of the narrative. She is now a noir protagonist with the inherent existential dilemma of a deluded dream that characterises noir sensibility, functioning as a mirror of a morally collapsed society. She is transgressive and able to mobilise beyond the patriarchal paradigm, cocksure in her own satirical rights, yet demonstrating weaknesses and making a plethora of errors of judgement. The absurdly iniquitous femme fatale of retro-noir is transformed by neo-noir into a self-aware post-feminist female human, trapped in a miasma of contemporary anxieties

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<sup>137</sup> *After the Lovedeath*, 1997, p.2

<sup>138</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Women in Film Noir*, 2000, p.10

like anybody else. Her humanness or ‘perceived wholeness’ modulates her into a new threat, which according to Tania Modleski in her studies of women in Hitchcock’s films, ‘not because they automatically connote castration, but because they don’t’.<sup>139</sup> The celebration of her ‘otherness’ may reaffirm the patriarchal binary system, yet her willingness to use her own resources against the asperity of the noir world and life conversely and effectively undermines the traditional gender prescriptions, which ultimately renders patriarchy irrelevant and archaic.

My intention here is to examine two serial killer noir texts—Helen Zahavi’s *Dirty Weekend* and Marc Behm’s *The Eye of the Beholder* (henceforth *The Eye*), questioning whether spatial constructions in these texts liberate or subjugate the subjectivity of the female serial killers, and how noir conventions employed problematise or facilitate the representation of their characters. This section seeks to demonstrate that the mobility of the female serial killers is a sign of their transgression, enabling them to manipulate their space as a means of achieving their goal. It argues that the difference between both texts primarily lies in the narrative positioning of the female characters—while *Dirty Weekend* has its main character as the female serial killer, *The Eye* narrative trajectory follows its hardboiled and male sleuth literary origin by posing the female serial killer as the object of the male protagonist’s investigation. Arguably, although the gender of the author affects the construction of space in his and her respective texts, the essential question lies in the way the texts diverge or conform to the canonical noir conventions, reflecting their different ideological motives.

The transgressiveness of female serial killers in both novels is contingent not only upon their ability to manipulate their mobility, a leitmotif that permeates both texts, irrevocably challenging the idea that women are always associated with locality, but also on their ability to subvert generic conventions. Doreen Massey, a feminist geographer, uses a somewhat anthropological argument to link the discussion about the public and private division with the binary opposition of masculinity and femininity. Massey elaborates:

Some culturally specific symbolic association of women/woman/local does persist. Thus, the term local is used in derogatory reference to feminist struggles and in relation to feminist concerns in intellectual work (it is only local struggle, only local concern) [...] That bundle of terms local/place/locality is bound in to sets of dualism, within which a key term is the dualism between masculine and feminine, and in which, on these readings, the local/place/feminine side of the dichotomy is deprioritized

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<sup>139</sup>*The Women Who Knew Too Much*, 1988, p.2

and denigrated [...] and that place called home is frequently personified by, and partakes of the same characteristics as the assigned to woman/mother/lover.<sup>140</sup>

Massey's observation de-romanticizes the idea that a woman's role as 'Domestic Goddess' is empowering, revealing that its association with locality forecloses some important feminist issues that are germane to women's struggle for equality and liberation. For Massey, locality is a sign of phallogocentrism, i.e., a euphemism for female suppression. Mobility, which according to Philip L. Simpson 'has always meant freedom to escape one's past and the consequences of the past',<sup>141</sup> is antithetical to locality and therefore is an apt and liberating means which the female serial killer uses to redefine her space.

Helen Zahavi's *Dirty Weekend* is a rape-revenge fantasy, embedded with an arsenal of canonical noir conventions such as labyrinthine plot, a depressing mood, and fragmented characters. However, the novel's narrative trajectory is informed by its conscious generic inversion, and exacerbated by the portrayal of a female sociopath as its emotional centre. *Dirty Weekend*, according to Sally Munt, 'has mapped the feminist crime novel on to a superlative revenge fantasy that inventively synthesizes a hybrid satire in which the hero is a serial killer'.<sup>142</sup> This arguably positions the avenger within the narrative itself, a liberating position that is traditionally occupied by a male protagonist character. Munt's observation is undeniably political, hence the apotheosis of the sociopath female protagonist as 'the hero', an example of feminists' revanchism that finds its apt expression in a serial killer noir text like *Dirty Weekend*. As Jane Caputi asserts, 'the theme of revenge of women fighting back and serially killing those who would rape, abuse or kill them is increasingly prevalent theme in fiction authored by women'.<sup>143</sup> The principal subversion of this genre as claimed by Caputi is the birth of a central female serial killer who is the protagonist rather than the antagonist of the text; like Bella in *Dirty Weekend* who refuses to remain or be a victim and goes out on a killing spree as an act of vengeance for the treatment she receives from men. Zahavi's intention is to establish the link between Bella and her revenge by applying a feminist view of space as 'a location in which to roam, play, plant and settle, not in which to bluster and bully, or in response, to cower

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<sup>140</sup> *Space, Place and Gender*, 1998, p.10

<sup>141</sup> *After the Lovedeath*, 1997, p.139

<sup>142</sup> *Murder by the Book?*, 1994, p.203

<sup>143</sup> 'American Psychos: The Serial Killer in Contemporary Fiction', *Journal of American Culture*, 16(1993), p.108

and huddle'.<sup>144</sup> As a satire, *Dirty Weekend* oscillates cunningly between noir conventions and a serial killer narrative, which as a result, produces a hybrid figure whose characteristics reflect the marriage of the classic femme fatale figure and the noir protagonist. With the emphasis on the working of her psychology, this novel provides an insightful and sympathetic understanding of the development of Bella's character and the motivation behind her actions, which consequently create in the reader the inevitable sense of complicity.

Zahavi's *Dirty Weekend* bears a surface resemblance to Abel Ferrara's *Ms. 45* (1981), especially with regard to the characterisation of the female protagonists. The early part of both texts concentrates on the construction of the female characters as victims of male oppression, violence and intrusion into their private lives. In *Dirty Weekend*, Bella is constantly stalked by her voyeuristic male neighbour, Tim, who threatens her with several indecent and dirty calls. Thana (Zoe Lund), the female protagonist in *Ms. 45*, is physically raped twice on the same day, signifying her vulnerability in the noir world. Refusing to capitulate, Thana manages to kill and dismember her second rapist who had broken into her house. Like Bella, the constant harassment from male strangers wherever she goes leaves her with no choice but to start carrying and using a .45 gun, enabling her to retaliate by roaming the night streets killing men who abuse or harass women, culminating in her running amok and shooting people at a Halloween party. The final shooting scene is done in slow motion so that the seemingly random shooting is not mistaken as such, allowing the audience to see that Thana's victims are all men. Although situating her revenge within a sociopath paradigm, the shooting is also symbolic of her role as a scourge of society, or in *Dirty Weekend*'s context, as an avenger in '[a] holy war' (p.98). Both texts turn personal revenge into political action, but *Ms. 45*'s ending, in which Thana is finally stabbed from behind by her own female friend, is flagrantly misogynistic, that is a severance from the ending of *Dirty Weekend*, which is a direct criticism of the masculine ideology of the serial killer noir genre itself.

The entanglement of the dichotomy of interiority and exteriority to highlight and signify the fear, desperation and alienation of the female protagonist is set from the beginning of *Dirty Weekend*, foregrounding that '[t]his is the story of Bella, who woke up one morning and realised she'd had enough' (p.1). The novel instantly modulates the subdued mood into

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<sup>144</sup> Catherine R. Stimpson, *Where the Meanings are: Feminism and Cultural Spaces*, 1988, p.xvi

action, and Zahavi's main purpose is to establish Bella's victimisation, constructing her identity with loaded images and discourses of a victim. The dingy interiority of her rented flat, and the violent exteriority that is Brighton, are now a combined metaphor for Bella's mental state, foregrounding not only noir's deterministic forces that oppress and alienate her, but also the forceful consolidation of patriarchy into her life. Mark Seltzer sees this as 'an exposure of private interiors so complete' that 'the senses of monitoring the interiors [...] become unnecessary or redundant'.<sup>145</sup> For Zahavi, the root of Bella's suffering is existential, rooted in Bella's being a woman, which in Western tradition, is often associated with nature. The novel is loaded with Bella's association with nature ('A black day for humankind' (p.27) and 'The damp earth that nurtured me. The soil from which I sprang. Banal perhaps, but mine' (p.28)), enabling Zahavi to associate Bella's revenge with female nature. Only by identifying Bella's existential despair is Zahavi able to accentuate the fact that 'pain and Bella made poor companions' (p.1).

To a certain extent, Bella's existential despair is underlined by the novel's textual design that intentionally positions her as a victim, evoking noir's sensibility of an oppressive and virulent milieu. For instance in chapter two, when Bella receives a threatening and harassing call from Tim, the phrase 'Bella in the basement' is repeated five times. On one level, this repetition can be interpreted as the framing of her character into a limited, mundane and banal pattern of life. On another, it is meant to be a consistent reminder for Bella of her position as a victim, which crucially creates the perspective of the novel. This textual evidence also evokes the pattern of desire that keeps recurring in the novel. Across the text, Bella's judgment is underscored by her inherent morality as evident in these narrations: 'Bella was reared to be polite [...] She was educated to be sensitive' (p.65) and 'Bella the moralist' (p.70), reminiscent of the canonical noir protagonists' lamenting the loss of innocence when they become sullied by the noir world. Bella's actions are therefore bound up by a sense of determinism, signalling her vulnerability in the malignant face of the outside world. The sense of worthlessness is almost insistent: 'Does she matter, this Bella-person? This nothing-person? She doesn't think so' (p.21), creating a feeling of alienation that psychopaths in noir thrillers usually experience. This echoes noir's mood of pessimism as the protagonist is trapped in the loop of human relations and power struggles, which irreversibly scar her emotionally. This sentiment is verbally expressed by Tim—her voyeuristic male neighbour—'I don't think you're

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<sup>145</sup> *Serial Killers*, 1998, p.165

worth anything' (p. 44), and reiterated by Nimrod, the male clairvoyant that she consulted, 'They have all been there. They've had a good poke around [...] You were open house, my dear' (p.36). What this textual evidence gradually reveals is that Bella's victimisation is visibly translated into Bella's connection with the space she inhabits. Indeed, Bella confesses:

I looked inside myself and there was nothing there; so I thought I'd camp in the empty space. Everything had drained away. All the hope and all the fight. Trickled away on the train down to Brighton. (p.33)

The etiolated language reflects the vacuity of her spirit. Therefore, her ability to transgress the spatial boundary is the defining feature of her liberation, and this ability is found in her desire to analyse her own feelings. Initially 'she wasn't one to analyse what she felt' (p.30), leaving the feeling buried in diegetic space, and all that she sees is 'nothing underneath' (p.32). As her desire begins to be expressed by language, she finds that 'the solution, like the key, is within' (p.34). The reference to the 'key' within is a phenomenon that I believe resembles Copjec's interpretation of the 'locked room/lonely room'.<sup>146</sup> In her analysis of film noir, Copjec argues that 'what film *noir* presents to us are spaces that have been emptied of desire. Or: the emptiness of the room indicates less that there is nothing in them than that nothing more can be got out of them',<sup>147</sup> a sentiment reversed in *Dirty Weekend* as the narrator avers that when '[y]ou begin to feed an appetite you didn't know you had [...] you came to see that it's never enough' (p.172).

Carla Freccero argues that 'what is romanticized in the figure of the serial killer, then, is an ideology of violence that presents violence as something originating in the private sphere'.<sup>148</sup> Zahavi essentially subverts the masculine form of serial killer narrative by de-locating the origin of Bella's victimisation less in her own private space, i.e. her own flat, and more in the public sphere, which ironically and consequently dramatises the feminists' doubts regarding the notion of 'a place called home'. Inundated with Tim's harassing attention and calls, Bella's private space is incessantly becoming a 'lock[ed]' place with 'stale' (p.8) air, and these images are used by Zahavi to create a sense of foreboding. Tim, therefore, is an embodiment of the masculine ideology that mercilessly infiltrates her

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<sup>146</sup> *Shades of Noir*, 1993, p.189

<sup>147</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> 'Historical Violence, Censorship, and the Serial Killer: The Case of American Psycho', *Diacritics*, 27(1997), p. 48

space, and his ideological function is to maintain the security of the boundaries of masculine gender assumptions, trying to make sure that Bella will remain within the culturally secured place assigned by patriarchy. Zahavi uses Tim and other men that Bella encounters to demonstrate how patriarchal intrusion into private space is a major source of the collapse of the romantic idea of a home, highlighting its increasingly ambivalent status. As a satire *Dirty Weekend* foregrounds Tim's flagitious infiltration into Bella's space to raise moral alertness, questioning the legitimacy of his actions that physically immure her. It is through her encounters with her other 'victims' that Bella's perception of her dwelling changes drastically, realising upon going 'back to her own flat [that is...] unlikely to be missed [...] the source of her damnation and her salvation. Her rest, her rented rat-hole, her little box of tricks.' (p.140). Translated into spatial terms, this visual imagery enhances her sense of alienation—bona fide noir's credo. This is also the noir sensibility that consequently invalidates the victim/perpetrator schism, creating a sense of complicity in the reader.

The change in the conception and perception of her space also mirrors her ontological uncertainties, reminiscent of the noir protagonist's and the male serial killer's schizophrenic identification with space. During her consultation with Nimrod, Bella demands: 'Cut out my heart and put a stone in its place. I want vengeance' (p.24). This demand has bifurcate functions. One, it shapes the ideological perspective of the text by reconfirming her status as the Other, consigning her further into an alienated position. Lee Horsley in her analysis of male psychopaths calls this 'the stripping of the civilised part' (p. 112), which is echoed by Mark Seltzer's claim that 'the devoiced interior must be understood not as the cause of violence but as its desired effect: the production and externalisation of voided or dead places within'.<sup>149</sup> Zahavi subverts this by celebrating Bella's 'otherness', and in the process, allowing Bella to siphon off male oppression—her getting rid of pain. Two, the demand also announces Bella's ability to transgress her 'victim' position, enabling her to assume her agency. Copjec, in her application of Lacanian psychoanalysis, suggests that the content of the emptiness is 'finally visible for anyone to see' once 'desire gives way to drive'.<sup>150</sup> Her desire (I want) is now manifested by her drive (vengeance). Hence, Bella's interpretation of her interior emptiness makes way for her mobility or her

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<sup>149</sup> *Serial Killers*, 1998, p.167

<sup>150</sup> *Shades of Noir*, 1993, p.188

ability to move out of her private space, resulting in her revengeful actions, which concurrently validate both her existence and action.

The celebration of Bella's 'otherness' through the serial killer narrative is the key to Bella's liberation, which in turn enables Zahavi to destabilise patriarchy and masculinity. Bella's existential despair is rooted not in her fear of men, but in their destructive nature and tendency to inflict pain—'What they want they must possess. What they can't possess they must penetrate. What they can't penetrate they must destroy' (p.35). Bella's fear can only be at the centre of the narrative when it is validated, and Zahavi's strategy of validation is by '[g]iving flesh to your secret fears' (p.46). Although Nimrod (a male clairvoyant) is the one who helps to validate her fear, his status as a foreigner and Bella's alienation are coexistent; thus allowing them to share the same spatial perspective. Likewise, Mr. Brown, who assists her in materialising her 'tactics [...] [and] strategy' (p.63) by selling her an illegal gun is also an alienated figure, situating him outside the law as illegal gun dealer and a socially outcast as a homosexual ('You mean I'm doing business with a bumboy, Mr. Brown?' (p.81)). Essentially, one of *Dirty Weekend's* main motives is to invalidate phallic power and Zahavi uses alienated male figures (Nimrod and Mr. Brown) as a destabilised representation of the phallus. Both male characters gave her weapons (flick-knife and gun), modulating their phallic symbolism into real weapons. Zahavi is aware enough not to fall into the trap of creating Bella as a phallic woman. Reference to a phallic symbol (including penis-envy (p.103) and a phallic god (p.108)) is made several times in *Dirty Weekend*, magnifying the significance of the satirical view of misogynistic traits in this serial killer narrative. Bella's powerlessness without a real gun ('She might be a nobody, but the gun makes her somebody' (p.129)) is a salient indication of Zahavi's intention to both reduce its symbolic power and importantly, to analogically belittle men's reliance on their biological penises to oppress women, proving by the fact that the crimes committed by men in *Dirty Weekend* are sexual and gender related. Zahavi uses satirical tools to deride, exaggerate, show contempt, and to illustrate how serial killing is an apt expression of self-insertion that validates Bella's existence.

Besides validating Bella's existence and action, her serial killing concatenates the transgression of spatial boundaries that appropriately mark her liberation. As mentioned in the earlier section, the structure of the serial killer narrative is centrifugal—spiralling away from the centre: Bella's first murder takes place in her neighbour, Tim's, house and further killings occur into a hotel, a parking lot, and the road—indicating her growing mobility and agency. This newly found mobility and power



through serial killing provides the aegis in dealing with her existential despair; she satirically reinvents herself ‘until she became their most fertile fantasy [...] The lilit of their dreams’ (p.94), signifying her ability to assimilate with the outside world, and is enhanced by her feeling comfortable and liking ‘its anonymity’ (p.102).

The narrative climax of *Dirty Weekend* takes place towards the end of the novel when, before leaving for London, Bella encounters a male serial killer. Zahavi intentionally named him Jack (‘She thought that she heard him say his name was Jack’ (p.184)) to evoke both the notorious Jack the Ripper and the major concern of her satiric text, that is, an attack on male sexual violence. This encounter is flagrantly ideological for three reasons: one, by naming the serial killer Jack, the novel highlights the perpetual confrontation of the feminine and masculine ideological motives in the serial killer narrative; two, by juxtaposing two supposedly mythical figures, *Dirty Weekend* reveals its actual mechanic of criticising male sexual violence, attacking it at the symbolic and fantastic levels. As a consequence, what remains unchallenged is the real, and as Bella’s existence has already been validated, the actual encounter is automatically reduced from a cosy pseudo-battle to a real physical encounter, allowing Bella to get the better of Jack; three, in addition to validating Bella’s existence, the encounter also shows Bella’s intransigent attitude towards female oppression through sex. Although their physical closeness resembles the act of making love, an intimacy usually reserved for lovers’ erotic union, the encounter foregrounds Bella’s control over the situation:

She grunted as she stabbed him, but softly, like a lady [...] They grunted back and forth. They sounded like a courting couple, grunting in the shadows of the pier. (p.183)

Indeed, the quote above illustrates how the narrator eroticises the act of killing Jack, bringing women’s life-long suffering to an end. *Dirty Weekend* ends appropriately with a warning:

If you see a woman walking, if she’s stepping quietly home, if you see her flowing past you on the pavement [...] Think on. Don’t touch her [...] For unknowingly, unthinkingly you might have laid your heavy hand on Bella. And she’s woken up this morning with the knowledge that she’s finally had enough. (p.185)

As a noir text, this warning provides an unsettling ending, not because of its revelation that women are no longer succumbing to male oppression, but because these women’s duende is inescapable, pre-destined, and fatal.

Unlike Bella in *Dirty Weekend*, the female serial killer in Marc Behm's *The Eye* struggles to find a way of validating her existence and liberation. There are two reasons for this. One is that the narrative structure of *The Eye* itself is a regurgitation of the hard-boiled private eye tradition, which is a masculine genre *par excellence*. The *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* claims that *The Eye* is 'a private eye novel to end private eye novels' (*The Eye of the Beholder*, Cover, 1999), foregrounding not only the satiric and cynical nature of the novel but also its noir vision. In *The Eye*, the male protagonist is more akin to the vigilantism of Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer than Sam Spade's authoritative professionalism, which means that the Eye is not motivated by monetary, but personal reasons. However, unlike Mike Hammer, the Eye's personal reason is the interpretation of his existential despair and not revenge. This existential despair is rooted in noir's sense of determinism related to his perpetual guilt of not knowing his own daughter Maggie. Secondly, a close third person narration is used that is effective in producing a subjective point of view. The third person point of view enables the novel to modulate the male protagonist's existential despair into fatal obsession noir style, and the femme fatale is the object of his obsession. Underlined by his wife's sneering message: 'Here's your fucking daughter, asshole! I bet you don't even recognize her, you prick! P.S. Fuck you!' (p.8), this narrative style also encourages the audience to feel sympathetic towards him, and the picture of 'a group shot of fifteen little girls sitting at tables in a classroom' (ibid.) is used by Marc Behm as an object cataphor, a form of suspense device that essentially portends the Eye's eventual fatal ending.

When the Eye embarks on 'The Hugo job' (p.12), he is drawn into a web of murderous activities perpetrated by a multiple personality female serial killer, Joanna. This is the way the novel transfers the value of the object cataphor from the classroom photo to the female serial killer figure, foregrounding the narrative's effort to objectify her. Cataphor, according to Deborah Knight and George McKnight in their study of suspense is 'an advance reference signalling some event or action that could occur later in the story',<sup>151</sup> and in the context of the noir narrative, facilitates the formation of the inevitable entrapment of the male protagonist. One important value of cataphor is the indication of its spatial dynamics that it creates and negotiates between the male protagonist and the female serial killer, as in order for suspense to take place, a direct link between the characters and event should be established, and the linkage is situated

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<sup>151</sup> Richard Allen and S. Ishii Gonzales (eds.) *Alfred Hitchcock Centenary Essays*, 1999, p.108-109

within the space where the event takes place. What this means, in noir terms, is that the male protagonist and the female serial killer are now destined to meet and occupy the same space, a choice that the latter eventually comes to make. It is through this understanding of the female serial killer's status as an object cataphor—the doublet of which are literal manifestations of the Eye's existential despair and fatal ending—and her identification with her shared space with the male protagonist, that her struggle for validation can be seen. Noir's cynicism about masculine ideology as well as its tendency to show the corrupt world through the protagonist's satiric eyes shows the extent of the genre's amenability, invariably allowing the female serial killer to find her own voice, thus signalling her liberation and power. Joanna's ability to mobilise beyond personal spaces is an indication of not only her liberation and power but also a criticism of the noir world she inhabits.

*The Eye* has a strong satirical motif, using the Eye's view of women as a hyperbole; while it foregrounds the fragmented image of women, it crucially criticises the validity of the Eye's ostensible omnipotent gaze. At the outset of the novel, the Eye is bombarded with images of nude women in a *Playboy* magazine: 'MISS AUGUST, far-out Peg Magee (left) is turned on by Arab movies, skin diving, Mahler, and zoology.' 'MISS DECEMBER, demure Hope Korngold (right), admits her erotic fantasies often involve subways, buses, and ferryboats. All aboard!' (p.8). Less than an hour later, he looks at a photo of 'a group shot of fifteen little girls' (ibid.). These multiple images of women that concatenate the themes of anonymity and fragmentation are central to the formulation of the Eye's gaze, giving the impression that women are reduced to mere images or objects of male fantasy. None the less, Joanna—the female serial killer—sees this 'Playboy mentality' as a joke. As an illustration, when responding to her husband, Dr. Brice, who asks: 'What kind of nonsense is that? Masturbation is ... lonely' (p.35), Joanna laughs: 'Where did you read that? In *Playboy*?' (p.36), leaving him 'ashamed of his moribund reaction' (ibid.) In this light, Joanna's character is born out of the need to deconstruct the monolithic assumption of the Eye's gaze, and her cynicism is the very weapon she uses to shield herself from him. Joanna's light-hearted attitude towards male gaze is embodied in her countless physical transformations, which are the articulation of her contumacious protest and resistance against such a gaze.

Marc Behm intertwines the dichotomy of privacy and publicity to effectively form the conflicting noir world inhabited by the main characters as well as a reversal of the standard doppelgänger narrative, allowing the female serial killer to exhibit her subjectivity. In the standard

doppelganger narrative, for instance in Robert Siodmak's *The Dark Mirror*,<sup>152</sup> the psychologically dark twin is the embodiment of destructive sexuality (she actually commits murder), while the good one represents the redeeming aspect of the chaotic noir world. In *The Eye*, however, there are two kinds of pairing involved. One, the pairing of the Eye with Joanna that essentially produces mystifying effect, a result of the display of a range of emotions, from sympathy to alienation. This pairing is a crucial noir mechanism that creates a sense of complicity as the point of identification, which in the Eye's point of view, is gradually disintegrating. What this does is to create a more sympathetic femme fatale through the attempted transfer of guilt, reflecting in turn the irony in the Eye's voyeurism. Second, the multiple personality that Joanna performs and displays is used by Behm to explore her subjectivity more profoundly. What this effectively does is to ultimately create 'a sympathetic character because of the space provided for a counter-image of inner struggle to emerge',<sup>153</sup> foregrounding Joanna's subjectivity, allowing us to feel sympathetic when she appeals: 'Don't hurt her...please don't hurt her' (p.110). With such sympathy, she is validated, 'blissful [and] [r]eprived' (p.139). In addition to exposing the femme fatale's survival needs in a male dominated world that degrades women, Behm allows this narrative style to give history to her subjectivity ('Well, I'll tell you. I lost my childhood and my youth. My father and my husband. And my mind-'(p. 156)), forming a melancholic mood that epitomises the noir sense of loss, alienation and victimisation. Serial killing, hence, is her means of demonstrating her resistance to her own objectification.

The novel consistently extenuates the power of the Eye's gaze, questioning its legitimacy. The Eye's obsession with Joanna foregrounds the male protagonist's perpetual entanglement with the femme fatale. In the standard canonical noir narrative, the romantic entanglement between the male protagonist and the femme fatale is one of the major causes of him being sucked into noir's underworld. *The Eye*, on the contrary, problematises this romantic entanglement by creating a platonic bond between the Eye and Joanna, which consequently negates the idea that the femme fatale in the novel is the embodiment of the Eye's fantasy, shifting the femme fatale's fatalism from her sexuality to her fragmented identity, i.e. her 'otherness'. The Eye immediately develops a fatal obsession with her multiple personality that he showers her with his 'shepherding love' (p.158), using her as his source of redemption. He is desperate and

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<sup>152</sup> 1946.

<sup>153</sup> Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.137

doomed, admitting that ‘He needed *this. Her.* [Original italic] She was his appeasement, his rod and his staff in the valley of death. And he was hers’ (p.60). His obsession highlights the flaw in his character and judgement, and the novel deliberately belittles him, cynically reducing him into ‘just some little peeper’ (p.108).

One key structural element of noir concerns the blurring and entanglement of the notion of the victim and perpetrator, mystifying the reader’s association with the protagonist. This signals the collapse of spatial boundary, allowing both characters to coexist in the same space. Initially Joanna is the object of the Eye’s investigation, and she exists within his perceptual space, however, as the story progresses, there is evidence of Joanna’s retaliation against the Eye’s gaze. Though initially more subtle, for instance, during the first ‘meeting’ with the Eye, ‘she turned quickly and glanced at the Eye, or beyond him, at-what?’ (p.17), her retaliation increasingly becomes more conspicuous and certain, aptly demonstrated as it is her resistance that makes her more aware of the fact that she is being watched:

Then she looked over her shoulder, straight into the Eye’s hiding place.  
 ‘There’s somebody there, Jim!’ She pushed him aside. ‘He’s watching us!’  
 Brice jumped up. ‘You gotta be kidding!’  
 ‘Over there,’ she pointed. ‘Look!’  
 ‘There’s nobody there, Jo!’  
 ‘Yes, there is!’  
 (p. 36)

Upon realizing that she has been followed, ‘she [...] stood in the lobby watching everyone who came through the doorway behind her’ (p.55). On guard to the hilt, she decides to hire a private eye, Kinski, to find out who has been following her; thus blurring the hunter/hunted schism.

One of the existential effects of the blurring of the hunter/hunted binary opposition is manifested in the way the Eye’s existence is reduced to that of an amorphous figure, moving like a phantom. In many instances, she ‘looked straight at the Eye’ but she ‘saw only the passing traffic’ (p.98). What this suggests is the strategy that Joanna develops, turning the Eye into the ‘other’ himself, apotheosising him as her ‘poltergeist’ (p.141). At the level of ideological symbolism her strategy essentially reverses and destabilizes the Eye’s ontological status, allowing the lopsided relationship to grow into a symbiosis as both figures are now conflated into alienated individuals in the noir world. The Eye is now a ‘spirit that I invented to haunt myself [...] I won’t have you gunning down my spirit’ (ibid.), and

she also finds him ‘comforting’ (p.174), making him the source of her redemption, a reversal from the standard noir characterization.

In addition to mirroring the destabilisation of the Eye’s ontological status, Joanna’s ability to transgress personal space is facilitated by her ability to perform different gender roles. Joanna’s multiple personality acts not only as a survival skill but also as a sign of revenge for the oppression she receives from men. *The Eye* obligingly explains the motivation behind her serial killing, when upon the Eye’s visit to Dr. Darras, she concedes:

‘What did you tell her [Joanna] to do, Dr. Darras?’

‘I?’ She frowned. ‘I told her to confront life. To fight. Not to yield or grovel.’

‘Well, that’s just what she’s done.’

(p.91)

The fluidity of gender identity warrants Joanna more space and allows her to form a female friendship with Becky Yemassee, whom she grooms to look and behave like her. They become partners in crime and hold a stake out together at a gas station where Becky is shot dead. After Becky’s death is announced, Joanna takes her revenge by killing ‘seven men that night’ (p.176), evincing the idea that Joanna’s action is a sign of her refusal to become a victim, and her mobility defines the power and liberation that she possesses. Indeed, towards the end when the Eye prays that Joanna will shoot and kill him so that he can be ‘*at peace for a while!*’ (p. 206), Joanna’s shot only manages to injure him, thus denying him eternal peace. Ultimately, at the last moment of her life: ‘Her eyes opened, and she smiled at him. “Yes, I know you”. “You were in the park ... you had a camera ... you took my picture”’ (p.209), foregrounding *The Eye*’s sombre and bleak vision.

## The Female Victim

### Perceptual Space and Victim Narrative in *In The Cut*

But in a sense he had begun to die that day. That was the first day of his death, and this would be the last.<sup>154</sup>

The noir world provides a physical metaphor for the noir vision of bleak humanity, doomed hope and deluded dreams. Essentially, canonical noir sustains the equilibrium between the mise-en-scene and the inner sense of the character, to ideate an inevitable sense of entrapment and claustrophobia. This is the vision that calamitously engulfs the male noir protagonist, exhibiting his status as a victim of the morally bankrupt world. Parker Jagoda in Paul Theroux's *Chicago Loop*, Frank Chambers in James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and Jeff Bailey in Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* (1947) epitomise this type of noir victim protagonist whose every step is set against an antagonistic force that he cannot escape from, and whose world-weary view of the world is darkly cynical. In *Chicago Loop*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Out of the Past* this vision is typically reinforced by the spatial/physical landscapes that both male protagonists occupy, reinforcing the sense of alienation, resignation and insuperable fatalism that characterised their victim status. If Parker Jagoda, Frank Chambers and Jeff Bailey's position as central figures in such a narrative is well explored, less so is that of Frannie, the female victim protagonist in Susanna Moore's *In The Cut*. By the same token, comparisons between Frannie and sexually promiscuous femmes fatales in the noir tradition are inevitable, although the latter's comeuppance is socially sanctioned—hence sans choice, Frannie's victimisation is due to a flaw in her judgement and not characterisation. I would like to demonstrate that unlike female characters in the classical noir tradition whose characterisation is the embodiment of a male fantasy, Frannie's position as the emotional centre of the narrative bears resemblance and relevance to that of the male victim protagonist, that is, as the critic/mirror of the society she is in. Noir victim protagonists speak to and about their contemporary society, and if Bailey and Chambers represent casualties of the Depression era, the impuissant Frannie represents the disillusionment in feminist movements that post-feminism is wont to criticise.

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<sup>154</sup> Paul Theroux, *Chicago Loop*, p.181

It is almost compulsory that in serial killer narratives women are usually the victims of hideous crimes. The act of serial killing women can be seen as a political act of femicide—a crime against femininity itself. Women are said to be easy targets because of their supposedly passive role in a society, their obligation to acquiesce and succumb to male dominance. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, there are three main categories of women in serial killer narratives—the investigator, the serial killer and the victim—and the first two have been dealt with in the previous sections. The third and last category is the female victim. Although the female victims are killed seemingly at random, some motives are clearer than others, for example the ethereal Tracy Mills (Gwyneth Paltrow) in *Se7en* was killed as a ‘lesson’ to her gravely ambitious husband, Detective David Mills (Brad Pitt). Undeniably, in some serial killer narratives, the victim role is reversible, like Dr. Kate McTierman (Ashley Judd) in *Kiss the Girls* and Dr. Helen Hudson in *Copycat* who stalwartly turn into investigators after falling victim themselves. In this section, I am more interested in analysing Frannie, a character who, unlike the ones mentioned above, is characterised by her indissoluble sense of resignation, feebleness and romantic disillusionment. Her position at the centre of the narrative, arguably, creates spatial-temporal proximity between her and the audience, allowing us to dissect the mechanics of her thoughts as a victim in the noir serial killer narrative, especially in her dealing with the ominous threat of the noir world, as well as creating a sense of complicity in the audience. Finally, I would also like to compare the ending of the novel with Jane Campion’s film version of the novel arguing that the different ending in the film weakens or lessens the bleakness of the text; therefore making it less effective in conveying its noir vision.

Following the footsteps of male noir protagonists who walked down the mean streets, Frannie’s visit to a bar like almost all decisions she makes in her life, ‘is almost always a mistake’ (p.30), the kind of mistake caused by a flaw in her personal judgement and not characterisation. This *mea culpa* is typical of the noir method of foregrounding the protagonist’s existential despair, which in the case of this novel is explored by the use of the first person narration, effectively creating a more intimate detailing of narrative events from a perspective that is both knowing and naïve, revealing Frannie’s pseudo-self-assertion and romantic disillusionment. The novel explores her fallibility as a vivid documentation or manifestation of her inherent subjectivity, occasionally punctuating the narrative with the attractive difference between a man and a woman. And this gender division is reverberated throughout the text as she ‘remembered that it was masculine gestures that aroused me’ (p. 19) and that ‘I am very interested



in the ways men are different from women' (p.42). Frannie's existential despair is rooted in her being a woman, and her constant victimisation is due merely to her lurid female sexuality, which in this case, rather than liberating her, severely circumscribes her agency. Unlike the femme fatale in canonical noir, who knows how to manipulate her sexuality, Frannie's status as a victim is defined by her lack of competence to survive in a big city (during her first meeting with Detective Malloy, '[i]t occurred to me for a moment, being a resident of New York City, to ask to see his badge, but that would have embarrassed me', and 'I invited him inside' (p. 16)), oftentimes allowing her active female sexuality to be hopelessly in control of her life.

Essentially, this is the direction that Moore is keen to pursue, while conveying the idea that Frannie is not so innocent after all, it is our total reliance on her perception to propel the narrative that provides a jarringly deluded view of the world that puts us in an uncomfortable position. It is through this flaw and not in spite of it that her perceptual space can be understood and the noir vision be manifested. This perceptual space in turn reflects and establishes the proximity between Frannie and the reader, invariably constructing her as a sympathetic figure through a process of re-humanisation. This is achieved by means of portraying her as a victim of a world that she cannot understand and by surrounding her with characters who are as disillusioned as she is. In a typical noir narrative, the female victim is objectified; a process that consigns her into 'the Other', evoking the genre's 'enormous debt to Gothic fiction'.<sup>155</sup> *In the Cut* subverts this conception by demystifying the myth surrounding not the serial killer, but the victim herself. What Moore does is to personalise the victim's experience of victimisation, which in itself is a critique of what Mark Seltzer in his study of the serial killer called 'the statistical person'.<sup>156</sup> Moore's effort shows that in the process of de-personalising the serial killer through the profiling technique, this technique also concurrently de-humanises the victims by turning them into part of the statistical data. By writing from the point of view of the victim, Moore is able to validate and legitimise Frannie's experience and subjectivity, and allow the 'victim's' experience to 'undermine our emotional stability',<sup>157</sup> which is the desired effect of a thriller.

Perceptual spaces in *In the Cut* are used to mirror Frannie's pervasive concerns through her eyes, her unreliable gaze, alluding to the female protagonist's existential despair. If a woman in Western tradition is

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<sup>155</sup> Philip L. Simpson, *Psycho Path*, p.19

<sup>156</sup> *Serial Killers*, p.39

<sup>157</sup> Martin Rubin, *Thrillers*, 1999, p.6

to be looked at and not vice-versa, Frannie's gaze is crucial in the construction of the narrative's perceptual space, which Moore effectively tries to limit in terms of its potency by making Frannie openly admit that 'my eyes aren't very good' (p. 22). Moore's treatment of Frannie's sight is both literal and metaphorical; this helps the reader to acknowledge a certain level of self-consciousness that Frannie possesses. With this in mind, her short-sightedness as a limitation serves two possible dramatic purposes: one, a plethora of mistakes that she commits due to her unreliable sight mirror her incompetence in building relationships with men, highlighting her ascending romantic disillusionment. *In the Cut* allegorically evokes the traditional 'romantic chivalric code' through Frannie's association with Malloy, however, instead of fulfilling the 'requirement that women [...] respond primarily to character, moral and mental qualities in men',<sup>158</sup> Frannie's response is insouciant, sexual and masturbatory, 'wondering idly if he was the type who needed to talk about it after, maybe on the phone a couple of days later. The more polite ask if your vagina has retained its shape.' (p. 45); two, to invest in the spatial-temporal significance of the narrative, which in turn determines two directions the novel is keen to explore. The first direction is to create frisson, which harks back to the novel's thriller form. Frannie's failure to see the face of the man with a tattoo on his wrist in the basement leads her to suspect Malloy, and her eventual intimacy with him culminates in an erotic encounter that further convolutes the plot. At the heart of this frisson is not only the combination of feelings of fear and excitement, but also a sense of ambivalence that characterises a thriller. Martin Rubin argues that

The overload and combination and ambivalence of feelings that the thriller creates, with a resultant lack of stability, produce a strong sense of *vulnerability* [original italic]. Thrillers characteristically feature a remarkable degree of passivity on the part of the heroes with whom we spectators identify. These heroes are often acted upon more than they act; they are swept up in a rush of events over which they have little control. The thriller creates, in both hero and spectator, a strong sense of being carried away, of surrendering oneself. Control-vulnerability is a central dialectic of the thriller, closely related to sadism-masochism.<sup>159</sup>

On the top left hand corner of the cover of the novel, a comment from *New York Times* that the novel is 'a ferociously uninhibited erotic thriller'

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<sup>158</sup> Juliet Blair, 'Private Parts in Public Places: The Case of Actresses', *Women and Space*, 1981, p.211

<sup>159</sup> *Thrillers*, 1999, p.6-7

encapsulates this. The second direction is to form a critique of gender division that is one of the novel's main themes. Feminist geographer, Doreen Massey, argues that 'it is [...] time [temporal] which is typically coded masculine and space, being absence or lack, as feminine'.<sup>160</sup> This refers to the idea that women are always associated with private space—hidden and apolitical. What Moore does is to neither support nor reverse the division, where reversal means simply substituting femininity with masculinity. Instead, she uses transgression to destabilise the binary of male/female and private/public as a way of problematising the issue of gender division. Earmarking the narrative with men as the subject of Frannie's gaze and sexual fantasy, and considering Malloy in particular as 'very effective in evoking forbidden or hidden wishes' (p.125) in her female protagonist, this transgression invokes the underlying ideology of the text, referring to Frannie's perpetual victimisation as part of a noir determinism that she cannot escape from. Moore does this without having to resort to absolute gender role reversal; although Frannie holds the narrative impulse, her position as a victim creates a noir sense of ambivalence—an effect that is destabilising rather than deconstructing. Her female protagonist is also aware of her insecurity, treading the fine line between control and vulnerability, self-reaffirming that 'I am not a masochist. I know that' (p.125).

One may wonder how this perceptual space evokes the fatal vision of the novel. Essentially, Moore's narrative technique is expressionistic, and she uses the perceptual space belonging to the female protagonist as a way of showing the emotional quality of the story. Since one of the major concerns of the novel is the destabilisation of binary opposition, which is consistently evoked by the novel's sceptical view of the perceptual space that Frannie possesses, the expression of this emotional quality therefore lies in the way Frannie consistently evaluates the events and her surroundings. In this sense, perceptual space also galvanises the novel's thriller effect that is necessary in provoking the affective and cognitive aspects of the audience. On one level, Frannie is streetwise, knowing when to keep 'to my side of the Square' (p.11) and realising that the physical space that she occupies provides no sense of security, 'no where is there a sense of peace' (p.6), which is reminiscent of the 'mythologised 'Frontier' of the Western, a world of violence and lawlessness, lacking any intrinsically effective machinery of civilised order, and dominated by assertive masculine figures of self-appointed authority'.<sup>161</sup> The novel relies

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<sup>160</sup> *Space, Place and Gender*, 1994, p.6

<sup>161</sup> Frank Krutnik, *In A Lonely Street*, 1997, p.93

on this visual narrative and the generic convention that correspond to the novel's criminal investigative structure to explain and ideate Frannie's effusive sexuality. In effect, Moore's expressionistic approach foregrounds the sense of foreboding, which is exacerbated by the amalgamation of the visual mechanism and the investigative narrative structure, and this is complexly entwined with her sexuality to mimetically represent the fatal vision that is encroaching upon her.

Nowhere more than in the ending of the novel is Moore's expressionistic approach salient and conspicuous. The feeling that Frannie is experiencing at the hands of the serial killer is honest, pure, organic, nostalgic and almost sacred:

He slid the razor down my neck [...] He grabbed me by the back of the neck, pressing the razor against my breast, just under the nipple, the nipple resting on the edge of the blade, the razor cutting smoothly, easily, through the taut cloth, through the skin, the delicate blue / skein of netted veins in flood, the nipple cut round, then the breast, opening, the dark blood running like the dark river, the Indian river, the sycamore, my body so vivid that I was blinded. (pp.175-176)

The novel makes no apology for its unfeigned frankness, thus rendering the effect more involutedly visceral and blatantly bleak. This is the quintessential disorientating ending to a noir narrative that refuses to offer any sense of resolution, and this refusal is underscored by the vulnerable victim protagonist's total immersion in the noir world of (romantic) disillusionment: 'I know the poem. She knows the poem' (p.179).

The main difference between the ending of the novel and the film is that at the end of Jane Campion's film version, Frannie escapes from the serial killer by killing him with the gun that she accidentally steals from Malloy whom she has left handcuffed to the bed in her apartment. This kind of ending is not unusual in the noir tradition, none the less it is less effective in rendering a noir vision of deluded dream and fatalism. There are several reasons why this is so, especially in the context of this film. First, while Moore's expressionistic approach is effective in evoking the nightmarish atmosphere of the ending, Campion's surrealistic approach, which consequently gives the film a sense of resolution, seems to abnegate noir's association with realism, an important aspect of noir's inherent ability to criticise. Second, Frannie's freedom at the end of the film allows her to escape from the nightmarish world, and her reunion with Malloy is symptomatic of a romantic reconciliation at the end of a romance narrative. This provides a stark contrast to the whole noir victim narrative

that the novel and to a great extent the film presuppose, indicating Campion's interest in disallowing or preventing Frannie from being a victim. Third, Campion's camera shot fails to capture Frannie's mental decoupage. Her shots are too distant and lack the intimacy that the novel consistently foregrounds and engenders to create a sense of complicity. Watching Frannie teetering into freedom in the film's finale fails to invoke any sense of sympathy and victimisation, and Campion's use of faded frame in the shot works as a proscenium that separates the audience from the character.

## CHAPTER TWO

### WHEN DID IT ALL BEGIN? WOMEN, SPACE AND REVENGE NARRATIVE

On the cover of Mickey Spillane's *I, The Jury* (Corgi Books, 1971) stands an iconic femme fatale complete with Barbie-doll pink dress, flicky blond hair, and two guns pointing in the opposite directions. Striking a seductive, flirtatious, 'feminine' pose, and with an engaging stare, she is titillating, fatal and lethal. Next to her is a caption:

I swear that I'd get the louse who killed Jack. He wouldn't sit in the chair—he wouldn't hang. He'd die just as Jack died, with a .45 slug in the gut.

Hammer's revengeful impulse as stated in the caption evinces Spillane's strategy to alienate his protagonist from his environment, and according to John Tuska, 'one of the principle factors behind his alienation is the fact that the femme fatale is in possession of her own sexuality.'<sup>1</sup> Her independence from patriarchal law poses a threat, and both the image and the caption on the cover of Spillane's novel are the manifestation of the threat and anxiety that she has generated. The novel aptly ends with the cold-blooded killing of Charlotte:

The roar of the .45 shook the room, Charlotte staggered back a step [...]. A face that was waiting to be kissed was really waiting to be spattered with blood when she blew my head off [...]. When I heard her fall I turned around [...].

'How c-could you?' she gasped.

'It was easy,' I said. (p.158)

This killing is therefore a compulsory ideological expression of patriarchal myth, which Janey Place theorizes, 'first allows sensuous

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<sup>1</sup> *Dark Cinema*, 1984, p.199

expression of that idea and then destroys it.<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey O'Brien adds another dimension to this conception by associating the titillating image with noir's invariable link to the elements of realism, romanticizing the cover of such a paperback and claiming that 'however heightened, exaggerated, or distorted, the images came from life [...] [and] their mood [...] is a blend of terror and fascination'.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the protagonist's vision in Mickey Spillane's novel is unapologetically bleak not only because of its reliance on his act of revengeful killing of the femme fatale for the narrative resolution, but also marked by the incipient and indissoluble intransigency associated with the reality of that killing itself. Spillane's hard-boiled alter-ego private eye, Mike Hammer, is the epitome of a revengeful male character, which as Peter Biskind observes,

The revenge [male] characters of the fifties [...] were typical inner-directed types, rigid, obsessed, fanatical men, altogether at odds with the prevailing attitude of relaxed tolerance. Rather than being open, sensible, and pragmatic, they were closed, irrational and dominated by some past injury.<sup>4</sup>

Hammer's deadpan attitude and solipsistic belief in his own action lead him to search 'high and low' to avenge the death of his male friend. Often, as in many noir texts written around this time, women, especially femmes fatales, are the culprits. Their image is also rooted in noir's fascination with style, and they exist as icons that contribute to noir ambience. In the novel quoted above, Hammer chooses revenge or male friendship over love, which consigns him to what Leslie Fiedler describes as 'American romance', that is, 'a masculine individualism, living by its wits and avoiding social, economic, and sexual entanglements'.<sup>5</sup>

Revenge as a motive is not scarce in noir tradition, and it generally informs the location of the male protagonist within the narrative itself. Whereas in Hammer's case he is the agent of revenge—the avenger, the existential figure of ill-fated Swede in *The Killers*<sup>6</sup> is the subject of revenge itself. I have to admit that this division is rather simplistic because noir's sensibility, in effect, problematises this very binary. What essentially defines the revenge motives of these texts is an existential

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<sup>2</sup> 'Women in Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, New Edn., 2000, p.48

<sup>3</sup> *Hardboiled America*, 1997, p.7

<sup>4</sup> *Seeing Is Believing*, 1983, p.255

<sup>5</sup> in *More Than Night*, 1998, p.52

<sup>6</sup> Dir. Robert Siodmak, 1946

anger that forms its ideological basis through which the relationship between the male protagonist and the femme fatale can be understood. Charlotte's relationship with Hammer is linked at two interrelated levels: first, at the literal level, Charlotte is the killer who kills Hammer's friend, hence the revenge motive; secondly, at the level of ideological symbolism, the seductively dangerous and elusive femmes fatales signify contemporary male anxiety: suspicion, duplicity, guilt and betrayal. The amalgamation of these levels characterizes contemporary male/masculine anxiety towards female independence and power and the ability she has in manipulating her sexuality to entice a male protagonist. An omnipresent way of directing and manifesting this anxiety towards a woman's threat can be seen in the inherent display of hyper-masculinity to the point of misogyny, which means, according to Naremore, that 'sometimes the hero's toughness is exaggerated to the point of burlesque'.<sup>7</sup> What this tough-guy image does is not only to ironically reveal the protagonist's insecurity and existential guilt or what Gill Plain calls 'the paradoxical vulnerability of men',<sup>8</sup> but also to consequently objectify the female character. For instance in *The Maltese Falcon*,<sup>9</sup> after Ruth Wonderly/ Brigid (Mary Astor) leaves his office, Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) has a conversation with his partner, Miles Archer (Jerome Cowan):

Archer: Oh, she's sweet. Maybe you saw her first, Sam, but I spoke first.

Sam: You've got brains. Yes, you have.

Of course, Sam's comment is both patronizing and guilt-ridden as he is also having an affair with Archer's wife and thus evoking his status as quintessentially a loner, but this masculine exchange introduces the leitmotif of a male buddy system inherent in the film, which consequently defines the personal moral code/ethic of a hardboiled detective figure like him and Hammer. This moral code can be understood only through hardboiled protagonists' eyes in their effort to make sense of the chaotic noir world they are in. Though physically attracted to his client, Sam has to remain cold-heartedly 'professional' and resist the evil seductress in front of him. In his defense to Brigid, Sam admits disdainfully:

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<sup>7</sup> *More Than Night*, 1998, p.49

<sup>8</sup> *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction*, 2001, p.57

<sup>9</sup> Dir. John Huston, 1941



Brigid: You know whether you love me or not.

Sam: Maybe I do. 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 want to, regardless of the consequences, and because you counted on that with me the same as you counted on that with all the others.

In this light, women who pose a threat to 'masculinity and normality'<sup>10</sup> are to be punished and annihilated as exemplified by *The Maltese Falcon* and *I, The Jury*, respectively.

These hardboiled private eye stories are linked stylistically, iconographically and thematically to the noir genre. The themes of distrust and betrayal allude to the genre's prevalent concern with masculinity in crisis and patriarchal corruption, and these find their expression in the iconic figure of the femme fatale, and to a great extent, her comeuppance is the reincarnation of the motif of the crisis of masculine identity itself. Therefore, if hardboiled private eye, victim-protagonist and corrupt-protagonist are the embodiment of 'urban American masculinity',<sup>11</sup> the femmes fatales that inhabit their world are therefore 'overrepresent[ed]'<sup>12</sup> [original italic] urban American femininity whose 'appearance marks the confluence of modernity, urbanization, Freudian psychoanalysis and new technologies of production and reproduction [...]'.<sup>13</sup> What I think of the most relevance to my argument is the spatial dimension that inevitably links these male and female characters, which is the urban milieu that, in noir context, invariably characterizes, dissects and demarcates male protagonists' existential despair. The emphasis on the spatial connectedness of these characters reveals the male protagonists' desperate struggles to reinsert control over the space that they inhabit with the femmes fatales, and this essentially involves the strategy of the annihilation of the femmes fatales at textual and narrative levels. Rendering this struggle both permanently ideological and practical, considering the femme fatale 'is not the subject of power but its *carrier* [original italic]',<sup>14</sup> this status in effect effectively reduces her into an icon, i.e., merely a narrative device. In an extreme case in which spatial struggle dominates the power relation

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Dyer uses this phrase to draw his conclusion with regard to a certain anxiety that characterized film noir. ('Resistance through Charisma: Rita Hayworth and *Gilda*', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.115)

<sup>11</sup> Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 2001, p.56

<sup>12</sup> Mary Ann Doanne, *Femme Fatales*, 1991, p.2

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2

between the protagonist and the femme fatale like John Boorman's revenge fantasy film *Point Blank*,<sup>15</sup> which is based on Richard Stark's novel *The Hunter*, James F. Maxfield remarks that Walker's revenge is 'the wish fulfillment fantasy of a nearly powerless man seeking to experience in his imagination the irresistible strength and dominance he could not achieve in reality'.<sup>16</sup> Walker, the avenging protagonist, may not kill his unfaithful wife (Lynne) for her betrayal with a gun, but his fantasy of her pusillanimous final speech before her suicide 'offers him at least an ego-saving interpretation of her betrayal of him [...]'.<sup>17</sup> I would argue then that the perpetual struggle to (re)insert control over space remains a crucial defining impulse in revenge narrative, and that this (re)insertion signals the epistemological trauma associated with femmes fatales or female avengers in general, foregrounding the characters' existential anger at patriarchy, and this effectively characterizes their association with urban landscape. The female avenger infiltrates this urban locale, as in Julie Killeen's case, '[s]he seemed to *lean toward* [original italic] the city visible outside, like something imminent, about to happen to it' (p. 5), carrying with her a sense of foreboding and an atmosphere of non-impunity. What become two principal questions of this chapter are: one, how do noir's notorious masculine traits affect the representation of these female avengers?; two, what are the similarities or differences between the female avengers in noir and neo-noir texts?

In order to answer these questions, this chapter investigates noir revenge narrative through the representation of the female avenging figure and the spatial struggle that she is associated with; this introductory section then will chart out the possible historical backgrounds of such characters, while revealing the ideological motive behind their construction. To begin with, there is a great affinity between femmes fatales and female avengers, and the most conspicuous implication lies in the underlying ideological consciousness that structures these characters, that is, the discursive link between the epistemology, sexuality and violence. While epistemology in this context often alludes to the modernist narrative intention of dissecting and exposing her characterization for the benefit of (male) audience or 'the knowing of her subjectivity', her sexuality is referred to as the demotic eroticisation of her body and its indissoluble link with violence which is rooted in the 'urbanization' of their existential despair. The propinquity between epistemology and sexuality is visually represented in film noir through the femme fatale figure, and is working

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<sup>15</sup> 1967

<sup>16</sup> *The Fatal Women*, 1996, p.98

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.100

towards engendering Janey Place's assumption that 'film *noir* [original italic] is male fantasy'.<sup>18</sup> The iconic femmes fatales of the classical noir films are usually of outstanding beauty, typically blonde, seductive, and manipulative as personified by characters like Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) in *Double Indemnity* and Kathie Moffett (Jane Greer) in *Out of the Past*. Some femmes fatales in film noir to a great extent are also avenging figures, but since their revenges are usually symbolic acts directed against patriarchy, they are oftentimes portrayed as 'castrated' figures whose fatalism lies in them being women and their beauty exudes danger that catalyzes the inevitable fall of the male protagonist; this is evidence of classical noir's association with (Freudian) psychoanalysis. There are also literal avengers who are constructed based on the overlapping motifs of epistemology and sexuality, and entwined with the agency for violence, like Julie Killeen in *The Bride Wore Black*,<sup>19</sup> who avenges the killing of her newlywed husband, Nick, by killing her suspects, though it is revealed in the denouement of the novel that she has killed wrong guys. Despite Julie's multiple-appearances, she is still framed within, for example, 'some looker' (p.9) and 'dressed to kill' (p.14) image/mode; this is a stereotypical example of a loaded representation of a female body that is not only eroticised but also seamlessly intertwined with violence. Consequently, the display of her sexuality and the concern for the epistemology adumbrate the motive of revenge itself, locating the narrative emphasis not on the violence, but her body and subjectivity. The novel's 'whodunit' structure also means that the narrative enquiry is centered on her mysterious self, and not the multiple murders that she has committed. Likewise, in cinema, Christine Holmlund summarizes this phenomenon laconically asserting that 'Hollywood [...] always considers the display of female bodies to be more important than the portrayal of female violence',<sup>20</sup> that is to say when the film finishes the audience will remember her physical beauty more than the violent act that she has committed.

While the eroticisation of the female body in canonical noir texts is morally policed by the ubiquitous Hays Production code, the hyper-sexualized body of the female avenger in neo-noir texts is derivative, originating from its [s]exploitation and erotic thriller roots, which therefore explains its torrid imagery. This is evident in revenge-fantasy

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<sup>18</sup> 'Women in Film Noir', In *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.47

<sup>19</sup> Cornell Woolrich, 5<sup>th</sup> edn., 1947

<sup>20</sup> 'A Decade of Deadly Dolls: Hollywood and the Woman Killer', in *Moving Targets*, ed. by Birch Birch, 1993, p.134

films like *Dirty Weekend* (1993) and *Ms .45* (1981) in which female protagonists', Bella and Thana, non-sexual bodies metamorphose into an erotic desideratum, and their sudden physical changes mark the display of the fashioning of 'feminine' desire in revenge narrative. In cinematic terms, this visual display, arguably, is a modernist articulation of patriarchal fetishising of the female body. We see this, for example, when, in Bella's case, the camera exploits her stockinged-legs to articulate her dangerous sexuality and intention, and when, in Thana's case, her heavily made up lips became the main focus of the camera to show her complete transformation into a female seductress and avenger, continuing canonical noir's intrigue of female sexuality. The focus or emphasis on the female avengers' bodies consequently trivializes the act of revenge itself, foregrounding the films' meta-psychology of fulfilling the (male) audience's fantasy.

What this comparison arguably shows is that although the rules are presently more relaxed, the female avenging figures are still structured by the same patriarchal ideology of female oppression or subordination. The florescence of female centered texts in the wake of feminist movements however presents a new kind of anxiety relating to the making of a female human, which informs the way the female protagonist is constructed within the narrative. I would argue that the strength of these female protagonists lies not in their ability to emulate male protagonists or in the emphasis on similarity, but in the fact that they pose a new threat to patriarchy by destabilizing its value system or the celebration of difference. In cinema and literature, this new threat is rooted in these female characters' ability to transcend binary oppositions, to transgress patriarchal-set boundaries, and to appear, despite all these, threateningly human with foibles and existential dilemmas. In embryo, female protagonists in neo-noir texts are no longer castrated others, but part of society that exhorts recognition of their subjectivity. In noir revenge narratives, the existential dilemmas facing these female characters allude to the failure of community and the failure of agency. The failure of community is related to the struggle or competition for space among female characters. As some texts are written by men the understanding of the failure of community helps in demarcating the extent to which the façade of misogyny allows for female liberty. Meanwhile, the failure of agency underlines key narrative turns that see the shift of function in the motive for taking revenge. The next sections are set to discuss the failure of community and the failure of agency.

## **‘I have nothing against—other women’:<sup>21</sup> The Failure of Community in Noir Revenge Narrative**

One strand of argument pertaining to women and space is that the two women occupying the same space signify community or female friendship. However, this is not always the case. David Glover in his analysis of Dorothy L. Sayers’s *Gaudy Night* argues that ‘whenever the mystery is set in an all-female institution, [...] [it is] a classic warning of the dangers to be faced when women are kept in one another’s company too much’, generating what he terms ‘a sort of collective pathology’.<sup>22</sup> Oftentimes, space is manipulated by film noir to typify anything but the sense of community, and the explanation for a woman’s criminal behavior is usually overly simplistic, linking it to mental conditions as a subterfuge for the more complex problem in the power struggle between a man and a woman. One possible explanation for this association between a woman and space is that ‘female orientation’ is ‘centripetal’, which ideologically is referred to ‘the realm of feeling and instinct’, and therefore is considered ‘threatening and uncontrollable’ by patriarchy.<sup>23</sup> Women’s association with mental illness, such as pathology as in the mad twin in Robert Siodmak’s film *The Dark Mirror* (1946) or a ‘a female homicidal maniac’<sup>24</sup> that the female protagonist in Woolrich’s *Bride Wore Black* is compared to, is also informed by the phallogocentric theory of psychoanalysis.

What this representation embodies is the subliminal fear of women’s occupying positions within a certain space, and the texts seems to locate the conflict of interest in the characterization of female characters itself. In *doppelgänger* narrative in which two women occupy the same space, for instance, in *The Dark Mirror*, the twin sisters can be seen as patriarchal imagery that blatantly ossifies male desire not only to punish economically independent women but also to reinforce patriarchal meaning of normalcy. The theme of psychopath is also prevalent in *Single White Female*,<sup>25</sup> a neo-noir film that borrows heavily from the gothic representation of domestic space. The film centers on Allison who, after finding out that her boyfriend—Sam (Steven Weber)—is sleeping with his ex-girlfriend, throws him out and advertises for a housemate. She picks a seemingly quiet

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<sup>21</sup> Cornell Woolrich, *The Bride Wore Black*, 1947, p.44

<sup>22</sup> ‘The Stuff that dreams are made of: Masculinity, femininity and the thriller’, in *Reading Popular Fiction*, ed. by Derek Longhurst, 1989, p.72

<sup>23</sup> Roger Bromley, ‘Rewriting the masculine script: The novel of Joseph Hansen’, in *Reading Popular Fiction*, ed. by Derek Longhurst, 1989, p.103

<sup>24</sup> p.45

<sup>25</sup> Dir. Barbet Schraoder, 1992

Hendra (Jennifer Jason Leigh), a psychopath who grows obsessive about Allison and who gradually changes her physical appearance to resemble Allison. The leitmotif of twin sisters is revisited here, as it is revealed that Hendra suffers from mental problem due to the death of her twin sister. The similarity between *The Dark Mirror* and *Single White Female* alludes to the critic of comity in sisterhood, but while the conflict in the first is rooted in domestic space, the latter is adventitious.

As one of the defining features of a film noir is its visual style, 'women's dangerous power is expressed visually.'<sup>26</sup> In both noir films and novels, the femme fatale is the figure of intrigue that represents a miasma of dangerous sexuality, and her status as an icon in canonical noir is disingenuously visualized, often emblazoned seductively on lurid paperback covers, publicity shots, and film posters. Unlike the femme fatale who is often visually active and seductive, and usually linked to the dark criminal underworld—a vespertine creature, her antithesis, i.e., the nurturing woman, is 'generally visually passive and static [...] [and] linked to the pastoral environment of open spaces, light, and safety characterized by even, flat, high-key lighting',<sup>27</sup> providing a vicarious alternative landscape with a beacon of hope that is comparable with the corrupt world in which the male protagonist is ensnared. The male protagonist usually ignores this hope, tempted by the femme fatale into the sleazy and entropic underworld instead. This alternative landscape, in essence, is not a matter of choice for the male protagonist at all as it indirectly contributes to noir's determinism by intensifying the sense of inescapable entrapment in the underworld. More simply put, the male protagonist's failure or inability to recognize this hope makes his future all the more bleak.

In the canonical noir genre, there is an element of romantic entanglement that often expresses the male protagonist's 'spiral journey downward', and this theme is often represented by the two types of women in film noir: the femme fatale and the nurturing woman. When both the femme fatale and nurturing woman are together in a scene, the contestation is obvious, and the winner is usually the femme fatale. The best visual illustration of the femme fatale's manipulative power can be taken from Siodmak's definitive film noir, *The Killers*.<sup>28</sup> In one scene in which Swede (Burt Lancaster) takes Lilly (Virginia Christine) to a party where they meet Kitty (Ava Gardner) for the first time, the film shot

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<sup>26</sup> Janey Place, 'Woman in Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, Ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.53

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* pp.60-61

<sup>28</sup> 1946.

shows Lilly sitting next to Swede who is standing up. Then Kitty walks into the scene and stands provocatively in the foreground before starting to sing, and Swede's facial expression is suggestive of neophilia. A perspective shot is established, with Kitty's foregrounding the shot and Lilly becoming part of the *mise-en-scène*. The shot also focuses on Kitty's sultry look and Swede's quixotic fascination with and adulation of her physical beauty. Lilly's jealous reaction towards Swede's fascination with Kitty is also highlighted but the subsequent scenes show Swede, beguiled, walks away from Lilly towards Kitty, excluding her from the contest. Eventually, the camera focuses on Swede and Kitty while eliminating Lilly, suggesting Kitty's power in not only seducing Swede but also excluding Lilly from the equation. This marks the threshold of the male protagonist's dissolution into the noir world, while foregrounding the *femme fatale*'s role as his nemesis and her power to manipulate space.

Noir's unequivocal interest in female sexuality leads Janey Place to conclude that noir film is not 'progressive'<sup>29</sup> in terms of its representation of women, and this is evident in female centered texts that continue to work as an expression of the contemporary male anxiety towards female independence, raising a question of authority. It is no coincidence that many such texts use the female protagonists' names in their titles, highlighting their interests in investigating these female characters. Angela Martin, for instance, points out that five noir films that were released between 1944 and 1946 'contain women's names in the title, central female characters and female stars in the lead'<sup>30</sup>—*Laura* (1944), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *My Name is Julia Ross* (1945), *Gilda* (1946) and *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946). A film like *Mildred Pierce*, for example, is fundamentally conservative and right-wing, with the eponymous heroine getting her comeuppance via the collapse of, initially, her own family, and latterly her business. In *Laura*, the eponymous heroine (Laura Hunt) admits, 'I am guilty as he is. Not for what I did, but for what I didn't do'. She is, referring not only to his jealous ex-boyfriend's, Waldo (Clifton Web), murderous scheme, but also, to the fact that she did not remain under Waldo's guidance or obey him: at the ideological level, she is at fault because she refuses to be defined 'in

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<sup>29</sup>'Women in Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.47

<sup>30</sup> ' "Gilda Didn't Do Any of Those Things You've Been Losing Sleep Over!": The Central Women of 40s Films Noirs', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.203

relation to man'.<sup>31</sup> Though both Mildred Pierce and Laura are active female figures who defy men in achieving their goals by being successful outside their homes, the main threat none the less lies in their possession of subjectivity; they present enormous threats to Western society's masculine ideology, and in the noir context, are the reincarnation of male protagonists' existential despair.

In understanding the tension between a female character and space in the noir tradition, the gothic genre, being the precursor of the noir genre, provides a point of reference in locating some of the underlying principles of this conflict. The gothic genre's fascination with female characters is well documented. Susanne Becker, for instance, asserts that 'the secrets of the gothic's persistent success is gender-related; it is so powerful because it is so feminine [...] and was early on seen as part of female culture and as "women's genre"',<sup>32</sup> echoing Amy Lawrence's claim that 'the Gothic genre, [is] one of the first "women's" genres'.<sup>33</sup> So close and influential this association is that Fred Botting, in looking at the excessive emotions evoked by the gothic sublime, argues that 'the feminization of reading practices and markets [...] were seen to upset the domestic sensibilities as well as sexual propriety'.<sup>34</sup> This subversive nature is inherent in the Gothic sensibility that noir inherited and exploited to provide a cynical view of contemporary society. Gothic's fascination with female characters never wanes, forming a paradox that presupposes that although these female characters are usually centralized, they are simultaneously subjugated by both the narrative and other characters especially male characters. These female characters in effect are to be acted upon or rescued by male heroes; a 'damsel in distress' role that not only restores the dominant power of patriarchy by foregrounding a romantic and chivalric heterosexual coupling, but also creates a means through which patriarchy can be seen as indispensable. Fred Botting uses the *Dracula* tale to show how '[w]omen constitute the objects and supports for male exchanges and identity, supports that are narcissistic in their reflections on and between men'.<sup>35</sup> *Rebecca*, on one level, also reaffirms this exchange by prioritising Mr. De Winter and acquits him from the crime that he eventually confesses to. Meanwhile, Robert Siodmak's *The Spiral Staircase* translates this exchange with extreme close up shots of some male characters' eyes.

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<sup>31</sup> Janey Place, 'Women in Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.47

<sup>32</sup> *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fiction*, 1999, p.2

<sup>33</sup> *Echoe of Narcissus*, 1991, p.112

<sup>34</sup> *Gothic*, 1996, p.4

<sup>35</sup> *Gothic*, 1996, p.151



Laden with Freudian psychoanalysis, *The Spiral Staircase* uses the female protagonist's muteness as castration anxiety, and this anxiety can be traced back in the bedridden matriarch, the mother of the serial killer. The film is punctuated by the shots of the killer's eyes, underlining and foregrounding his authority as the owner of the gaze within the narrative. In one scene, for instance, the killer gazes at the female protagonist who, in terror, looks in a mirror. The camera zooms in on the reflection of her face in the mirror revealing her face sans mouth, signifying not only her status as a castrated figure but also the film's refusal to give her a voice. *Rebecca* and *The Spiral Staircase* use gothic iconographies like the spiral staircase and the mansion to represent the labyrinthine journey that the female protagonists have to take whilst evoking the sense of entrapment and impending danger.

The importance of space in gothic tales derives from its obsessive demand for placing the female protagonist in a confined space. Chris Baldick opines that:

For the effect to be attained, a tale should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration...[which] will invoke the tyranny of the past (a family curse, the survival or archaic forms of despotism and of superstition) with such weight as to stifle the hopes of the present (the liberty of the heroine or hero) within the dead end of physical incarceration (the dungeon, the locked room, or simply the confinement of a family house closing upon itself).<sup>36</sup>

The gothic novel like Daphne De Maurier's *Rebecca*, for instance, delineates and employs this effect as a suspense and horror mechanism. Indeed, the novel as well as Alfred Hitchcock's film version of the novel start with the unnamed protagonist's (Joan Fontaine) famous opening line, 'Last night I dreamt that I went to Manderley again', evoking the gothic sense of a nightmarish past encroaching into the present. In the film, the opening line is used to accompany the image of the entrance gate to Manderley as the camera slithers through the darkness before the façade of Manderley. Manderley is the reification of the failure of the domestic sphere to protect the female character, and it is apparent that the text's intrinsic use of the gothic mood and iconography expresses and reveals the horror originating from domestic space.

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<sup>36</sup> *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, 1992, p.xix

The combination of gothic elements and noir dark visions retrodicts and foregrounds the horror within a home, and this theme highlights the plight and ordeal of the female protagonist within the confinement of domestic space. Reflecting the critical nexus of the narrative and women within domestic space itself, what this combination does is to locate the female character at the center of narrative. Using *Rebecca*<sup>37</sup> as an example, Mary Ann Doane demonstrates how suspense is built within a house with the employment of a forbidden space in which a woman is barred from entering. In her study of horror in ‘woman’s film’, Doane claims that:

One could formulate a veritable topography of spaces within the home along the axis of this perverted specularisation. The home is not a homogeneous space—it asserts divisions, gaps and field within its very structure.<sup>38</sup>

Manderley’s gargantuan and complicated structure is superfluous and lackadaisical—creating juxtaposition with the petite female protagonist—and the narrative effort is to establish a devouring sense of misplacement and isolation. The conflict that is rooted in the sharing of space in *Rebecca* is epitomized by the relationship between the new Mrs De Winter and other female characters, Mrs. Danvers, a martinet matronic figure, and the deceased inchoate Mrs. De Winter, the eponymous Rebecca. These female antagonists—Mrs. Danvers, portrayed as the devil incarnate, is cold and sinister, and likewise, Rebecca’s ‘image’ dominates the house—‘that tall sloping R dwarfing its fellows’ (p.88)—are textbook gothic characters. At the center of this conflict is the ‘locked room’ that represents the tension between these female characters, making the new young Mrs. De Winter feel entrapped, and struggling to find her authority. In *Rebecca*, claustrophobia yields fear. Manderley for the female narrator is a labyrinth:

I must have lost my bearings, for passing through a door at the head of the stairs. I came to a long corridor that I had not seen before, similar in some ways to the one in the east wing, but broader and darker—dark wing to the paneling of the walls... It was quiet and dark... and I thought, as I stood there, wondering which way to turn, that the silence was unusual, holding something of the same oppression as an empty house does...<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1940

<sup>38</sup> ‘The “Women’s Film”’: Possession and Address’, in *Home Where The Heart Is?*, ed. by Christine Gledhill, 1994, p.287

<sup>39</sup> Daphne De Maurier, *Rebecca*, [1938] 1969, p.90

The destruction of Manderley at the end, as it is set ablaze by Mrs. Danvers, is the penultimate result of the failure of community. Also, it represents both the refusal of the present to let go of the past and essentially how the conflict of the present encroaches into the future, gothic credos that influence noir sensibilities.

One of the major differences between noir and the gothic with regards to the failure of community is that, while in noir texts it signifies an escape from masculine trapping, in the gothic tradition it often reinforces masculine ideology. To begin with, domestic thrillers like *The Hand That Rocks The Cradle*<sup>40</sup> and *Poison Ivy*<sup>41</sup> provide a useful point of comparison that allows us to define some key features of a domestic noir film. The films' primordial motive is to demonstrate how revenge yields a battle for domestic space, and the female characters' struggle culminating in physical fight to restore their families signifies both the effort to critique masculinity and at the same time to protect its ideology. *The Hand That Rocks The Cradle* starts with the presentation of a perfect American home—the mother, Claire (Annabella Sciorra), preparing meal, and the father, Michael (Matt McCoy) shaving while entertaining his daughter, Emma (Madeline Zima). Due to Claire's allegation about her pediatrician's unethical behavior, he committed suicide leaving behind a devastated wife, Peyton, who ends up having a miscarriage that leaves her unable to be pregnant again. Peyton's revenge is motivated by the fact that she wants to have a family again—husband, home and kids. Indeed, in the last fight between Claire and Peyton, Claire declares, “This is my family Peyton”, reinforcing a patriarchal and masculine ideology of heterosexual expectations and coupling. Similarly, *Poison Ivy*, a film directed by a female director, Katt Shea, is about Sylvia Cooper who is depressed and unhappy at home, and befriends an orphaned girl from Los Angeles, Ivy. Ivy's obsession with Sylvia's family culminates in her killing Sylvia's hypochondriac mother, Georgie, on her birthday. She assumes the role of the lady of the house, including having an affair with Sylvia's father. When Sylvia discovers Ivy's scheme to take over her mother's place, she comes back with a vengeance. In their final confrontation, Ivy's final plea is that they “all can be a family”, evincing the film's apotheosizing heterosexual's assignment. Both *The Hand That Rocks The Cradle* and *Poison Ivy* offer narrative solutions that pander to the standard heterosexual ideology, reaffirming women status as the vehicle for disseminating the patriarchal value system.

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<sup>40</sup> Dir. Curtis Hanson, 1992

<sup>41</sup> Dir. Katt Shea, 1992

In Charles Williams' noir novel, *The Hot Spot*,<sup>42</sup> the failure of community is reflected between the two female leads—Gloria and Dolores Harshaw—and is triggered by their attraction to a handsome newcomer to their small American town, the male protagonist, Harry Madox. Dolores, being the standard self-aware femme fatale, realizes that despite her sexual shenanigans with Madox, he is attracted to the seemingly innocent Gloria. On the pretext of wanting to discuss her late husband's business with Madox and Gloria, Dolores summons them both to her house—a space that she knows she is in control of, and starts blackmailing both Gloria and Madox. Dolores manipulates the circumstances that Gloria and Madox are in to be able to leave the small town with Madox, knowing full well that she is in control of their relationship. Dolores' departure with Madox is a parody of its classical counterpart, functioning as a critique of heterosexual coupling in which the woman is secondary to the man. Meanwhile, in the noir film *Single White Female* the failure of heterosexual coupling is the cause of the meeting between the two female leads. As a critique of masculinity, *Single White Female* may portray men as sexual predators, but its underlying ideology is mirrored by the film's refusal to resolve its conflict, leaving the audience with a sense of ambivalence. Hendra's action, though considered the sign of the failure of community between the two female characters, is also significant in putting the kibosh on heterosexual masculine ideology.

**'I did something wrong...once':<sup>43</sup>**  
**The Failure of Agency as *Mise-en-abyme***

In line with the portrayal of revenge in Hollywood films, The Motion Picture Code (1930-1960) especially in a section called Particular Application: Crimes Against Law indicates that:

Revenge in modern times shall not be justified [...]<sup>44</sup>

One of the defining characteristics of the noir genre is its critical and cynical view of the world, and this is mirrored, especially in the canonical noir, by the male protagonist's struggle to comprehend the world, raising the question of his authority. A departure from the knee-jerk feel good Hollywood productions of American Dreams, noir films offer endless nightmares that chart out American males' trials and tribulations in post-war America, and The Motion Picture Code is not only an example of the

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<sup>42</sup> 1969

<sup>43</sup> *The Killers*, Robert Siodmak, 1946

<sup>44</sup> Joseph M. Boggs, *The Art of Watching The Films*, 1985, p.372

right wing's idea of governing and policing Hollywood's portrayal of revenge and its motive, but also a desperate attempt to hold on to the innocence of an imagined past. The advent of the economic boom inevitably forms modernist ideologies that influence noir texts in terms of characterization and urban location, and with their radical restructuring of social strata, these ideologies raise the question of authority (ontological) and bring to the fore the theme of revenge (epistemological) in noir texts.

Revenge as a theme is therefore ubiquitous in the noir tradition, and its impulse is normally revealed by the genre's convoluted narrative structure and heightened by its bleak visual mode and tone, mirroring not only the protagonist's lone perpetual struggle for survival in noir underworld but also the complex motive for revenge itself. Thus, reinforcing noir's credo of 'what it seems is not what it is'. In the opening scene of *The Killers*,<sup>45</sup> as an illustration, Swede (Burt Lancaster) awaits his death in his own home upon knowing that the killers hired to kill him out of retribution taken by Jim Colfax (Albert Decker) whom he has double-crossed in the past are about town. An insurance investigator, Jim Reardon, pursues the case against his boss's trivializing attitude, which through a sequence of flashbacks the film's convoluted plot uncovers and explains the events that lead to Swede's eventual acceptance of his murder. The main reason why the representation of revenge is allowed in *The Killers* then is less to do with the idea that the male protagonist, Swede, is a morally corrupt individual and the world that he inhabits is an underworld full of criminals; therefore, the film is not seen as a threat to the moral standard of the middle class right winged Americans, but it has a lot more to do with the fact that all events could be linked to the femme fatale's, Kitty Collins (Eva Gardner), fatalism, ultimately revealing that Swede is just an everyman's man. Coupled with that, as the production codes are also undergoing some transitions, influenced by the shifting definition of morality and marked by the mobilizing and alterable social attitude of the mass audience, the representation of the act of revenge in a film is also relaxed and tolerated.<sup>46</sup> This also means that noir revenge narrative is at a climactic, which is no longer restricted to and associated with the underworld inhabited by morally corrupt criminals as exemplified by *The Killers*, which I would argue marks the shift in function in the motive for taking revenge. Swede's death in the Jacobean tragedy style is inevitable,

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<sup>45</sup> Robert Siodmak, 1946

<sup>46</sup> Yvonne Tasker suggests that 'it is not that the effective end of the Hays Code coincident on the Supreme Court's 1948 Paramount decision meant an end to censorship of course, but that a reformulation of what could be said and shown within the mainstream followed from that demise' (in *Working Girls*, 1998, p.11)

just like the death of the corrupt policeman, Barney Nolan (Edmond O'Brien), who is the subject of revenge by a gangster, Packy Reed, in *Shield For Murder*,<sup>47</sup> as he hopelessly follows the route to his own destruction. Swede and Barney, as noir protagonists, are sympathetic figures driven by their own arrogance and the critical tone of their morality runs deep throughout the narrative, provoking a sense of ambivalence that is the result of their involvement with crime. On the other hand, in female centered texts in which the female protagonists are not criminals but innocent victims, like Bella in the novel *Dirty Weekend*<sup>48</sup> and Thana in the film *Ms. 45*,<sup>49</sup> there is an immediate and intense shift in the function of revenge, foregrounding noir's increasing moral ambivalence that effectively abnegates any compunction about taking revenge. Unlike Swede's nemesis in *The Killers* who are professional killers, Bella and Thana are two ordinary women whose motive for taking revenge is to survive under patriarchy and whose appropriation of agency also mirrors their ontological questioning of their innate failure of agency.

The shift of function in the motive for taking revenge, that is, from signifying the criminal intent of the criminals to signifying the appropriation of agency by someone who has been a victim under the patriarchal value system marks the point of reversal in noir revenge narratives. What this appropriation of agency in revenge narratives reveals is the deep-seated power struggle between male and female and it is mandatory for the latter to respond, as the oppressed party, at both literal and symbolic levels. Within the structure of noir revenge narrative in a female centered text, the female character's craze for vengeance often alludes to noir's tendency to destabilize the victim/perpetrator schism, bringing to the fore the ideological motive of such violent actions. At the symbolic level, this kind of narrative also espouses the belief that men's physical and psychological violence towards women is a patriarchal attempt to articulate the return to the masculine totalizing ideology. Taking revenge for these female avengers, therefore, is not an expression of mere aggressive agency (which is often one of the dominant traits in many male avengers like Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer) against what I call the 're-masculinization' of chivalric codes, but essentially it is a symbolic act of rewriting feminine scripts by the appropriation of their agency.

What the appropriation of agency usually signifies is the desperate need to mobilize from a victim position, but in a modernist text like

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<sup>47</sup> Dirs. Edmond O'Brien and Howard W. Koch, 1954

<sup>48</sup> Helen Zahavi, 1992

<sup>49</sup> Dir. Abel Ferrara. 1981

Graham Greene's *The Confidential Agent*,<sup>50</sup> the male agent's act of revenge alludes to the narcissistic construction of himself. In *The Confidential Agent*, D. (the confidential agent) undergoes a radical transformation due to his anger at the murder of a girl, Else, of whom he is fond. In the first section of the novel, D. is portrayed as a docile person who is emotionally numb and refuses to react to physical attack or violence. When he is attacked by L. and a chauffeur:

D.'s hand were useless; he made no attempt to hit back (his mind remained a victim of the horror and indignity of the physical conflict), and he didn't know the right way to defend himself. The chauffeur battered him. (p.36)

When he learns about her murder, however, he furiously declares: 'No time to talk. That child was murdered. Somebody's going to die' (p.107). From that point on, 'rage dictates his movements' (p.109) and it 'was like vitality in his veins [...] He had stood up to the watcher, the beating, the bullet: now it was their turn' (p.110). The appropriation of his agency in effect is the text's expression of a male chivalric code, a romantic idea of a man standing up for a hapless woman. It is narcissistic because it appeals to his heroism that consequently makes him look and feel good. On the other hand, inverted narcissism is employed by Joseph Conrad in *The Secret Agent*<sup>51</sup> to dehumanize the secret agent's wife, Winnie Verloc, consigning her to the role of the other. In the novel, the wife of the eponymous agent, Winnie Verloc, kills her husband as an act of revenge, not only for being responsible for the death of her mentally handicapped brother—Stevie—but also for blaming her for his death. Mr. Verloc, in exonerating himself from the 'killing', claims that 'if you will have it that I killed the boy, then you've killed him as much as I' (p.209). As a modernist writer who normally writes about the underside of human psyche, Conrad draws upon bourgeois cultural values and identities to reduce her into 'an existence foreign to all grace and charm, without beauty and almost without decency' (p.198), a representation driven by masculine anxieties and desires. The novel stresses that:

Mrs. Verloc's mental condition had the merit of simplicity; but it was not sound. It was governed too much by a fixed idea. Every nook and cranny of her brain was filled with the thought that this man, with whom she had lived without distaste for seven years, had taken the 'poor boy' away from her in order to kill him. (p.202)

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<sup>50</sup> [1939] 1971

<sup>51</sup> [1902] 1965

The association between a woman and psychopathology is discursive, pandering to masculine sense of normalcy, and in this case it is used as an explanation for her paranoia. Winnie's mental illness is therefore relevant to the construction of Verloc's narcissism as long as she fails to perform her uxorial duty, of being a Domestic Goddess. Her comeuppance, being betrayed by a man called Ossipon that leads her to commit suicide, parallels the underlying masculine ideology that punishes women who have subjectivity. In both *The Confidential Agent's* and *The Secret Agent's* case, the word 'agent' in the title is apropos in indicating the move towards a pivotal point in which the victim becomes the 'active' agent—the hunted who turns into the hunter. Although narrative turns in both texts help to signify the appropriation of agency by the have-been-victims into perpetrators, their roles are in accord with the construction of male narcissism by masculinist ideology.

In cinema, *Cape Fear*<sup>52</sup> and *Disclosure*<sup>53</sup> deal with male rape as the subject matter, suggesting 'masculinity' in crisis and the need for rebuilding male narcissism. While the first deals with the issue of male rape by equating rape with femininity, the latter deconstructs or redefines the meaning of rape. Both narratives, essentially, allude to the narcissistic constructions of the male protagonists. *Cape Fear* uses the traditional assumption in its discussion about rape (I use discussion rather than depiction because the rape itself is never shown) in that rape can only happen to women or the feminine body. In the film, Max Cady (Robert De Niro), when confronted by Sam Bowden (Nick Nolte) who he claims is responsible for his imprisonment, poses this question:

Cady: You ever been a woman?

Bowden: What?

Cady: A woman. Some fat hairy ugly Hilly Billy's wet dream?

[...]

Bowden: Look. I realize that you have suffered.

Cady: You don't know what a suffering is councilor [...] I've learned from

geeks [...] I learned to get in touch with the nurturing side of myself [...]

The feminine side [...] sodomized by four white guys, or four black guys.

Cady's use of rape as the motivation behind his revenge is his way of reclaiming his masculinity. By being 'made' a woman, he is doubly victimized; not only that his masculinity is tarnished by rape, reducing him to being 'a woman'. Cady's use of hyperbole to describe the male inmates

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<sup>52</sup> Dir. Martin Scorsese, 1991

<sup>53</sup> Dir. Barry Levinson, 1994



who raped him also evinces his intention to show Bowden that what has happened to him in the prison is deplorable, unimaginable and unforgivable. What Cady does is not only to reestablish a binary of male/female and active/passive but also to show how the dismantling of the binary will result in the destruction of masculinity. This argument resonates well with one of Clover's categorizations of rape-revenge film<sup>54</sup> that concerns the masculine-feminine divide.

*Disclosure* uses male rape as a backlash against feminism and to redefine the constitution of rape itself, in accordance with women's demand for equal treatment of gender at workplace. Made in the 1980s, this 'corporate thriller' film represents both the greedy decade of Thatcherite and Reaganite politics, and male anxiety about women's economic independence. This anxiety is expressed clearly by Don when asked by Tom Sanders for help:

They are stronger. They are smarter. They don't fight fair. The next step of human evolution is like the Amazon [...] keep a few of us for sperm and kill the rest.

The very existential argument is reiterated by Meredith Johnson in her defense for her action (I'm a sexually aggressive woman [...]. It's the same damn thing since the beginning of time). Surrounded by strong willed and successful women ('A Friend'—the sender of the surreptitious advice via emails turns out to be a woman too) characters, Sanders' masculinity is at stake. The primitiveness of the sexist language used by the characters moreover foregrounds the film's tendency to use existential sentiment to express its anxiety towards female independence. Indeed, there is a sense of desperation in Sanders' voice that he has to resort to shouting to reassert his 'dominance [...] feeling [his] patriarchal urge' to 'fight [his] own battle' whilst disagreeing with the idea that his wife is to be the breadwinner of the family. This subversion is crucial and effective not only in configuring his status as a victim but also in reinserting his masculinity; the ideological impulse that attacks active female sexuality. The film's subsequent narrative follows this epithet, and Sanders, reiterates this sentiment, 'sexual harassment is about power. When did I have the power? When?' Sanders' utterance is a signpost of the narrative turns of the film in which his masculinity is re-installed, signifying his

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<sup>54</sup> Clover calls this a single-axis category since it does not involve the city-country divide. One example of the city-country axis is *I Spit on your Grave* in which the rape victim comes from the city and the rape takes place in a country (*Men, Women and Chainsaw*, 1992)

appropriation of agency. Indeed, the film tries to simultaneously build the notion of evilness in Miss Johnson as deformed in character, using a male computer programmer aptly called ‘angel’ as a way of criticizing her to a biblical proportion. Sanders’ cynical question: ‘Did it ever occur to you Meredith [Johnson] that I set you up?’ echoes David Trotter’s observation on the fate of the femme fatale: ‘when her power of fascination suddenly “evaporates” [...] [the male protagonist] rejects her, and regains his imaginary, narcissistic identity [...] Her collapse, when it comes, renders her utterly abject.’<sup>55</sup>

The 1970s sees the burgeoning of revenge as an integral part of narrative structure in Hollywood production. Paul Cobley in his study of the revenge thrillers warns that ‘[i]n reading the revenge thrillers of the seventies, it is important to consider the manifold nature of the impetus and the objects of revenge’.<sup>56</sup> Patrick Fuery, meanwhile, outlines three of the main motives often found in such films during the period of the 1970s and 1980s: ‘patriotism (*Rambo*), rape (*Lipstick*) and urban crime and the individual policeman’s [...] fight against it (*Dirty Harry*)’.<sup>57</sup> Of the three, the first and the last motives apotheosize the male’s supremacy and control. On the other hand, because in literature and cinema a woman is defined by her gendered body, her revenge is consistently related to rape-revenge, a revenge based on the oppression of her gendered identity and body; this is part of feminist politics that concerns a female body and addresses its ideology. This trend is also seen as related not only to the increase in the reported rape cases<sup>58</sup> but also the emergence of second wave feminism as argued by Jacinda Read and Maria Lauret. ‘[T]he very discourses that establish gender differences as differences in sexuality’, argues Sabine Sielke, ‘also construct female sexuality as victimization’.<sup>59</sup> Hence, rape-revenge, as a motive, is more imperative and germane to feminist issues and struggles.

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<sup>55</sup> ‘Fascination and Nausea: Finding Out the Hard-boiled Way’, in *The Art of Detective Fiction*, ed. by Warren chernaik, Martin Swales, and Robert Vilain, 2000, pp.30-31

<sup>56</sup> *The American Thriller*, 2000, p.168

<sup>57</sup> *New Developments in Film Theory*, 2000, p.146

<sup>58</sup> It is reported that there is a ‘staggering increase (about 15 percent every year) in reported cases of rape during the 1970s -cases estimated moreover to be only a small percentage of the total actual occurrence’ (Elaine Showaltzer, ‘Rethinking the Seventies: Women Writers and Violence’, in *Women and Violence in Literature*, ed. by Katherine Ann Ackley, 1990, p.239)

<sup>59</sup> *Reading Rape*, 2002, p.2

The question is, why the 1970s? Maria Lauret sees the development of ‘American feminist fiction of the 1970s and 1980s [as] a liberating literature, a female body of texts which sought to liberate both women and writing from the constraints of masculinist double standards in literature and in life.’<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Cowie, meanwhile, argues that:

[W]hat marked the re-emergence of feminism as a political and social movement from the late 1960s was a new articulation of the contradictions of ‘femininity’, and of motherhood and gender for women in the industrial West, together with a new analysis of the conditions—social as well as economic—producing these contradictions.<sup>61</sup>

In literature and cinema, these contradictions are figured by: one, feminist critical discourses with regard to the essence of femininity; two, the influence of postmodernism in revealing, as suggested by Michel Foucault, the ‘inadequacy of the hegemonic grand narrative’.<sup>62</sup> While Cowie’s argument is principally based on the ideological formation of the representation of women in a particular historical moment in the realm of the real, rape-revenge narrative, on the contrary, often alludes to the realm of fantasy, the realm that tirelessly produces spatial-temporal reality for women to attack the Symbolic Order. This is the realm that feminist critics can actually negotiate to comprehend the contradictions in the representation of women, and rape-revenge narrative marks an incipient opportunity to abnegate the primordially raffish assumption about women and femininity. Jacinda Reads has suggested that:

If we are to fully understand the significance of the feminist stories the rape-revenge film tells, we must also seek to understand the way in which the films engage with, negotiate and rework these ‘mass cultural fictions of femininity’. Indeed, insofar as feminism can be defined as involving a struggle over the meanings of femininity, it is in its ongoing articulation of these struggles that the rape-revenge film can be seen to be attempting to make sense of feminism.<sup>63</sup>

Arguing that the real challenge is in trying to find the story of femininity that is occluded by the miasma of feminist critical discourses on rape-revenge texts, Read suggests that reading ‘with the grain’ will help to bridge the gap between ‘feminine’ and ‘feminist’. Nonetheless, feminist

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<sup>60</sup> *Liberating Literature*, 1994, p.1

<sup>61</sup> *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis*, 1997, p.15

<sup>62</sup> Marianne H. Marchand and Jane L. Parpart, *Feminism/ Postmodernism/ Development*, 2003, p.2

<sup>63</sup> Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers*, 2000, p.10

critics are also fully aware of the trap of any theoretical complacency, recognizing that the representation of women in revenge narrative can also be 'male-serving', and especially in cinema, the image of women can be reduced into 'a sign of everything and anything but herself',<sup>64</sup> reminiscent of the femme fatale figure in the classical noir film.

In embryo, the male-serving image of women is traceable in the gothic and sensation novels, which inextricably link this image of women with the oppressive (domestic) space that they inhabit. Maureen T. Reddy, in *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel*, draws this parallelism:

If gothic novels are about women's fears [...] then sensation novels are about their fantasies, with both encoding striking critiques of women's entrapment in domestic life and powerlessness in their primary reality, the family.<sup>65</sup>

The amalgamation of female fear and fantasy marks the theoretical impasse in consigning or figuring rape-revenge narrative into a certain genre: while Carol Clover, consigns the rape-revenge films into the horror genre, Pam Cook, in her analysis of *Thelma and Louise*, traces the origin of rape-revenge films in the 'exploitation genres, with their high quotient of sex and violence and apparent pandering to sadistic male fantasies. Although these films, seem at first glance to be unredeemably misogynistic, a closer look reveals that all is not as it appears'.<sup>66</sup> Jacinda Read's argues that:

Rape-revenge is best understood not as a genre, but as a narrative structure, which has been mapped on to and across not only a whole range of genres, but a whole range of historical and discursive contexts.<sup>67</sup>

What Read does in her book is, in order to make sense of feminism in the 1990s through rape-revenge films, to establish the idea that rather than being genre-bound, the rape-revenge structure transgresses any historical movement and context. Revenge narrative in horror, exploitation and sensational texts is radically transgressive, yet it is non-existential, lacking the lugubriously dark tone and cynicism that characterize noir mood and atmosphere. In addition to that, the essence of noir revenge narrative, for

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<sup>64</sup> Elisabeth Cowie, *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis*, 1997, p.16

<sup>65</sup> 1988, p.8

<sup>66</sup> 'Border Crossing: Women and Film in Context', in *Women and Film*, ed. by Pam Cook and Phillip Dodd, eds., 1997, pp.xv-xvi

<sup>67</sup> *The New Avengers*, 2000, p.25

example in *Thelma and Louis* vis-à-vis its horror, exploitation and sensational counterparts, I would argue, lies in the idea that the female protagonists in noir revenge narrative are given a benighted dignity that is a defining feature of a noir existential protagonist, a Chandleresque figure reincarnated.

One strand of argument germinating from the location of the female protagonist at the center of narrative is that she is the subject of the masculine gaze. The dialectical approach to the gaze as masculine, hence oppressive to women, has been the major concern in the theorization of the representation of women in cinema as championed by Laura Mulvey. Critics have however been questioning Mulvey's theory, adding for instance, in a 'woman's film', Mary Ann Doane's asserts that:

Because the 'woman's film' obsessively centers and re-centers a female protagonist, placing her in the position of agency, it offers some resistance to an analysis which stresses the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of the woman, her objectification as a spectacle according to the masculine structure of the gaze.<sup>68</sup>

In noir revenge narrative, the process of centering and re-centering a female protagonist alludes to not only the genre's tendency to disorient the audience, creating an ambivalence that is a crucial part of noir cynicism but also the genre's way of foregrounding the theme of alienation and isolation, which characterize the female avenger's existential despair. Holmlund's survey of female centered films<sup>69</sup> reveals that 'in every film, shadowy lighting, sharp camera angles, probing camera movements, rapid editing and relentless soundtracks weave an erotic aura around the murders most fail to see.'<sup>70</sup> This carries a heavy resonance with the way the narrative and visual style of the classical noir films 'investigate' and eroticize the female characters, especially the femme fatale figures.

The issue of spectatorship is duly addressed by Linda Ruth Williams in her analysis of *Baise-moi*<sup>71</sup>—a French rape revenge porno flick. *Baise-moi*'s association with pornography is demonstrated by Williams as a way of questioning the film's status as a drama or pure exploitation. Drawing

<sup>68</sup> 'The "Woman's Film": Possession and Address', in *Home Where the Heart Is?*, ed. by Christine Gledhill, 1994, p.286

<sup>69</sup> Christine Holmlund's survey involves six films which are *Black Widow*, *Aliens*, *Fatal Attraction*, *Blue Steel*, *Mortal Thoughts* and *Thelma & Louise* (A Decade of Deadly Dolls: Hollywood and the Women Killer', in *Moving Targets*, ed. by Birch Birch, 1993, p.143).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Virginie Despentes, 2000.

from the film's similarity with its mainstream counterparts, Williams opines that:

Whether the 90s girls-with-guns were meant to titillate or empower was never resolved; now *Baise-moi* marries the iconography of sexy female violence incarnated in *Nikita* or *Blue Steel* and *Butterfly Kiss* with hardcore to confuse the issue even further.<sup>72</sup>

Williams' emphasis on iconography is the reflection of her concern with the visual style rather than the visual-content of the film itself, and this is an indication that rape-revenge film's visual status is volatile in the sense that it can fall back to its exploitation root which can seriously disparage the focus on rape as a feminist political issue itself. *Baise-moi* is categorically a 'rape-crisis discourse—which, for the sake of its political agenda, realigns explicit, (porno)graphic representations of rape with acts of real rape',<sup>73</sup> revealing its status as a radical re-examination of the appropriation of agency. The film presents a more complex problem in the critical discourse of spectatorship especially because of the film's refusal to represent but instead to create a simulacrum of rape exacerbated by the marriage between revenge and exploitation sub-genres; this seems rather pretentiously mawkish as its political agenda is tremendously occluded by the titillating power of hardcore pornographic images.

Meanwhile, Kate Stables, using soft-core films like *Basic Instinct* and *Body of Evidence*, offers another way of looking at the representation of female characters, utilizing postmodernism as the critical tool by which the new female fatale figure can be understood. Stables observes that:

The new fatale is defined as a sexual *performer* [original italic] within a visual system which owes as much to soft-core pornography as it does to mainstream Hollywood.<sup>74</sup>

She goes on to argue that the 'series of sexual spectacles' formed by such a film 'create[s] a reductionist concept of the 90s fatale as a figure almost exclusively devoted to the practice of sex, whatever her notional career',<sup>75</sup> evincing the idea that these female characters are aware of the power of the performance of their sexuality and body, using them ultimately as the very weapon to achieve their goals. The new fatale

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<sup>72</sup> 'Sick Sisters', *Sight and Sound*, 2001, p.28

<sup>73</sup> Sabine Sielke, *Reading Rape*, 2002, p.4

<sup>74</sup> 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing The Femme Fatale in 90s Cinema, in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, pp.172-173

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* p.174

figures' highly sexualized bodies in Stables' analysis function both as titillation and as an intrigue that contributes to the investigative narrative structure of both films. In a non-investigative noir narrative such as in the film *Ms .45* and the novel *Dirty Weekend*, the female protagonists' heightened sexuality is conflated with their violent actions, and this conflation is made so central to the narrative that it is almost deliberately expunging the significance of the protagonists' initial position as victims of sexual crime.

While the revenge taken is a marriage between violence and the erotic, a preponderance of critics such as Read and Lehman argues that in mainstream films the rape scene itself is non-erotic in nature. Citing examples from *I Spit On Your Grave*<sup>76</sup> and *Ms .45*, Read and Lehman observe that both rape scenes are not only non-erotic but also peripheral to the narrative. Lehman suggests that:

These films position their target male audience to enjoy the gruesome spectacle of a woman wreaking havoc on the male body. Her rape is merely a narrative pretext for setting this bizarrely pleasurable pattern in motion.<sup>77</sup>

The positioning of the male audience as masochistic voyeur results in another problematic reconciliation within the revenge structure, which consequently reveals that the rape itself is gradually trivialized as the narrative expands and focuses on the act of violence committed by these female avengers instead, which at the center of this violence is the eroticisation of their female body. The combination of violence and female erotica reflects, as postulated by Showalter:

We might take the new plots of women's fiction as further evidence of backlash, a warning that breaking the rules, challenging the ideology of feminine subservience and trying to live a more independent life inevitably puts a woman in jeopardy [...]but[...]Women's novels are testing the limits of the liberated will and the metaphysics of violence[...]Although its fictional forms are more disturbing than we might have predicted, violence as a fantasy was an undercurrent of feminist thought during the decade.<sup>78</sup>

This is partly true especially in a noir revenge narrative like Kathryn Bigelow's *Blue Steel*. Generally, it can be assumed that what is essentially

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<sup>76</sup> Meir Zarchi, 1978

<sup>77</sup> ' "Don't Blame This On A Girl": Female Rape-revenge Films', in *Screening the Male*, ed. by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, 1996, p.107

<sup>78</sup> 'Rethinking the Seventies: Women Writers and Violence', in *Women and Violence in Literature*, ed. by Katherine Anne Ackley, 1990, p.240

centralized is the post-rape physical transformation that rape victims undergo, so centralized that the image is loaded with female sexuality, evoking the castration anxiety in men. Bigelow challenges this assumption by employing an androgenic female character, which in effect destabilizes the feminine/masculine divide. Also, the film portrays rape as non-erotic in nature, and as the rape scene immediately proceeds the love scene between the female protagonist, Megan (Jamie Lee Curtis), and her lover, Mann, the ideology that differentiates these two scenes is underscored by Bigelow's technique of showing the physical and psychological differences involved between the two scenes, foregrounding the issue of consent. While the lovemaking scene is erotically shot, suggesting its intimacy and privacy, the rape scene takes place in a rapid sequence; thus amplifying the desperate nature of the aggressor who runs for his life after the rape, the helplessness of the victim, and the nature of rape itself. And this is tantamount to a simulation, echoing Steven Shaviro's claims that this visual style 'strains toward the explosive instability of the coming moment' which confirms Bigelow's celebration of 'visceral immediacy as an *effect* [original italic] of simulation.'<sup>79</sup> On top of that, the camera's refusal to act as the characters' points of view brings into question the role and proximity of the audience's involvement, which results in the complicity of the audience; hence the destabilization of viewers' perception and/or their voyeuristic tendency. Bigelow aptly constructs Megan's revenge as her pragmatic response to the intrusion on her privacy by both the rapist and viewers, fomenting its motive by politicizing the personal. What Bigelow intends to do via the high adrenaline revenge action at the end of the film is to provoke a critical response that disparages critics like Lehman and Clover who claim that such a film emphasizes the violent retribution over the rape itself. *Blue Steel* is a neo-noir film because of Megan's sheer determination and belief in her own moral codes, and her initial image as a Tartar facilitates the association with hardboiled male protagonists who walked down the mean streets before her. Jacinda Read in her discussion about the transition from noir to neo-noir films, for instance, explores the tendency of a post-modern aesthetic 'to play with these fragments of the past, subjecting them to parody or ironic quotation'.<sup>80</sup>

Female avengers' actions are ideologically driven, which indeed offers some justification for their serial killings, as in Thana's and Bella's case. As Lehman and Clover points out that in many rape-revenge films, the

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<sup>79</sup> *The Cinematic Body*, 1993, p.5

<sup>80</sup> *The New Avengers*, 2000, p.157



rape scene normally involves a gang of men, and therefore it is only relevant for the female avengers to kill serially. Lehman sees this serial killing as an excessiveness that serves two cinematic purposes: one, as 'narrative demands of the feature film since the avenging woman hunts down the men one by one'. Second, it also points to male erotic bonding.<sup>81</sup> While the first is compounded on the narrative's exploitation root, the latter is also related to the male audience's identification with the rapist, as they can also be part of the pack. Carol Clover picks up this point made by Lehman by reconsidering the gang rape as:

Very much to do with male sport and pecking order and very little to do with sex, the idea being that the team sport and gang rape are displaced versions of one another, male sorting devices both, and both driven by male spectatorship and misogyny.<sup>82</sup>

Drawing her argument from *The Accused*,<sup>83</sup> Clover points out that during the rape, 'the male spectators cheer and clap and chant in unison.'<sup>84</sup> In the film *The Accused*, the marginalization of rape is achieved with the use of flashback technique as the dominant narrative structure that effectively usurps the female protagonist's subjectivity. This is achieved in three ways. One, the rape scene is shown as a testimony to the post-rape trial. Second, as the rape scene is narrated by a male witness, it presents a conflict of interest. Third, as Sara's (Jodie Foster) identity and personal life is revealed in stages, the revelation casts some doubts on her credibility as a witness and victim. With her checkered background exposed together with the effect of rape on her, it is hard to sympathize with her situation. *The Accused*, as the title suggests, represents the 80s ambivalence as the reference to the accused is arbitrary, which poses an important question: who is actually being accused?

My viewing of Abel Ferrara's *Bad Lieutenant*<sup>85</sup> also reveals the same attitude towards rape. The film starts with the voice of a male sports commentator making a softball commentary, which suggests the film's effort to reinsert the male protagonist's masculinity through sports. The leitmotif of sports apotheosises male bonding—for instance, the discussion

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<sup>81</sup> "'Don't Blame This On A Girl': Female Rape-revenge Films', in *Screening the Male*, ed. by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, 1993, p.107

<sup>82</sup> 'High and Low: the Transformation of Rape-revenge Movie', in *Women and Film*, ed. by Pam Cook and Philip Dodd, 1997, p.80

<sup>83</sup> Dir. Jonathan Kaplan, 1988

<sup>84</sup> 'High and Low: the Transformation of Rape-revenge Movie', in *Women and Film*, ed. by Pam Cook and Philip Dodd, 1997, p.81

<sup>85</sup> Dir. Brian De Palma, 1992

about a nun's rape that the male protagonist is investigating immediately turns into a talk about a softball match—that underscores the protagonist's struggle for acceptance in the alienating urban location he is in. Ferrara tries to establish a psychological link between men's interest in rape and their interest in sports through their pecking order and buddy system, punctuated by the sports commentator's voice that is so inter-woven within the narrative that everything else in the film seems an auxiliary to keep the narrative going, making the act of raping itself peripheral to the narrative trajectory; this is the very misogynistic construction that makes rape seem frivolous. *Bad Lieutenant* does not make an apology for being cynically misogynistic through the male protagonist's struggle to find his own authority and agency—existential angst that characterizes the failure of his agency. Critics of the film like Rich sarcastically question Ferrara's vision 'as a quest for redemption, reasoning perhaps that if a nun can forgive the crackheads who rape her with a crucifix, then an audience should be able to forgive Ferrara, right? Wrong.'<sup>86</sup> On one hand, Rich is right in the sense that she questions the role of the spectators in the whole process of accepting or viewing the rape, and incriminating them along the way. On the other, she misses the point that rape in this film reflects less on female oppression and more on male angst and insecurity. For instance, the film seems to suggest that rape is a forgivable crime as, and to the lieutenant's chagrin, the nun forgives her rapists. The lieutenant's contention of her willingness to forgive is a typical construction of a noir romantic hero. At one stage he annoyingly asks the nun: 'Do you have the right to let these guys go free?' This echoes Sally Munt's argument that 'a discourse of rights harmonizes with the myth of individual endeavour, within the construction of the popular hero'.<sup>87</sup> *Bad Lieutenant* is a noir film especially because of its refusal to provide a closure, and Mark Kermode points out that the 'unresolved narrative which sets up wrong-doers for punishment, but then denies the audience the cathartic release of seeing them put into justice [...] left [the audience] disoriented and uneasy.'<sup>88</sup> The lieutenant's failure of agency culminated in his death at the end of the film—the *mise-en-abyme* that is directly related to his urban locale. Location is crucial in revenge narrative as the failure of agency among the female avengers is also a *mise-en-abyme* that drags them further into the noir world.

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<sup>86</sup> 'Film-school Revenge', in *Action/Spectacle Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Jose Arroyo, 2000, p.128

<sup>87</sup> *Murder by the Book?*, 1999, p.41

<sup>88</sup> 'Bad Lieutenant', in *Sight and Sound*, ed. by Jim Hillier, 2001, p.181

## The Juveniles

The dilemma faced by juvenile characters centres around their disillusionment with the world that they are in, and the experience of social and psychological displacement is inescapable, alluding to the failure of agency and community:

‘I felt so lonesome all of a sudden. I almost wished I was dead.’  
—J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*.<sup>89</sup>

Veda: You think because you have made a little money you can get a new hairdo and some expensive clothes and turn yourself into a lady. But you can’t, because you’ll never be anything but a common frump, whose father lived over a grocery store and whose mother took in washing. With this money, I can get away from every rotten, stinking thing that makes me think of this place or you.  
—Michael Curtis, *Mildred Pierce*.<sup>90</sup>

The aim of this section is to study female juvenile characters in Daniel Blythe’s *The Cut*<sup>91</sup> and Jack Womack’s *Random Acts of Senseless Violence* whose points of view are foregrounded by the use of the first person narration, arguing that if the juvenile female character, Veda, in the classical text *Mildred Pierce* is used to magnify the failure in motherhood, the juvenile female characters in both neo-noir novels represent the appropriation of agency, whilst mirroring the disintegration of society due to the failure of patriarchal community. In both novels, the themes of displacement and alienation are revisited, but the focus on juvenile female characters through the first person point of view, I would argue, will not only exacerbate the noir mood of alienation, but also presents their struggle to find validation in the disintegrating world, providing a critique and social commentary of the collapse of patriarchal value system. Central to the struggle for validation is the issue of (self) control, and this section tries to illustrate how the loss of agency results in the female juvenile protagonist’s different position within the narrative: in *The Cut*, as a target of revenge, and while the appropriation of agency in *Random Acts of Senseless Violence* sees her ‘becoming’, which according to Gilles Deleuze, ‘is the process of transformation created when a body disconnects

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<sup>89</sup> [1951] 1988, p.51

<sup>90</sup> 1945

<sup>91</sup> 1998

from its habituated modes of acting and thinking in favour of a multiple and changing process of experimentation',<sup>92</sup> enabling her to take revenge.

The representation of juvenile characters as alienated and troublesome figures is not new in the noir tradition, as found in Hal Ellson's pulp novel *Tomboy*,<sup>93</sup> and in the noir film *Mildred Pierce*. These alienated juvenile femmes fatales are the embodiment of excess that is rooted in the postwar American's effort to compensate for the loss of community and agency. They are a direct reminder of the outcasts and drifters in noir tradition, whose marginalization mirrors the alienation and sense of displacement experienced by war veterans. In addition to using juvenile characters to exacerbate the theme of alienation that both texts explore, the portrayal of these characters as disillusioned and displaced is marked by their existential anger that reflects the classical noir's epistemological uncertainty. Their anger is collectively representative yet tense and personal, alluding to their struggle to fulfill or make sense of parental expectations, which are also equally disillusioned and directionless. Their share of American Dreams gone awry is translated by the treatment they received from disillusioned adults, and especially from their parents whose expectations mirror their own struggle to make sense of the postwar world.

*Mildred Pierce* narrowed down the cynicism of parental expectations to a mother figure, whose social handicap or 'illness' is considered one of the major causes for the disintegration of a family unit—a threat to patriarchal gender and economic organization—that contributes to the juvenile's sense of insecurity. The theme of a 'bad' mother is prevalent in the 1940s, and can be traced in both noir and non-noir texts. In non-noir novel like Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, the protagonist's moral ambivalence is punctuated by the thought of his mother who 'hasn't felt too healthy since my brother Allie died' (p.113), refocusing and reaffirming the failure of motherhood as his source of anxiety and angst. In *Mildred Pierce*, the eponymous protagonist spoils her daughter (Veda) rotten, to the extent that she was willing to admit to the murder committed by her daughter. The theme of 'maternal narcissism'<sup>94</sup> is conspicuously explored by this film, using the obstreperous Veda's excessiveness and

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<sup>92</sup> In Elizabeth Hills, 'From "figurative males" to action heroines: further thought on active women in the cinema', *Screen*, 40:1(1999), p.45

<sup>93</sup> Corgi Edition, 1962

<sup>94</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, in relation to Karen Horney's study on the theme, defines maternal narcissism as 'of the mother's projecting onto the child her own unfulfilled desires, or of her use of the child to play out problems with her own mother', ('Motherhood and Representation: From Postwar Freudian Figurations to Postmodernism', in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, E. Ann Kaplan, 1990, p.128)

moral decay as a mirror of Mildred's own failure not only to provide her with a sense of security but also to curb her own enthusiasm to find success outside her home—the essence of psychoanalytic cultural meaning of 'lack' that, according to Laura Mulvey:

Women's desire is subjected to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound, she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it. She turns her child into the signifier of her own desire to possess a penis [or in this film's context, wealth] (the condition, she imagines, of entry into the symbolic).<sup>95</sup>

Veda's claim at the end of the film that 'It's your fault I'm the way I am' is not only the articulation of the film's ideological imperative that shifts the blame from her to her mother, but it also reflects Veda's incorrigibility, permanently corrupted by her own mother.

While the shift of blame from Veda to her mother marks noir's interest in locating social evil in women's failure to perform uxorial duties, of being Domestic Goddesses, it also presents a critical neglect of addressing other noir anxieties related to juvenile characters. In a film in which a mother is not the source of the juvenile character's anxiety, like Bobby in the film *Talk About A Stranger*,<sup>96</sup> the noir mood of paranoia and obsession that characterizes the destructive nature of the character is also exacerbated by the film's focalization or point of view. Bobby's destructiveness is recalcitrant hence non-nostalgic, his obsession and paranoia allude to the 'McCarthyite fifties, of a society that punishes failures to conform and suspects those who do not 'belong'',<sup>97</sup> and the film uses a liminal figure of aspersions—Mr. Matlock—as a newcomer to the small town to personify Bobby's destructiveness and paranoia. Bobby's characterization differs from that of Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye*, whose oscillation of ideas and opinions provides a cynical and satirical view of class divisions, *sans* the bleakness and destructiveness that are important in a noir mood of pessimism. For that reason, Holden's juvenile perception is frequently risible, resulting in the novel's almost bathetic ending.

It seems natural to assume that Bobby's xenophobia is not related to the failure of domestic space but is informed by the ambiance of the world that he is in, mirroring an American ethos of situating the enemy outside the American land. *Talk About A Stranger* is an atmospheric noir thriller that relies heavily on its visual mode to effectively create a sense of

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<sup>95</sup> 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. by Patricia Erens, 1990, p.29

<sup>96</sup> Dir. David Bradley, 1955

<sup>97</sup> Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, pp.153-154

paranoia and suspicion while simultaneously reflecting the psychological state of the protagonist. For instance, the film instantly invests on its visual style of brooding darkness of night times not only to parallel Bobby's effort to investigate Mr. Matlock, but also to mirror Bobby's spiral journey downward into his paranoia and obsession. If the sense of alienation and displacement is the major theme that unites the juvenile characters in *Talk About A Stranger* and *Mildred Pierce*, what essentially differentiates the first from the latter is the fact that the first is told from the male juvenile's point of view, and the latter's subjectivity is revealed through a sequence of flashbacks narrated by the eponymous protagonist, revealing the film's interest in investigating and blaming female subjectivity.

Women as subjects of investigations are prominent in the noir investigative narrative and *Mildred Pierce* is emblematic of this intrigue, reflecting noir's affinity with the Gothic tradition. The ideological imperative of *Mildred Pierce* is rooted in its patriarchal construction of a woman, which to a certain extent harks back to noir's origin in the Gothic. Noir, being the progeny of the Gothic, maintains some of its iconographies with regards to the representation of women, while locating their conflict within domestic space. In a Gothic horror film like *Carrie*,<sup>98</sup> the juvenile character's association with domestic space and her relationship with her mother present a conflict that, in patriarchal terms, is destructive to the construction of a traditional family unit. Based on Stephen King's book, *Carrie* is about the eponymous female juvenile who is shy and the butt of her school's jokes. *Carrie*'s association with horror entails its portrayal of the juvenile character as the monstrous other, and the film, even at the outset, turns her body into an abject essence through a sudden display of her 'feminine story' of menstrual blood that she herself cannot comprehend. With her surreptitious kinetic power, she ends up killing almost everyone who 'oppresses' her including her mother and schoolmates who attended the prom night; this is one of the characteristics of a horror film that not only consigns her to the role of the Other but also gives her a victim-hero status. Clover aptly relates this destructive 'power', which 'has given a language to her victimization and a new force to the anger that subsidizes her own act of horrific revenge'<sup>99</sup> to feminism. Ostensibly, as victim-hero, *Carrie* epitomizes the appropriation of agency from a victim to an agent of her revenge. However, the framing of her character as 'monstrous' with Antaeon power within the Gothic horror tradition alludes to the psychoanalytic binary system that treats femininity as a

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<sup>98</sup> Dir. Brian De Palma, 1976

<sup>99</sup> *Men, Women and Chainsaw*, 1992, p.4

negative force and as an alterity, as if a woman can only be strong and powerful after repudiating and forsaking not only her femininity but also humanity. This is the epistemological nervousness that sets Carrie apart from Veda in *Mildred Pierce*, Bel in *The Cut*, and Lola in *Random Acts of Senseless Violence*—the juvenile female characters in noir texts whose narrative reflects their epistemological uncertainty. If on one hand, epistemological nervousness is the reflection of patriarchal uneasiness towards female independence and therefore regressive in nature, epistemological uncertainty, on the other hand, alludes to the fluidity of gender roles, hence the transgressiveness of the characters.

Daniel Blythe's *The Cut* chronicles the life of a juvenile female character, Belinda Archard a.k.a. Bel, who is approaching eighteen. Blythe combines Bel's psychological and physical entrapment between her loveless relationship with her stepmother and the town that she lives in at 'the end of the world' (p.57) to represent a bigger socio-economic critique of Thatcherite Britain. The sense of entrapment and isolation in effect is now embodied in her relationship with people and her surroundings, which becomes the metaphor for her emotional state. At the outset of the novel, Bel consciously greets the reader:

Hi, I'm Bel. I'm waiting. I can taste the rain, the petrol-smoky town and the sea. I've got a knife in my pocket.<sup>100</sup>

The miasma of organic and mechanised imageries is to prefigure the ambivalence of the decade that the novel represents, and the image of a knife is used less as a phallic symbol than as a literal knife to depict the near-anarchic state of the environment that Bel is in. This is a typical image of 80s England, the decade that sees the class gap widening under Margaret Thatcher's conservative government, and is radically portrayed in films like *Sammy And Rosie Get Laid*<sup>101</sup> as a critique of the widening social divide.

In addition to providing the background to the environment that Bel is in, Bel's introduction of herself as 'tough' is an indication of the novel's eagerness to portray her as a mere braggadocio—a critic of her middle-class background—as the subsequent narrative uses this to debilitate her sense of authority. In the beginning of the novel in which she is in a video shop where she plans to steal, Bel's ingenuity is undermined: she confesses, 'I can feel my face getting hot with annoyance. It's as if he doesn't think I present a threat, doesn't think I'm worth bothering with' (p.2). The

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<sup>100</sup> p.1

<sup>101</sup> Dir. Stephen Frears, 1987

impending danger that she seems to embody earlier vanishes, reducing her into a mere attention seeker. On one level, the caprice of her idea in which she is contemplating a killing and then thinks that ‘this is stupid. This is ridiculous [...] so idiotic, so unmotivated’ (p.3) shows the mockery of her bravery at work. On another and more importantly, Blythe uses Bel’s snobbery, contumacious attitude and impressionability as a way of disorientating the reader, the same way Whit Stillman embellishes his upper class preppies’ insecurities in *Metropolitan*<sup>102</sup> with dialogues about Jane Austin and French socialists, and a façade of Urban Haute Bourgeoisie (UHB), the group that they found to help them identify with their ‘class prerogative’, which argues Audrey (one of the female preppies), ‘whatever that means’. However, while *Metropolitan* universalizes the experience of growing up with its self-criticism and self-deprecation, *The Cut* is curiously darker in its approach, using Bel’s delusional view of life as a cynical reflection of the absurdity of class and gender difference.

Blythe seems to tell us that anarchism knows no class and gender boundary, and reminiscent of the flower children’s dynamic struggle between youthful idealism and ‘powerful’ authority, Bel’s continuous struggle for validation reveals conflicting ideologies at work. These conflicting ideologies are the result of the employment of the first person point of view, and the disorientation derived from the proximity created by such narrative techniques is further exacerbated by both Bel’s class snobbery and juvenile attitude towards life. By using the first person narration, the novel punctuates the idea of proximity and distance between the narrator and the reader, which effectively produces narrative style that is so rhapsodical and confessional that at times it becomes unreliable. Bel’s snobbery culminates in endless lies to the extent that she herself is not sure of what the truth is anymore, frustratingly confessing, ‘Sod the false bio-data’ (p.132). Throughout the story, there is also a mood of desperation in her voice—her confession is rhetorical that her existence needs reaffirmation from the reader/interlocutor (‘You get the idea’ (p.30), ‘You with me so far?’ (p.34), ‘Doesn’t this just confirm what I was saying?’ (p.36))—which in turn functions as a mere display of her insecurity that irreversibly highlights her vulnerability. This sense of vulnerability also reinforces the sense of alienation, and by inserting a high degree of uncertainty in both the character’s actions and judgment, the novel seems to mock her snobbery, creating what Laurence Perrine describes as ‘dramatic irony’ and ‘irony of situation’.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> 1990.

<sup>103</sup> *Literature*, 1984, p.178



Though the narrative chronicles Bel's life, the novel does not follow the 'bildungsroman' of the 1970s, whose protagonist found her "self-actualization" in solitary flight from her society'.<sup>104</sup> Bel is too aware of her class status to be affected by it, and for her, Kate—her stepmother—is a parasite clinging on to her father's wealth to be socially upgraded:

She (Kate) [and] all her friends are similarly anal-retentive. They're all masked behind their greasepaint and their designer dresses, 'cos they're all women with things to hide from their pasts [...] from past men who've faded to just a name on a cheque [...] is a way of convincing themselves that they've got structure to their lives.<sup>105</sup>

While the novel intermittently expresses its political and moral view rather overtly via Bel's rectitudinous morality, one cannot help but think that the purpose of such interludes ('I've got a healthy cynicism for any party that preaches basic morality on the one hand and shags its secretaries on the other' (p.132)) is to dismantle Bel's bulwark of privilege against the people she looks down upon. To do this, Bel's gaze is foregrounded primarily to ostensibly embody her self-control, to assert her control over her seemingly gregarious friends, and over the narrative itself:

Someone called Belinda Archard has taken control of everything like a teacher on a school trip. Belinda checks the mirrors, [...] Belinda's in charge here. She almost feels like checking if everyone's got their packed lunches, and taking a register.

Belinda's in charge, see, she's the one who knows what she's doing.<sup>106</sup>

It is through the ostensible authority of her gaze that Blythe finds the way to gradually comment on the absurdity of class difference. *The Cut* manages to mock Bel's perception of her controlling gaze by dismantling her beliefs one by one, and disillusioned, the failure of her agency is overshadowed by her own class snobbery, for instance, seeing Marcie straight in 'her eyes—a victim's eyes ...—beg me from a face thick with crunchy layers of foundation' (p.22), making her unaware of the fact that she has been double-crossed by her own friends.

'Losing it' is the main thematic concern in the second part of the novel, marking Bel's ultimate failure of agency, admitting that 'I have been unsafely penetrated by future-history' (p.231). This is the kind of noir determinism that Charlie Black in *Metropolitan* correctly identifies:

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<sup>104</sup> Katherine B. Payant, *Becoming and Bonding*, 1993, p.62

<sup>105</sup> *The Cut*, p.64

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19

‘People of this background are doomed to failure’, realizing that ‘they are carrying on in their own lifetimes a tradition that was dead before they were born’.<sup>107</sup> Therefore, after being held responsible for killing Birthmark (one of the skinheads led by Dreads who wears ‘camouflage jacket, ripped jeans, twisted and stumpy hair’ (p.228) thus epitomizing the clash of two classes), Bel is transmogrified into the subject of revenge, marking the reification of the novel’s agenda of not only dissolving class distinction but also ridiculing Bel’s class snobbery. Dreads’ revenge and Bel’s contumacious refusal to accept defeat are two commensurable themes that refer to her loss of agency, and therefore lead to what is ‘less likely to be a sense of shocked disillusionment than of weary recognition’.<sup>108</sup>

I meet Dreads’ gaze, trying not to gag on the stench. It must be ignorance of what he’s going to do gives me my false bravura. I stare insolently into his unwashed face, stinking, scrounging Fally face, thinking how I need to get my hands free, need to get to the knife and Cut right into his trendy, I’m-all-fucking-right-Jack, welfare-state world.<sup>109</sup>

Bel’s eventual recognition is also eminently juvenile and vacuous, ‘Now I’m smiling broadly. And I don’t care. I really don’t care. Whatever they do to me, I’ve won. Society, civilization, call it what you will’ (ibid.), culminating in her total acceptance of her defeat, realizing that she is ‘under their control. I am in their power. They can do anything they want with me’ (p.243). If this kind of weariness is reminiscent of the noir protagonist’s total immersion in the noir world, Bel’s non-repentance (‘I have left her [Marcie] kind behind now’ (p. 255)), however, presents another interpretation of the text, and evinces the idea that at the heart of *The Cut* lies a more important recognition than that of what has happened to Bel, that is, the divided world that she desultorily tries to protect. This desultory protectiveness is apparent at the end of the novel when upon thinking that she may have seen ‘a bright birthmark on her [little girl] soft cheek’ (p.265)—the idea that the past [Birthmark that she ‘kills’] is infiltrating the present—she realizes that ‘there is no way I will ever know’ (ibid.), leaving her, like many noir protagonists before her, disillusioned, alienated and doomed.

Jack Womack’s *Random Acts of Senseless Violence* (henceforth *Random Acts*) chronicles the life of a juvenile female character, Lola Hart,

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<sup>107</sup> Roger Ebert, ‘Metropolitan’, *Chicago Sun Times*, <[www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert\\_reviews/1990/08/561272.html](http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1990/08/561272.html)> [accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> of July 2003]

<sup>108</sup> Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.156

<sup>109</sup> *The Cut*, p.239

who comes from a loving and stable middle-class family with a younger sister (Boob), an English professor as a mother, and a scriptwriter as a father. They live in a respectable Manhattan neighborhood in New York, and both Lola and her sister attend a girl's private school in which she excels in her education. Physically, she looks bigger than a girl of her age, growing 'almost as tall as Daddy is now and I'll probably be stronger than he is before you know it' (p.60). It is through a diary that her father gives her on her twelfth birthday that the narrative of the story is unraveled. Addressing it as Anne, the personal entries in her diary are not only an articulation of her feelings and views of life but also a historical document of the city she inhabits, which indeed charts out the 'coming of age' narrative of the novel. Essentially, as the novel is told from the point of view of a mere twelve-year old girl, its central theme is prefigured in the first sentence of the novel, 'Mama says mine is a night mind' (p.7). Lola's characterization is marked by the contrasting mixture of innocence (as expressed by the word 'mama') and violence (as expressed by the phrase 'night mind'); this irreversibly foregrounds both the existential determinism controlling the protagonist's actions and also noir's tendency towards moral ambivalence. In embryo, the play of innocence and violence characterizes not only the juvenile female protagonist's process of 'becoming' a postmodern subject, but also noir's tendency to destabilize and disorient the reader within the novel's anarchic cyberpunk narrative, gradually exploring Lola's mental landscape to mirror the appropriation of her agency.

The back cover of *Random Acts* states that the novel's narrative is imbued with 'cyberpunk intensity' in 'troubled near-future' Manhattan; this points to the novel's postmodern sensibilities and anarchic narrative. As a postmodern text, *Random Acts* is self-aware, using pastiche to construct its ideological thrust:—when Lola's family moves to a new and rough neighborhood, she notices that a box containing 'Pooh books and Oz and *Life Among the Savages* [sic.]' (p.74) is missing, and this loss can be seen as a threshold of Lola's process of becoming a postmodern subject. Although the novel makes a palpable reference to *Oz* and *Life Among the Savages* as symbols of Lola's innocence, they are disguises for *Random Acts*'s underlying ideological and visual motives, which I would suggest can be understood by looking at William Golding's *Lord of The Flies* and David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*.<sup>110</sup> I will argue that *Random Acts*

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<sup>110</sup> In contrast to Shirley Jackson's *Life Among the Savages* ([1948] 1981) that deals with the trial and joy of motherhood, *Lord of the Flies* ([1954] 1970) chronicles the transformation of a group of male children who is divided into two groups when they are stranded in an island: one, who retains its civility; two, who

employs pastiche to reflect the novel's theme of 'what it seems is not what it is', which is a premise of postmodernism that alludes to its reliance on surface meanings to construct its ideological thrust. The purpose of my analysis is to demonstrate how pastiche, as a technique of association in postmodernism, helps us to understand Lola's postmodern space, and how this space makes her revenge possible. Her process of becoming a postmodern self, in my opinion, is completed once the revenge takes place.

*Random Acts*, to a certain extent, is a postmodern reworking of *Lord of the Flies*, which provides a socio-psychological study of juvenile male characters stranded on a deserted island. *Random Acts* nonetheless envisages a grittier picture of the dark side of human nature by parodying Golding's alien landscape with eminently familiar space as the very location of the collapse of the patriarchal order. In so doing, the novel continuously unravels layers of familiar yet 'hidden' sub-surfaces to criticize the seemingly 'normal' Manhattan that Lola's happy family lives in, and to expose the narrative's primary surface as a palimpsest of the 'hidden' underworld. The main function of this primary surface is to abrogate these 'hidden' layers, but instead of consigning them to a place 'somewhere else' where Golding's juveniles were left stranded, *Random Acts*'s postmodern irony re-locates them somewhere closer to Lola's home. This 'somewhere closer' location is the opposite of Golding's island, because according to Rob Latham, this postmodern location 'can no longer be envisioned as safely "over the rainbow" [a romantic idea of closed frontier] because it is now everywhere, it is "reality"'.<sup>111</sup>

In this light, *Random Acts* regurgitates the visual style and motif of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*,<sup>112</sup> whose underworld is hidden underneath the primary surface of white picket fences and a friendly fireman waving (which Latham argues, is 'a quintessential representation of American innocence')<sup>113</sup> beyond the limit of the cinematic proscenium. Janet L. Preston in 'Dantean Imagery in *Blue Velvet*' notes that 'Lynch's first effort is to establish the radical disjuncture between what seems to be and what is, between appearance and reality, by creating images which carry dual

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turns into 'real' savages. *Blue Velvet* is theoretically linked to the film *The Wizard of Oz* in Rob Latham's article called 'There's No Place Like Home: Simulating Postmodern America in *The Wizard of Oz* and *Blue Velvet*' (in *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 1(1988), pp.49-58)

<sup>111</sup> 'There's No Place Like Home: Simulating Postmodern America in *The Wizard of Oz* and *Blue Velvet*, *Journals of the Fantastic in the Arts*, (1) 1988, p.57

<sup>112</sup> 1986

<sup>113</sup> 'There's No Place Like Home: Simulating Postmodern America in *The Wizard of Oz* and *Blue Velvet*, *Journals of the Fantastic in the Arts*, (1) 1988, p.51

implications'.<sup>114</sup> The reflexive nature of *Blue Velvet* delineates the film's postmodern irony, which deconstructs and destabilizes the meaning of primary surface itself, framing the tangibility of Jeffrey's perceived primary reality within the Symbolic Order. As a result, *Blue Velvet*'s narrative is reduced into a mere Oedipal drama. *Random Acts*, to a certain extent, follows this very route by using Lola's journey into the dark side of human experience to expose its landscapes as symbols 'in which the "repressed" of the law and the "repressed" of consciousness converge'.<sup>115</sup> One crucial difference lies in the idea that *Random Acts* also parodies *Blue Velvet*. This means it carries an extra ironic freight; while Jeffrey's journey takes place in the Symbolic, Lola's chaotic world is the result of the crush of the three orders—Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real—forming a postmodern space that releases her from the constraint of patriarchy that the Symbolic embodies.

In addition to exploring the theme of 'dual implications' to analogically provide a visual route to the understanding of Lola's characterization through her relationship with this postmodern space, *Random Acts* also concurrently marks the novel's effort to criticize *Blue Velvet*'s affinity with the (Lynch's/patriarchal) Symbolic. While *Blue Velvet* uses a severed ear (itself is a signifier of castration anxiety) to mark Jeffrey's spiraling journey into the Symbolic, *Random Acts* locates the start of Lola's journey inside the postmodern space in Lola's 'night mind' itself, a prevalent theme in the cyberpunk sub-genre. What this difference ironically highlights is that Lola's journey is centrifugal; therefore parodying Jeffrey's centripetal movement. The difference in directions marks Jeffrey's eternal entrapment in the Symbolic (he eventually embraces a 'normal' heterosexual relationship with the 'good' girl) and Lola's appropriation of agency, that is a process of her 'becoming' a postmodern self; thus allowing her to cross patriarchal-psychosocial boundaries. This is characteristically neo-noir because along with the novel's cyberpunk narrative viz., its anarchism, this narrative harks back to noir's tendency to cross patriarchally sanctioned boundaries.

Reminiscent, to an extent, of the traditional noir narrative's use of a physical landscape to mirror the male protagonist's journey into the underworld, Jack Womack nonetheless manipulates the novel's postmodern landscape to seamlessly extend and reconstruct multivalenced worlds that are so intertwined that 'EARTH IS HELL' (p.81) and vice-versa, the result of not simply mutating the Imaginary into the Symbolic,

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<sup>114</sup> *Film Literature Quarterly*, 18(1990), p.168

<sup>115</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, 1996, p.138

and then the Symbolic into the Real, but letting them collapse onto each other. The collapse of the three orders creates not only noir moral ambivalence ('I tried to figure out who looked guiltiest and finally decided they all looked as guilty as they did innocent' (p. 75)), but also results in the blurring of the distinction between the world and the underworld ('[...] mobs of animals in the cities [...]. How will they tell the difference between us and everybody else?' (p.120)). Nonetheless, the ultimate result of the collapse of the seemingly intransigent boundaries of the three orders is an explosion of chaos that is debilitating to the 'power' of patriarchal Symbolic that organizes gender difference according to woman's lack, marking the fluidity of gender definition in postmodern world.

What Womack does is to actually offer a way out of psychoanalysis as a 'grand narrative', allowing Lola to form a more fragmented or hybrid identity beyond the mother/father/daughter relationships, not only via gender difference, but also Lola's lesbian sexuality, enabling Lola to consciously remove men that she encounters to the sidelines. Men from Lola's point of view are mainly inert, inimical, vacuous, and insignificant, bordering on a certain level of absurdity. In this case, Womack stresses Lola's sexuality instead of gender to parody the noir genre's representation of a female character, using men as signposts for the fragmentation of her humanist self, allowing her to become a postmodern subject. This in effect makes the acquisition of gender as an intransigent identity irrelevant, and for Lola to survive the novel's cyberpunk landscape she needs to re-remember the 'reality' of the pre-mirror stage, the reality in which the association with female images (associated with desire for one's mother *qua* organic being) is propitious and liberating.

Therefore, rather than questioning the meaning of 'reality', *Random Acts*'s central theme is about 're-remembering' pre-mirror stage female reality/experience; the reality that becomes prominent in the Imaginary, is radically lost in the Symbolic, but forms a foundation for a girl's entry into the Real. This reality is not random; instead it is related to the memory of 'pre-specular objects—the breast, voice, gaze and so on—',<sup>116</sup> allowing her to seek strength from her primordial desire relating to a woman's organic self. But unlike a Foucaultian self whose sexual desire 'almost inevitably lead[s] to death',<sup>117</sup> Lola's sexual 'perversion' constructs her agency or her desire to live. Besides, although Lola's over-identification with pre-mirror stage female reality may constitute female perversion or diversion, Womack seems to say that it doesn't matter anymore because the ultimate

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<sup>116</sup> Elizabeth Wright, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, 1992, p.175

<sup>117</sup> Lynn Hunt, 'The Revenge of the Subject/The Return of Experience', *Salmagundi*, 9(1993), p.48

target of adulthood is not normalcy, but perversion itself ('Every adult I know now is mindlost and worsening day long and I'm crazy enough now') (p. 235) and 'Maybe my new name Crazy Lola was right' (p. 205)).

This identification with female reality/experience is transferred and translated into her relationship with: one, her diary, Anne, which is given by her dad so that she 'could remember how sweet life is even when it doesn't seem like it anymore' (p.9) and that despite 'there's too much reality these days' (p.18), Lola knows 'when something's real or not' (p. 21), marking the fluidity of Lola's reality and memory; two, Liz, a black girl that Lola becomes 'romantically' involved with. Therefore, this female experience is crucial as 'it is around this experience that [... Lola has] organized and out of this experience that [...she has] developed a sense of solidarity, commonality, and community',<sup>118</sup> as embodied by their group 'Death Angels'. Liz's (and other group members of Death Angels) ethnicity is important for Womack because it provides a nexus between the failure of patriarchal community that enables the formation of female alliance with a shared experience—a feminist utopian vision, and Lola's process of becoming. Womack uses Liz's ethnicity not only as a benchmark for Lola's re-conceptualization of her identity, but also as a way of addressing 'the utopian dimension of feminist "community"',<sup>119</sup> which is shared reality or experience (including oppression), that Lola eventually transgresses. Through this re-conceptualization and transgression Lola finally forms her postmodern self, but ultimately, this can only be achieved when Lola understands the meaning that is created by the collapse of the past into the present, as translated by the spatial landscape of the city that she inhabits.

In addition to using the image of ruined cities as a pastiche of Freud's 'used of imagery of ruins or the archaic as a metaphor for the insistent pressure of a repressed past on the unconscious mind',<sup>120</sup> the novel also uses technological determinism (encapsulated as the novel's neo-noir credo) not only to allude to the novel's ontological rejection of a unified self in postmodernist culture, but also to demonstrate the collapse of the past (memory) onto the future—the Gothic's sensibility prevalent in the cyberpunk narrative—creating noir ambivalence which is central to Lola's spiraling journey in the chaotic world. In so doing, the novel foregrounds the effect of tele-visual media (television and cinema), as the leitmotif of technological determinism that envelops Lola's chaotic world, on Lola's

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<sup>118</sup> Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a 'Postfeminist' Age*, 1991, p.17

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20

<sup>120</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, 1996, p.138

fragmented subjectivity. Within ‘technological determinism’, William Marling argues, ‘instead of man creating himself from/against a landscape, technology now composes or reduces character on the field of its own possibilities’.<sup>121</sup> In this respect, Lola’s America can be understood not as accumulated representations of Hollywood like *Blue Velvet*’s Lumberton, which is ‘a town built wholly upon the representations of Hollywood’,<sup>122</sup> rather it is the result of technological intervention/advancement that goes beyond the blurring of the distinction between the imagery and the real, to the extent that it conflates the real with the imagery (‘People on the street applauded like it was a movie’ (p.48), ‘I lay there watching like it was a movie until I stopped crying’ (p.191), and ‘Oh Anne if there is hell like on Christian commercials I guess I’m bound for it’ (p.210)), creating a new form of reality that is valid in itself.

Essentially, noir ambiance, created as a result of technological determinism in the postmodern world, forms a sense of entrapment that molds Lola’s character within the tradition of a classical noir protagonist. Therefore, Lola has to struggle to make sense of the world that is both alienating (‘I get so mad and lonely’ (p. 111), ‘Sometimes I think I’m turning invisible Anne’ (p.129), and ‘I need somebody but outside of you I don’t know who Anne’ (p.137)), and brimming with desperation (‘[t]he world brutalizes however you live it whatever you do’ (p. 221), and ‘I can’t remember what I used to be like Anna—it fears me’ (p.231)). But unlike the classical noir protagonist’s delusional view of the world, Lola’s postmodern subjectivity helps her to quickly resign herself to the idea that ‘[n]o matter what I don’t do I’m still doing something’ (p. 143), marking her disintegration and total immersion in the morally corrupt society. The speed of her transformation surprises her, ‘[i]t was weird though that you could adjust to something so quick’ (p.125). Eventually, as the transformation is inextricably intertwined with her dominant reality, her actions ‘seemed in dreamtime’ (p. 252) and are governed by technological determinism of entrapment that she cannot escape from, portending Lola’s existential anger and nihilism, which in itself is a parody of Jim Thompson’s ‘almost Calvinistic moral ferocity’.<sup>123</sup>

To free Lola from this existential anger and nihilism, Womack takes *Random Acts* into the revenge narrative territory. While the existential anger and nihilism are touchstones of the fragmentation of Lola’s

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<sup>121</sup> *The American Roman Noir*, 1995, p.191

<sup>122</sup> Rob Latham, ‘There’s No Place Like Home: Simulating Postmodern America in *The Wizard of Oz* and *Blue Velvet*, *Journals of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 1(1988), p.52

<sup>123</sup> Anthony C. Hilfer, *The Crime Novel: A Deviant Genre*, 1990, p.153



humanist subjectivity, revenge not only exacerbates Lola's moral ambivalence ('It's like nada's changed but certain it has, it's so much worse' (p.253)), but it also marks her desperation to 'let it [anger] out' (p. 250). Essentially, Womack also ties Lola's revenge—killing her late father's boss, Mister Mossbacher—with technological determinism, giving it an accurate temporal framing: 'Clock shows three thirty Anne it's when my pen looses freest once my night mind's loose but it's lost the leash now and there's no rehanding it' (p.252). What this sense of determinism does is create a noir mood of pessimism, which as Anthony Hilfer argues,

[T]he isolated and hopeless struggle of the protagonist becomes a left-handed acknowledgement of the futility of resistance, inspiring not a desire to communally seek justice but merely a resigned, if bitter, concession to/fatality.<sup>124</sup>

Besides signifying her readiness to go solo, this sense of resignation is also important in highlighting her transgressiveness, that is her stalwart decision to break the pandects or moral codes of Death Angels to join the notorious Dcons, marking Lola's total immersion in the noir world.

## The Wronged Women

'Sweet is revenge—especially to women'  
—Lord Byron.

Control, autonomy, possibility are mocked by the avenger's fist, or phallus, or knife. Whereas the woman's novel of the 1950s and 1960s too often ended in the heroine's madness or suicide, it now ends in her rape, assault, or murder. Today's heroines fear dying, not flying.<sup>125</sup>

The objective of this section is to investigate the figure of a wronged woman in revenge narratives, arguing that the dominant masculine ideology in the classical noir is completely destabilized in neo-noir texts, not by a femme fatale figure, but rather by a wronged woman. This is the consequence of not only the postmodern paradox but also the changing gender roles in contemporary society that neo-noir cynically and enthusiastically captures. A wronged woman in the classical period is the embodiment of nostalgia and a romanticized idea of lost innocence, part of American Dreams that illuminates a male protagonist's subjectivity, while

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., pp.152-153

<sup>125</sup> Elaine Showalter, 'Rethinking the Seventies: Women Writers and Violence', in *Women and Violence in Literature*, ed. by Katherine Anne Ackley, 1990, p.239

at the same time, foregrounding noir's ideological motive of threatened masculinity. In tracing the causes for the destabilization of noir's masculine ideology, I will briefly look at some wronged women figures in the noir tradition to illustrate how neo-noir wronged women present a more destructive anxiety, arguing that while the classical wronged women signify the failure of agency, neo-noir wronged women's act of revenge, on the other hand, signals the appropriation of agency as a result of their new form of subjectivity.

Women in the noir tradition are wronged at two complementary levels: one, the literal level, referring to men (who can be a father or a father figure, husband, lover, male criminals); two, the ideological level, which refers to both the structure of the noir genre itself and its influence by psychoanalysis. Both levels are subsumed under what Lee Horsley called '[r]epressive male power',<sup>126</sup> which in turn invokes Janey Place's claim that film noir is a male fantasy. Given that the narrative structure of the noir genre itself is repressive, wronged women are ubiquitous in the noir tradition, but they remain liminal figures vis-à-vis the highly sexualized femmes fatales in films and novels like *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. It seems that unlike femmes fatales who represent a threat to masculinity and patriarchal organization of gender roles, wronged women are 'angelic' female figures usually associated with domestic space; the symbol of stability that reinforces classical noir's masculinist ideology. My contention is that wronged women figures, while representing the patriarchal reinstatement of compliant women, also testify to the magnitude of the threat to patriarchal stability. The relationship between these two main types of women in the noir genre is usually expressed by their association with space, and their space is often linked together by a male protagonist whose spiraling journey into the criminal world marks the process in which he will eventually corrupt the sanctity of domestic space.

For that reason, domestic space or home in the noir tradition is no longer sacrosanct, which marks its failure as a locus of 'family' happiness. In drifter narratives, for example in the film like *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, the danger lurking in the home that the male protagonist, Frank Chambers, stops and works in is as malevolent and dangerous as the open road that he comes from. By the same token, in the film *Double Indemnity*, the femme fatale is first shown in her home, enabling her to first meet the male protagonist and then plots, though subtly, the murder of her husband. The idea that evil lurks within one's home is a domestic noir

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<sup>126</sup> *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.134

anxiety that harks back to the post-World War anxiety aroused by female economic independence. Nonetheless, home is also a place where a nurturing woman is located within the noir narrative, and it is the location in which the male protagonist, who is trapped by a quagmire of murder, chicanery, and sexual temptation that is usually embodied by a femme fatale figure, wrongs her. Since there is a direct correlation between a female character and home in the noir tradition, both of them become the subjects of patriarchal interrogation. This relationship is more apparent in women centered texts or better known as ‘women’s films’<sup>127</sup> or (family) melodrama like *Mildred Pierce* in which the positioning of a female figure at the center of the narrative also reflects patriarchal anxiety towards the destruction of its control of personal relations.

In the classical noir films like *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*<sup>128</sup>, *Sleep, My Love*,<sup>129</sup> and *Conflict*<sup>130</sup> the wronged women are victims of the men they love. In *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, the male protagonist, Tom Garrett, uses his position as a novelist to murder his erstwhile wife and to try to benefit from it by discrediting capital punishment, which he hopes will make his novel a bestseller. He is finally executed when he accidentally admits to his present fiancée, Susan, that he is actually the murdered victim’s long lost husband. In *Sleep, My Love*, the female protagonist, Alison Courtland, is controlled and wronged by three authoritative patriarchal figures: her husband, a fake psychiatrist, and the obnoxious police officer. Her husband, Richard, tries to drive her into suicide in the hope that he will inherit Alison’s fortune. Meanwhile, in *Conflict*, Katherine Mason is strangled to death by her husband, Richard, who admitted to her that he was actually in love with Katherine’s own sister, Evelyn. These films are what I call comeuppance films, and central to this kind of narrative is the investigation of the male protagonists’ neurotic masculinity, which is one important premise of noir films. This, I will argue, is due to the apparent gothic influence that centralizes the female characters (Susan, Alison, and Katherine), which in turn, ‘places a male as the enigma’.<sup>131</sup> While Susan’s position is different from the rest of

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<sup>127</sup> Andrea S. Walsh uses this term to describe a film that features a strong and sacrificial mother. This term, according to her, is related to some particular themes and narrative devices ‘designed’ primarily for female viewers (*Women’s Film and Experience*, 1984, pp.24 and 26)

<sup>128</sup> Dir. Fritz Lang, 1956

<sup>129</sup> Dir. Douglas Sirk, 1948

<sup>130</sup> Dir. Curtis Bernhardt, 1945

<sup>131</sup> Murray Smith, ‘Film Noir, The Female Gothic and *Deception*’, *Wide Angle*, 10(1988), p.64

the wronged women mentioned above as she holds the testimony that enables her fiancé's execution to continue, Alison's and Katherine's husbands are brought to justice by other male figures. All of them, nonetheless, are examples of women wronged by the men they love, which is noir's tendency to present love as romantic fatalism. 'Love, in the [noir] novels and films,' according to Robert Lang, 'is never simple or benign matter [...] [signifying [...]] a kind of sexual paranoia that animates the genre'.<sup>132</sup> To fall in love and to die because of it have been two major enterprises that imperiously govern a lot of noir and neo-noir narratives.

The classical noir tradition can be said to be one of the harbingers of the portrayal of love as romantic fatalism, and although neo-noir texts continue this tradition, the main difference between the two lies in the idea that while the classical noir uses the strategy of negation, neo-noir uses the strategy of appropriation in its portrayal of the female protagonist's subjectivity. This means, on one hand, an underlying ideological motive of the noir genre is to negate female subjectivity or agency. For instance, when the wronged wife in the film *Conflict* is killed by her husband, it takes a male psychiatrist, Mark Hamilton, to reveal her husband's role in her murder. The neo-noir genre, on the other hand, uses the strategy of appropriation to foreground a wronged woman's subjectivity, allowing her to take revenge for herself. In the film *Blue Steel*, as an illustration, the female protagonist, Megan, after being raped by a psychopathic stalker, hunts him to the hilt, resulting in his death. It is through the appropriation of her agency (from a victim to an avenger) that she is able to take revenge on her rapist.

The fundamental question that critics of revenge narratives have asked is the same in films and novels: Does the revenge fit the crime? However, in my opinion, this question is particularly irrelevant to the noir genre because revenge in the noir tradition should be understood by its two complementary principles: one, it prevents any adage of morality to set in; two, it creates a sense of ambivalence and complicity in the audience, and deludes the audience's perception with the female character's own uncertainty, raising its 'epistemological doubt'.<sup>133</sup> The main difference between revenge narratives in the noir tradition and a 'noirish' or pure action thriller is that while the first should be able to destabilize the audience's moral standing, the latter inevitably brings a sense of

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<sup>132</sup> 'Looking for the "Great Whatzit": *Kiss Me Deadly* and Film Noir, 27(1988), p. 33

<sup>133</sup> Lee Horsley, 'Notes for Lee Horsley, English 303 Modernism Lecture on Sherlock Holmes', in Crime Culture <http: www.crimeculture.com> [accessed 1 June 2004]

vindication or closure. Therefore, seeking justice is not the main concern for taking revenge in the noir tradition; instead it works as a marker for the dissolution of the female protagonist's embracing the patriarchal moral code, allowing her to form her own subjectivity and historicity.

To establish this, let us look at a few revenge narratives in non-noir genre. Revenge narratives in the comedy genre, for example in films like *The First Wives Club*<sup>134</sup> and *She-Devil*,<sup>135</sup> are concluded with a sense of vindication, an enclosure that restores the moralistic view of revenge itself. From the perspective of theme, *The First Wives Club* also satirizes Hollywood's view and treatment of 'ripe' women, as succinctly summarized by Elise (Goldie Hawn), 'babe, district attorney and Driving Miss Daisy', and its primary concern for the sense of stability ('it's not revenge, it's justice') let it gravitate towards Hollywood cliché. *She-Devil* is darker in mood when compared to that of *The First Wives Club*, not because of Ruth's (Roseanne Barr) systematic plotting of a revenge against her husband, which involves burning 'his home, family, career and freedom', in that very order, rather its comic approach is overshadowed by her unrelentingly sheer and dark determination to destroy her husband's happiness, which is supported by the noirish visual narrative and style of the film. For instance, after burning her husband's house down, the film zooms in on Ruth's face, creating a frame that shows a demoralizing satisfaction she gets from her action. The facial expression in effect significantly forms a pervasive sense of unease and ambivalence in the audience. I believe the problem with this film lies elsewhere, that is, although *She-Devil* can be considered a 'tame' noir comedy that is able to destabilize the patriarchal moral code with its comic approach, Barr's own status as a sardonic and controversial comic 'star' makes it hard for us to accept her victimization in the first place.

A text's ability to evoke noir sensibility does not always guarantee its noir status. Two examples of this can be found in an action thriller film, *Double Jeopardy*<sup>136</sup> and a gothic-influenced drama, *Death and the Maiden*.<sup>137</sup> In the first, Elizabeth 'Libby' Parsons finds herself in prison after being found guilty of the murder of her husband that she has no recollection of. However, *Double Jeopardy* is a highly contrived and formulaic film that culminates in a 'morally' happy ending, typical of a Hollywood crowd pleaser. Though Libby is the female version of a male noir protagonist who is framed and disenfranchised by the law and his

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<sup>134</sup> Dir. Hugh Wilson, 1996

<sup>135</sup> Dir. Susan Seidelman, 1989

<sup>136</sup> Dir. Bruce Beresford, 1999

<sup>137</sup> Dir. Roman Polanski, 1994

cunning femme fatale, she is not disillusioned by what has happened; her problem is therefore non-existential. As a stereotypical action thriller protagonist, Libby's character is full of ingenuity to enable her to concoct a plan of revenge; however, the motivation of her subsequent actions is not based mainly on revenge, rather it is driven by her desire to be reunited with her son. Although the film plays with several noir conventions, it lacks the dark mood and tone necessary to evoke certain instability in the audience's reactions. Her admission that 'I haven't felt this good since the day my husband died' and her shooting her husband at the end, even though as a self defense, concludes her suffering and this gives the film a narrative closure that is further underlined by her being reunited with her son. Therefore, it lacks the edge, darkness, and a sense of complicity that characterize a film noir.

Based on a stage play, which may explain its theatrical feel, *Death and the Maiden* uses rich visual symbolism to effectively create claustrophobic domestic space to represent the female protagonist's, Paulina Escobar (Sigourney Weaver), psychological state. Trapped and immured by heavy downpour and nightmarish thunderstorm, the film sets a 'claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space',<sup>138</sup> reminding the audience of its Gothic sensibility of the haunted past collapsing into the present. The film's refusal to give an interpretative solution to Paulina's accusations evokes the film's modernist sensibility, while at the same time, satirically criticizing the failure of patriarchal law to defend her ('Of course he just stood there, he is the law'), which is a blatant social commentary reminiscent of Julie Killeen's skepticism of the law in *The Bride Wore Black*, 'I didn't believe it then, and I don't believe it now!'<sup>139</sup> One fundamental problem with this film, however, is its failure to translate Paulina's forlorn perseverance into classic existential despair, a failure derived from the film's straightforward representation of her character. For that reason also, the film's motif of doubt is also weak, and this is due to the film's primary concern to find justice for her victimization, rather than to reveal its unstable undercurrent that pervades most noir narratives.

In my opinion, the motivating premise of wronged women in revenge narratives is the perpetual search for an ideal 'home', which is a paradox central to the dialectic of women and patriarchal oppression. This may seem to pander to patriarchal oppression, but neo-noir's tendency to pay homage to the disintegration of home during the classical noir period alludes to its fascination with the deconstruction and reconstruction of

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<sup>138</sup> Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, 1992, p.xix

<sup>139</sup> Cornell Woolrich, 1947, p.176

home as a new spatial dimension in which the wronged women can re-center their subjectivity, enabling them to take revenge on flagitious men who have wronged them. In this manner, there is a sense of bittersweet nostalgia attached to the meaning of home, which consequently expands its myth beyond the constraint of patriarchy; thus destabilizing the traditional meaning of home. This, in embryo, means that home in the neo-noir genre has both metaphorical and metonymical dynamism, which remarkably reinforce a new myth that would be useful for these neo-noir wronged women. In other words, wronged women in neo-noir texts are still under the sway of the patriarchal myth of an ideal home, but rather than emphasizing its presence, neo-noir narratives sanguinely stress its new function as a muse that is enabling rather than debilitating to these wronged women. Its status as a muse bespeaks its fluidity, and this allows the wronged women to mobilize, which is crucial in assisting them to bring their own meaning to the constitution of home.

Therefore, central to revenge narratives in the neo-noir sub-genre is the wronged women's ability to mobilize; and this is a result of the fluidity of the meaning of home. This mobility is all encompassing, which involves physical and psychological shifts from the constraint of patriarchy. In the classical noir tradition in which the concept of home signifies a literal and ideological imposition of a patriarchal value system, this kind of mobility is granted usually to the femmes fatales, only to punish them for having it. The wronged women, meanwhile, are consigned to the domestic sphere, reinforcing the private/public divide. In this sense, this divide is inextricably linked to victim/perpetrator schism; both moreover allude to the gender boundary that patriarchy puts on the wronged women's mobility. With a neo-noir ability to destabilize the Western binary system, the boundary marker is constantly shifted, allowing the wronged women to function beyond the traditional gender role. But this liberation is without its consequence as it expounds upon the idea that the fluidity of the meaning of home is constantly mutating into their existential despair, reminiscent of the classical noir male protagonists.

Rape-revenge narratives like Helen Zahavi's *Dirty Weekend* and Abel Ferrara's *Ms .45* illustrate this pattern well, demonstrating that the infiltration of public into private space inevitably produces typical noir anxiety concerning the loss of agency. Structurally, the narratives of both texts are very traditional or conservative, consisting of 'three parts of revenge: the causal sequences, the acting out, the revelation.'<sup>140</sup> However, while Ferrara uses this structure to effectively turn the female avenger into

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<sup>140</sup> Patrick Fuery, *New Developments in Film Theory*, 2000, p.140

a spectacle, Zahavi, on the other hand, manipulates this structure to ideologically challenge the patriarchal organization of gender roles, allowing the female protagonist to re-assert her autonomous authority over her own space. There is no denying that *Ms. 45*'s use of cinema as its medium affects the way a female avenging figure is represented; though Thana's character is transgressive, the transgression harks back to rape-revenge's origin in the exploitation genre that panders to a male fantasy of erotically charged violence. The same fate befalls the film version of *Dirty Weekend*,<sup>141</sup> which instead of evoking a female fantasy of revenge, contradictorily produces an erotic female image that conforms to male fantasy.

What these texts have in common is the transformation of victim figures into active avenging characters whose motivation is triggered by the intrusion of public elements into their private space. Both Bella and Thana benefit from their ability to transgress this spatial divide, which allows them to take revenge. But this is not enough for them to escape from their existential despair. Reminiscent of the classical male protagonist, this despair points to the fragmentation of their subjectivity, with the mystification of Bella's character (as signified by her final meeting with the legendary Jack the ripper figure), and Thana's eventual death at the hands of her own female colleague. Whereas in the case of *Dirty Weekend*, the dissolution of Bella's humanist subjectivity is complete when she is consigned to the symbolic, in *Ms. 45*, it ceases when she starts shooting randomly, foregrounding what Myra MacDonald calls 'moral treachery'.<sup>142</sup> This moral treachery is the result of the collapse of 'the rationality of woman',<sup>143</sup> which means that Thana is no longer able to cope with the 'lunacy of men',<sup>144</sup> and her death is pre-determined by patriarchal expectations.

On the other hand, the female protagonists in *Thelma and Louise*<sup>145</sup> try to escape the lunacy of men by venturing into an open landscape. Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise* is a self-aware postmodern film that conflates a few generic conventions together (from the western to comedy action thriller) to arrive at its own narrative resolution. This is an impressive product of postmodern pastiche that relies heavily on a montage of

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<sup>141</sup> Michael Winner, 1993

<sup>142</sup> *Representing Women: Myth of Femininity in the Popular Media*, 1995, p.122

<sup>143</sup> Hilary Radner, 'New Hollywood's New Women: Murder in Mind—Sarah and Margie', in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. by Steve Neale and Murray Smiths, 1998, p.250

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p.249

<sup>145</sup> 1991



recognizable images to form a meaningful organization of ideas, which concurrently creates its own unique ideological motive. Even though postmodernist critic Fredric Jameson considers pastiche ‘blank parody’, in my opinion, the fragmentation and destabilization of generic boundaries in *Thelma and Louise* can only be better expressed through pastiche and not parody. According to Myra MacDonald,

Whereas parody speaks from a particular point of view, pastiche plays with our fantasies, teases us and changes shape before we can pin any meaning on it. Ambiguity and ambivalence prevail.<sup>146</sup>

In the context of this film, moreover, pastiche also generates a kind of anxiety usually associated with the tendency in postmodernism to destabilize the subject, which is useful in the understanding of both female protagonists. It is through Thelma and Louise’s postmodern journey that the ideological thrust of the film is revealed, and pastiche underscores the construction of their new form of reality by showing how this ideology is continually constructed in a cinematic sense, creating a dramatic tension that is both ambiguous and ambivalent.

The dramatic tension in the film is centred on the efforts of these active and (physically) aggressive women trying to escape the oppressive male dominated world, which is exacerbated by the film’s association with rape-revenge. Elaine Showalter asserts that ‘it may well be that rape is another metaphor for the apocalyptic sense of panic, uncertainty, and frustration that pervades contemporary life’.<sup>147</sup> Written by a female scriptwriter, Callie Khouri, the film at times carries radical and cultural feminist agendas, which can come across as rather spiteful. But that is the whole point of this film, whose eponymous protagonists would rather be on the run than be bullied by patriarchal ‘Geraldo Show’ kind of law. Their arduous journey in the western style is the closest they can get to literalizing the metaphorical journey West, the quest that belies the fecund American dreams. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark in *The Road Movie Book* conceptualize this kind of journey as ‘embedded in both popular mythology and social history, going back to the nation’s frontier ethos’,<sup>148</sup> ‘promot[ing] a male escapist fantasy linking masculinity to technology and defining the road as a space that is at once resistant to while ultimately

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<sup>146</sup> *Representing Women: Myth of Femininity in the Popular Media*, 1995, p.114

<sup>147</sup> ‘Rethinking the Seventies: Women Writers and Violence’, in *Women and Violence in Literature: An Essay Collection*, ed. by Katherine Anne Ackley, 1990, p.254

<sup>148</sup> 1997, p.1

contained by the responsibilities of domesticity: home life, marriage, employment'.<sup>149</sup> The reversal of role in this film brings their struggle beyond just a personal level. Therefore, Thelma and Louise are the personification of female cultural and ideological dissatisfaction with the way patriarchy marginalizes them while at the same time needing them to build those dreams. With this in mind, it is easy to see the film as a critique of American dreams gone awry, and the revenge as rooted in their weariness of men. This is clearly expressed by Thelma who, upon commenting on her abusive husband, says, 'He's an asshole, but most of the time I just let it slide'.

Although the pairing of two female protagonists is important in highlighting how patriarchy can affect them in different ways, its main shared criticism is of the destructive nature of heterosexuality. In effect, it is the need to escape her oppressive and abusive husband that leads Thelma to join Louise in the journey on the 'fishing' trip, and it is Louise's reaction to rape (both in Texas and when Harlan tried to rape Thelma) that turns them into outlaws. One caveat though, that is, on one hand the film's treatment of men is not totally ignominious, highlighting the film's subversion of the western genre that treats a woman as part of the hero's Frontier quest. Figures like Hal Slocumb (a policeman who wants to 'help' them) and Jimmy (Louise's non-committed boyfriend) may offer a possibility for some kind of redemption, but Thelma and Louise's weariness of heterosexual relationships signifies their existential angst and anger, a noir credo that makes them noir protagonists ('Certain words and phrases just keep drifting through my mind, things like incarceration, cavity search, death by electrocution, life in prison, shit like that, know what I'm sayin'? So do I want to come out alive?'). On the other hand, Hal and Jimmy also epitomize the pervasive nature of heterosexuality as they represent the illusion of freedom that patriarchy continuously offers. Therefore, the female protagonists' encounter with malicious men is marked by Thelma's tergiversation. This is especially true after her sexual encounter with a young male drifter, J.D., who then steals their money, which is their only hope to escape. In my opinion, the sexual encounter between Thelma and J.D. may guarantee Thelma's heterosexuality, but it also highlights heterosexuality as perversely destructive. On another occasion, when Thelma holds a stick up at a gas station, her words are the repetition of what J.D. said during their encounter. Nonetheless, even for this reason, the noir credo dictates that Thelma's action is not entirely blameless on the moral level for she

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<sup>149</sup> *ibid.*, p.2

carelessly handles her newly found liberation by succumbing to sexual temptation.

The film's concentration on the sense of disruption as a result of Thelma and Louise's status as outlaws evokes a noir sensibility akin to the narrative of victims of circumstances in the classical noir tradition. After the apparent narrative setup in which Thelma was almost raped and was then rescued by Louise, their journey is about reconstructing their own meaning of home. If the old adage that 'Home is where the heart is' is to be applied here, home in neo-noir is no longer a confined space defined by its domesticity, but rather it is an open landscape that they feel ensconced in, despite the continuous hostility they encounter along the way. The scorching hot and barren landscape provides an infinite mise-en-scene that bespeaks their alienation; this alludes not only to the classical noir labyrinthine landscape, but also to the film's refusal to provide any consistent or focused point of view. Lee Horsley, in referring to 'wronged man' narratives, argues that

The damaged, displaced protagonist sees society from an unfamiliar angle, without any of the conventional props for preserving peace of mind, and, in contrast to the outsider hero of adventure stories, he is unlikely to accomplish a restoration of order.<sup>150</sup>

Ridley Scott's use of multiple points of view, which oscillates prevalently between Thelma and Louise, is an epistemic strategy to disorient the audience. With each female character possessing her own ethical imperative, the film concentrates on their efforts to create gaps by creating an ideological line that 'put some distance between us and the scene of our last goddamn crime'. Ironically, an important effect of this is that their journey West is now syncretic and no longer fictional, which consequently concretizes their struggle for liberation from male oppression. Therefore, their final decision to drive off the cliff can be seen as rather taxonomical, gyrating around the idea of eternalizing their struggle:

Thelma    Ok, then listen, let's not get caught.  
 Louise    What are you talking about?  
 Thelma    Let's keep going.  
 Louise    What do you mean?  
 Thelma    Go.  
 Louise    You sure?  
 Thelma    Yeah, yeah. Let's.

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<sup>150</sup> *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.156

On one hand, as the camera freezes them on the air, the sense of accomplishment is somewhat halted and dangled. On the other, the frozen image on the screen can also function as a reminder that they remain obdurate regardless of the outcome of their actions, denying the film any narrative resolution. These possible readings of the ending in itself is a crucial indication of the sense of ambivalence that the film creates, and of the after taste that poses a question of whether or not such liberation is possible.

The theme of ‘the journey West’ is also explored by Vicki Hendricks in her novel *Miami Purity*<sup>151</sup> to illuminate the female protagonist’s existential dilemma. In addition to resembling Thelma and Louise’s disillusionment with heterosexual coupling that sets their journey off in the first place, the female protagonist of the novel, Sherri, is also obsessed with finding ‘true’ love. For Sherri, at ‘thirty-six-looking-thirty’ (p.4), she is determined to get herself ‘out of the dark bars and into the daylight’ (p.5). Her experience with men has almost cost her her life, disillusioned by the thought that ‘there was love in their hearts’ (ibid.). Looking for a fresh start and determined that ‘Hank was gonna be my last mistake’ (p.5), Sherri actually follows the footsteps of the noir protagonists in the classical noir period such as in *Double Indemnity* and *Murder, My Sweet*, in which, argues William Marling, ‘the narrative process of the protagonist is embedded within a narrative process of social improvement’.<sup>152</sup> Sherri’s position at the center of the narrative inevitably foregrounds her existential dilemma—her fear of losing her agency compels the narrative to represent her characterization as an ironic figure. However, Sherri’s genuine determination to ‘move on’, enhanced by the oscillation of her character between a victim and an aggressor, saves her from being a caricatured figure like Bridget Gregory in John Dahl’s neo-noir film *The Last Seduction*.<sup>153</sup> Therefore, unlike Bridget who is clearly empowered by her ‘journey West’, Sherri is left disillusioned—‘I start to think I’m getting somewhere but find out I’m really on the same old flat track going round’ (p.83).

If sexual fulfillment for a femme fatale in the classical noir ‘is never the compulsion, but it is rather the power of the sexual over people’,<sup>154</sup> reflecting her destructive power, in Sherri’s case, her sexual fulfillment is also governed by her own personal ethic (‘It felt good, but I knew I ought

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<sup>151</sup> 1995

<sup>152</sup> ‘On the Relation Between American Roman Noir and Film Noir’, *Literature Film Quarterly*, 1993, p.186

<sup>153</sup> 1994

<sup>154</sup> Patrick Fuery, *New Developments in Film Theory*, 2000, p.164

to watch it' (p. 7)); this brings her characterization closer to that of the male protagonist in the classical noir tradition than the femme fatale figure. Ironically, what this reflects is the sense of fatality of her sexual desire—the kind of fatality that in neo-noir novels comes two a penny nowadays. For instance, the theme of love embroidered with fatality is also pessimistically explored in Elsa Lewin's *I, Anna*, which is a melancholic study of the inner city alienation and isolation. Lewin's middle-aged eponymous protagonist, having been wronged by her husband, Simon, who married a younger woman, and her daughter who blames her for her father's leaving the house, struggles to find meaning in her life after '*twenty eight years I had depended on Simon to tell me how I looked. Now I didn't know* [original italic]' (p.9). But reminiscent of the noir tradition, '[o]ne has to have suffered to love, really love' (p. 297), and as in the tradition noir fatality, love also means death, as how it dictates the suicidal end of Anna. Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward aptly remark, '[o]ne aspect of film noir which many filmmakers have chosen to underscore is its forlorn romanticism, the need to find love and honor in a new society that venerates only sex and money';<sup>155</sup> what characters like Sherri and Anna prove is that this sentiment is also present in the literary noir.

Sherri's own personal moral integrity ('I would never do anything that made me lie.' [p.129]) is not only an indication of greater affinity with the hardboiled detective figure than with the femme fatale, but it also reflects her vulnerability or insecurity. It can be argued, however, that this vulnerability or insecurity is rooted in her confusion between love and sexual desire. This, of course, is not new to many noir texts; sexual desire itself is often embodied in the figure of a femme fatale—a figure that explicitly represents the classical noir's treatment of sexual deceit. Sexual deceit is also one of neo-noir's major preoccupations with gender anxieties, which in turn evokes the transgressive nature of noir sensibility itself. Parallel to the classical noir's representation of a noir hero who 'falls somewhere between a tragic victim and a hapless fool' because of his uncontrollable sexual desire, *Miami Purity* successfully evokes this ontological uncertainty by using sexual desire, not as 'Hegel's doctrine of internal relations' dictates, rather as 'a principle of the ontological displacement of the human subject', which eventually, as conceptualized by Lacan, Deleuze, and Foucault, 'comes to signify the impossibility of

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<sup>155</sup> *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edn., ed. by Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, 1992, p.398

the coherent subject itself'.<sup>156</sup> In a neo-noir text like *Miami Purity*, this incoherent subject is primarily expressed by Sherri's insecurity, and the translation of that insecurity into existential anger and despair.

Therefore, to a certain extent, it might be accurate to view Sherri's revenge as a result of Payne's betrayal of her love as an enactment of a catharsis of her past abusive relationship. To a greater extent, however, the novel is overwhelmed with noir's sense of fatality, and this is especially true with Sherri's pessimistic surrendering to fate. Ironically, this can be seen as her strength rather than weakness, and what differentiates Sherri from the classical femme fatale is her ability to sustain her personal moral code, realizing that 'I didn't care what happened to me. I deserved whatever I got. I just wanted to show him how it felt to be used' (p.208). Maybe what Hendricks is trying to do is to show that the inevitable fatality in Sherri's life is partly to blame, and it is because of her personal moral code also that she is not blameless for what has happened. This is done in two ways. One, Hendricks transforms her critical view of institutionalized patriarchy (with constant reference to Christianity) into a more personal attack on Payne himself. The effect of this is that it reverses the hardboiled tradition in which the protagonist's personal ethical code eventually gives way to institutionalized patriarchy, as when Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* coldly passes Brigid O'Shaughnessy over to the police despite her appeal for his love. Two, it creates a close proximity between the reader and Sherri, which is effective in forming a sense of complicity in the reader. Therefore, even though the ending in *Miami Purity* evokes the pattern in *Thelma and Louise*, its intimacy offers a more disturbing and bleak view of Sherri's future, or the lack of it.

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<sup>156</sup> Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century French*, 1987, p.6



## CHAPTER THREE

### DESIRE AND TRANSGRESSION: PERFORMING GENDER?

A conspicuous characteristic of the great modern divide between human and non-human is that its construction is accompanied by strong hostility to monsters and hybrids in their capacity as boundary figures which adhere to neither the human nor the non-human sphere.<sup>1</sup>

Western culture, until recently, has been defined by binary oppositions viz., human/non-human, culture/nature, man/woman, active/passive etc. Nina Lykke, as the above quotation indicates, sees the divide between human and non-human as a source for the formation of a mythical monster, which in turn works as a metaphor for the fear of boundary crossing itself. Jill Clark duly observes that contrary binaries, viz., ‘the dichotomies implicit in Western metaphysics that split Self from Other, Mind from Body, Male From Female, Presence from Absence, Upper Class from Lower, Active from Passive, and Subject from Object’, ‘are mirrored in political practices everywhere in Western culture’.<sup>2</sup> These binary oppositions are so deep-seated in Western culture that they germinate a further division in the way patriarchy perceives the ‘weaker’ groups, particularly that of the association between the weaker with the feminine/feminized. In popular culture, while the ‘masculine’ signifies a rationally present body, the ‘feminine’ signifies lack or the irrationally absent counterpart. This division is an important part in the ‘discourse of modernity’ with which feminism ‘has tried to inscribe itself’.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nina Lykke, ‘Between Monsters , Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontation with Science’, in *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs*, ed. by Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidotti, 1996, p.15

<sup>2</sup> ‘Scientific Gazing and the Cinematic Body Politic: The Demonized Cyborg of *Metropolis*’, *Intertexts*, 1999, p.168

<sup>3</sup> Nina Lykke, *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontation with Science, Medicine and Cyberspace*, 1996, p.18



The association between ‘woman/feminine’ and nature has often been one of the major concerns in feminist criticism.<sup>4</sup> The debate surrounding this issue focuses on the way culture is seen as masculine and therefore oppressive, resulting in narratives that privilege male subjectivity by describing its agency and autonomy in terms of sexual aggression against the female. Jonathan Dollimore, for instance, rationalizes that ‘men create culture as a defence against nature, and since women are identified with nature, culture is also a defence against female nature’<sup>5</sup>—a sentiment shared by a feminist theorist, Sherry Ortner, who argues that a ‘woman is relegated to a subordinate social sphere by virtue of her universal identification with nature’.<sup>6</sup> Feminist theorists and critics, both in literature and cinema, argue that the conflict between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ has resulted in the construction of a female body as a mere cultural product of patriarchal representation and imagination, consigning her to a passive role or position within the binary. This application of the binary system is more palpable among female critics in England, who, according to Patricia Erens, ‘began to develop other theoretical models, influenced by continental thinkers including Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan [...]’.<sup>7</sup> The dichotomy associating a female with passivity (hence lack of subjectivity and agency) is one of the major concerns in feminist criticisms of the Freudian psychoanalysis that to a great extent informs the way women are perceived in Western popular imagination. Women, in effect, are merely the embodiment of male fantasy.

One of the important implications of the debate surrounding this divide can be seen in the theorization of the cinematic representation of women, especially in the earlier criticism of the cinematic representation of women that centres on the theorization of gaze. Laura Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, drawn from Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, is a seminal and controversial work on cinematic gaze that picks up this

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<sup>4</sup> Another relevant debate can be found in the science of zoology. Londa Schiebinger in her analysis of the terms *Mammalia* and *Homo sapiens* in the ‘Taxonomy For Human Beings’ argues that ‘within Linnaean terminology, a female characteristic (the lactating mamma) ties humans to brutes, while a traditionally male characteristic (reason) marks our separation’ from the animal/beast (in *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, ed. by Gill Kirkup, Linda Janes, and et al, 2000, p.16)

<sup>5</sup> *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, 1999, p.xxiv

<sup>6</sup> in Mary M. Wiles, ‘Mapping the Contours of Cyborg Space in the Conspiracy Film: The Feminine Ecology of Luc Besson’s *La Femme Nikita*’, *Post Identity*, 1997, p.56

<sup>7</sup> ‘Introduction’, *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. by Patricia Erens, 1990, p. xvii

point by theorizing the gaze as male or masculine and the object of the gaze as female or feminine, that is women as objects 'to be looked at' and men as the lookers, consigning the image of a woman to being a fetishized object of male voyeurism. It is noted by many critics that Mulvey's theorization of gaze not only further reinforces the dichotomy between femininity and masculinity, but also neglects the active roles of female spectators. The bias in the binary also explains why women are usually absent in the narrative. In relation to that, when semiotic is introduced to feminist film criticism, Patricia Erens asserts that 'women do not represent themselves on screen, especially in Hollywood films, but are merely signs for all that is non-male'.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Timo Siivonen opines that:

This Nature-Culture conflict [...] in which the semiotic link between sexuality and biological procreation, on the one hand, and the female sex on the other, has been repressed. On the narrative level, this appears as the absence of women and their sexuality.<sup>9</sup>

This absence, in effect, heightens the oppressive nature of Hollywood narrative in particular, forestalling the potential of the narrative to work against the grain. Because of this, if female sexuality is presented at all, it appears in the form of what Simone De Beauvoir called the 'other', literalised by monstrous figures like alien creatures in the *Alien* trilogy.

One of the challenges in feminism is to centralize a woman's point of view. This can be achieved by destabilizing the generic conventions and formulaic demands of texts that privilege a man's position in the narrative. In relation to that, feminist concerns with regard to the conception of gaze are generally divided into two major perspectives: radical feminism that consciously articulates its intention to erase male's privileged position, and revisionist feminism that is more eager to redefine genre conventions. In the first instance, Donna Haraway in 'A Manifesto For Cyborgs' looks at how the association between woman/nature and man/culture has given birth to a female cyborg figure. Implicit in her view are the liberatory possibilities offered by the cyborg figure because it is, according to Haraway:

A creature in a postgender world: it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-Oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or the other seductions to organic

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> 'Cyborgs and Genetic Oxymorons: The Body and Technology in William Gibson's Cyberspace Trilogy, *Science Fiction Studies*, 1996, p.237

wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity.<sup>10</sup>

For Haraway, the strength, rather than the weakness, of feminist analysis lies in the ability to draw a close relationship with the hybrid of monstrous figures. Of course Haraway's controversial ending of her paper, 'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess'<sup>11</sup> sparks a lot of critical debates (for example Nina Lykke and Kirsten Gram-Hanssen), especially because her point of 'objectivity', as argued by Gram-Hanssen, is seen from the 'subjugated perspective' which can hardly bring 'any change in the human domination of nature'.<sup>12</sup> In the second instance, revisionist feminism offers a world where both man and woman can co-exist, attempting to position the woman within the narrative, without bolstering patriarchy. The female character in neo-noir texts originates from this stance, challenging noir's generic conventions without pretending to assuage the patriarchy that she has destabilized. In my view, the need to study the transgressive female figures in both literature and film stems from the need to set them free from the constraint of the binary, that is, from the limitation set by this ideological bias. Noir or/and neo-noir, a genre that has been criticised particularly for its portrayal of dangerous and fatal female characters, or strong female characters if you like, is one of the best places to look.

The main purpose of this chapter is to study and chart out some of the transgressive female characters in neo-noir texts. Generally speaking, the study of noir texts (both literary and cinematic) has been largely focused on gender difference. This chapter does not claim to be different in that respect; however, my main objective is to analyse the effects of generic mutations on the representation of female characters from noir to neo-noir texts, arguing that although women are transgressive in both kinds of text, the neo-noir women's fragmented subjectivity enables them to mobilise beyond patriarchal categorisation of gender roles. Traditionally in noir texts, the female characters are stereotypically divided into a good woman and a femme fatale—a representation that panders to male fantasy. A neo-noir woman, however, can be a hybrid figure of both categories of women. What unifies noir and neo-noir women is that they signify the

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<sup>10</sup> In *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, ed. by Gill Kirkup, Linda Janes and et al, 2000, p.51

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p.57

<sup>12</sup> 'Objectivity in the Description of Nature: Between Social Construction and Essentialism', in *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs*, ed. by Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidoti, 1996, pp.92-93

destabilisation of gender roles and identity, and they often function as a threat to the male protagonists' virility: as Kaplan postulates, 'gender [...] destabilizations add to the experiences of alienation, fragmentation and inconsistency that characterize both film *noir* and neo-*noir*'.<sup>13</sup> I would also like to investigate how a noir female character 'metamorphoses' into a neo-noir character as the genre is expanded, subverted, exaggerated and to a great extent crossed or hybridised. As the link between the femme fatale and the new transgressive figure lies in their transgressiveness, there is a clear assumption that the latter embodies the re-visioning or reworking of the first. The disparate and diversified texts that I will be using in this chapter reflect the variety of female roles in neo-noir texts.

In addition to that, postmodernism, as a critical tool, will be used as it allows me to look at how the transgressive figures contest and challenge the 'nature' and 'culture' divide. My contention, therefore, is that the transgressive female figure, coupled with noir moods and conventions, succeeds in blurring the boundary dividing both femininity and masculinity, and therefore renders the divide obsolete. As a critical framework, I believe postmodernism opens up the opportunity to understand genre mutations, that is, the amalgamation of several genres within a particular text. What postmodernism helps us to understand in relation to the characters in the text is its 'expressions of ontological rejection' of a coherent or unified self,<sup>14</sup> affecting the way we view both the texts and the characters. I will illustrate how the postmodern paradox, which is inherent in the way the ideological complexity of the texts is heightened, relies on its tendency to destabilize a text to formulate the dynamic of the cross-fertilization of genres. By the same token, genre mutation then can be seen as a way forward in which all the ontological and epistemological questions can co-exist especially in literalising the motifs and images found in the text. It also ultimately reflects the anxiety in postmodernism culture that is in the infinite boundary crossing itself.

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<sup>13</sup> *Women in Film Noir*, 2000, p.1

<sup>14</sup> Scott McCracken lists 'deconstruction, decentering, disappearance, demystification, discontinuity [...]' as the expressions of the ontological rejection. In *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction*, 1998, pp.8-9

## Desire and Transgression

The only other piece of equipment I had was me. My own strength, my own weight.

—Cody, Liza, *Monkey Wrench*, p.91

It may be my mind but you're making yourself at home in it.

—Cadigan, Pat, *Mindplayers*, p.23

He was dressed as a woman now— that was the reason for his being driven down.

—Theroux, Paul, *Chicago Loop*, p.148

The quotations above have at least a twofold role: on one hand they illustrate some of the problems in the representation of a female self, viz., the transience of the gendered body itself, and on the other hand, they refer to the way the texts privilege the expression of female self and sexuality within their narratives. In the first instance, the problems allude to the fundamental question of the constitution of a woman, that is, '*What is a woman?*' The female characters in both Cody's and Cadigan's novels are examples of transgressors, or boundary crossers—characters who defy the traditional definition of a woman. 'Transgression', observed Scott McCracken, 'involves the destabilisation of such categories'.<sup>15</sup> This, in effect, means that an effort to place these characters into steady categories reflects the absurdity of such a categorisation. Likewise, the absurdity in putting Theroux's character into any monolithic gender category reminds us of the ambiguity of gender definition in postmodernist texts, accentuating the idea that a gender identity is in a state of perpetual flux. All the characters mentioned above work against stereotype, which 'refers to cultural representations which are produced with monotonous regularity'.<sup>16</sup> What this suggests, ironically, is that to produce the effect of transgression, we still have to rely on conventions<sup>17</sup> as a point of reference. In short, transgression is the antithesis of stereotype, forestalling categorisation and monotony. The second role alludes to the way gender identity is now seen as a social construction, signifying the fact that the expression of a female self or identity is no longer solely defined by biological determination, as illustrated by such novels like *Chicago Loop*. Despite all that and due to postmodern irony, gender distinction is still

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<sup>15</sup> *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction*, 1998, p.155

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.163

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p.166

prominent in crime narrative, foregrounding the issue of domination and oppression. However, recognizing that a gendered body in a postmodern text is a hybrid allows us to understand the shift in the dialectical relationship between a body and gender identity, which oftentimes works as a new anxiety that is prominent in neo-noir thriller texts.

Neo-noir texts embrace this tradition of boundary crossing by employing parody and pastiche, and postmodern narrative structure to destabilise the notion of self. This is possible, as Kaja Silverman points out, because 'the further we travel into the future the more profoundly we encounter the past'.<sup>18</sup> While noir's dark mood influences and infiltrates into other genres and sub-genres (like gothic horror, melodrama, science fiction and cyberpunk) by means of generic mutations or cross-fertilisation, postmodernism through pastiche allows the re-statement and re-visitation of these individual genres' characteristics, only for them to be further fragmented. The third quotation above taken from *Chicago Loop* illustrates how the female self can vacillate between a male body and female desire, as some characters in some other texts in this chapter will also show. What this suggests, in embryo, is that a female self is no longer exclusively defined by the physical boundary of a female body (biological), nor by its gender (cultural). Following neo-noir interest in scrutinizing and foregrounding a destabilized self, this chapter will also look at how the notion of inwardness is carried into or mirrored by the outside world and vice versa. In short, this chapter will look at the representation of the 'female' transgressors in contemporary noir texts and their link with the female self as expressed within these texts.

Drawing on Lee Horsley's observation about the nature of transgression, that is, 'the transgressions represented can be a mirror, the damaged self as an image of the society that caused the deformation or the unbalanced mind as a metaphor for society's lunacy (the burden of the past carried into the futures as inescapable fatality)',<sup>19</sup> I propose that the female self and desire in neo-noir texts can be analyzed especially in association with its spatial clues which can be traced in her body. The general assumption regarding a transgressive female character is that if her image can be used to mirror cultural and societal turbulence, and she therefore can also be seen as an agent of the breakdown and deformation, hence her agency. In the case of the femmes fatales, it is not their criminality that is linked to the idea of them transgressing patriarchal value systems, but their sexuality and bodies which exude danger and fatality. John Tuska argues

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<sup>18</sup> 'Back to the Future', *Camera Obscura*, 1991, p.109

<sup>19</sup> *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.3

that, 'all of the roles of women in *film noirs* are defined by their relationship with men; even in the case of a femme fatale, her solitary significance to the plot is the relationship she has with men'.<sup>20</sup> What this means is that she represents male desire, either the desire that needs to be controlled or extinguished, which is shown in the putative ending for a femme fatale, that is, for her to be annihilated. It is imperative then to show, since neo-noir texts capitalize on their 'self-contradictions, their ironies and, the mocking holes in coherence and meaning, [and] the pleasure of sarcasm'<sup>21</sup> to destabilize the conventional meaning of gender distinction, allowing the femme fatale to exist outside the noir paradigm of gender division, how the change in the portrayal of the female characters in neo-noir texts affect the way male desire is represented.

A preponderance of feminists finds that noir films, despite their misogynistic view of the female body and sexuality, provide a platform in which liberatory voices can be found. In terms of the literary noir, McCracken's observation is particularly illuminating and relevant:

The transgressive element in popular fiction means that it always has a subversive potential; but the use of that potential for a particular political project requires a sophisticated narrative which can relate the symbolic and the social for the liberation rather than domination.<sup>22</sup>

McCracken's observation encapsulates the quiddity of noir narratives, whose symbolism, coupled with their convoluted plot, is transgressive by nature, allowing the female characters to find liberation beyond patriarchal gender assignment. And this is also true for cinematic noir: for example in the film *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis, as an iconic femme fatale, generates the kind of anxiety that mirrors a masculine desire to repress female sexuality, signalling the male's anxiety towards her independence and sexuality. In the film, this repression finds its expression via the use of flashbacks and a 'confessional' first person narration. However, Phyllis's characterisation also defies noir conventions, allowing her to be a sympathetic femme fatale. In the final scene when she shoots Neff, Phyllis finally admits:

No, I never loved you Walter, not you or anybody else. I'm rotten to the heart. I used you just as you said. That's all you ever meant to me. Until a

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<sup>20</sup> *Dark Cinema*, 1984, p.206

<sup>21</sup> J.P. Telotte 'Fatal Capers: Strategy and Enigma in Film Noir', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 1996, p.2

<sup>22</sup> *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction*, 1998, p.174

minute ago, when I couldn't fire the second shot. I never thought that could ever happen to me.<sup>23</sup>

Phyllis's admission points to the weakness in her character, aligning her with the kismet of the male protagonist; Phyllis, like Neff, is a transgressor, a mirror of the morally collapsed society. For that reason also, Phyllis's character can be seen as having the ability to fashion the narrative, finding a liberatory voice that makes her a sympathetic rather than ruthless a character, relating to what Tuska calls *hamartia*, a Tragic Flaw not of judgement but of fatal obsession.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, William D. Jeffrey opines that 'Neff subjects Phyllis to *his* forbidden desires' by arguing that 'Neff's relationship to Phyllis is shaped by projective identification, [that is], a primitive defence mechanism',<sup>25</sup> making Phyllis his victim and not vice versa.

If a noir thriller, as argued by many critics like J. P. Telotte and Lee Horsley, 'is rooted in its own time and place',<sup>26</sup> a neo-noir thriller 'argues for the form's generic persistence [...] for its ability to speak with power to other times and circumstances, as more than a limited, post-war product'.<sup>27</sup> The emphasis on the temporal and spatial situatedness of noir texts within a certain critical and cultural meaning is the result of modernist assumptions about the identity of the subject. However, one of postmodernist's main agendas is 'to step outside their "true identities" and explore and create new personalities [...] a feature that was deemed the ultimate fruition of the postmodern dissolution of the subject'.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, in the postmodern age, this observation inevitably produces one of the crucial questions of this chapter: Is gender difference relevant now? At the heart of this is a dialogue between noir conventions and postmodern concerns that is marked by its interest in pushing back and dissolving boundaries into irrelevance.<sup>29</sup> So, this chapter tries to contest the general

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<sup>23</sup> Dir. Billy Wilder, 1944

<sup>24</sup> *Dark Cinema*, 1984, p.211

<sup>25</sup> 'Double Indemnity: Creation and Destruction of a Femme Fatale', *Psychoanalytic Review*, 1997, p.702

<sup>26</sup> *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.13

<sup>27</sup> J. P. Telotte, 'Fatal Capers: Strategy and Enigma in Film Noir', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 1996, p.1

<sup>28</sup> Marjorie Worthington, 'Bodies that Natter: Visual Translations and Transmissions of the Physical', *Critique*, 2002, p.192

<sup>29</sup> Scott Bukatman in *Terminal Identity* talks about how '[I]n true postmodern fashion, the boundaries between genres and media, between 'high' and 'low', and between mainstream and experimental forms have dissolved into irrelevance...' (p.9)



assumption that gender is no longer relevant and of upper-most importance in the postmodern age and to suggest that only through the understanding of the hybridity of the subject can the female characters find their liberation. This contestation is inherent in the critique of the constitution of the figures of the transgressors who are the literal manifestations of both progression and digression rolled into one in the theory of representation and who signify the usurpation of the homogeneous subject by postmodernism. In short, this section is used to explore the notion of desire and transgression, linking them with the female characters in neo-noir texts.

One of the characteristics of a neo-noir text is that it can be marked by its status as a hybrid, an amalgamation of genres. For that reason, to understand the characters in noir texts, it is crucial to comprehend the noir thriller's shared history with Gothic horror and detective fiction that yields some similarities in terms of the representation of the female characters. As both noir and Gothic rely heavily on the masculine attitude towards woman/femininity, that is, as the embodiment of male fantasy and as an abject essence respectively, in both cases the images of women are highly constructed. Whereas the Gothic associates a woman with fear, detective fiction treats a woman as a mystery. The amalgamation of both creates what David Trotter describes as 'the stuff to be deciphered [which] is also the stuff of moral and material horror'.<sup>30</sup> Representation, being a crucial item or aspect of cultural production, is undeniably male chauvinistic in nature. Indeed, woman as a threat to masculinity is as prominent in the canonical noir thriller narrative as in both Gothic and detective fiction. This is echoed by Richard Dyer who in his analysis of film noir argues that 'film *noir* is characterized by a certain anxiety over the existence and definition of masculinity and normality'.<sup>31</sup> The *Alien* films for instance, combine Gothic elements and noir mood and visual symbolism with an investigative structure to represent and simultaneously investigate the desire of the feminine subjects. Throughout the *Alien* trilogy, from *Alien* to *Alien Resurrection*, femininity is always at the centre of investigation, be it in the character Ripley<sup>32</sup> or the aliens themselves.

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<sup>30</sup> 'Theory and Detective Fiction', *Critical Quarterly*, 1991, p.71

<sup>31</sup> 'Resistance Through Charisma: Rita Hayworth and *Gilda*', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.115

<sup>32</sup> In an interview with Sigourney Weaver, she claims that the character Ripley was originally a man. When referring to the famous strip scene at the end of the film, Weaver reckons that it was 'kind of provocative—you almost seeing me through the alien's eyes' and that it never occurred to her that people would think that it was

One of the recurring themes in many Gothic horror texts that finds its contemporary expression in literary and cinematic texts is castration anxiety as critically analysed and highlighted by feminist critics like Barbara Creed and other feminist psychoanalysts including Juliet Mitchell and Jill Clark. Creed's seminal work on the '*Monstrous Feminine*' theorises the origin of monstrous figures in horror films as a metaphor for the feminine threat to the patriarchal value system. Likewise, Clark and Donna Haraway see the parallelism in such a metaphor with the figure of demons, alien and cyborg, which 'can also be feminised scapegoats for dominant patriarchies'.<sup>33</sup> Another variation of this castration anxiety in the narrative is in the (visual) absence of the female threat itself. For instance, in a film like *Rebecca*, the eponymous Rebecca is never shown on screen. She becomes the object of the unnamed female protagonist's fear and the subject of the investigative narrative. At the level of ideological symbolism, Rebecca represents both the lack, hence the threat, as well as the 'Other' that needs to be investigated. In this case, the reason for her death becomes the narrative trajectory. Therefore, one of the overlapping points between the noir thriller, the Gothic horror and detective fiction lies in the way that the woman, especially the transgressive figure like the femme fatale, is represented. In short, the Western dichotomy that draws a clear line between a man and a woman whilst subordinating the latter is often scrutinized by feminist critics in an effort to, as argued by some feminist poststructuralists such as Kristiva and Luce Irigaray, 'attack the notion of fixed and unitary cultural identities, by recovering, for example, hitherto underrepresented forms of feminine'.<sup>34</sup> Neo-noir's status as a postmodernist cultural production defies any form of homogeneity, thus enabling the female characters to find their own voice within the narrative.

The different types of women in the noir tradition usually reflect the desire to reclaim masculinity, an expression of anxiety that characterises the misogyny in film noir. In as much as noir narrative is about the threat posed by female transgressors, it is also about how the anxiety derived from it forms a kind of metaphor for masculine angst, anxiety, insecurity, alienation and ultimately fragmentation. In this light, the female characters in noir texts signify transgression: 'film *noir*', argues by Kaplan, with 'its potential for subversion of dominant American values and gender-myths, provided an ideal group of films through which to make feminist uses of

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exploitative, in Danny Peary, 'Interview with Sigourney Weaver', *Films and Filming*, 1981, p.26

<sup>33</sup> Jill Clark, 'Scientific Gazing and the Cinematic Body Politic: The Demonized Cyborg of *Metropolis*', *Intertext*, 1999, p.168

<sup>34</sup> Maggie Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, 1995, p.216

classic-text arguments'.<sup>35</sup> The fascination in film noir and in the crime novel with a female body and sexuality is often embodied in the femme fatale figures who titillate and lure the male protagonists into the darker side of human experience and psychology, and sometimes, their sexuality exudes danger into which the male protagonists are usually drawn. Implicit in the portrayal of their dangerous sexuality is the association it has with noir fatalism. For instance, J.P. Telotte in his analysis of the film *Double Indemnity*, comments on the verbal exchange between Neff and Phyllis, linking it with 'discourse of death and desire':<sup>36</sup> 'we were talking about automobile insurance, only you were thinking about murder, and I was thinking about the anklet you were wearing'. This highlights, he argues, the kind of fatalism associated with the desire of/for the femme fatale. In addition to that, these dangerous transgressors are often juxtaposed with some other female characters—in both noir novels and films—who function as redeeming or nurturing figures in the otherwise unbearably alienated underworld of the male protagonists.<sup>37</sup>

The investigative and crime structure of noir narrative can also be understood as the yearning or longing for something that is lacking in the noir world, a desire that mirrors the idea of American dreams gone awry. Sabine Vanacker observes that '[f]eminist epistemologists have pointed to the gender polarities that deeply mark a phallogocentric Western Culture, which has tended to associate masculine with the search for knowledge, and femininity with the object of this search'.<sup>38</sup> The understanding of desire and the desiring subject, as I see it, can be partially understood by looking at the way psychoanalytical theory forms the ideological basis for Western binary oppositions. The idea that women are subordinate to men is reinforced by the Freudian interpretation of the Oedipus Complex and its trajectory that concerns the formation of a normal heterosexual human being. Freud's theory is formed on the 'acknowledgement of the supremacy of the PHALLUS', which therefore suggests that 'the girl must accept her definition as inferior, because she is anatomically castrated, lacking a penis'.<sup>39</sup> The Oedipal theme is endemic in Western popular culture since it panders to the Law of the Father in reaffirming its position

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<sup>35</sup> *Women in Film Noir*, 2000, p.3

<sup>36</sup> *Voices in the Dark*, 1989, p.46

<sup>37</sup> John Tuska theorizes that there are two basic kinds of women in film noir: the femme fatale and the loving wives and mothers (*Dark Cinema*, 1984, p.202)

<sup>38</sup> 'V.I. Warshawski, Kinsey Millhone and Kay Scarpetta: Creating a Feminist Detective Hero', in *Criminal Proceedings*, ed. by Peter Messent, 1997, pp.78-79

<sup>39</sup> 'Castration Complex', in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Elizabeth Wright, 1992, p.41

within the grand narrative. By assigning an active female role as a threatening figure that needs to be castrated to allow the formation of a normal heterosexual masculine identity to take place, Western culture is founded on the fear of this castration to produce a certain type of representation of a woman. It is in the fear and anxiety towards female sexuality itself that feminism sees the opportunity to investigate masculinity. Feminist critics' writings on popular culture rely on the reformulation of the castration complex, especially with the shift from 'BIOLOGY to differences produced for both sexes by LANGUAGE'<sup>40</sup> as introduced by Lacan. Lacan also suggests that "“desire exists” because there is a level of language “which escapes the subject in its structure and effects, and because there is always, on the level of language, something which is beyond consciousness, and it is there that the function of desire is to be located””.<sup>41</sup> Julia Kristeva, whose work explores the relationship between linguistics and psychoanalysis, for instance, sees the fear of the archaic mother 'to be essentially fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing'.<sup>42</sup> This power is an interpretation of the desire of the desiring subject that forms the basis of fear for a masculine object, that is, the fear of the ruling father who sets the standard of masculinity itself through the severance from the mother into the world of masculine identity. In short, the narrative engine of film noir often becomes a palimpsest for the Oedipal drama.

The figuring of desire as feminine has always been a major interest in cinematic noir texts especially because it is often directly linked to the representation of women itself. In cinema, psychoanalysis offers the tool by which the understanding of the nature of representation and the desire associated with it can be achieved. When Neff in *Double Indemnity*, for instance, is fixated with Phyllis's anklet, his obsession is the embodiment of his fetishised desire, a desire that he needs to curb or control, culminating in his killing Phyllis. In psychoanalytic terms, Phyllis has to be annihilated for Neff to finally identify with the father figure, that is, his mentor, Keyes, reaffirming his masculinity. These links point to the need to reassert the protagonist's masculinity, as James F. Maxfield asserts, that 'manhood is chiefly defined in terms of dominance—dominance not only

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p.43

<sup>41</sup> in J.P. Tellote, *Voices in the Dark*, p.51

<sup>42</sup> Mary M. Wiles, 'Mapping the Contours of Cyborg Space in the Conspiracy Film: The Feminine Ecology of Luc Besson's *La Femme Nikita*', *Post Identity*, 1997, p.56

over the seductive female (who threatens to sap the male will) but over competing males as well.<sup>43</sup>

A variation of this need to link fatal desire with the feminine is also prominent in other film genres, namely horror, as illustrated by a film like John Carpenter's *Christine* (1983). Hollywood's obsession with the automobile and female desire is clearly manifested in this film. A film like *Christine* (and many other horror films) simply literalises desire in the form of representation, which is unmistakably feminine in nature though not in appearance. Based on Stephen King's novel of the same title, the film ventures into the figure of a car that has a deadly mind of its own. Christine is a car, a product of an industry often associated with men. Indeed, the workers at the factory where 'she' was manufactured are all men. To have it with a 'feminine desire' is to place her within the realm of the other. Not only that it is figured as a 'she', but also a femme fatale at that. Elizabeth Cowie in her introduction to *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis* suggests three interrelated issues concerning the representation of women in film, the second of which she theorizes as:

There is the issue of the image as identity; this is two fold, on the one hand it can be seen as an external imposition, so that these social definitions penetrate or interpellate the woman as an image of her identity, socially defined-and which, recognized by woman as the other and as imposed, is also resisted. On the other hand there is the image as identity which is possessed and appropriated by the woman as social agent and psychical subject.<sup>44</sup>

The corollary of this is that the desire represented as being embodied in the figure of a car, Christine, can be a sheer product of identification with feminine desire. When the female protagonist, Leigh, declares, 'Why? You don't like me slapping your girl?!', she denounces the representation of such feminine desire by physically attacking Christine. To be able to denounce the feminine desire inscribed in Christine, Leigh should first be able to negotiate the 'otherness' of herself. In other words, as Cowie's interpretation of Lacanian psychoanalysis suggests, '[a]s a result our image of ourselves always comes to us from outside ourselves, from the place of the other'.<sup>45</sup> The reason why Leigh hates Christine so much is because she sees the monstrosity in herself that is reflected by Christine. In the end, Leigh's monstrosity materializes when she helps to destroy

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<sup>43</sup> *The Fatal Woman*, 1996, p.2

<sup>44</sup> 1997, p.3

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

Christine. The double negation of the feminine subject further illustrates the fact that femininity is to be repudiated or redeemed in Hollywood films especially in the horror genre. This sentiment is shared largely with the classical noir texts.

Central to the dialectic of desire is the idea of identification. Psychoanalysis provides some theoretical conceptions on the subject of identification. When looking at desire, two key issues should be addressed, namely, identification and representation. Identification becomes the centre of Freudian structuring of 'id, ego and superego via the Oedipus and castration complex',<sup>46</sup> which is undervalued by feminist psychoanalysis, which in turn adopts Lacan's account of the mirror image. In cine-psychoanalysis, identification is often associated with the gaze. Identification is also used in the study of a star image<sup>47</sup> to show how an audience can identify with some screen persona and not the characters that they play<sup>48</sup> (see Gledhill's *Stardom*). The perplexity arising from the study of star status is analogous to the affinity between the idea of identification and gaze itself. Judith Still concurs, postulating that the concerns are manifested in two ways: 'on one hand, the general process by which people are brought to make representations and the role of SEXUAL DIFFERENCE in that process or, at least, in the theorization of that process; on the other hand, the context and structure of gendered representations'.<sup>49</sup> Martin Barker postulates that identification is a mechanism through which 'the symbolic formations of films, their subtexts, their "messages" are conveyed to those primal parts of our mind which operate behind and below the "rational" levels', and therefore constitutes a process of both "engagement" and "entrapment".<sup>50</sup> In this case, identification in itself is an anxiety that filmic representation covertly tries to address, especially concerning the identification with the female characters. This anxiety is expressed alongside the feeling of guilt, as noir texts investigate femaleness while concomitantly questioning the positioning of maleness or masculinity as the identifier of the signified subject. In the context of the noir genre, Lee Horsley sees the sociological

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<sup>46</sup> Janet Sayers, 'Identification', in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Elizabeth Wright, 1996, p.168

<sup>47</sup> Richard Dyer's *Star*(London: BFI, 1998), which combines semiotic and sociological approaches is the pioneer in the study of star image.

<sup>48</sup> See also Christine Gledhill's *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (1998) for further discussion on this.

<sup>49</sup> 'Representation', in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Elizabeth Wright, 1996, p.378

<sup>50</sup> 'Crashing Out', *Screen*, 2002, p.76

potential of its ability to literalise guilt: 'the guilt represented in the noir thriller is both individual and social, the narrative is thus both transgressive and critical [...] It expresses fears and anxieties but also has the potential for critique, for undermining complacency and illusions'.<sup>51</sup>

The idea that a woman is an embodiment of a male fantasy is a ramification of the theorization of the gaze as being male or masculine, and this is an apprehension that neo-noir texts are increasingly eager to destabilize. In contemporary cinema, a female body is sexualised and commodified especially in the wake of a body culture that informs the psychology of a capitalist state. Unlike the classical noir narrative which is often predicated on the expression of male anxiety as the controller of the narrative and women as the subjects of the narrative itself, neo-noir texts cash in on the burgeoning interest in post-feminism by making the active roles played by men redundant. If the classical noir's fascination with subjugated female characters oftentimes (as they are the embodiment of recurrent male anxieties) is ironically expressed by the power that these women have upon the men, neo-noir texts destabilize this desire to the point that both gendered bodies are perpetually commercialised. Brian Jarvis, for instance, asserts that '[a]s desire is channelled towards consumerism and the fetishism of commodities, reification intensifies to such a level that the consuming self itself becomes objectified as capitalism's most valuable product'.<sup>52</sup> With the withering of Western gender polarities, linked with postmodernism's trend of forestalling categorization, neo-noir texts have increasingly formed desire within this context, accentuating noir's tradition of mirroring contemporary anxieties. Besides, as these characters are also constructed based on cultural stereotypes, hence their iconic status, gender definition is no longer a restriction, but provides room to manoeuvre. Consequently, these transgressors dissolve the boundaries imposed on them by relying on gender politics as the primary mechanism. In the postmodern context, these transgressors are also emblematic of the dissolving and destabilizing of boundaries accentuated by this gender politics. This paradoxical aspect of postmodernism also enhances the neo-noir mood and facilitates the mechanisms that allow the re-inscribing of female desire to take place, that is, by foregrounding not only gender distinction but also by foregrounding liberation over domination.

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<sup>51</sup> *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.12

<sup>52</sup> 'Watching the Detectives: Body Images, Sexual Politics and Ideology in Contemporary Crime Film', in *Criminal Proceedings*, ed. by Peter Messent, 1997, p.225

The main implication of this destabilisation of gender division can be seen in the way desire is represented in neo-noir texts. If the noir thriller's 'preoccupation with the relationship between masculinity and desire'<sup>53</sup> explains why the noir world pullulates with dangerous female sexuality, the same cannot be said about neo-noir texts, and it is this ambivalence over the treatment of the female characters and desire that sets the sub-genre apart from its genre. In his study of hardboiled and *roman noir* texts, Christopher Metress asserts that:

[...] the *roman noir* questions and negates the mastery of desire that is so fundamental to the masculine heroics of the hardboiled detective novel. If, as Chandler suggests, the masculinity of the detective hero is defined by his response to desire, then, as the novels of Cain, Thompson, and Goodis suggest, the masculinity of the *roman noir* is threatened by—not defined by—his response to desire. In the *roman noir* then, the problem for the hero is not how to order desire, how to subordinate and pursue passions in a manly and honorable way [...], but whether or not he can desire at all without initiating a swift process of self-destruction.<sup>54</sup>

Neo-noir texts, on the other hand, consciously play around with the axis of female characters and desire, allowing them to ridicule the tenets of canonical noir. Desire, in this context, can be destructive and constructive, but more importantly, its ambivalence misplaces and displaces its correlation with gender division. In short, neo-noir texts celebrate desire and its potential as a dream and nightmare of both masculinity and femininity.

I will propose that, although a female gender in some texts chosen is defined neither by the conventional gender division nor the ontologically organic determination, its exposition is still discernible by looking at the transgressive characters who contest the Western dichotomy and cross the conventional gender boundary. In *Christine* for instance, the film is an illustration of how genre mutation works at the narrative level. A car that can repair and move by itself is definitely within the science fiction and horror genres. Nonetheless, the 'mind' of the car is characteristically that of a 'woman' who shows its love to its owner by taking revenge on his behalf. Named Christine, as indignantly argued by the female protagonist, Leigh, 'The car is a girl!', its deadly 'activities' that include murderous revenge and jealous attacks are resonant of the 'monstrous feminine' in

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<sup>53</sup> Christopher Metress, 'Living Degree Zero: Masculinity and the Threat of Desire in the *Roman Noir*', in *Fictions of Masculinity*, ed. by Peter F. Murphy, 1994, p.156

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.158



horror films. What the film tries to show is that the combination of obsession and female desire can lead to a horrific ending, in this case, the death of the male protagonist, Arnie Cunningham (Keith Gordon). Needless to say, just like many other deadly 'female' characters, Christine also gets her comeuppance by being squashed into scrap metal. My interest is in looking at neo-noir texts that deal with desire as the integral motivation of their characters, showing how their transgressiveness can result in the deconstruction and destabilisation of the gender binary.

This slippery area of discussion concerning desire and transgression in itself can be taken as a metaphor for the new anxiety that arises from this postmodern trend of destabilizing and deconstructing the dominant power structure and narrative by means of boundary crossing. The destabilized self is often revisited in the form of a pastiche that dislocates the progenitor of that particular self. In other words, an uprooted self, divorced from its origin and social context, can be perceived as an object without identity or desire. Therefore, I will suggest that imbued with spatial clues such as the body, mind and cyberspace, there are still some elements of 'femaleness' that can be traced back from the genre's standard representation of the female transgressors. In short, body, mind and cyberspace are spatial signs that signify the text's realignment with gender identity, thus re-inscribing the traditional gender division. Drawing from my analysis of transgressive figures, I will illustrate how the coupling of neo-noir moods and style, and postmodern structure allows for the body to dissolve into irrelevance, and enables the expression of the female self or desire to prevail. The rest of this chapter will try to show the transition or evolution involving the representation of the (female) transgressors and the context in which it takes place.

### **Performative Gender Changes**

'Performative Gender Changes' is not a form of demarcation that draws one of the topographical boundaries in gender categorisation. Rather it informs this section as a critical category that foregrounds the shift in the theorization of the representation of a gendered identity that takes place within the figure of transgressor. In addition to signifying the fluidity of gender definition in postmodernist texts, the transition is also rooted in the nature of transgression itself, which allows gender prescription to be dismantled, dissolved and fragmented, allowing for the formation of a hybrid subject to take place. It is in this very state of gender fluidity that feminism finds liberation. Indeed, Pam Cook has noted that 'new feminist movies transgress boundaries/—[...]—finding their identities in the very act

of transgression.<sup>55</sup> The disparate variety of character types subsumed under this critical category reflects the scale on which transgressors can mobilize within the neo-noir thriller sub-genre. This category also deals with the way the destabilized self affects the theorization of the subject, in both the literary and cinematic representation of the transgressors, when the crossing of the traditional boundary of gender roles takes place. In short, theorising gender as performative marks one of the transitions of boundary crossing involving a certain performance in gender roles, allowing, especially in the neo-noir crime genre, for the ‘female’ characters to find their liberatory voices.

This section is looking at several neo-noir novels and films that foreground the representation of gender as performance, arguing that gender, as a construct, ‘is nothing if not performative’.<sup>56</sup> The concept of performativity is adopted from Judith Butler’s theorization of the term that ‘captures the ways in which gender and sexual identifications are continually remade through repetition, or the compelled performance of dominant discourse’.<sup>57</sup> Keith Harvey and Celia Shalom add that ‘the idea of repetition is crucial here: it not only allows one to explain how gender roles are consolidated, but also opens up a space in which variation, modification and subversion become possible’.<sup>58</sup> In effect, performance here can be taken as a way in which gender roles are being played or performed by the characters rather than being prescribed or determined by either biological or cultural conditions. This also means that the theory of the performative subscribes to the idea that gender roles and identities are independent from the Freudian Oedipus complex; thus denying masculinity as the standard of normalcy. Consequently, by ‘disavowing assumptions of foundational, pre-discursive moments and the concomitant notion of autonomous masterful subject’,<sup>59</sup> the critics on gender division can start moving beyond such hegemonic restrictions. This is important in the theorization of the transgressors as it marks the point of departure for gender crossing which affects the way a female body is represented and to a certain extent perceived. The subversion of gender expectations is possible when performance, which paradoxically relies on gender

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<sup>55</sup> *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, 1997, pp.xiii/xiv

<sup>56</sup> Kimberly Lenz, ‘Put the Blame on Gilda: Dyke Noir Vs Film Noir’, *Theatre Studies*, 1995, p.20

<sup>57</sup> in Lise Nelson, ‘Bodies (and Spaces) do Matter: the Limits of Performativity’, *Gender, Place and Culture*, 1999, p.331

<sup>58</sup> *Language and Desire: Encoding Sex, Romance and Intimacy*, 1997, p.14

<sup>59</sup> Lise Nelson, ‘Bodies (and Spaces) do Matter: the Limits of Performativity’, *Gender, Place and Culture*, 1999, p.331

stereotype as a point of reference, is able to destabilize the category of gender, resulting in a disconcerting view of a unified subject. Performance is directly linked to the notion of gender as a process, in which gender roles are ‘processual’,<sup>60</sup> and are constructed based on the fragmentation of the (previously) unified self. This is in tandem with the definition of ‘the concept of postmodern subjectivity as irretrievably fragmented, diffused, and completely constructed.’<sup>61</sup> The meaning of a text across the movement of gender crossing and fragmentation by postmodernism allows the construction or deconstruction of a self to take place and at the same time dislocates or relocates the self out of its social context. This section will look at how the dislocation and relocation affect the way the (female) transgressive characters in neo-noir texts are represented and the way liberation can be understood from these transitions.

In the classical noir narratives, gender roles are reinforced by associating or assigning the femme fatale with the role of a naturally disruptive force that further alienates the male protagonist from his society. This natural force can only be explained, ironically, by understanding her role as culturally constructed. Gender assignment, then, reflects the prominent aspect of masculine dominance that embodies ‘the threat of loss of male control’ in noir texts.<sup>62</sup> Male autonomy, as embodied in a figure like Mickey Spillane’s Mike Hammer, for instance, is protected with excessive virility, allowing the subjugation of the female characters to occur. In this case, the culture and nature debate is central as the figure of a femme fatale is the product of both cultural and natural representations of a woman. An instance of how the natural is used to further negate or stultify the cultural construction of a femme fatale can be seen in Joseph H. Lewis’s *Gun Crazy*<sup>63</sup> a.k.a *Deadly is the Female* (1949) in which the disparate way of introducing both male and female protagonists signifies their contrasting characteristics. The film is about Bart Tare (John Dall) who has been obsessed with guns since he was a child. The film introduces Bart as a small and scared boy who tries to steal a gun in a hardware store. The beginning of the film is expressionistic with rain and darkness used as symbols that foreshadow Bart’s doomed and fatal end. Feeling scared and regretting his action, Bart stands in a crucifix fashion in front of the broken glass displayer, further reinforcing the idea that he is actually a victim, or the innocent one. Indeed, even from the beginning of the film, the other

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Marjorie Worthington, ‘Bodies that Natter: Virtual Translations and Transmissions of the Physical’, *Critique*, 2002, p.193

<sup>62</sup> James F. Maxfield, *The Fatal Woman*, 1996, p.2

<sup>63</sup> Reissued title in the USA in 1950

characters testify to Bart's inability to kill by stressing his unthreatening and harmless marksmanship ("He wouldn't kill anything, not even an old mountain lion that had a bounty on him") and his obsession with the gun ("It was as if the gun was simply something he had to have, just as other boys have to have jack-knives, or harmonicas, or baseball bats"), establishing his masculinity as natural, peaceful, inoffensive and innocuous.

This is shown in contrast with the way Annie (Peggy Cummins), his so-called partner in crime, is represented. As a matter of fact, Annie is first introduced by her boss as:

The famous, the dangerous, the beautiful Miss Annie Laurie Starr, direct from London, England...to whose remarkable marksmanship the greatest pistol and rifle shots in America have gone down in defeat. So here she is, ladies and gentlemen, so appealing, so dangerous, so lovely to look at.<sup>64</sup>

The combination of the announcement and her appearance on stage with cowboy attire foregrounds the issue of gender construction, thereby underlining two important aspects of her characterisation: one, her role as a naturally dangerous femme fatale who combines beauty and marksmanship to lure the male protagonist into alienation and the world of crime; two, the context in which she is located suggests a sense of displacement or dislocation from the traditional female roles. Drawn from the anxiety arising from women's economic independence in post-war America, this sense of dislocation is deliberate, foregrounding the themes of sexual dominance and noir fatalism. Central to these themes is the performative aspect of her role that also mirrors her ingenuity in seducing the male protagonist into the criminal world, establishing, irreversibly, the existential conflict prominent in the noir protagonist.

The juxtaposition highlights the anxiety that film noir induces, in representing women's aggressive sexuality as natural, therefore, inevitably fatalistic. The danger that she exudes lies in her ability to also perform a more submissive role that signals her transgressiveness, that is, the ability to oscillate between passivity and activity. In the film, Annie uses not only her sexuality and femininity to obtain her wants but also, at the same time, manipulates the cultural expectation of a man as the 'breadwinner' of the family to further defeat him. Indeed, in the course of the film, the dichotomy of nature and culture is transgressed by Annie who uses her sexuality to 'blackmail' Bart into doing what she wants. When Bart refuses to hold a stick up, she announces:

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<sup>64</sup> *Deadly is the Female*, Dir. Joseph H. Lewis, 1949

Bart, I want things, a lot of things, big things ... I want a guy with spirit and guts. A guy who...will do anything, a guy who can kick over the traces and win the world for me...Come on, Bart, let's finish it the way we started it, on the level.

She knows that by appealing to his weary masculinity she provokes the existential dilemma that causes anguish to the noir protagonist, reflecting not only a post war American attitude towards female independence but also a symbolic absorption of his masculinity. Cultural expectation of a man, in effect, is used by Annie to defeat Bart's harmless nature, modulating his blasé outlook into noir obsession and fatalism. Her femininity is also exaggerated, allowing the audience to be constantly aware of her gender, despite her role as an active and 'masculine' character. For that reason, her femininity is considered both natural and 'performed', but in both cases, she is the epitome of noir's fatalistic desire all the same.

### The Misfits

What the theory of performativity does involve is the blurring of the dichotomy of gender as naturally determined or culturally constructed. Femininity as both natural and 'performed' is often underlined in neo-noir's representation of transgressive women especially in the form of pastiche, parody, and satire—as if paying homage to classical noir texts. Neo-noir texts, especially the ones written by female writers, often cross the nature and culture divide by allowing the female characters to be sexually promiscuous and economically independent, but they may or may not get away with their crimes. Reminiscent of both femmes fatales and noir heroes in the classical noir texts, this postmodern female figure is what Kate Stables calls 'a creature of excess and spectacle'<sup>65</sup> who has 'the ability to avoid textual suppression'.<sup>66</sup> In other words, transgressive female characters in neo-noir texts are not only imbued with the characteristics of both the redeeming and femme fatale figures, but they also share the existential dilemma of classical noir protagonists, reflecting the contemporary discourse around 'woman'.<sup>67</sup> In literary noir, this instance can be seen in books written by Vicki Hendricks viz., *Miami Purity* and *Iguana Love*, in which the female characters defy categorisation, as they

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<sup>65</sup> 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing the Femme Fatale in 90s Cinema', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.167

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.171

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, p.165

are the conflation of a noir protagonist ridden with existential conflicts and a femme fatale with fatalistic tendencies. Woody Haut observes that ‘*Miami Purity*, as a parody of how men think women think about men, might be said to have been written from the viewpoint of a woman imagined by a man imagined by a woman’.<sup>68</sup> Haut’s observation is informed less by the points of view the books are written from than the way Hendricks de-locates the ideological basis for her female characters.

The shift in the ideological basis can be traced on the back cover of Vicki Hendricks’s *Iguana Love*,<sup>69</sup> in the review that summarises her attitude towards the crime genre itself:

*Miami Purity*, Vicki Hendricks’s first novel, reclaimed for women a genre too often seen as male-only. *Iguana Love* takes further her unique mix of muscle, sex and violence.

The review highlights the propensity that female writers have in (re)joining and subverting the crime genre by means of transgressing the conventional portrayal of women as physically and sexually passive and timid, or physically and sexually fatal, reminiscent of the two main types of female characters in the noir canon. Neo-noir women, therefore, are defined by their performance, rather than their presence.<sup>70</sup> If, according to Roger Bromley, ‘[t]he organizing of the male subject in the “tough guy” tradition of crime fiction is through the construction of a “libidinal economy” based upon an ideology of masculinity’,<sup>71</sup> these novels challenge such conceptions by structuring the female subjects around the need for survival, assigning their roles less as femmes fatales than as women trying to survive or merely have fun, a palpable resonance of the post-feminist agenda. Whereas the female protagonist in *Miami Purity* (Sherri) is seeking ‘to clean up’<sup>72</sup> after an abusive and absurd relationship, Ramona in *Iguana Love* is ‘a thrill-seeking redhead addicted to adventure’.<sup>73</sup> Both novels are provocative and cynical in the sense that they satirize not only, according to Haut, the nature of the female protagonists by magnifying their desire as ‘the be-all and end-all of

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<sup>68</sup> Woody Haut, *Neon Noir*, 1999, p.175

<sup>69</sup> (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1999)

<sup>70</sup> Kate Stables, ‘Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing the Femme Fatale in 90s Cinema, in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.173

<sup>71</sup> Roger Bromley, ‘Rewriting the Masculine Script: The Novel of Joseph Hansen’, in *Reading Popular Fiction*, ed. by Derek Longhurst, 1989, p.102

<sup>72</sup> This phrase is taken from the review on the back cover of *Miami Purity*.

<sup>73</sup> This is how the novel describes her on the back of the cover of *Iguana Love*.

existence',<sup>74</sup> but also by caricaturing generic conventions as a whole. By magnifying their desire and caricaturing generic conventions, these novels are not only able to undermine the discourse of duality in the crime genre by allowing the female characters to perform gender roles as part of their method of survival, but are also capable of freeing the female characters from the gender trappings often associated with the femme fatale and noir conventions. The ideological implication of this is that these characters are set apart from their male hardboiled counterparts or even their female progenitors, allowing for new epistemological meanings of the subject to form, that is, a subject who has mixed consciousness of the world around her.

The mixed consciousness can also be understood by looking at John Dahl's *The Last Seduction* (1994) in which the female protagonist, Bridget/Wendy Kroy (Linda Fiorentino), is portrayed as a diehard character who will do anything to achieve her goal. At a first glance, Bridget is a postmodernist representation of a femme fatale because her image articulates both the anxiety that men have towards women's independence and the ambivalence that her fatal actions generate, signifying her agency. The film entices us to believe that her sole motivation is money, the manifestation of the film's effort to calibrate her with the role of a *bona fide* femme fatale. However, her cold-blooded actions speak the language of insecurity and desperation; a putative definition of the hunted, hinting at her being engulfed by capitalism. She, in effect, is as much a victim as a perpetrator in a world where money (a symbolic identity of patriarchy) rules. In the realm of the real, she is an 'active' character, possessing the ability to look, to hold the dominant gaze. For instance, after having sex with Mike (Peter Berg), the camera aligns its gaze with hers, eroticising his naked body. Tony Davies theorises this situation, asserting that, '[l]ooking, [...], has less to do with seeing than with dominating; [...] exhibit[ing] some of the semiotic displacement and narcissistic absorption of a fetish.'<sup>75</sup> Therefore, the gaze not only accentuates her domination, but also, ironically, weakens her as a subject engulfed by her own fetishism. In this sense, according to Lee Horsley, 'noir accentuates fear and anxiety, ambivalence and vulnerability.'<sup>76</sup> This is an aspect of the postmodern paradox that, for this reason, helps to explain Bridget's character; she is a subject not moulded

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<sup>74</sup> Woody Haut, *Neon Noir*, 1999, p.175

<sup>75</sup> Tony Davies, 'The Divided Gaze: Reflections on the Political Thriller', in *Reading Popular Fiction*, ed. by Derek Longhurst, 1989, p. 118-119

<sup>76</sup> *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.8

by mere role-reversal, but informed by the post-feminist view of hybrid subjectivity. John Orr argues that:

The problem for the sexy noir fall-guy is not so much forbidden desire as the surfeit of desire, the male body is in constant demand, working sexual overtime [...] Women are desiring but no longer adoring.<sup>77</sup>

Bridget simply does not care.

In the United Kingdom, there is a ‘new wave’ of crime writers whose works are quintessentially and ‘distinctively British in tone, style and setting’.<sup>78</sup> Lee Horsley points this out by stressing that this new band of writers is not only interested in exploring their regional urban locations, but also the psyche of the ‘female’ characters, reminiscent of noir visual styles and mise-en-scene. Writers like Nicholas Blincoe, Liza Cody and Stella Duffy<sup>79</sup> also introduce characters who challenge the stereotypical representation of women in crime novels, relying on not only role-reversal, but also the inversion of the crime genre itself. Coterminous with noir’s dark mood and interest in the destabilization of the notion of oneself, gender divisions in these novels are destabilized and they are used as a reversal or subversion to enable the narrative to challenge the Western dichotomy of gender stereotyping as well as to question the stability of the holder of the gaze. A fragmented subject provides many precarious assumptions about gender roles, foregrounding the problem in apotheosising masculine chivalry in the narratives of such crime novels.

In contrast to Hendricks, who uses ‘performance’ to blur the culture/nature divide, performativity is used by Liza Cody to distinguish the natural from the cultural. Cody’s *Monkey Wrench (MW)* and *Musclebound (M)* are part of a trilogy chronicling the life of a physically strong female character, Eva Wylie A.K.A London Lassassin, a wrestler reputed to be ‘one of the meanest, toughest villains in the business’ (*MW*, p.2). As a wrestler, she is a performer who is paid to provide a veneer of physical actions and appear tough, often reflected by the use of hardboiled verbal exchanges between Eva and the other characters, fulfilling cultural expectations about her. Nonetheless, the first person narration employed by Cody provides a dramatic irony that to some extent parodies the hardboiled dialogue of crime novels written by James M. Cain and Mickey Spillane. On the surface, that is as a performer/wrestler, she is cold-hearted

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<sup>77</sup> *Contemporary Cinema*, 1998, p.191

<sup>78</sup> Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.223

<sup>79</sup> The novels by these ‘new wave’ writers include Blincoe’s *Acid Casuals*, Liza Cody’s *Monkey Wrench* and *Musclebound*, and Duffy’s *Calendar Girl*.



(“You think I’m a cold-hearted bitch, do you? Or maybe you don’t. Maybe you think I am pretending to be a cold-hearted bitch to protect my image” (*MW*, p.10), “And I mustn’t laugh, ‘cos when I laugh he thinks I am soft. Which I ain’t. I’m the boss. And that’s a fact he better not forget” (*M*, p. 2)). In fact, however, as Eva Wylie herself admits, ‘deep down inside she’s soft and warm and cuddly’ (*MW*, p.10), suggesting that she is simulating and faking ‘maleness’. This also ‘denotes the feminine masquerade, in the Irigarayan sense, which woman performs in enacting male-defined scripts and roles.’<sup>80</sup> These abilities form, according to Bromley, ‘the most subversive female figure in crime fiction’.<sup>81</sup> Her performance in the form of her physical strength and hardboiled articulations, hence, can be seen as a response to certain ideological and psychological imperatives that her inner dialogue cannot deal with. Again, her body cannot escape the idea that it ‘is a contested cultural site [...], [whereby the] questioning and refashioning of the body coincides with a number of fierce political battles that are currently fought over issues of personal freedom and control of the body.’<sup>82</sup>

### The Cross-dresser and the Transsexual

One of the effects of boundary crossing is that the gaze or voyeuristic tendency of the male characters and audience alike is significantly displaced, creating a very disorientating view of the signified subject. What is called into question is the stability of the gazer rather than the objectification of the subject. The theoretical application of desire in relation to the gaze is somewhat similar in both literary and cinematic representation. As Elizabeth Cowie postulates, ‘the pleasure of representation lies not only in what is signified—a meaning—in the traditional, realist, sense, that is a coming to know; it also lies in a coming to desire made possible by the scenario of desire which I come to participate in as I watch a film, view an image, or read a text’.<sup>83</sup> The cinematic gaze is contested not only by the occurrence of against-stereotype bodies such as physically aggressive female characters (Pvt. J

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<sup>80</sup> Paulina Palmer, ‘The Lesbian Thriller: Transgressive Investigations’, in *Criminal Proceedings*, ed. by Peter Messent, 1997, p.98

<sup>81</sup> Roger Bromley, ‘Rewriting the Masculine Script: The Novels of Joseph Hansen’, in *Reading Popular Fiction*, ed. by Derek Longhurst, 1989, p.103

<sup>82</sup> Deborah S. Wilson and Christine Moneera Laennec, eds., *Bodily Discursions: Genders, Representations, Technologies*, 1997, p.4

<sup>83</sup> Elizabeth Cowie, *Representing the Woman*, 1997, p.4

Vasquez in *Aliens*)<sup>84</sup> but also the exaggerated representation of femininity as often embodied in the (comically effective) lesbian characters like Violet in *Bound*.<sup>85</sup> In literary noir texts, noir narrative style coalesces with its convoluted plot structure, giving some room for the characters that inhabit the text to manoeuvre freely, adding fuel to their agency. Noir elements, then, are of paramount importance because while they translate female desire and body into a form of representation, they also complicate and implicate the gazer's association with the signified subject. As the body of the signified subject is no longer an indication of any physical limitation or barrier, its fluidity presents a challenge especially in terms of identification. The dismantling of the identification with the signified subjects can be achieved by both misplacing and displacing the gaze as a result of the fragmentation of the identity of the subjects, which denies the audience's full anticipation, leaving them feeling disorientated—a feeling normally associated with noir's effect on the audience/reader. Indeed, the new 'female' body, as represented in the chosen texts, challenges the cultural production of such an image so that a new recuperative reading of such a representation can be made. One of these challenges has resulted in the need for a reversal of the audience/reader's expectation with regard to the images of the characters so that full participation or an anticipatory reading does not take place. In other words, the transient image of gender roles as performative has succeeded in confusing and disorientating the audience, culminating in not only the liberation of the 'female' subject but also in challenges that yield some questions concerning the nature of the gaze itself. However, this section will look at the male cross-dresser and transgender characters, trying to find out whether this form of 'female' representation liberates or oppresses them.

One crucial site in which the theorization of gaze is incessantly challenged is that of gender as a disguise, as in the case of a cross-dresser or a transgendered person. Paul Theroux's *Chicago Loop* uses gender as a disguise to question the nature of the gaze and voyeurism, relying on gender stereotyping as a mechanism that eventually enables the male protagonist to experience subjugation. However, rather than dissolving the boundary between femininity and masculinity, the end product seems to reinforce and perpetuate the conventional category of gender. Part of this conflict arises from the narrative technique employed by Theroux. The third person narration is used in this novel to set up a mood that is a tally with the conventional sense of voyeurism experienced by both the male

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<sup>84</sup> Played by Jenette Goldstein, dir. John Cameron, 1986

<sup>85</sup> Played by Jennifer Tilly, dir. Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1996

protagonist and the reader. Like the third person narration in classical noir texts, it has two functions in this novel. First, it is a technique employed by Theroux to implicate the reader by organizing the view of the novel from a more objective angle. An objective angle facilitates the unfolding of the story along with Parker's venturing into the event that leads him into a murder, giving the audience enough space to identify with his character and ordeal. At the level of ideological symbolism, subconsciously, the readers will be irreversibly implicated by his view as well as his actions, and will become aligned to his role as the protagonist. This argument has its danger as the audience is assumed masculine or active, which is not necessarily so. Nonetheless, the third person narration in this case is effective in creating a sense of voyeurism as it negotiates the 'organized gaze' belonging to the male protagonist with the stereotypical representation of femininity. Consequently, having been subconsciously trapped by familiar images of masculine as well as feminine representation, the audience is complicit within Parker's gaze and actions, destabilizing the gazer itself. This is so because for the disengagement to take place the audience must first be voluntarily engaged with the character, creating a trap between letting go and succumbing to the character's disillusionment, both of which result in the disorientation of the readers' (dis)position. This disillusionment yields a guilty position for the reader by fashioning its narrative in a manner akin to the canonical noir texts. Secondly, an objective point of view also empowers him, allowing him to be seen as a victim rather than a perpetrator. The guilt is deliberately shifted, accentuating the psychology of a sadist that he regularly exhibits.

*Chicago Loop* tells the story of a Chicago psychopath named Parker Jagoda who advertises himself in the Personal columns of the newspapers to find a date. Parker lives a double life. On one hand, he is happy with his wife and son, and on the other, he is a hermit who has 'no friends' (p.2) and his social life is 'like an alien' (ibid.). For him, 'her acceptance of them [his words] helped him wish himself into existence' (p.7). This kind of perception, originating neither from a mere role-reversal nor psychological sublime, challenges the traditional male role in which men define women and not vice versa. For instance, in an incident in which he ends up killing a woman called Sharon in the act of orgasmic sexual pleasure, he feels the need to understand women's subjectivity, especially Sharon's. Apparently imbued with sado-masochistic tendencies, the novel, through Parker's character, questions the central issue in voyeurism.<sup>86</sup> In

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<sup>86</sup> Lee Horsley, in her analysis of the novel, argues that 'one of the central questions in the analysis of voyeurism, as of sadism, is to do with complicity of the victim—the acquiescence of the passive person. Choice is something that Theroux's

understanding his victim, Parker goes through physical transformation by dressing up and behaving like Sharon, thus allowing himself to be a victim of abuse and harassment ('*like that dyke over there*' (p.151)). Inevitably, he becomes the object of the 'male' gaze and consistently reminds himself that he 'was not a spectator: he was not a man' (ibid.) As an object of (masculine) gaze, he was made invisible by the narrative and 'preferred the dark' (p.149) where he can feel 'bold and hopeless' (p.140). The descent of the male protagonist into female objectivity allows the novel to be categorized as a neo-noir novel, foregrounding noir fatalism and determination. The noir world that Parker chooses to inhabit is a fabricated world in which he is the process and the product of the fabrication, highlighting gender transformation as performative. His cross-dressing, hence his status as a transgressor, is an apparent performance of gender stereotype which illustrates how this subjugation by the narrative is possible.

It would be facile to assume that a male cross-dresser trying to comprehend female subjugation would empower women. To support my case, I will apply the analysis of the film *Boys Don't Cry* by Judith Halberstam<sup>87</sup> to show how this is so. Even though cross-dressing and transgender are generally different, they provide the same underlying principle in understanding the nature of gaze. The disjuncture alludes to the idea that unlike *Boys*, which according to Halberstam, 'keeps the viewer trained upon the seriousness of Brandon's masculinity, the authenticity of his presentation as opposed to its elements of masquerade',<sup>88</sup> *Chicago Loop* does not offer such a recuperative reading since the act of cross dressing is more deliberately close to masquerading a gender. However, both gender transformations are gradual processes, a crucial element in the theorisation of performativity. Parker's desperation to feel 'subjugated' and 'victimised' as a woman is bewildering, as portrayed by Theroux, and can be identified as a way of reinstating the masculine gaze. In *Boys*, Halberstam argues that:

Not only does *Boys* create a transgender subject position which is fortified by the traditional operations of the gaze and conventional modes of gendering, it also makes the transgender subject dependent upon the recognition of a woman.<sup>89</sup>

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psychopathic protagonist, Parker Jagoda, feels he gives to his victim, Sharon.' In *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.213

<sup>87</sup> 'The Transgender Gaze in *Boys Don't Cry*', *Screen*, 42(2001), p.296

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, p.297

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p.296

Parker's cross-dressing subject, a sign of his emasculation, on the contrary, is dependent upon the recognition of men to fulfil his sadistic requirement, reaffirming the discourse of dualism in the theorization of the masculine gaze. His disguise exposes the ideological discontent of the male heterosexual gaze that it temporarily disarms, at the expense of female subjectivity. His physical make up recalls the 'politics of appearance', that is, as Rita Freedman argues, 'the idealisation of female appearance camouflages the underlying belief in female inferiority'.<sup>90</sup> Gender differences are therefore ironically reinstated, subordinating female subjectivity along the way.

Unlike a cross-dresser, gender as performative reaches its subliminal level in a transsexual character. Whereas a cross-dresser may go through material changes only, that is at the level of clothing and make up, hence the affinity with fetishism, a transsexual has not only the psychological urge to belong to the opposite sex, but may go a step further by going through an operation to 'modify' the sex organ. The sublimation of a transsexual body poses a new question concerning gaze and identification: Is this bodily transformation empowering to the image of a woman in general? In Nicholas Blincoe's *Acid Casuals*, the story of a transsexual hit wo/man is told from a third person point of view to allow for the expression of 'femaleness' to take place. Even from the outset of the novel, Blincoe does not make Estela's transsexuality a secret, but intentionally provides clues to it in the way we are introduced to her ('Neither the accent nor her looks were English', 'She wore a ton of make up and there was nothing natural about it but she was no dog' (p.1), and 'This woman had made herself into a cinema queen' (p.2)). The partial revelation about Estela's identity from the beginning plays important roles not only in turning the crime story into a how-to-do-it narrative, moving the focus temporarily from her characterisation (and body) to the narrative of the text itself, but also creating a sense of dramatic irony that privileges her over other characters.

An important element of Estela's transsexuality is that it is also revertible, making it a choice (construct) rather than a determination (autonomous control). On one occasion, when meeting her old friend, Michael Moss, she surprises him by 'dropping her voice to a nasal drone' (p.93), speaking in Manchester's accent to reveal to him who she really is. If the *bona fide* femme fatale's association with a gun is psychoanalytically seen as a 'penis envy' syndrome, Estela makes it clear

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<sup>90</sup> cited in Vicki Coppock, Deena Haydon and Ingrid Richter, *The Illusions of 'Post-feminism': New Women, Old Myths*, 1995, p.24

that ‘I never had any reason to miss my cock’ (p.104), freeing her from the symbolic into the realm of the real. Her intention, as she told Theresa: ‘Don’t hurry me, Theresa. I am not a girl any longer, I need time to put right what nature is set on putting wrong’ (p.183), signifies the act of constructing femininity and deconstructing masculinity through stages. These stages underline Estela’s claim that ‘even as a boy, she had woman’s intuition’ (p. 52), suggesting that like femininity, masculinity is also a process and not as monolithic as it first seems. Gender for Paul/Estela is performative, allowing her to perform femininity with ‘preposterous burlesque’ (p. 184), not only turning herself from ‘almost a virgin’ (p. 5) into a ‘killer tart’ (p.209) but also ‘restoring’ the order of the crime world she ventures into. The ambiguity in gender division, created by a transsexual figure like Estela, gives her choices, ‘both could look quite dramatic—either a demon or an angel’, and she chooses to be ‘a pouting angel in punky drag’ (p.229).

In addition to giving the transsexual choices of gender identity, transgender character not only transgresses gender categorisation, but it also relies on gender stereotypes to undermine such a classification, especially with regard to the romance narrative, a common narrative in canonical noir. The stereotype perpetuated by the romance narrative is therefore subverted and what we once held dear between a man and a woman is no longer true, and our anticipation is challenged by such a twist of mood, which effectively disorients us from the direction of the narrative. In this case, the fact that gender difference and stereotype are arbitrary has been manipulated by Neil Jordan in his film *The Crying Game* to trap the audience’s expectation, creating ‘the reversal of expectations’<sup>91</sup> on the other characters’ and audiences’ part. This is important in some ways. First, in building towards its narrative climax, this ‘reversal of expectations’ allows the film to ‘tease’ the male protagonist as well as the audience at every possible moment. This means the stereotypical representation of gender is used to organize the expectation only to be dismantled piece by piece. Second, the effectiveness and believability of the plot also relies on the way genders are stereotyped. When Jody admits to Ferguson while pointing at Dil’s photo, “Now she is my type”, the racial and gender stereotype and expectation are at play. The question arises of whether his ‘type’ is determined by gender or racial expectations (Dil is also Black) or both, only to be revealed later that it is gender that dominates the whole picture. Third, the arbitrariness of gender differences also permits the protagonists (Ferguson and Dil) to manoeuvre

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<sup>91</sup> Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.204

within a certain gender expectation, and eventually facilitates the crossing of the boundaries of gender roles. With the ability to manoeuvre and cross the boundaries of gender stereotype, the characters organize a certain expectation for the audience as a means of trapping them, only to reverse the expectation later.

Even at the outset of the film, the narrative succeeds in structuring and organizing the audience's expectation with help from the music score and visual elements. This is central in building up suspense and concomitantly deconstructing the visuals represented before. For instance, the film's opening credits set a romantic mood by playing *When a Man Loves a Woman* as a background song before the film shows a couple, a black guy (Jody played by Forest Whitaker) and a white woman (Jude played by Miranda Richardson) frolicking around a funfair. Race, rather than gender, is at the centre of this spectacle. The film shocks us by abruptly moving from this romantic territory into the unexpected IRA terrorism in which Jody is taken hostage.

Analogous to the 'Scorpion and Frog' tale narrated by Jody to Ferguson (the male protagonist as well as one of his captors that he has grown fond of) to appeal to the latter's 'nature', the film challenges the nature/culture divide by relying on stereotype to show the paradox of representation, which results in both the male protagonist's and audience's mis-recognition of the meaning intended. This is achieved by using double-edged dialogues that conceal their double-layered meanings even from the male protagonist. In an effort to gain sympathy from Ferguson, Jody appeals to his nature by associating Ferguson's nature with that of the frog—helpful, gullible and unthreatening. As Ferguson is one of the kidnappers, he is supposed to be just the opposite. Therefore, his interpretation of the tale will be single-layered, involving a certain level of mis-recognition of what Jody actually means. This mis-recognition is also shared by the audience who has so far been fed with familiar images governing gender relationships, i.e., a non-sexual and harmless conversation between two guys in their position. Jody's word choice in complimenting Ferguson ("You are the handsome one" and "Thank you handsome"), while homoerotic, is also ostensibly single-layered and therefore harmless in Ferguson's view. Jody's choice of a girlfriend also reveals the way this paradox is represented and the climactic scene that exposes Dil's sexual identity poses more questions than it provides answers surrounding the definitions of gender and sexuality. The paradox is not understood by Ferguson and the audience for two main reasons: one, Jody is in the army, a profession usually associated with masculinity and heterosexuality, and second, Dil's image fulfils the stereotypical imagination of a woman; she

is a hairdresser and a nightclub singer. Each of them is performing a gender stereotype to feed on the audience's/social expectation.

Gender as performative is used by Jordan, therefore, as a means of reversing both the male protagonist's and audience's expectation. In the film, gender is performed not only by Dil who is a transsexual, but also by Ferguson. When Ferguson decides to pursue Dil, he is ready to imitate and assume some of the characteristics possessed by Jody, without realising what they are. Unlike Dil who is a willing performer, Ferguson is unaware of his role-playing. Judith Butler in her theorization of gender as drag argues that:

If it is in an imitation that regularly *produces* the ideal it (gender) attempts to approximate, then gender is a performance that *produces* the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it produces on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait (that array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation), the illusion of an inner depth. [original italic]<sup>92</sup>

*The Crying Game* intends to do that by dismantling Ferguson's masculinity, which also means the questioning of his gender identity. In the beginning, Ferguson is portrayed as a straight man, oblivious to his bisexuality. When Jody asks him to hold his cock while he pees, Jody's remark that "I swear it wasn't easy for you" is jokingly answered by Ferguson, "The pleasure is mine". At this point, the audience laughs with them, not knowing that they, like Ferguson, are oblivious to what is going on. This also means that the audience's expectation parallels that of Ferguson. Consequently, his ignorance becomes the audience's too. In other words, gender dominance is transformed into a competing force, and masculinity, as a monolithic power structure, 'must repeatedly be won, it exposes masculinity as a process of construction',<sup>93</sup> hence performed. This explains why, after leaving the IRA, Ferguson works as a construction worker, that is, a profession dominated by men.

When Dil's 'true' gender identity is divulged, the audience's gaze is already aligned and fixed with that of Ferguson, and therefore the audience is implicated by their similar oblivion or expectation. This oblivion is exacerbated by point of view camera angle. In the scene where Dil and Ferguson are about to have sex, the camera slithers down Dil's naked body

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<sup>92</sup> 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', in *Inside/Out*, ed. by Diana Fuss, 1991, p.28

<sup>93</sup> Danae Clark, 'The Question of Masculinity', in *Gender: Literary and Cinematic Representation*, ed. by Jeanne Ruppert, 1989, p.41



to reveal her male genitalia. The camera halts, creating a static framing of a male sexual organ, which in this case carries two purposes. One, the halt represents the 'shock' experienced by both Ferguson and the audience. Two, the framing of a male genitalia underlines the significance of what the film is questioning, that is, gender as a mere performance, and a convincing one at that. This convincing performance of gender refers to what Butler calls 'the illusion of an inner depth', as quoted above. In conjunction with that, this scene also calls into question the stability of the gaze and gazer, challenging them by putting male genitalia at the centre of the discourse of abjection. The result is what is described by Tony Davies as the 'climactic *coup d'oeil*',<sup>94</sup> that is, when 'looking', literally, can harm you, as is evident when Ferguson ends up throwing up at the sight of the male sexual organ.

The placing of a male genital on a 'female body' signifies Dil's role as a transgressive figure, thus calling into question the conventional meaning of gender roles and identities. Her body remains at the centre of a conflict that deconstructs the patriarchal conception of gender stereotype, signifying the performativity of gender identity and role. This is so because her performative gender role directly brings the meaning of Ferguson's masculinity into question. In other words, her transgression has resulted in the need to investigate Ferguson's masculinity, placing him in the realm of mystery, a stark contrast to the conventional noir narrative in which female sexuality is often the subject of the investigation. One of the effects of deconstructing the meaning of Ferguson's masculinity and sexuality is the raising of questions about the nature of the gaze itself, which is also at the centre of the issue relevant to gender stereotype and representation, and their possible transgression. Dil, performing the role of a woman with a woman's appearance, is the signified subject, that is, the object to be looked at. The pleasure of looking at her is highlighted, for example, when she performs a song on a stage. As a stage performer, she titillates and enjoys being looked at. Nonetheless, her body represents a conflict that defines what Ferguson is. For Dil, her crossing of the boundary of gender division and prescription comes as 'natural', undermining and blurring what Ferguson thinks s/he is. Once Ferguson realizes who Dil is, his gaze is also changed. This is reflected upon when, revisiting the bar where Dil is a singer, the film begins to highlight the sexuality of the patrons of the bar. In other words, the camera is no longer prescriptive but descriptive, heightening the sexual atmosphere of the gay

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<sup>94</sup> 'The Divided Gaze: Reflections on the Political Thriller', in *Reading Popular Fiction*, ed. by Derek Longhurst, 1989, p.119

bar. In one of the climaxes of the film in which Dil ties Ferguson to bed so that she can avenge Jody's death by shooting Jude, it is Ferguson who assumes the passive role—as insinuated by the tale of the 'Scorpion and Frog'. One question worth pondering is that if performing as a woman is 'natural' for Dil, how can it be a form of performance? The answer lies fundamentally in the idea that in both instances, i.e., as a woman or a 'boy', gender role is a 'process' that she learns through gender stereotyping, amplifying her ability to defy gender prescription under patriarchy. For that reason also, she is less comfortable as a 'boy' as it is imposed by Ferguson. This is an intriguing factor imminent in noir characterization in which the notion of self is non-unified and fragmented, and in Dil's case, hybridised.

The film's interest in the destabilized self or identity is enhanced by its noir tendency of luring the male protagonist into the dark side of human experience. In the tradition of noir characterization, Dil embodies the iconic figure of a femme fatale whose presence signifies danger or threat to the male character. Her threat is not to do with the way she draws Ferguson into her world of gender crossing, but with the willingness on the part of Ferguson to participate. This willingness is driven less by guilt than by obsession, consigning Dil to Ferguson's masochistic fantasy, a defining element of film noir's fatalism. Unlike the classical femmes fatales who are often deadly, Dil is also reassuring or redeeming. The dismantling of the dichotomy of threat and assurance by Dil's character confuses Ferguson, and the film devotes most of its later part to deconstructing the latter's masculinity by revealing his preference for the same sex (as opposed to gender) body. This is shown when, in an act of desperation to protect Dil, he transforms the 'female' Dil into a 'boy', with short hair and cricket jacket. His assumption that gender stability (which he hopes to achieve by 'restoring' Dil's gender identity) is defined by biological conditions and determinations stems from his own identity crisis, as his 'dark and secret' passion is unravelled. Reminiscent of the classical noir texts' tendency to destabilize the notion of a unified self, this kind of anxiety reveals the struggle of the hegemonic force to maintain gender dichotomy.

### **The Investigator**

Building on French theorist Luce Irigaray's theorisation of 'feminine masquerade', Paulina Palmer asserts that:

By parodically mimicking conventional images of femininity, and introducing into their performance a note of 'excess', women, Irigaray argues, can expose their inauthenticity, and at the same time, assume a degree of agency'.<sup>95</sup>

Palmer's assertion not only introduces the term 'excess' to encapsulate gender identity as a performance, but also brings the idea of inauthenticity and agency into the fore, thus illuminating postmodern motifs of female subjectivity. This is particularly true in the apprehension of contemporary female investigators in which the element of 'excess' harks back to female investigators in the past who were often invested with the extrapolation and exaggeration of femininity, which sometimes resulted in, paradoxically, comical and animated representation and characterization. This postmodern figuration effectively situates these female transgressors within a social and cultural context that they are not usually associated with, signifying not their post-war American displacement but the shift in epistemological power. In the context of the female investigative figure, this epistemological power marks a shift in role-reversal in which it is now the female 'detectives who assumes the role of reading sign and chasing knowledge [...] privileging the women's voices, offering a woman-centred interpretation rather than masculine readings'.<sup>96</sup>

Often, in an effort to place these characters within a certain sociological context, the female investigators are given the jobs/cases that are usually suited to male investigators only. Nonetheless, being a woman can be an advantage, in the sense that they are assigned to certain cases especially due to the fact that they are women. For instance, in Martin Amis's *Night Train*, Mike Hoolihan is asked to handle the suicide case because she is 'a woman. But I think you are tough enough' (p.64). In many female investigators' stories, the plot loyally follows the standard hardboiled narrative, foregrounding both the chivalry and insecurity of the protagonist. Sally Munt in *Murder by the Book?* postulates that 'the role of female investigator is located as new, naïve, transgressive and sexualised (the virgin/whore binary is implicated and then collapsed within the same image)'.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, these female investigators defy gender stereotypes by venturing into the male world without actually compromising their gender

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<sup>95</sup> 'The Lesbian Thriller: Transgressive Investigation', in *Criminal Proceedings*, ed. by Peter Messent, 1997, p.97

<sup>96</sup> Sabine Vanacker, 'V.I Warshawski, Kinsey Millhore and Kay Scarpetta: Creating a Feminist Detective Hero', in *Criminal Proceedings*, ed. by Peter Messent, 1997, p.79

<sup>97</sup> 1994, p.32

identity, which is resonant of the liberal feminist idea of the ‘liberated woman, who is equal to the male role but still retains femininity—strong within her gender role’.<sup>98</sup> To a great extent, female noir crime investigators, then, are hybrid subjects, jettisoning the idea that they exist merely due to role-reversal or generic subversion or inversion while, simultaneously, carrying the burden of demystifying a historically ‘masculinist model’,<sup>99</sup> that is, the tendency to ‘celebrate traditionally masculine values and to reinforce conservative social attitudes’.<sup>100</sup> Hybrid subjects are transgressors, transgressing gender roles and generic conventions. Therefore, their new and varied roles as investigative figures are also performative, a signpost of their effort to penetrate a male dominated world and profession.

While still facing challenges associated with working in a man’s world, such as the fact that these female characters have to overcome prejudices and personal hostilities from society and especially from their own male counterparts, to succeed in their profession they have to form a kind of female alliance or network with other female characters whose information and assistance facilitate their investigation. This female alliance is important as it represents a ‘counter culture’ attitude towards crime, foregrounding the sisterhood that feminism has promulgated. In *V.I. Warshawski*, for instance, a female alliance is formed between Vicky, Bernard’s daughter (Kat), and Sal, a Golden Glow bartender, which according to Sally Munt, breaks the traditional form ‘by having this female friendship at the narrative centre; it legitimises this intimacy and accords it with literary value’.<sup>101</sup> In *Night Train*, an alliance is found between Mike and Jennifer’s mother (Miriam) and to a certain extent Phyllida Trounce, Jennifer’s ex-roommate, marking the main shift in the nature of their subjectivity, which also means that they have to come to terms with their new form of subjectivity. The strategy of coming to terms with their new subjectivity can be seen in their names, V.I. and Mike, which represent not only the ambiguity of gender identity but also highlight the ambience of the environment they are in. As a strategy, it affects the ideological foundation of the characters. Whereas V.I.’s insistence on using androgynous initials has a degree of comic effect, Mike’s name has a hardboiled feel to it, resonant of Mike Hammer’s tradition.

Roger Ebert observes that the eponymous female protagonist in *V.I. Warshawski* reveals that ‘she’s hard-boiled on the job [...] but she’s a closet romantic, and like guys who are bearded and tough on the outside

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<sup>98</sup> *ibid.* p.33

<sup>99</sup> Maureen T. Reddy, *Sisters in Crime*, 1988, p.5

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Murder by the Book?*, 1994, p.11

but pushovers underneath'.<sup>102</sup> This observation can also be applied to other transgressive female characters, for example, in such 'tough woman' crime novels as Vicki Hendrick's *Iguana Love* and Lisa Cody's *Musclebound*, which I have discussed earlier. The juxtaposition made by Ebert yields two levels of interpretations. First, it is in keeping with the conventional way of analysing a female sleuth that the character is defined in relation to her male counterparts within the genre itself. This is seen as inevitable, as the narrative of a female investigator like *V.I. Warshawski* is both subverted and exaggerated. In the film, Vicky is paid a mere dollar to baby-sit her new 'boyfriend's' daughter, but ends up investigating his murder. These circumstances can also be seen as the effect of the shift in the epistemological power in crime fictions that 'posit a subjective, involved, emphatic type of knowing (different from the objective, distanced knowledge which is the masculine epistemological ideal)'.<sup>103</sup> Secondly, in relation to that, the comparison directly places her within the genealogical context of the hardboiled tradition, but with make up and a pair of breasts. Vicky is interpreted based on her exaggerated 'female' appearance, an element of 'excess': her obsession with her new red shoes is both a symbol and an extreme example of femininity at play. The need for this juxtaposition reflects another end of the continuum, which is reminiscent of exaggerated masculinity, viz., bearded and tough male characters that feminist crime writers try to destabilize. The double-edgedness of her personality and identity offers a way in which gender as performative is understood, that is, as what Baudrillard terms a kind of "sarcastic variable" [...] self-contradictions, their ironies, the mocking holes in coherence and meaning, the pleasure of "sarcasm" implicit in such a disclosure'.<sup>104</sup> Her transgressiveness, therefore, lies not only in her ability to subvert the audience's expectation, but also in her ability to tease them with her exaggerated characterization.

Based on Sara Paretsky's series of novels, in the film, *V.I. Warshawski*'s transgressiveness also lies partly in the casting of Kathleen Turner as the eponymous private eye. The film chronicles the life of *V.I.* (Victoria or Vic) whose professional career as a private investigator

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<sup>102</sup> 'V.I. Warshawski' p.1 in *Chicago Sun Times*

<[www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert\\_reviews/1991/07/661914.html](http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1991/07/661914.html)> [accessed 23 July 2001]

<sup>103</sup> Sabine Vanacker, 'V.I. Warshawski, Kinsey Millhore and Kay Scarpetta: Creating a Feminist Detective Hero', in *Criminal Proceedings*, ed. by Peter Messent, 1997, p.79

<sup>104</sup> J.P. Telotte, 'Fatal Capers: Strategy and Enigma in Film Noir', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 1996, p.2

intermingles with her personal life. She is the epitome of an active female figure, independent and physically tough, signalling her defiance of the male cultural stereotype. Indeed, the casting of Turner as V.I. has bifurcating effects. The first one is that it nullifies gender domination via her exaggerated femininity, creating a comic effect that foregrounds the issue of femininity as performative. Turner, whose acting career ranges from comedy (as Chandler's transsexual father in the sitcom *Friends* and the voice of Jessica Rabbit in the animation film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*) to crime, in which she is strongly associated with her femme fatale roles (such as Matty in *Body Heat* (1981) and Joanna/China Blue in *Crimes of Passion* (1984)), provides a confusing gender site that she uses to a great effect here. As V.I., enhanced with a sexy and sultry female body, she is titillating and intriguing (a group of men ogles and teases her when she is jogging), literalising and heightening her feminine desire and sexuality. These, at the same time, signify a threat to masculinity (her investigation/profession is viewed with disdain by Lt. Bobby Mallory, her late father's colleague), a common anxiety that harkens back to a femme fatale character. Her female desire is therefore dominant as it is literalised and heightened. The second is to contest the notion of masculinity by granting her some traits usually associated with deadpan masculine male characters like Sam Spade and Mike Hammer while at the same time remaining eminently feminine. In addition to having a husky 'manly' voice, V.I. is also known as a 'female dick', a nickname that is not only oxymoronic but that it also signifies her ability to transgress and perform different gender roles. Her performative gender roles, then, are evident in the way her characterisation oscillates between femininity and masculinity to achieve her goal. Since *V.I. Warshawski* lacks the dark mood of noir, the film fails, despite these two ironic functions and their ability to destabilize the pleasure of watching her on screen, to criticise the contemporary anxiety.

If *V.I. Warshawski* deals with gender as performative with comic effect, Martin Amis's *Night Train* fuses a noir dark atmosphere with the obsessive characteristics of its female protagonist, Mike Hoolihan, to underline noir interest in the inwardness of the character. This is possible since noir's interest in the character's inwardness results in the fragmentation of the self, revealing and foregrounding the common debate surrounding the 'natural' and the 'cultural'. Unlike V.I. in *V.I. Warshawski*, which is a loose film noir, the Mike Hoolihan character is fragmented at the end of the investigation, generally owing to its conventionally noir ending, and specifically due to the protagonist's being complicit in the investigation itself. Comparisons can be made between V.I. and Mike,

especially by looking at the reason for them having androgynous names, underlining the need to understand their performativity. In *V.I. Warshawski*, V.I. rationalizes that her choice of using her initials is because she gains ‘more respect’ in her line of work (V for her is ‘virtuous’), though this is not necessarily true as she is looked down by most males she encounters, highlighting a widespread attack on her femaleness. The veneer of physical toughness sometimes borders on ruthlessness, therefore, is seen as a survival technique that she employs in order to be accepted in her chosen career. As a result, the blurring of the dichotomy of gender roles and prescription relies heavily on her ability to perform the different gender roles, enabling her to solve the case that she is dealing with. In conjunction with that, as the boundary is irreversibly crossed, both gender traits and identities are palpably intertwined, affecting the psychological imperative of the character as a hybrid subject. What this psychological imperative deals with is manifested via her ‘excess’ gender traits. Having been exaggerated, her femininity is as camp as her masculine traits, and therefore evokes a certain level of performance. Her ‘camp’ performance, as in the cinematic representation of the character, is to do with the way she is visually presented. For instance, her obsession with her new pair of red shoes takes precedence over the importance of her investigation. ‘The privileging of style over content in the production and consumption of aesthetic objects,’ argues Robert Corber, ‘is usually understood as one of the defining characteristics of camp [...]’.<sup>105</sup> In other words, it can be said that she ‘performs’ the role of a woman who transgresses the patriarchal convention by being both feminine and masculine at the same time, destabilizing the audience’s expectation. Though at a superficial level *V.I. Warshawski* cannot be seen as a film noir, especially because the ending of the film offers a sense of closure as she manages to solve the murder case without she herself being fragmented, her performativity manages to destabilize the genre’s as well as audience’s stability.

Unlike V.I. Warshawski, Detective Mike Hoolihan in Martin Amis’s *Night Train* is named as such by her abusive father. In the novel, Mike refuses to be identified as a woman because she thinks that as a police officer (she refuses to use the gendered policewoman) she is ‘a member of a race called police’ (p.5). Her power and strength, therefore, lie in her ability to challenge gaze with gaze. She concedes:

But the men know at once what I am. Because I give them the eyeball—absolutely direct. As a patrol cop, on the street, that’s the first thing you have to train yourself to do: Stare at men. In the eyes. And then when I was

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<sup>105</sup> *Homosexuality in Cold War America*, 1997, p.59

plain clothes, and undercover, I had to train myself out of it, all over again. Because no other kind of woman on earth, not a movie star, not a brain surgeon, not a head of state, will stare at a man the way a police stares.<sup>106</sup>

Her explanation enables the reader to understand that she is only performing her role as part of her duty as a police officer, which in turn empowers her. In this manner, her transgression is not only signalled by the way she takes her profession ‘a hundred per cent, like I always do’ (p.55), but also by the way she handles the personal prejudices she faces as a woman. In addition to that, unlike Vicky, Mike is born with masculine characteristics—‘My features I inherited from my father’ (p.2), ‘I feel the predator in me’ (p.53) and a comment from a male suspect, ‘We talked on the phone last night, I thought you were a guy’ (p.105)—giving her an androgenic features, thus blurring the gender division. *Night Train* is a reworking of the noir genre, as its noir mood and characterization are inherently similar to many classical noir investigative texts, but this time with female characters as both the protagonist and the femme fatale: the protagonist, Mike Hoolihan, has a checkered past and inner vulnerability (‘I was no longer his interrogator. I was detective Mike Hoolihan, whom he knew: A police and an alcoholic. And a patient’ (p.75) and ‘My father messed with me when I was a child’ (p.86)); and the femme fatale, Jennifer Rockwell, is closely linked with the protagonist (‘Jennifer Rockwell is inside of me, trying to reveal what I don’t want to see’ (p.67), ‘Is Jennifer testing me? Is that what she’s doing—setting me a test?’ (p.97), and ‘For days I have hated her for Arn Debs. Detested her, despised her. Hated it that she thought I’d swallow Arn Debs—that I’d reckon he’d do, even as a decoy’ (pp.145-146). The kind of female bonding that results in the protagonist’s realization of her own emptiness culminates in the dismantling of her ‘tough’ police role or image, harking back to the notion that gender identity is performed by her, as part of her professional commitment.

If exaggerated masculinity is bestowed on V.I and Mike, Marge in *Fargo* uses her extreme femininity to find liberation and solve her murder case. As a direct effect of this extreme representation of femininity, the film through Marge brings scopophilia into question, hence challenging the stability of the gazer. In the film, the protagonist is not only a policewoman but also a heavily pregnant one. Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand) is given the task of investigating a series of murders in Minnesota. With the dialogue as deadpan as that of Mike Hammer,

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<sup>106</sup> *Night Train*, 1998, p.35



Gunderson's character is full of witticism, creating a strategy of survival that locates her in the discourse of performativity. Her characterization, especially her physical appearance, is a far cry from the usual representation of a female investigator like the seductive V.I. Warshawski. Her body is the sign of extreme femininity that the film tries to encompass to both challenge and displace the gaze. For instance, with her protruding stomach, she is hardly physically attractive, yet her wittiness attracts the attention of both the other characters and the audience. Her physical presence dominates, not only the screen but also the narrative trajectory, as she crosses the boundary between the 'pleasure and pressure' to look at her; thus deviating from the usual set up of patriarchal representation. Likewise, the fact that she is obviously pregnant challenges the pleasure of watching her female body, leading into some sort of guilt for the audience. The film's *mise-en-scene* is starkly white with snow, that is, the opposite of the darkly Gothic atmosphere and setting usually associated with the noir world. Her wittiness 'humanises' her, divorcing her from the usual monstrous feminine image generally associated with woman and her reproductive organs and capability. This means that gender as performative is evident in the way her body defies the common cultural representation by stressing on the naturalness of her physicality and mentality, demystifying the traditional crime thriller's cultural repertoire. *Fargo* diminishes the difference between centrifugal and centripetal, not through mere role-reversal, but through the destabilisation of gender divisions by performativity.

### The Lesbians

The display of a female body in excess, as often reflected by lesbian texts, parodies the traditional theorization of gaze as masculine. In this case, gender roles are crossed as the female bodies are described in abundance, rendering their overwhelming eroticism obsolete and concomitantly disorientating the reader. Maureen T. Reddy in *Sisters of Crime* observes that:

Whereas hard-boiled detective fiction in particular, and conventional crime fiction generally, tends to objectify women [...] lesbian feminist crime fiction redefines the threat lesbians and potentially all women, pose to men which is actually threefold: (1) the threat of indifference (2) the threat of changing the relations of the sexes by placing women at the center of concern; and (3) the threat of radically altering social power relations

through a moral vision that does not assume the value of hierarchical order and that does consistently value women's relations to other women.<sup>107</sup>

For example, Stella Duffy's *Calendar Girl* and *Beneath the Blonde*<sup>108</sup> offer a new way of perceiving the gaze by appointing a female lesbian sleuth as the protagonist. Unlike V.I Warshawski's comic character, Saz is just a woman, who happens to be a lesbian and a private eye. However, like V.I and Mike Hoolihan, her being a woman facilitates and enables her to find work, and oftentimes she is hired to do her job particularly because of her gender and not her sexuality ('Women like you. I mean people doing what you do. I thought, maybe you could help me?').<sup>109</sup> Likewise, in *Beneath the Blonde*, she is hired as an 'assistant' because she is a woman, which is perceived as enabling her to move more freely in guarding Siobhan, the female lead singer of *Beneath the Blonde*.

The use of two different points of view in both novels scrupulously organizes the gaze to concomitantly build up suspense and mystery. In both novels Saz's stories are narrated in the third person, allowing access to her subjective point of view whilst putting a barrier between the reader and her psychology. The first person narration is reserved for other female characters, Maggie in *Calendar Girl* and the serial killer, Shona in *Beneath the Blonde*, so that the perspective is not rigorously restricted to the female protagonist, which means a linear representation of sub-plotting (the stories are usually alternated in different chapters), thus enabling the reader to understand the motivations of the characters while creating some sort of dramatic irony on the part of the female sleuth. Therefore, the gaze in the novels is plural; yet functions dominantly to put the readers in an awkward and helpless position as the stories are unravelled with temporal parallelism, creating urgency and desperation. The plurality of the gaze is eventually singularised, which is also where the narrative solution overlaps, providing a strategic ground for Duffy to resolve the suspense and mystery. This strategic ground is reminiscent of the classical detective genre's tendency to provide a *denouement*, a narrative conclusion. Therefore, the dominant gaze is the one belonging to Saz, as the novels' trajectory points at her ability to pull the different subplots together. Surrounded by other female characters who are mostly ex-lovers and lesbian friends, the novels punctuate Saz's sexuality by organizing her gaze as a desiring gaze, 'Saz secretly rejoiced in Siobhan's laughter'

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<sup>107</sup> 1988, p.130

<sup>108</sup> Saz Martin is also featured in Duffy's other novels like *Wavewalker* and *Fresh Flesh*.

<sup>109</sup> Stella Duffy, *Calendar Girl*, 1999, p.19

(*Beneath the Blonde*, p. 152), thus implicating her in the course of her investigation, reminiscent of the noir protagonist. The texts organize the audience's gaze as masculine, as both the subject and object of the gaze are women ('She had green eyes and wasn't especially tall and her tits weren't that big, though her legs are long and shapely' (*Calendar Girl*, p.4) and 'She held Saz tight as she fucked her, Saz's body deliriously surrendering to wide awake dreams of fantasy finally made flesh, her mouth open to kiss Siobhan, her body wide open to take her' (*Beneath the Blonde*, p.185)).

Following the tradition of the hardboiled American crime novel,<sup>110</sup> the lesbian sleuth, like her male counterpart, is implicated in the course of her investigations by her desire towards another woman. Sally Munt theorizes that 'popular lesbian-feminist crime novels have tended to produce a particular version of this antithesis' in which 'the detective hero exhibits a paradox: he is at once a representative of society and a critique of it'.<sup>111</sup> For that reason, many lesbian sleuth texts maintain the 'masculine forms' of the genre: 'Manifestly they are opposed to patriarchy; implicitly, however, they depend on many aspects of the mainstream genre, such as an overriding Manichean morality of good versus evil, notions of unified subjectivity, innateness, natural justice, and tidy textual closures'.<sup>112</sup> With the kind of desire that is often associated with man, that is sexual desire towards another woman, her gaze is similar but not identical to that of her male counterpart. To a certain extent, the novels follow the whodunit plot in which the women are the subjects of investigation. In *Calendar Girl* the woman that Saz is investigating has several names and wears a wig, but she is often described as 'the Woman with the Kelly McGillis body', highlighting her 'absence' in the narrative. J. P. Telotte sees these 'phantom' women as liberating, asserting that 'the recurring figures of female absence, after all, wield a control over their respective narratives, whether by withholding necessary information, [...], directing point of view, [...], or providing the only possible focus for multiple point of view'.<sup>113</sup> Similarly, the serial killer in *Beneath the Blonde* turns out to be a woman though her sexuality is dubious. In *Calendar Girl* her investigation brings her to the dark world of New York high-class prostitution, drug smuggling and gambling, which is easily infiltrated by her because she is a woman.

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<sup>110</sup> Paulina Palmer, 'The Lesbian Thriller: Transgressive Investigations', in *Criminal Proceedings*, ed. by Peter Messent, 1997, p.90

<sup>111</sup> *Murder By the Book*, 1994, p.125

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> 'Siodmak's Phantom Women and Noir Narrative', *Film Criticism*, 1987, p.2

In articulating female desire, gender is deliberately performative in lesbian characters. Like performative gender roles, which are represented by the investigative female figures via the extrapolation of femininity, lesbian characters also use performance to display gender roles in excess. This excess is characteristically postmodern, which ‘find[s] expression in the lesbian thriller [that sees] the representation of sexual identity and gender in terms of performance and masquerade’.<sup>114</sup> This excess can be seen as a way of masquerading gender, which is often embodied in the Femme-Butch iconography. In Andy and Larry Wachowski’s film noir, *Bound* (1996), the two lesbian protagonists, Corky (Gina Gershon) and Violet (Jennifer Tilly) are attracted to each other and their interactions signal their desire for each other:

Corky: What are you doing?

Violet: Isn’t it obvious? I am trying to seduce you.

The deliberate articulation and display of Violet’s seduction highlights not only her excessive femininity but also the conflict it causes, viz., signalling Corky’s paranoia about whether or not to desire her and ultimately to wrestle with the dominant gaze, i.e., the audience’s.

In the film, whereas Corky’s ‘butchness’ articulates masculinity in excess, Violet’s ‘femme-ness’ characterization parodies the visually fetishized femme fatale. Lenz argues that

Lesbian performance dismantles the strict male/female gender identification from dominant culture that is prevalent in traditional performance and works to deconstruct its fetishized image of Woman.<sup>115</sup>

Corky, a female ex-convict with a shady past or background, is reminiscent of the male protagonist (Frank Chambers) in Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, whose checkered past contributes to the paranoia and alienation of his present life. The film follows traditional noir’s convoluted narrative structure, visual techniques and conventions to create an atmosphere full of tension, suspense, betrayal and mistrust. As a butch lesbian, Corky is a plumber/handy (wo)man who literally dresses her ‘sexuality’ with a masculine dress code. On the other hand, Violet, with her smoothly soft voice, plays the role of the femme by displaying

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<sup>114</sup> Paulina Palmer, ‘The Lesbian Thriller: Transgressive Investigations’, in *Criminal Proceedings*, ed. by Peter Messent, 1997, p.96

<sup>115</sup> Kimberly Lenz, ‘Put the Blame on Gilda: Dyke Noir Vs Film Noir’, *Theatre Study*, 1995, p.21

extreme femininity. In other words, both of their gender roles are performative, that is, performing ‘identities that are prescribed by hegemonic discourses’,<sup>116</sup> but this time they play it with excess. The film surprisingly enough follows what Sally Munt considers as the pattern in the lesbian and feminist crime novel, in which ‘the resolution is achieved in two stages: first through self-determination (the process of individuation essential to thriller mode) [often represented by ‘coming out’], and second through integration and communality, features shared by most lesbian novels [often represented by finding a lover (romance), or the lesbian community (politicization)]’.<sup>117</sup> In the film, the first phase involves Violet’s ‘coming out’ of the closet and starting a sexual relation with Corky. The second phase is when she proves that she can be trusted by Corky and escapes with the stolen money.

In conclusion, there is an apparent shift in the way that women are represented in noir thriller texts especially between the classical noir films and neo-noir films. By looking at the transgressive female figures in the classical texts, a few comparisons can be made in terms of gender as being performative, that is, a kind of performance to liberate women from the restrictive perception of the representation of their bodies. The question of gender is further complicated when these transgressive characters also include ‘male’ characters who assume or perform the role of a woman, drawing attention to noir’s sensibility in blurring the boundary of gender division. By obscuring the Western binary system with regard to gender as a natural or a cultural construction, these transgressive characters, assisted by noir conventions and interests in a destabilized self, achieve a liberatory function especially by disorientating and alienating male characters and audience alike.

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<sup>116</sup> Lise Nelson, ‘Bodies (and Spaces) do Matter: the Limits of Performativity’, in *Gender, Place and Culture*, 1999, p.337

<sup>117</sup> *Murder By the Book?*, 1994, p.125

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FROM SCIENCE FICTION TO FUTURE NOIR: THE VOYAGE BEGINS

Once society has begun to fiddle around with people, there's no turning back.

—Nili in *Body of Glass*.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most important thematic concerns in Marge Piercy's *Body of Glass* is the questioning of the status of a human being. The interface between machine and human in this novel (and other novels of its type) has directly affected the way human beings think about their own body, signalling and reflecting the deconstruction of the dynamic of western dualism. While the 'anthropomorphizing' (p.95) cyborg, Yod, struggles to be more characteristically human with his developing consciousness about humans' feelings and emotions, human beings work in the opposite way, that is, by investing more in 'engineering' their bodies; in consequence, they not only blur the distinction between themselves and machines, but also call into question what constitutes a human. The novel envisions that the extension of technology into a human body, whether biological or mechanical, is inevitable.

As exemplified by *Body of Glass*, the interface between human and machine signifies the curious blurring of one of the important polarities in Western thinking. This section aims to investigate the possible links between human beings and machines, and the effects of such links on the status of female characters in relation to their transgressiveness, in the hybrid of science fiction and the noir thriller genre known as 'future noir'. Examination of these links may hopefully reveal the varying degrees of interface that can be liberatory and influential to these female characters. As I consider the human and machine interface as another demarcation that helps to define transgressive female characters, it can therefore be taken as a critical category apart from the performative gender roles

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<sup>1</sup> Marge Piercy, p.558

discussed in the earlier chapter. This categorization is an effort to demonstrate that the blurring of the binary of human and machine causes the collapse of human identity and reality, including the traditional understanding of gender division and classification, forming the bleak future of the noir world. Especially with the incorporation of noir moods and conventions, and the influence of postmodernist culture, this category traces and investigates a variety of 'female' characters 'future noir', often embodied in the cyberpunk sub-genre.

This method is germane to the nature of genre developments and studies considering the concept of hybridisation offered by Mark Jancovich,<sup>2</sup> who looks at the overlap between genres. Helen Carr has analysed the importance of a genre study, as she believes that 'since the norms and expectations of each genre are enmeshed with the norms and expectations of society as a whole, they seem a particularly fruitful point to focus upon—how gender enters into and is constructed by the form of the genre, and how and perhaps why those constructions may change'.<sup>3</sup> Carr's argument highlights the idea that the nature of a genre is influential in determining how gender is represented or constructed, drawing attention to the need to understand the working of this representation within a certain genre. With the concept of hybridisation at work, this section also sets out to discover how and why the amalgamation of genres affects such representation, in this case in the 'future noir' sub-genre that originates in science fiction and the noir thriller genre. The affinity between science fiction and future noir is the result of the first's evolution and expansion, and the latter's association with noir's structure, mood and convention. For that reason, future noir amalgamates both science fiction and canonical noir's extrapolative traits to form its own symbiosis, adding a social and critical edge to it. In embryo, this section will investigate the transgressive female characters in the hybrid of science fiction and noir thriller texts that can be categorized as 'future noir' to demonstrate how the ontological uncertainty inherent in noir texts can further complicate the binary opposite of human and machine, which has resulted in the interface. This section of my research poses the question of gender relevancy, problematized by the postmodernist conception of a fragmented self, to arrive at its conclusion that transgressive females in future noir texts benefit from such fragmentation to overcome their oppressive portrayal or representation.

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<sup>2</sup> *Rational Fears*, 1996

<sup>3</sup> *From My Guy to Sci-Fi*, 1989, p.7

## Technology and Gender Divisions

What is important about science fiction, even crucial, is the very thing that gave it birth—the perception of change through technology. It is not that science fiction predicts this particular change or that that makes it important; it is that it predicts *change*.

—Isaac Asimov in the foreword for *Encyclopedia of Science fiction*

The proliferation and popularity of the science fiction genre is generally attributed to its speculative,<sup>4</sup> prophetic, extrapolative and allegorical narrative of imagining the past, future or an alternative/parallel world. Its flexible spatial and temporal significance creates possibilities for exploration of disparate themes and characterization ranging from speculation about the Armageddon, invasion of aliens from other planets, discovery and exploration of the universe, to time-travel across time and space. These varied themes are the result of science fiction's tendency to criticise contemporary social, political and economic concerns, using the imagined world as a mirror of the present. This 'imagined' world, while often creating a thrilling atmosphere and mood, hence the genre's palpable popularity, is not too far-fetched for the audience to accept and comprehend its very tenet.

Sometimes, science fiction's varied and disparate themes are fully explored at the expense of the character development, a characteristic that is more prominent in the earlier science fiction texts. The claim of science fiction as a genre, as pointed out by some critics like Kingsley Amis, 'has always been that it is a literature of ideas. A fiction in which the idea rather than the individual is the protagonist'.<sup>5</sup> This statement is echoed by Hazel Beasley Pierce's claim in *A Literary Symbiosis* that 'science fiction/fantasy is idea-based'<sup>6</sup> and that it is a genre in which 'the social imperatives take precedence over the individual'.<sup>7</sup> Both claims may refer to the Golden Age of English language science fiction, from the late 1940s to the late 1950s, when adventure into outer space was undertaken by a group, rather than an individual. In Robert A. Heinlein's *Rocket Ship*

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<sup>4</sup> In distinguishing fantasy fiction from science fiction, Joanna Russ explains that fantasy 'embodies a "negative subjunctivity"...[i.e.]...what *cannot* happen, what *cannot* exist'. Science fiction, on the other hand, is about '*what has not happened*' in *To Write Like A Woman*, 1995, p.16

<sup>5</sup> cited in Roz Kaveney, 'The Science Fictiveness of Women's Science Fiction', in *From My Guy to Sci-Fi*, Helen Carr, ed., 1989, p.80

<sup>6</sup> 1983, p.4

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p.10



*Galileo* (1947) and Werner von Braun's screenplay of *Life on Mars*, which was filmed in 1955, for example, the stories are narrated in the third person, focusing on teamwork rather than an individual's adventure. One of the effects of Amis's observation points to the genre's adaptability that feminist science fiction writers talk about, and the allowance that the 'group versus individual achievement' theme implicitly made it possible for female writers to subvert and appropriate the conventions by focusing on the female characters' personal development, creating a rounded character that the audience can relate to. The adaptability and malleability of the genre's form and its protean themes, in effect, explain not only the genre's popularity but also its ability to be 'hybridised'.

Historically, as science fiction has previously been associated with a young adolescent male readership as its primary commercial target, it is logical to conclude that the adventures undertaken are conspicuously suitable for men only. In *Rocket Ship Galileo* adapted into a film in 1950 called *Destination Moon*<sup>8</sup> (Irving Pitchel)) and *Life on Mars* all the crewmembers are male, making it easier for the male audience to identify with the heroic adventure. In a film like *Planet of the Apes* (1968), the only female crewmember dies on the spaceship while travelling back to earth, leaving all male crewmembers to venture into the 'new' world. The male heroes are therefore seen as the vehicle for the fulfilment or excitement of male fans' desire or of their dream to explore the universe, a way of experiencing their rites of passage in the world 'created' for them. In effect, the male hero provides an oneiric view of the myth-making process of the 'world' in science fiction, in which the success of the hero's adventure provides an illusion of or analogy for the coming-of-age of these adolescent male readers. This myth-making process, as illustrated by *Planet of the Apes*, involves the need to rescue not only the turbulent 'world' but also the 'endangered' female species.

In that vein, Eric S. Rabkin's survey on the female characters in science fiction reveals that:

A further telling index of the present expansion and maturity of science fiction is the fact that even male writers are paying more attention to their female characters, often to quite good effect, sometimes using them even as that rare bird, the female protagonist.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Heinlein writes the screenplay for *Destination Moon* based on his novel *Rocket Ship Galileo* (1947).

<sup>9</sup> 'Science Fiction Women Before Liberation', in *Future Females*, Marleen S. Barr, ed., 1981, p.11

Rabkin's survey reaffirms the assumption that women in science fiction proper exist in relation to men. It suggests that, though women are liberated by the genre, they are usually considered to be men's sexual objects, despite the proliferation of the portrayal of physically strong female characters—an assumption stems from the genre's long association with male readers or audience. This kind of treatment can be seen in the film adaptation of Jean-Claude Forest's comic book, the highly eroticised and camp *Barbarella*,<sup>10</sup> with Jane Fonda as the eponymous heroine who carries out a mission to capture a mad scientist called Durand Durand in the 41<sup>st</sup> century. At the outset of the film, *Barbarella*'s body is eroticised as she floats in her spaceship, gradually undressing. Indeed, throughout her adventure, she literally makes love to almost all men (including a blind angel) that she comes across and gets undressed gratuitously. She is a strong character, but also a sex object tailor-made to titillate the male audience—the assumed spectators of science fiction. At the level of ideological symbolism, a character like *Barbarella* reveals that the representation of a woman in science fiction can be reactionary rather than progressive.

Though science fiction's readership has previously been associated with male adventure, some feminist critics on science fiction believe that the world imagined by the genre is not always misogynistic. Indeed, Joanna Russ strongly suggests that:

Perhaps one place to look for myths that escape from the equation Culture = Male is in those genres that already employ plots not limited to one sex—i.e., myths that have nothing to do with our accepted gender roles [...][one of the] three places one can look: [...] Science fiction [...][which ignores] gender roles [...] [and] [...] is] not culture-bound.<sup>11</sup>

Arguably, Russ is somewhat too optimistic in her view of gender division in science fiction. Other critics disagree, as reflected by Constance Penley's argument that '[i]ronically, it is science fiction film—our hoarest and seemingly most sexless genre that alone remains capable of supplying the configurations of sexual difference required by the classical cinema'.<sup>12</sup> I would argue that in the alternative or alien world in which gender is ostensibly free from cultural construction or influence, it could not completely divorce itself from the cultural background of its

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<sup>10</sup> Dir. Roger Vadim, 1968

<sup>11</sup> *To Write Like a Woman*, 1995, pp.90-91

<sup>12</sup> 'Time Travel, Primal Scene and the Critical Dystopia', *Camera Obscura*, 1986, pp. 75-76

author. Authors are gendered and culturally informed, therefore, their works are ‘in response’ to what they observe or perceive in their daily lives. In a great many cases, as science fiction authors are mainly men, female characters—from Maria in *Metropolis* to Lara Anderton in *Minority Report*—are consigned to their traditional roles of providing a romantic interest for the male protagonists. Russ’s conception of isolating the female characters from their cultural context can be problematic in liberating them; such a text may well be high in critical edge but low in comprehension/reception, defeating the feminist’s aim of criticising and promulgating the genre itself. Her novel, *The Female Man*, is the reflection of this phenomenon, high in quality, but not an easy read at all.

Russ’s Culture=Male equation, however, helps us to understand one of the major concerns among feminist critics of science fiction, that is, the prominent association of men with technology that consequently excludes a female from its grand narrative. I would suggest that feminist critics should look at the inherently common thematic oppositions in science fiction texts to be able to subvert this convention. This can be achieved in three ways: by looking at the alternative world; by looking at the association between women and nature; and by investigating the different attitude that science fiction has towards technology itself. In the first instance, I find Geoff King and Tanya Kryzwinska’s suggestion very illuminating:

One way of exploring the thematic oppositions established in science fiction cinema in more detail is to look at the kind of futures or alternatives that are imagined.<sup>13</sup>

Even though King and Kryzwinska’s suggestion focuses on science fiction cinema, it is also relevant to literary science fiction. The alternative world that is imagined in sci-fi texts reflects both its allegorical and extrapolative strategy and formulation, functioning as a mirror of our own world. Science fiction often employs binary oppositions to heighten its thematic oppositions or variations, whose clues and motifs can actually be obtained from the alternative world imagined and presented.

One of the main roles of feminist science fiction writers involves subverting and challenging the putative assumptions that hard science fiction and its sub-genre make about female characters, that is, that women are to be rescued by male protagonists. Feminist science fiction writers then manipulate the alternative world to give these characters the chance

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<sup>13</sup> Geoff King and Tanya Kryzwinska, *Science Fiction Cinema: From Outer Space to Cyberspace*, 2000, p.13

to live without the constraint of their gender identity. One popular approach, according to Kaveney, 'is simply to tackle those assumptions in earlier work which happen to matter to them, often those assumptions which degrade and insult women'.<sup>14</sup> In Naomi Mitchinson's *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*, the protagonist is a woman, Mary, whose inter-planetary adventure celebrates her femaleness whilst enabling her to work professionally around the universe. Mitchinson incorporates a diary writing style into her narration, validating female emotion as a scientific record. Meanwhile, *Floating World* by Cecilia Holland, chronicles the life and adventures of an anarchist female protagonist who crosses the boundary of race and gender, as she is both black and a woman, trying to create peace in the galactic. The message of *Floating World* is obvious: if a man can get sexually or professionally involved with an alien, so can a woman. Both novels promote women's freedom to choose: while the female protagonist in *Floating World* chooses to keep her pregnancy by an alien leader (Saba), the female protagonist in *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* allows a scientific experiment to be carried out on her body. These are signs of transgression in which, though gender identity is important in raising gender issues, traditional gender roles are increasingly irrelevant.

The second way of understanding the portrayal of female characters in the evolution of the science fiction genre is by looking at the association of women with nature, a recurrent theme that is responsible for subjugating the female characters. A great body of feminist criticism picks up the way and the reason why the representation of women in science fiction is often associated with nature by looking at the dynamic of the binary system that dictates a lot of Western thinking and ideas. In the case of science fiction, much criticism focuses on the opposition between culture/masculine and nature/feminine; which explains why a woman is represented as such in hard science fiction. In both *The Time Machine* and *Metropolis*, which are considered seminal works in the science fiction genre, the culture/nature schism is highlighted with help from the mise-en-scene and the atmosphere of the world the female characters inhabit. *The Time Machine* although acknowledged by some critics as a reflection of Wells's interest in Darwinism, is importantly about associating women/femininity with nature. For example, The Eloi are soft and gentle natured, and Wells paints the world that they inhabit as both having an Edenic feel and atmosphere, and a feminine one. In *Metropolis*, the organic Maria and her non-organic replica extend the binary opposition of women/nature by adding

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<sup>14</sup> 'The Science Fictiveness of Women's Science Fiction', in *From My Guy To Sci-Fi*, Helen Carr, ed., 1989, p.81

irrationality to the schism. This is signified when the robot Maria runs amok, highlighting the idea that a mechanical and robotic lifestyle is not conducive to female beings.

On the other hand, feminist utopian science fiction writers tackle the divide by actually celebrating and essentialising women's harmony with nature by showing how these women can be super-productive and progressive, if they work effectively with nature. Not rejecting technology in its totality, feminist science fiction writers are more interested in portraying technology as a choice rather than a compulsory element that female characters have in their life. This choice is prominent in Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* in which the characters have the option to either use science and technology or not, and most of them choose not to. The idea of celebrating woman's association with nature is usually foregrounded by feminist ecologists, who usually represent the alternative world as an ecologically friendly environment—green and rich with interesting flora and fauna. In *Memoir of a Spacewoman*, for instance, the female protagonist's duty, as an agent of communication, is to communicate with aliens from other planets and study possible living organisms that she finds, including fauna and butterfly-like creatures.

As women are often associated with nature, the apparent consequence of this is that they are seen as emotional rather than rational beings—a stark contrast to what science and technology is all about. Science's apotheosis of the rational rather than the emotional has clear implications for the treatment of a woman in science fiction: she is an emotional being and is always in trouble, hence her dismissive 'damsel in distress'<sup>15</sup> role. Scott Sanders argues that:

Women and nature bear the same features: both are mysterious, irrational, instinctive; both are fertile and mindless; both inspire wonder and dread in the hero; both are objects of male conquest. Just as men in SF embody consciousness, the agency through which nature knows itself, so women embody fertility, the agency by which nature reproduces itself. Men belong to the realm of mind; women and nature, to no-mind. Women are the bearers of life; men are life interpreters and masters.<sup>16</sup>

Sanders, however, concedes that this analogy or binary opposition 'does not hold for all SF by any means',<sup>17</sup> though it is common enough to

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<sup>15</sup> According to Scott Sander, the 'damsel in distress' is 'the humblest of all' categories of female characters 'who frequently endanger men in SF', 1981, p.49

<sup>16</sup> 'Women as Nature in Science Fiction', in *Future Females*, Marleen S. Barr, ed., 1981, p.42

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p.43

draw a conclusion from. Science fiction's association with male fantasy marks its use of science and technology as the epitome of rationality. Probably because of its origin in the early form of 'science fiction texts', which according to Roz Kaveney, 'were essentially not very dramatised lectures on the future of technology and technocracy',<sup>18</sup> the traditional science fiction narrative therefore, according to Russ, 'avoids offending against what is known to be known'.<sup>19</sup> Another variation of the women/emotional schism is the association of women with the occult or metaphysics, which can be traced in the idea that the science fiction genre shares the same lineage with the noir thriller in the gothic tradition. While the gothic's frequent centring of the female characters highlights the emotional aspect of the genre, science fiction association with male characters is often associated with (scientific) reason. In the film *Minority Report*, for instance, whereas Agatha represents the occult—an affinity with the gothic, Detective John Anderton represents the practical—the rational or scientific. 'Here [in science fiction]', as observed by Pierce, 'reason battles with emotion'.<sup>20</sup> Anderson's reliance on the occult also represents a typical noir protagonist conflict, trapped within an irrational system and in dire need of a way to get out of the entrapment. In the film, elements of science are manipulated both as a means of expressing the technological anxiety inherent in the film, and as a way in which the anxiety can be dealt with.

The third way of understanding the evolution of female characters in science fiction is through the representation of technology itself. Science and technology receive a varied treatment in science fiction,<sup>21</sup> which act as an analogy for the varied treatment of the female characters in science fiction. Though not all science fiction stories show hostility towards technological intervention into human lives, some like Boris Sagal's *The Omega Man* and the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix*, undeniably manipulate the audience's anxiety and paranoia of technology rather overwhelmingly. The different attitude towards and perception of science and technology indeed provides the basis for a variety of narrative trajectories, enabling the texts to explore domains not explored in other genres, such as in *The Matrix* in which the human world is taken over by machines. Science fiction's discrete approach to technology reflects its ontological concerns over the effect of technology on human identities and

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<sup>18</sup> 'The Science Fictiveness of Women's Science Fiction', in *From My Guy to Sci-Fi*, Helen Carr, ed., 1989, p.79

<sup>19</sup> *To Write Like a Woman*, 1995, p.22

<sup>20</sup> *A literary Symbiosis*, 1983, p.205

<sup>21</sup> Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, *Science Fiction Cinema*, 2000, p.52

lives, as illustrated by novels (like Marge Piercy's *Body of Glass* and William Gibson's *Neuromancer*) and films (like Steven Spielberg's *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* and David Cronenberg's *Existenz*). For in this very ontological question lies the need to reconcile technological advancement with human dignity, enabling the human to take control of the machine. Films like *The Matrix* and *The Terminator* are the epitome of this very quest.

Feminist science fiction writers manipulate technological advancement to provide opportunities for female characters to cross the boundary of traditional gender roles and definitions. In both Mitchison's *Memoir of a Spacewoman* and Cecillia Holland's *Floating World*, the journey across the universe undertaken by the female protagonists is made possible by space technology. Films like *Contact* (1997) and Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996) show how technology can assist human beings in conflict. In *Contact*, it helps Ellie to not only explore the alien world but also to understand herself better, allowing her to come to terms with her father's death. Feminist science fiction novels like Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* and Marge Piercy's *Body of Glass* signify the importance of technology in the female characters' lives. Even though some characters in *The Female Man* prefer not to use technology, this is a matter of choice. On the other hand, the female characters in *Body of Glass* are valuable to the society that they live in due to their knowledge of technology, a knowledge that is crucial in protecting their free city. In future noir, with its close affinity with dystopian narrative, the machine, according to Jane Donawerth, is 'a symbol for the dangers and possibilities of women's freedoms'.<sup>22</sup> The female characters in these films represent the different types of female characters found in science fiction and explore the way they are treated, forming an ideological basis for the understanding their transgressiveness.

Our understanding of the evolving representation of female characters in science fiction can be clarified by grouping these characters into three main categories which, although this classification is not exhaustive, it gives us a stronger sense of how female figures function in different kinds of narratives. First, female characters who are victims, both at the level of characterization and narration, in which they are subsumed or usurped by the male characters (verbal-less Nova for instance). This type of victimisation tends to be found in narratives that prioritise the male characters, especially, say, by making a male character the narrator,

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<sup>22</sup> 'The Feminist Dystopia of the 1990s: Record of Failure, Midwife of Hope', in *Future Females, the Next Generation*, Marleen S. Barr, ed., 2000, p.49

centring the narrative with his consciousness. The victim narrative in the science fiction genre normally requires the female characters to be rescued by the male protagonists, either literally or symbolically, as exemplified by Weena in the film version of H.G. Well's *The Time Machine*, Nova in *Planet of the Apes* (1968) and Rachel in *Blade Runner*. Some female characters are also usurped by a narrative, which makes their appearance perfunctory. In Brian De Palma's *Mission to Mars* (2000), there are ostensibly three prominent female astronauts who seem to be intelligent and brave—Terri, Renee Cote and Maggie. Maggie, though inspirational to her husband, Jim's, mission to Mars, appears only in flashbacks; thus confirming her absence from the main narrative. Likewise, when Renee's character gets killed at the beginning of the adventure, the only female survival, Terri, is shown to be more emotional vis-à-vis her male counterparts. On several occasions, her disbelief of any bizarre discovery ('That's impossible') reflects her incompetence. Indeed, the three female characters are somewhat 'absent' from the adventure, as a consequence of the centring of male consciousness, which at least works as the *prima facie* evidence of male supremacy.

Second, the initiator of an event who crosses the boundaries of gender roles; this signifies her agency. In *Metropolis* and *Fahrenheit 451*, Maria and Clarisse, respectively, are initiators who protest against the oppressive structure of the government. As initiators, both Maria and Clarisse signify agency, hence a threat. Other transgressive characters can be found in *Mad Max The Thunderdome* with Aunt Entity (Tina Turner) who writes the law used in Thunderdome; Trinity (Carrie-Ann Moss) and the female oracle (Gloria Foster) in *The Matrix*, who propel the narrative of the story, the first with her kinetic strength and the latter with her ability to prophesy; and Commander Kate Bowman (Carrie-Ann Moss) as the leader of the first manned mission to Mars in *Red Planet* (2000) who leads an all-male mission to Mars.

The third category refers to a female victim who transforms into an initiator. This category signifies both the science fiction's schizophrenic representation of a female character and her appropriation of agency, a crucial indication or a sign of transgression. Transgression, in effect, can be seen as an effort to reject the genre's strategy of the objectification of her subjectivity. The roles of victim/initiator do overlap, for instance, in Roger Christian's *Battlefield Earth: A Saga of the Year 3000* (2000) in which the female character, Chrissy, having been taken hostage, fights back upon her rescue. In *Hollow Man*, the male character, Matthew, complacently says to Linda, 'I save you for a change', trying to reclaim the male supremacy that Linda has been denying him. With the more



varied and disparate types of female character available in more recent science fiction, especially in the cinema (and often as the protagonist), this can be seen as a genre shift that offers female characters some degree of liberation and freedom. In Walter Hill's *Supernova* (2000), on the other hand, Kaela Evers's character evinces science fiction's schizophrenic representation of women in a more direct way, especially with the casting of the physically strong Angela Basset as a female protagonist, who is a no-nonsense chief medical officer on board an emergency medical vessel called Nightingale, that responds to a distress signal. Her encounter with the victim-cum-villain, Karl, ends up in a cat and mouse chase in which he eventually claims that 'The distress signal is not for you to help me, but for me to help you.' Notwithstanding her own fight for survival, her life is saved only with the help of Nick, reaffirming the film's romance narrative in a typical Hollywood fashion.

These two last categories of female characters in science fiction owe a lot to the interest of female science fiction writers in reinventing and appropriating the genre. This is an argument that has been developed, for example, by Raffaella Baccolini, who asserts that the contributions of female science fiction writers to the genre have 'contributed to the breakdown of certainties and universalist assumptions about gendered identities [...] [which] [...] have all been tackled, explored, and re-appropriated'.<sup>23</sup> A preponderance of female science fiction writers in the 60s and 70s, like Joanna Russ, Naomi Mitchison, Ursula K. Le Guin and Marge Piercy, wrote within generic conventions to highlight and simultaneously to rework the stark assumptions about female characters often found in the genre. In effect, their work in general provides an oppositional take on classical science fiction by offering transgressive female characters, who often contest and at same time celebrate their gender differences. Summarizing Tom Moylan's analysis of these oppositional texts, Raffaella Baccolini notes that Moylan identifies three levels at which texts of this sort reverse or diverge from the parent genre: 'the iconic level, or the way in which the alternative society is presented; the discrete level, or the way in which the protagonist is presented; and the level of generic form, or the way the text becomes self-aware and self-critical'.<sup>24</sup> Moylan's conception, especially the third level, is useful for my analysis because it provides a framework for the understanding of future noir—a vision or retake into the past, future and present rolled into one. As

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<sup>23</sup> 'Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of Katherine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler', in *Future Females: the Next Generation*, Marleen S. Barr, ed., 2000, p.16

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p.17

science fiction has evolved and expanded tremendously, developing a relationship with other genres and sub-genres (particularly noir) and responding to the critical and creative involvement of feminist/female science fiction writers, it is important to investigate the contemporary female characters available and to assess the extent to which these female characters have actually changed.

In conclusion, the science fiction genre's treatment of the female characters is rather schizophrenic, creating room for the appropriation and re-visioning of the genre by female writers. That said, the binary opposition embedded in the narrative of science fiction, ironically, provides the necessary platform for staging the gender dichotomy. The association of women with nature reinforces this division further, even in the case of feminist or women writers whose strategy is to celebrate a harmonious relationship between the female and the natural, rather than pitting a female protagonist against a hostile natural world. The major concern of the next section is to look at what happens to these female characters and all the binary oppositions that they represent, as gender roles and identity become confused, and boundaries are crossed. The objective of the next section is to explore another level of demarcation involving (female) transgressors.

## **The Transgressive Female Characters in Science Fiction and Future Noir**

"I mean, my TV guide interview was six paragraphs about my boobs and how they fit into my suit".

—Communication Officer Lieutenant Tawny Madison (Sigourney Weaver) in Dean Parisot's *Galaxy Quest* (1999).

It may be a bit strange to quote a spoof sci-fi film to represent the more serious texts of the genre. However, Madison's statement can be seen as magnifying some aspects of science fiction films in relation to their representation of the female characters. If the science fiction genre invests a lot of its narrative on speculation, what a film like *Galaxy Quest* evinces is that the prediction about women in science fiction is reactionary rather than progressive. In charting the history of science fiction Roz Kaveney has pointed out that the role of women in early science fiction is 'restricted to standing around having things explained to them by the hero and saying "Gosh. Wow. How terrific."' <sup>25</sup> highlighting its lucid misogyny. Women

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<sup>25</sup> 'The Science Fictiveness of Women's Science Fiction', in *From My Guy to Sci-Fi*, Helen Carr, ed., 1989, p.79

are the object of male desire, simply providing a love interest for the male protagonist (as Madison eventually falls in love with Commander Taggart played by Tim Allen).

Science fiction's ability to free the characters from their cultural and gender constructions explains why women are not largely ignored. Feminist science fiction writers proliferated in America in the 1970s contemporaneous with women's movements; thus this association led female science fiction writers to focus on 'feminist' utopian landscapes to create alternative or parallel worlds that served feminist political purposes. Indeed, Eric S. Rabkin concludes that 'science fiction has been bolder in imagining alternative roles for women than has any other formula literature'.<sup>26</sup> For Joanna Russ, the genre's concern with the exploration of a new or imaginative alternative world and society is liberating for women, referring to the genre's ability to create a character detached from patriarchal imaginations. This opportunity provides a catalogue of female characters who simply deal with putative assumptions in the canon. 'One of the things which feminist SF writers have done,' argues Roz Kavaney, 'is simply to tackle those assumptions in earlier work which happen to matter to them, often those assumptions which degrade and insult women'.<sup>27</sup> 'Science fiction', argue Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, 'links visions of science and the unknown to speculations about human evolution and destiny'.<sup>28</sup> In that vein, Joanna Russ asserts that science fiction 'is the only modern literature that attempts to assimilate imaginatively scientific knowledge about reality and the scientific method, as distinct from the merely practical changes science has made in our lives'.<sup>29</sup> Russ also argues that the concerns displayed by feminist science fiction writers are also changing, reflecting the genre's compatibility with current issues, which affects the debate surrounding the writers' knowledge or understanding of reality.

The science fiction genre is capable of capturing and projecting the anxiety of the present in its speculation about the future or its invention of the alternative world. Its main interest is in creating another reality, an option in which women can have their views. In this alternative reality, women's issues are now human issues, demonstrating both the irrelevance of gender divisions and the adaptability of the genre. The extent to which this is true is evident in Eric S. Rabkin's assertion that the genre's

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<sup>26</sup> 'Science Fiction Women Before Liberation', in *Future Females*, Marleen S. Barr, ed., 1981, p.25

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p.81

<sup>28</sup> *Science Fiction Cinema*, 2000, p.2

<sup>29</sup> *To Write Like A Woman*, 1995, p.11

‘speculation on ethics and religion has, like speculation on society and politics, often created a full range of female characters unbounded by convention’.<sup>30</sup> The portrayal of women as ‘free agents’ marks their symbiosis with technology. Jane Donawerth, for instance, in her effort to compare the 1970s and 1980s feminist utopian texts with the 1990s dystopias suggests that

Women in feminist dystopias of the 1990s are pictured in partial alliance with technology. They embrace self-fabrication and its lack of innocence, [and] breach the boundary between human and machine [...]<sup>31</sup>

The female characters’ readiness to embrace technology also means that they are no longer representing ‘difference’, highlighting not only the destabilization of their humanist subjectivity, but also the similarity they have with the male character. This affinity is a new threat, which therefore, as Constance Penley in her analysis of *The Terminator* argues that ‘the majority of science fiction films work to dissipate that fear of the same, to ensure that there is a difference’.<sup>32</sup> Postmodernist culture has destabilized our sense of identity and simultaneously and paradoxically brought back into question the relevancy of gender differences. Penley also quotes Raymond Bellour who ‘maintains that in the nineteenth century men looked at women and feared they were different but in the twentieth century men look at women and fear they are the same’.<sup>33</sup> This evinces the idea that the anxiety that men have been facing in relation to women is still the same, though the fear is grounded on the sameness rather than difference. Science fictions often liberate the female characters by putting them alongside the male characters, as regularly found in films like *Terminator Two: Judgement Day* and the *Alien* trilogy. As a consequence, they are no longer willing to wait to be rescued by the male protagonists, to the extent of reversing the traditional gender roles, like Jane (Dina Meyer) in *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995) who plays an important role in saving Johnny (Keanu Reeves) from dying due to the overloading of data in his head.

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<sup>30</sup> ‘Science Fiction Before Liberation’, in *Future Females*, Marleen S. Barr, ed., 1981, p.23

<sup>31</sup> ‘The Feminist Dystopia of the 1990s: Record of Failure, Midwife of Hope’, in *Future Females, The Next Generation*, Marleen S. Barr, ed., 2000, p.53

<sup>32</sup> ‘Time Travel, Primal Scene, and the Critical Dystopia’, *Camera Obscura*, 1986, p.76

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

Gender differences and role-reversals are celebrated as in the instance of romantic love, highlighting their agency and status as a transgressor. An example of this can be found in the film *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999). Motivated by this romantic love, the female protagonist of the film, Natasha/Jane (Gretchen Mol), jacks herself into the virtual world and saves the male protagonist Douglas Hall/ John Ferguson from her maniac husband, David (all played by Craig Bierko) and ‘turns’ him from a virtual being into a real human. The role of a saviour for a female character can be seen as an inversion of the conventions in the canonical science fiction genre; this inversion can also be seen in Steven Spielberg’s *Minority Report* (2002), in which Lara saves her husband, Detective John Anderton (Tom Cruise), from being ‘imprisoned’ eternally by breaking into the prison to rescue him. In Kathryn Bigelow’s *Strange Days* (1995), the inversion appears at both ‘psychological’ and physical levels, culminating in a romance. Despite Mace repeatedly says that she is helping Lenny Nero because she cares about him as a friend and the fact that he was there to console her traumatised son sometime in the past, the intimate kiss at the end of the film is a ‘give away’ that their feelings towards each other are more than platonic. In *Strange Days*, Mace provides the energy that Lenny lacks, physically fights for Lenny’s safety, making her a transgressive character—transgressing gender roles.

Though some science fictions still lucidly uphold romantic love, patriarchy is left at stake. This narrative provides a critique on men’s crucial role in human reproduction by making it obsolete. This signals the idea that the ‘phallus is becoming irrelevant’ and the arrival of ‘post-phallic culture, [...] a place for men who accept the fact that size doesn’t matter’.<sup>34</sup> In Joanna Russ’s *Female Man* and Naomi Mitchison’s *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*, women in the utopian world have the ability to achieve the ultimate reproductive freedom, independent of men. In Mitchison’s *Memoirs* the reproductive technology is called ‘grafting’ and the female protagonist volunteers to be the first human host to be experimented on with the science of grafting. Though it is not a complete success, as the ‘entity’ which she calls Ariel eventually dies, she is aware ‘that it was also an exciting and novel piece of research’ (p.52). Marlene S. Barr laconically claims that ‘cloning is exceedingly threatening—to patriarchy. Cloning can change the penis’s reproductive role’.<sup>35</sup> In some science fiction films, masculinity is rendered obsolete and in need of reassertion.

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<sup>34</sup> Marleen S. Barr, ‘Post-phallic Culture: Reality Now Resembles Utopian Feminist Science Fiction’, in *Future Females, The Next Generation*, Marleen S. Barr, ed., 2000, pp.80-81

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.76

In Roger Spottiswoode's *The 6th Day* (2000), the reassertion of masculinity is put to the extreme, as cloning affects the way men function in their family and familiar setting. In *The 6th Day*, masculinity is depicted in two-fold at its iconic level, that is, in the form of hyper-masculinity embodied in the iconic images of Arnold Schwarzenegger (Adam) and his clone. When Adam's family is kidnapped, Adam and his doppelganger clone eventually agree to work together to save Adam's family. *The 6th Day* inserts its patriarchal values by restoring Adam's family and making his clone another responsible father. However, the need for the two fathers for the film to arrive at its narrative solution ultimately mirrors the fragmentation of masculinity, which in turn challenges the traditional conception of masculinity as monolithic and intransigent.

### **Future Noir and Postmodernism: The Irony Begins**

The term 'future noir' encapsulates a postmodern encounter with generic persistence, creating a mixture of irony, pessimism, prediction, extrapolation, bleakness and nostalgia. This mixture of thematic concerns finds its cause in the hybridity of future noir itself—a product of postmodern consumer culture that is 'consuming the consumer',<sup>36</sup> creating a new breed of noir thriller that is continuously and consciously at play with its own generic expectations. When dealing with future noir, there are two prominent feelings involved: one, there is a sense of belonging to the nostalgic past embodied in 'the protagonist's violence, paranoia and fragmented psyche'<sup>37</sup>; two, there is a sense that you have been taken for a devilish ride, not of your own free will but dictated by exposure to the inescapable trappings of the narrative of the near future. It is like experiencing *deja vu*, or a postmodern 'old is new'<sup>38</sup> moment—a moment when you are overwhelmed by a sudden rush awareness that the familiar conventions are suddenly being attacked by arsenals of ambiguous futuristic imageries and symbolisms. Future noir is persistent in keeping its generic pessimism of urban or modern nightmare, but it also allusively exploits the 'seventies revisionism', 'eighties pastiche' and 'nineties irony'<sup>39</sup> (also known as neo-noir), to create a new protagonist who is both 'dark' and playful like the characters in Gibson's *Neuromancer*. In future

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<sup>36</sup> Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.190

<sup>37</sup> Richard Martin, *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls*, 1997, p.7

<sup>38</sup> This is a phrase used by James Naremore in his analysis of noir and neo-noir films. In James Naremore, *More Than Night*, 1998, p.167

<sup>39</sup> These are some of the organisational chapters of Richard Martin's *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls*.

noir, the shadow of Philip Marlow lingers on and intermingles with a character as superficially human as Gibson's Johnny Mnemonic. Noir realism is also fragmented, evidence of the conflation of elements of science fiction and gothic fantasy in its narrative.

At the centre of the fusion that is future noir is its postmodern reference to a hybrid subject, evoking noir's shared origin with both the science fiction and gothic genres. The thematic concern of the trio finds its point of confluence in the representation of the body, foregrounding gender issues, sexual, and body politics. Let's consider briefly the issue of gender representation in the three aforementioned genres, concentrating on the possible differences or similarities in the portrayal of the male protagonist. The canonical noir protagonist is usually trapped in a psychological warfare of 'alienation and despair', that is, 'the existential trap which the "forces" around the noir characters have set, with or without their assistance, there often seems to be no way out'.<sup>40</sup> This compels his critics to see him not only as a mechanism of social and cultural subversion but also as mirror of the breakdown of the societal value system. Noir is a vision of nightmare, whose visual style is 'a translation of both character emotions and narrative, [forming a recurrent] pattern of visual usage'<sup>41</sup> to reflect the male protagonist's 'existentially bitter attitude',<sup>42</sup> providing no sense of narrative closure. In the science fiction genre, the male protagonist is usually an adventurous individual, possessing a heroic quality that, once upon a time, reflected the ambition and inspiration of the American Founding Fathers. To a certain extent, a science fiction text also provokes an ontological question of the constitution of a human (What is a human?), constructed not only through a romantic encounter with a female figure (like Nova in Schaffner's *Planet of the Apes*) but also antagonistic figures of 'frontier myth' (like Apes in *Planet of the Apes*). Brian McHale, for instance, argues that the science fiction genre is '*the ontological genre par excellence*' [original italic],<sup>43</sup> which in turn reaffirms Joanna Russ's claim that the genre is effectively 'making what is usually a literary metaphor into a literal identity'.<sup>44</sup> Science fiction's ontological quest also reveals its epistemological

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<sup>40</sup> Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, eds. *An Encyclopaedia of Reference to the American Style: Film Noir*, 1992, p.387

<sup>41</sup> Alain Silver, 'Introduction', in Alain Silver and James Ursini, eds., *Film Noir: Reader*, 1998, p.3

<sup>42</sup> Todd Erickson, 'Kill Me Again: Movement becomes Genre', in Alain Silver and James Ursini, eds., *Film Noir: Reader*, 1998, p.308

<sup>43</sup> *Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987, p.59

<sup>44</sup> *To Write Like a Woman*, 1995, p.xv.

juxtaposition between a human and non-human to in turn define the constitution of a human.

In a great many examples, science fiction films often use horror figures as a means of evoking and literalising the evil in the alien or antagonistic forces. These films, like Brian De Palma's *Mission to Mars*<sup>45</sup> and Paul Anderson (III)'s *Event Horizon*,<sup>46</sup> according to King and Krzywinska, 'figure the future in terms of the *gothic*' [original italic].<sup>47</sup> In *Event Horizon*, the horror figure is the embodiment of 'hell' visited by the eponymous deep space research vessel through the 'gravity drive' invented by Dr. William Weir. *Event Horizon* can be interpreted as a modern reworking of a haunted house as Dr. Weir himself, after becoming the 'ghost' from hell, repeatedly calls the vessel 'home'. Dr. Weir represents a loaded image of an evil reincarnated—a characteristic of the gothic horror-fantasy that shows the world with excessiveness, creating an environment that influences the way the male protagonist is seen and treated. Gothic excess is often expressed through a sense of alienation, the grotesque, and the abjection, thus disrupting normalcy. These are elements shared in the noir genre, which as Lee Horsley observes, 'this pull towards excess which gives noir its unsettling power, its savage intensity and its haunting sense of irreversible fate'<sup>48</sup>—the sense of fatality with which the noir protagonist has to deal. The heterogeneous catalogues of science fiction, the noir thriller and Gothic fantasy are calibrated in future noir, creating a sense of ambivalence as described by McHale:

Intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they 'tip over' into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions—the sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but bidirectional and reversible.<sup>49</sup>

Postmodernism, anyway, is a 'discursive construct'.<sup>50</sup>

Whereas the male protagonist in canonical noir is defined by his existential despair or angst—an inward questioning of being, and is shaped by the criminal milieu that he is drawn into, the male 'heroic' figure in the

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<sup>45</sup> 2000

<sup>46</sup> 1997

<sup>47</sup> *Science Fiction Cinema*, 2000, p.79

<sup>48</sup> *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.229

<sup>49</sup> *Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987, p.11

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5



science fiction genre is the epitome of masculine chivalry, referring to an outward questioning of being, creating the discourse of the 'other', the non-*I*. Therefore, science fiction often relies on the 'literalisation' of the antagonistic force that a male protagonist encounters, such as alien beings from outer space, in an effort to define what constitutes a human being. The gothic genre, on the other hand, usually literalises the antagonistic forces in sinister, mythical and horror figures (like Medusa, dragon and monster, angel and the undead, and other metaphysical beings) as a metaphor for mass anxieties, fear, disgust or taboo. The gothic genre is therefore seen as a display of an abject essence, the literality of Kristeva's 'neither subject nor object' of the 'other', that is 'one of those violent, dark revolts being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable'.<sup>51</sup> For that reason, the gothic fantasy is commonly about the cosmic struggle of 'good versus evil', and the good must prevail over the evil as '[t]he solution must lie in a stronger force than the disruptive or threatening one: the force of logic and reason, a vital personality, or even a counterforce existing on the suprahuman level'.<sup>52</sup> Of course in some cases these categorisations do overlap, but science fiction proper in general represents the Other as a source of fear, and not as abjection in Kristeva's sense of the term. In future noir, the destabilisation of the Other signifies the displacement of sexual difference, signalling the idea that it is no longer 'politically correct' to have sexual difference self-evidently shown on the screen. It none the less points to what Constance Penley terms as trying to 'reactivate infantile sexual investigation'.<sup>53</sup>

In future noir, these characteristics are encroaching inside the visual style and narrative content, creating a new type of male romantic character who is increasingly dubious, alienated and fragmented. The ontological uncertainty in science fiction coalesces with the 'downbeat existential dilemma'<sup>54</sup> intrinsic in a noir protagonist, coupled with the gothic's excess, is epitomised in future noir protagonists who, like James Cole in Terry Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys* and John Murdoch in Alex Proyas's *Dark City*, are alienated, hunted and fragmented. These noir elements are so vivid that you can almost feel and smell the collision and the collapse of generic boundaries in these films, as the narrative and visual images crochet their ontological and epistemological impulses, obfuscated by

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<sup>51</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1982, p.2

<sup>52</sup> Hazel B. Pierce, *A literary Symbiosis*, 1983, pp.6-7

<sup>53</sup> 'Time Travel, Primal Fear, and the Critical Dystopia', *Camera Obscura*, 1986, p.76

<sup>54</sup> James Nick, 'An Eye for an Eye', *Sight and Sound*, 2002, p.14

postmodernism that seems to hinder any easy reading. Helen Carr concurs that '[p]ostmodernism is about fragmented images, and its manifestations are so diverse that often it's hard to read what the fragments say'.<sup>55</sup> But as I have argued earlier, building from Brian McHale's apprehension of the concept of postmodernism, it is also a discursive construct that helps us in 'constructing its reference',<sup>56</sup> making it a useful theoretical and critical framework for the analysis of future noir texts.

Referring to *Twelve Monkeys* and *Dark City*, the ontological instability of the male protagonists permits an alternative reading of the female characters. The narrative of both films is fuelled by the underlying romantic encounters with the main female characters, Dr. Kathryn Railly and Emma Murdoch/Anna, respectively. These romantic encounters are primitive, perhaps suggesting a certain primal journey into the paranoid world, reflecting the danger that these female characters exude to the male protagonists, reaffirming their status as desiring mothers and eventually as castrated figures.<sup>57</sup> This is an element of romance narrative that while it re-establishes the future noir hero as a romantic figure, it concurrently silences the woman. Dubious, alienated, and fragmented, this future noir protagonist remains 'the last action hero' none the less. Quite interestingly though, these women do not provide a direct threat to the male protagonists, at least, they are as oblivious to their own destructiveness as the male protagonists themselves. In that sense, they are also sympathetic figures. The image of a whore and an angel collapses together, as epitomised by Emma Murdoch/Anna whose evanescent identity renders life ephemeral, forming a hybrid that nullifies division of gender roles. Gender is still at the heart of the debate, but gender roles have significantly been disrupted, a postmodern paradox that is inherent in future noir, providing alternatives to the reading of the female characters.

Postmodernism is useful for oppositional texts like the ones produced by feminist/female writers because it challenges the binary opposition that is often a defining feature of science fiction, the gothic fantasy, and the noir thriller. Raffaella Baccoline, for instance, opines that:

It is the very notion of an impure science fiction genre, with permeable borders that allow contamination from other genres, that represents

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<sup>55</sup> *From My Guy To Sci-Fi*, 1989, p.11

<sup>56</sup> *Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987, p.5

<sup>57</sup> Constance Penley relates the desire in the time travel story with that of Freud's primal scene fantasy, the fantasy of seeing or being at 'one's own conception', Time Travel, Primal Scene, and the Critical Dystopia, *Camera Obscura*, 1986, p.72

resistance to hegemonic ideology and renovates the resisting nature of science fiction and makes the new science fiction genre also multi-oppositional.<sup>58</sup>

This is, in other words, the hybridisation of a genre, a postmodern strategy for attacking a homogenous category. The hybridisation of a genre in effect affects the ideological dominant of the text, engaging it with deeper and perhaps more complex issues that foreground the shift from an epistemological (modernist) to an ontological (postmodern) reconstruction of the narrative. Therefore, it is easy to accept the idea that *Twelve Monkeys* is a future noir and not a science fiction proper text, not because of its visual and narrative style, but because of the film's organisation of its 'ontological dominant [as the] principle of systematicity' that clusters the film's 'otherwise heterogeneous catalogues'.<sup>59</sup> There is an epistemological 'hesitation'<sup>60</sup> here, formed by the investigative structure of the narrative or the epistemological quest of the text; but its ontological uncertainty forms the 'ideological dominant', which originated in the instability of the male protagonist that is exacerbated by postmodern paradox of the time travel narrative, making this film a future noir text. This arguably depends on which or what way we are looking at the text, which in either case points to the instability or fragmentation of the text itself. What this offers feminist/female writers is an alternative interpretation of the genre, allowing them to centralize the female characters who are normally marginalized in a standard modernist narrative.

If as a genre, noir's affinity with detective fiction's modernist ideological basis foregrounds the female character as the subject of the male protagonist's investigation, future noir exposes an ideological instability to give this female character her own voice. Subduing patriarchal oppression is not what future noir aims to do, at least not at the syntactical level (hence, the main female character can sometimes be seen 'playing' a very traditional role, like Emma Murdoch/Anna in *Dark City* (a wife and a nightclub singer, reminiscent of the canonical femme fatale), Rachel in *Blade Runner* (a 'damsel in distress') and Lara Clarke/Anderton in *Minority Report* (a wife or redeeming figure)). Instead it happens because of the competing ontological and epistemological focuses within the narrative itself, allowing the female character, especially the female

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<sup>58</sup> 'Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of Katherine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler', in *Future Females: The Next Generation*, Marleen S. Barr, ed., 2000, p.18

<sup>59</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987, p.10

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12

protagonist, to dominate the narrative. In other words, it would be facile to assume that this is achieved via role-reversal, as it is at the ideological level rather than structural that female/feminist writers try to undermine patriarchy. In the film *Blade Runner*, the ideological uncertainty is highlighted when the ontological status of the Blade Runner himself, Rick Deckard, is destabilised and fragmented, marking the shift of the film's principle narrative from 'her to him'. He is now the subject of the investigation, revealing his ontological uncertainty and vagaries. This turns him into the hunted, the same fate often enough faced by the male protagonists in *Twelve Monkey*, *Dark City* and *Minority Report*.

### **Men/Machine Interface: The Body Snatched– The Paranoia Begins? The David Cronenberg's case**

The body has in recent years been one of the most prominent subjects in the science fiction genre. The representation of the body as a metaphor for the paranoia, horror and to some extent the conspiracy within American government provides an apparent rhetoric of alienation, contamination and infiltration in science fiction texts. The body is thus central in the popular discourse of an American culture engulfed in the obsessive fear of both the known and unknown, culminating in the scapegoating of the Other. For instance, in the classical science fiction texts of the 50s, the body is figuratively used to represent the fear of the McCarthy years when America was battling against the 'enemy within', i.e., 'the myth of Communism as total dehumanisation'.<sup>61</sup> Some science fiction films during that period like Kurt Neumann's *The Fly* (1958) and Don Siegal's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) capture some of the paranoia associated with the body, marking the beginning of the body culture and politics in Western popular imagination. While *The Fly* indulges in the fear of contamination, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* tackles the danger of the subconscious conformity, which is responsible for creating zombie-like citizens.

The figurative uses of the body in the classical texts get a literal treatment from the 1980s onwards, allowing an increasing opportunity to dissect a human body and soul, reinforcing the Western binary system. The horror of bodily invasion is reflected by external/alien infiltration and replicated in the discourse of alien abduction, creating a rhetoric commonly associated with contemporary anxieties such as AIDS epidermic, drug abuse and addiction, disconcerting scientific experimentation by the

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<sup>61</sup> Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, 1986, p.192

American government and weird or distressing war syndromes. The rhetoric of paranoia, contamination, transformation, and infiltration re-emerges with the remaking of films such as David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986) and Abel Ferrara's *Body Snatchers* (1994). The major difference between these latest remakes and their progenitors lies not only in the treatment of the body, the images of which are presently portrayed more intimately on the screen, but also is characterised by the emergence of emotional intensity that was absent in the previous films. Whereas in Neumann's *The Fly*, the protagonist is transformed into the shape and size of a real fly, Cronenberg's *Bundlefly*'s shape and size is the replica of a human facsimile, giving it a more direct association and affinity with a human body. Likewise, Ferrara's *Body Snatchers* creates a visceral effect by showing the most graphically gory and queasy details of a human body being snatched by the aliens, especially with the use of close up shots vis-à-vis the first two earlier versions.<sup>62</sup> This more intimate association with a human body is attributable to the contemporary body culture and politics that dissect not only the body, but also the mind, foregrounding the old Western binary system.

The remakes of these films exemplify and magnify the continuing interest Western culture has in the human body or sexuality. In the case of the science fiction genre, it is a matter of the endurance of the existing generic conventions. The genre has always been interested in the human body, especially a female body, which is often traditionally represented by figure of 'the Other', signifying the antithetical traits associated with women. Helen Haste argues that 'the metaphor of dualism which maps on to masculinity and femininity logically requires that one pole is the negation of the other'.<sup>63</sup> In this case, femininity is the negated and masculinity is the negator, establishing a well-defined territory in which gender traits and divisions seem to presuppose the treatment of the character. Science fiction's preoccupation with the body, coupled with noir's ontological imperative, in effect, calls into being an antagonistic figure, often embodied in a female character whose subjectivity within the narrative is often displaced as the Other. However, with the shifting of the scapegoated Other from the outside to the inside of a human body, foregrounding the formation of a hybrid or fragmented subject, the future

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<sup>62</sup> All the three films are adapted from John Finney's novel. The second version bears the same title as the first and was directed by Philip Kaufman in 1978. The locations in all three films are also different with Siegel's location a small American town, Kaufman's is a big city, and Ferrara's in an army camp. These discrete locations offer different metaphors in the reading of the film.

<sup>63</sup> *The Sexual Metaphor*, 1993, p.5

noir text inevitably poses a very different ontological question. One may argue that the human body itself is now the enemy that betrays the humanist sense of identity, which the human/machine interface usually represents. Others, like feminist critics on future noir and science fiction, would argue that the hybrid and fragmented identity is a chrysalis from which the liberation of the female characters in the genre and sub-genre can be found. There is no denying that future noir texts remain interested in the ontological question of whether a human body can be the major defining characteristic of a human being or not. Its primary question now is: what if the human body itself betrays the definition or constitution of a human being? The answers lie in future noir's inherent poetic of postmodernism that often digs uncompromisingly beneath the surface to reveal the genre's tendency not only to give prominence to its concern with destabilizing hegemonic categories like gender and genre themselves, but also, as discussed earlier, to 'construct [...] its reference',<sup>64</sup> amid future noir's ontological uncertainty.

Traditionally in the science fiction proper, the invasion narrative hinges on aliens and spaceships as their major iconographies, which in effect place the origin of the threat outside the human body. With the concern has shifted from the 'outward-ness'/external into the 'inwardness'/internal, a new kind of interest in the human body reached its heyday in the 1980s, especially when the paranoia about AIDS started to envelop the world. The human body was suddenly a threat and an abject essence, originating from the fear of AIDS that is commonly associated with any bodily secretion, as epitomised by the narrative of 'body horror' that mushroomed around that period. This paranoia is paralleled by the development in the body culture that turns a human body into a 'spatialised' subject within the narrative, constructing a landscape that harks back to the 'inner space/outer space' schism. Talking about the concept of 'Inner Space'<sup>65</sup> in relation to the New Wave movement of Science fiction in the 1960s, Edward James argues that:

Sf should no longer be an exploration of the possibilities for humanity and science in the future or an educational introduction to aspects of science wrapped in the sugar coating of plot and adventure. Sf should not be an exploration of a hypothetical external reality, because objective reality is,

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<sup>64</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987, p.5

<sup>65</sup> According to Edward James, the term 'Inner Space' had been invented in 1953 by J.B. Priestley. *Science Fiction in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, 1994, p.170

[...], a dubious concept. Sf should be a means to explore our own subjective perceptions of the universe and our fellow human beings.<sup>66</sup>

James's view signifies the changing of interest and direction in the thematic consideration of the science fiction genre, focusing on the 'inwardness' of the human being's world, in an effort to comprehend the human's reality. I would concur with James, arguing that the shift to future noir also lies in the destabilising of science fiction's epistemological quest; one that is often embodied in its ontological uncertainty, and reflected in future noir's disinterested view of Western taxonomy. This means, by turning into biological sciences, a human body is centralized, essentialised, and ultimately fragmented; and the narrative in the science fiction genre therefore gives rise to a new question concerning the ontological status of the body, requiring and appropriating a different type of discourse to deal with the body's complicated manoeuvring in the space investigated. Often, the discourse of inner space is used sensuously, and this time rather more intimately within the scope of human physique and mind, drawing attention to a new reality that is being driven by the need to cross the boundary of human skin.

Although the human body has become the central landscape in which the investigation, speculation, and extrapolation of the new human reality takes place in both science fiction and the future noir sub-genre, their themes do not necessarily change. Indeed, technological invention and scientific experimentation are used less as the means to cross the boundary set by human skin, and more as a metaphor for the anxiety originating in the interface itself, as if revisiting the themes of infiltration, transformation, contamination, and invasion. The watershed lies, I would argue, in the way science fiction and future noir form and dramatise the Other and the hybrid subject, respectively, though both are informed by their association with the Gothic. Whereas the Other in science fiction can be seen as a 'superego figure, avenging itself on liberated female sexuality [...] an identification [...] with punishment', the hybrid subject is 'a creature from the id, not merely a product of repression but a protest against it, an identification with the return of the repressed'.<sup>67</sup> The implication of this is that, on one hand, science fiction texts usually produce heroic male protagonists who save the female characters by defeating the antagonistic force. Or in the case of *Mimic*,<sup>68</sup> the genetically engineered insects called 'Judas Breed' created by a team led by an entomologist, Susan Tyler,

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<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, 1986, p.195

<sup>68</sup> Dir. Guillermo del Toro. 1997

finally come back to haunt and hunt her, representing her inevitable link with the Other. On the other hand, future noir is inhabited by complexly constructed protagonists whose hybridity mirrors the collapse in societal values and systems. The relevant questions now are: Is human identity still at stake? How does it affect the representation of the female character and the meaning of being a female? This section tries to answer these questions by looking at the human/machine interface in order to find liberatory voices for these 'female' characters in two David Cronenberg's films.

David Cronenberg's allegiance to body culture is useful in illustrating how the man/machine interface affects the way female characters are portrayed in popular culture or cinema. For the purpose of this study, two of his films that I consider of paramount importance in investigating the representation or the treatment of women in science fiction and future noir texts, as they capture the paranoia about the insertion or invasion of machine/scientific experimentation into a human body, are *The Fly* and *Crash*. I would argue that whereas *The Fly* falls into the category of science fiction/horror hybrid, *Crash* is a future noir film. Famously (or notoriously?) dubbed as the "King of Veneer Horror", "the Baron of Blood", and "Dave 'Deprave' Cronenberg",<sup>69</sup> Cronenberg's fascination with the human body is regularly epitomised by his films like *Shivers*, *Videodrome*, *Rabid*, *The Fly* and *Crash*. Critics of these films label him the master of body rupture and transformation, observing that he creates images that are truly the 'most shocking, perverse, disgusting and truly inventive scenes of horror and bodily mayhem ever conceived for the cinema'.<sup>70</sup> Indisputably an *auteur*, Cronenberg's oeuvre is tied together by his interest in dissecting a human body that has been torn asunder, investigated, and usually contaminated: in the case of *Shivers*, by excretory-like parasites. The genres' different ideological frames consequently affect the meanings attached to the representation of the female characters, especially at the level of ideological symbolism. I will be using these films to demonstrate how the fundamental difference in their ontological uncertainties moves the latter into the future noir territory. These uncertainties indeed are their most potent forces.

Whereas *The Fly* falls within the realm of the science fiction/horror hybrid due to its affinity with the abject essence, *Crash* is a future noir text in which the atmospherically bleak world is the mirror of the protagonist's existential despair; 'human beings' struggle to find new meanings in their

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<sup>69</sup> Chris Rodley, 'Introduction', *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, Chris Rodley, ed., 1997, p.xv

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*



relationships with machines, culminating in the inescapable human/machine interface. What this suggests is that, unlike *The Fly*'s ending that is subliminally cathartic, *Crash* is sombre and cold throughout, *sans peur et sans reproche*, denying any purgation of the (audience and characters') emotions. Likewise, although their interests in the interception of the machine by/in the human body are somewhat similar, the watershed lies in the ontological uncertainty of future noir that is mutated into the character's existential dilemma. The films' ontological instabilities, moreover, are drawn from the different metaphor that the interface represents, influenced in turn by the essence of hybridity. The fusion of science fiction and the gothic horror in *The Fly* is characteristically prevalent in the making of a tragic and melancholic hero (Although Cronenberg himself claims that *The Fly* is a metaphor for the ageing process and denies the idea that it is intended as an AIDS metaphor),<sup>71</sup> the film's romantic angle is a chrysalis from which the treatment of the female character can be divulged, whereby, according to Chris Rodley, we see the film's 'triumph of love story over special effects'.<sup>72</sup> Arguably, *Crash*, which is based on J.G. Ballard's novel of the same title, combines science fiction elements with noir pessimism and inescapable fatalism to produce a postmodern hybrid. This bleakness may be a result of two authorial visions: Martin Barker, Jane Arthurs and Ramaswati Harindranath argue that *Crash* 'is a very self-conscious film [...] very evidently formed out of a combination of the visions of J.G. Ballard and David Cronenberg'.<sup>73</sup> This is concurred with by Cronenberg who observes that 'the sci-fi-ness [of *Crash*], comes from [J.G.] Ballard anticipating a future pathological psychology'<sup>74</sup>—a vision that he himself tries to accomplish. This shared bleak vision of the future world engendered by psychopathology is the embodiment of noir's vision of postmodern nightmare. Therefore, embedded in both films' ideological differences are their ontological conflicts that offer different ways of reading the female characters. In other words, the portrayal of the female characters in *The Fly* and *Crash* as 'hopeless romantic' is also emblematic of the genres' reaction towards Western culture's interest in investigating a female body, sexuality, and subjectivity; and this is referred analogously to the human/machine interface.

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<sup>71</sup> John Costello (*David Cronenberg*, 2000, p. 64) and Chris Rodley (*Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, ed., 1997, p.125-127) both quote Cronenberg on this matter.

<sup>72</sup> 'Introduction', *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, in Chris Rodley, ed., 1997, p.xiv

<sup>73</sup> *The Crash Controversy*, 2001, p.5

<sup>74</sup> *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, in Chris Rodley, ed., 1997, p.194

One of the strategies employed in *The Fly* involves locating the metaphor of the interface in the ‘spatialisation’ of a female body. The ‘spatialisation’ of a female body marks a new cultural attitude towards the human body itself; it is, however, mostly characterised by the pejorative representation of a female body as a landscape to be explored, manipulated, and ‘tamed’, not only intriguing and threatening, but also ultimately replaceable or dispensable. In *The Fly*, Seth Brundle declares to Ronnie, “What I am working on? I am working on something that will change the world and human life as we know it”. The ideological significance of Brundle’s experiment is embodied in the womb-like teleports, which in turn carry a bifurcate metaphor: one, for a mother’s womb. The teleports’ main role is to ‘reproduce’, taking away a woman’s unique ability to bear children (As a ‘gene splicer’, the teleports function as a mother’s womb and Brundlefly is its progeny); two, for a female body. In encouraging Ronnie to experiment with the teleports, Brundle claims that ‘It makes you feel sexy’. It is sexy because the teleports are, for him, a female body that can be penetrated and analysed, the centre of his unique invention and exploration. To a certain extent, Cronenberg’s *The Fly* can be seen as a modern reworking of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in which the ‘scientific request is described in terms of sexual aggression against (female) nature’.<sup>75</sup> The teleports represent a female body or a castrated mother—a symbol of fertility, fatal, evil, and mysteriously seductive; hence is required by patriarchy to be annihilated or controlled.

*The Fly* also manifests the paranoia of technological invention gone wrong, whilst simultaneously placing the female body as the locus of horror. ‘Locating horror in the body’, argues John Costello, ‘is therefore logical, with no spiritual battleground of “good” versus “evil”, and no promise of afterlife’.<sup>76</sup> Costello’s view of the body as a site for horror gives prominence to the body as an abject essence, a site where ‘cultural abomination’ is finally personified. This ‘cultural abomination’ may be explained by Mike Merrin, who quoted Cronenberg’s talking about ‘the AIDS epidemic [...] and asked the interviewer to see it from the point of view of the virus’,<sup>77</sup> highlighting Cronenberg’s tendency to dig deep beneath the surface of mere representation. Apparently, for Brundle, ‘I

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<sup>75</sup> ‘The Monster We Create: Woman on the Edge of Time and Frankenstein’, *Critique*, 2001, p.139

<sup>76</sup> *David Cronenberg*, 2000, p.32

<sup>77</sup> ‘The Fly (1986)’, p.2, <<http://us.imdb.com/Reviews/218/21847>>. John Costello, however, reported that Cronenberg ‘took great pains to distance the film from being read as an Aids allegory’, in *David Cronenberg*, 2000, p.64

wasn't just talking about sex and penetration. I am talking about penetration beyond the veil of flesh', which signals his epistemological quest that directly puts the female character at the centre of his personal conflict with technology. This conflict is a construct, in which, Cronenberg, through his male protagonist, has moved the body out of the realm of the representational, making allowance for the protagonist's flawed judgement to snowball. Technology is the enabler of the bodily transformation, but Ronnie's body that raises Brundle's curiosity is the catalyst, hence her role as his nemesis.

Misogynistic, the film is a strict revision of the Fall narrative, blaming the female character for the male protagonist's downfall. If in the Fall narrative 'what simultaneously subverted and energized the subject of Western culture was not desire *per se* [Original italic], but transgressive desire haunted by the death which it brought into being',<sup>78</sup> the transgressive desire in the film leads less to the invention of his project, and more to his own tragic death. His status as a tragic hero is due to the flaws in his own judgement, turning him into a sympathetic figure as his human body gradually disintegrates while the 'fly' concurrently takes shape. The film entraps Ronnie, complicating her in the loop of Brundlefly's desire to resist his dehumanisation, and pleading with her with the promise of 'a family of three ... more human than I ever long for'. Ronnie's ultimate punishment is not only to carry the burden of her unwanted pregnancy, but also to be forced to 'kill' Brundle. By strategically placing her within the Fall narrative, and locating Brundle as a tragic hero, the film demonstrates how his humanity supersedes his fly/machine side. So, when Brundlefly pleads her to shoot 'him', his heroism is again centralised, turning Ronnie into *la belle dame sans merci*. This narrative impulse can be cathartic, an element of science fiction that severs it from the future noir territory.

*Crash*, which according to Ian Sinclair is 'the posthumous dream of a book that no longer exists',<sup>79</sup> is the manifestation of Cronenberg's anxious vision about the interface of human and machine. It unashamedly investigates female desire, sexuality, and body, reminiscent of canonical noir's treatment of women. This interface signifies the collapse of the bleak future into the chaotic present ("Vaughan: It's the future, Ballard, you're already part of it"), which inevitably combines the physical fusion of a human with technology. The film's ontological uncertainty originates in the framing of its conflicts between its spatial-temporal and ideological

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<sup>78</sup> *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, 1999, p.91

<sup>79</sup> *Crash*, 1999, p.19

framework around a female body, hence its irrationality, culminating in the creation of a catalogue of characters who are blasé about their surroundings and are brought together by the obsessive desire for pleasure. The use of sexual act as the narrative trajectory of the film expresses the characters' actions to transgress theological-cultural boundaries. The result is a tremendous blurring of identity and sexuality, while consigning the female characters to the narrative of becoming the Other, who are usurped by hedonistic 'epicurean' ethics. These hedonistic 'epicurean' ethics are reminiscent of the portrayal of women as the embodiment of a male fantasy, which shapes them into *bona fide* femmes fatales. One may ask: are the female characters in *Crash* liberated? My analysis tries to prove that this is possible, especially by looking at neo-noir elements available in the film.

*Crash* relies heavily on its visual<sup>80</sup> style to articulate the basic premise of the story. The stream of light created by moving cars is resonant of the 'running' light in Chandler's mean street or the neon lights of 'techno noir' in James Cameron's *Terminator*, thus creating an atmospheric feast of noir darkness and a double-edged world that is not what it seems. The film's tendency to invest a lot of its visual focus on both the body of a human and a car underlines both the voyeuristic desire at play and its technological determinism. The focus on a naked female body, scarred male and female body, and a wrecked car in equal measure creates a series of visceral images that unbalances and destabilizes any moral judgement attached to the sexualized body, which results in the fragmentation of the 'humanist' self. These catalogues of conflicting images, coupled with some raw sex scenes, give the idea that all of entities in the film are penetrated bodies or perhaps penetrable, as body eroticism and car crashes are intertwined. Cronenberg's characters are transgressors that reflect the insanity of society and challenge the spectators' moral ground, as they are often covertly placed within a voyeuristic distance, the very essence of what constitutes noir disorientation of the audience. The antagonistic force the characters have to face is no longer the gangster underworld but their own bodies and uncontrollable, ungratified sexual desire, which can only

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<sup>80</sup> Martin Barker in his study on the controversies surrounding the film (hence its poor reception in the U.K., stresses on a film as a powerful form of culture due to its reliance on visual representation) also concedes that most film academia scorn the film based on their current presumptions that 'our visual relationship to films simultaneously positions us and enmeshes us' (p.76). This in a way supports my point that *Crash* relies heavily on its visual as part of the narrative structure. In 'Crashing Out', *Screen*, 2002

be satiated with mechanical invention and intervention. Cars are eroticised, as illustrated by the way Vaughan sensuously describes his James Dean look-alike's car in great detail and pleasure, before re-enacting some famous crashes involving celebrities like James Dean and Jayne Mansfield. The association that is made between car crashes and celebrities (who cash in on their public images) is also a sign that 'auto-eroticism' is related to an obsession with images—injured and scarred images of humans and automobiles. The characters in the film are eroticised, but they are fundamentally flat and 'lifeless', highlighting the sense that *Crash* is a film about visual fascination and not character development.

To a certain extent, the film is misogynistic, characterised by its effort to fuse desire of/for a woman with technology, which results in both the eroticism of technology and the castration of the female body. Technology, in effect, is a new expression of desire itself in which the discourse of the encounter is gradually becoming the palimpsest of the interface, which is achieved not in stages but through the nullifying of female subjectivity. The controversial three successive sex scenes at the outset of the film demonstrate Cronenberg's curious vision of a 'fragmentable' female body, foregrounding its malleability with technology; this in turn reflects the technologically determined sense of foreboding. In the opening scene of the film:

*As we float past the planes we notice a woman leaning against the wing of a Piper Cub, her chest against the wing's trailing edge, her arms spread out to each side, as though flying herself. As we get closer we see her jacket is pulled open to expose one of her breasts, which rests on the metal of the wing.*<sup>81</sup>

In this camera cue, Cronenberg creates a fusion with an image of a woman (Catherine) imitating technology while having sex; dehumanising her while simultaneously eroticising technology. Technology is aggrandised and has increasingly been incorporated with the sexual scene, a strategy employed by Cronenberg to gradually fuse and eventually denounce the female body in sexual acts. In the second sex scene between James Ballard and his camera assistant, '[s]he is draped across a table strewn with camera parts',<sup>82</sup> signifying not only the curious blurring of technology, desire and the human body but also the fragmentation of the female body itself. Female identity and sexuality are constantly destabilized, the result of the inevitable fusion with technology. The third sexual scene finally

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<sup>81</sup> Chris Rodley, *Crash*, 1996, p.3

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4

demonstrates the detachment of desire for/from the female body, while foregrounding the theme of remoteness or alienation:

*Their sex-making is disconnected, passionless, as though it would disappear if they noticed it. An urgent, uninterrupted flow of cars streams below them.*<sup>83</sup>

The anal sex performed by the couple is designed by Cronenberg to show the distancing of desire from the female body and the lack of intimacy between them. A conventional female body, Cronenberg decided, is no longer attractive without the intrusion of technology, signifying a literal attack of culture on nature. The shift of desire from animate to inanimate objects signifies the vision of a neo-body as a masculine construct, enabling Cronenberg to create a *mise-en-scène* in which ‘passion’ is contextualised within the image of moving and crashed cars, apotheosising and eroticising technology as a result.

If Cronenberg himself admits to using sex as the plot,<sup>84</sup> the characters are then reduced to being mere plot devices, which in turns helps to explain their ontological uncertainty, buttressed by their sexual practices that create not intimacy, but distance. The film centres on a protagonist couple (Jim and Catherine) whose inveterate ‘husband-wife’ exchanges bespeak of their sexual conquests (“Did you come?” and “Did she come?”). The couple’s quest for sexual gratification galvanizes the basic premise of the narrative, forming noir deterministic encounters with a series of other ‘damaged’ characters. Technology in the form of crashed automobiles is the nexus that gravitates them towards each other, but never connects them at any level other than sexual gratification. Cronenberg creates characters who are both existentially detached (noir alienation) and suicidal/damaged (noir pessimism). When Jim is involved in a head-on crash, the line between physical pleasure and machine is inevitably crossed. Sexual pleasure and the crashed car are intertwining, marked by Dr. Helen Remington’s, the wife of the dead driver, accidental breast exposure at the accident spot. This intertwine eventually forms a knot of sexual gratification, when during a hospital visit, Catherine and Jim indulge in a mutual masturbation whilst she is describing to him the condition of his wrecked car. Eventually, the couple (Jim and Catherine) meet Vaughan (Elias Koteas) who tempts them into the subterranean

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p.5

<sup>84</sup> Cronenberg, in a press conference, defends his use of three succession of sex scenes at the beginning of the film as the plot of the film (in Martin Barker, et al, *The Crash Controversy*, 2001, p.5)

culture with a project that involves ‘something we are intimately involved in ... the reshaping of human body with modern technology’, reminiscent of ‘the new flesh’ that the male protagonist, Max, in Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* is ‘forced’ to accept.

When conventional female bodies are no longer desirable and intimate, the film sets out to fuse them with technology in an effort to establish their status as the Other. In the third sex scene of the film, Catherine stands facing the outside of her apartment, exposing her buttocks to James. This act of mooning, according to Ian Sinclair, is ‘a metaphor of otherness’.<sup>85</sup> This metaphor is mixed with the scarification of the female body by machine, and Cronenberg, in order to dislocate intimacy of the female body, not gradually but with urgency, as embodied in the automobile crash itself, places desire within the context of crashed automobiles, which in turn link women with cuts and bruises—a metaphor for castrated woman and her monstrous vagina. In the first car crash involving James Ballard and Dr. Helen Remington, Ballard sees her as ‘*the other woman in the other crashed car [who] inadvertently jerks open her blouse and exposes her breast to James [...]* In the strange, desperate privacy of this moment, the breast’s erect nipple seems somehow, impossibly, a deliberate provocation’.<sup>86</sup> The breast is metonymical of the nurturing female body, foregrounding the ontological quest of the characters’ ultimate existential experience (Vaughan: [...] the car crash is a fertilizing rather than a destructive event, a liberation of sexual energy). However, this very act of sexual liberation is placed within the metaphor of the Other. Therefore, the accident that Ballard was involved with is used by Cronenberg to decentre female subjectivity, causing it to function as a catalyst of Ballard’s Oedipal journey into manhood. Cronenberg creates the visual language for Ballard to start seeing the women—Catherine and Helen—as ‘*a bizarre mirror image*’,<sup>87</sup> ‘*watches her (Catherine) microscopically [...]* as though, perhaps, she isn’t human’,<sup>88</sup> or ‘*Helen [...]* straightening her skirt around her hips like a department-store window-dresser jerking a garment on to a mannequin’.<sup>89</sup> Women as the Other are hence castrated, and therefore disengaged from the narrative of quasi-homosexuality. As a result, Ian Sinclair observed:

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<sup>85</sup> *Crash*, 1999, p.52

<sup>86</sup> Chris Rodley, *Crash*, 1996, pp.8-9

<sup>87</sup> Ian Sinclair, *Crash*, 1999, p.8

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p.36

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p.38

The 'existential romance' is between James Ballard and Robert Vaughan, that is the thrust of the narrative: a psychosexual alliance between the passive, voyeuristic Ballard and the deranged and driven Vaughan, with his prophetic tattoo and his programme of assassination/suicide.<sup>90</sup>

In another instance, when Vaughan has sex with Catherine, the act is '*like two semi-metallic human beings of the future making love in a chromium bower*', not only literally bruising Catherine's breasts, '*the marks forming a pattern like car crash injuries*',<sup>91</sup> but also symbolically marking the narrative's usurpation of her subjectivity. Having relinquished a conventional female sex organ, bruises and cuts on the female body are important in Cronenberg's oneiric visions, a masculinist effort to construct a '*neo-sex organ*'.<sup>92</sup>

As an oneiric vision, Cronenberg's noir world is a mirage which alludes to the Oedipal dream itself, that is, a dream of castrating the mother in the Symbolic in order to identify with the Father. The man/machine interface in the form of cuts, bruises and the visceral, in Cronenberg's vision, refers to the archaic—the primitive desire to blame the woman for the male's downfall. In the original script of the film, Cronenberg vividly demonstrates the dissolving of technology with human body, whilst putting the blame on the female character.

James: There's still a patch of blood there on the road. Did you see it?

Renata: I saw the blood. It looks like motor oil.

James: You were the last one I saw just before the accident. Do you remember? We made love.

Renata: Are you still involving me in the crash?

The film's lack of moral foundation is exacerbated by the visceral effect of watching the characters struggling to gain pleasure from car crashes. The more the couple associate themselves with Vaughan, the deeper they are sucked into the dark world of 'psychopathology' where 'auto-eroticism' and self-destructiveness are the order of the day, thus 'redefining our relationship to the automobile in radical, psychosexual ways'.<sup>93</sup> The crossing of the boundary between bodily pleasure and machinic intervention culminates in the death of Vaughan—but this is also the ultimate (sexual) goal of his 'project', rendering it a success (in the

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<sup>90</sup> Ian Sinclair, *Crash*, 1999, p.21

<sup>91</sup> Chris Rodley, *Crash*, 1996, p.50

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p.53

<sup>93</sup> Chris Rodley, 'Introduction', *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, in Chris Rodley, ed., 1997, p.xxiii



noir sense of the word). Forsythe in Cronenberg's *Shiver* summarizes this sentiment, professing that 'even dying is an act of eroticism'.<sup>94</sup> The idea that the ultimate quest for pleasure has not yet been achieved ("Maybe the next one darling...Maybe the next one...") leaves the film with a strong sense of determinism in which the characters are designed to be doomed and hopeless, that is, noir fatalism at its own zenith.

Noir fatalism is expressed through the characters' obsessive relationship with death. The film curiously explores the relationship between the sexual dissident and the death wish in an effort to feminise the desire for death itself. Jonathan Dollimore theorizes that

The sexually dissident have known that the strange dynamic which, in Western culture, binds death into desire is not the product of a marginal pathological imagination, but crucial in the formatation of that culture.<sup>95</sup>

When Colin Seagrave (Peter McNeill)–Vaughan's stunt partner–dies in a road accident as the result of re-enacting Jayne Mansfield's auto crash, he is found cross-dressed—an apparent effort to imitate Mansfield. Since Seagrave's ultimate goal is to die not only in the re-enactment of Jayne Mansfield's (a female) fatal car crash but also as her, this aim signals the importance of associating desire for death with femininity. Whereas Cronenberg aligns Seagrave's death wish with femininity, in Vaughan's case, the feminisation of the death wish is achieved by feminising his body and desire. Cronenberg feminises Vaughan's desire by establishing him as a 'feminine' character, the one that is obsessed with being penetrated by both machine and another man. Dollimore argues that:

The Western preoccupation with death, desire and loss is also significantly gendered [...] It was or is a narrative in which woman is held responsible for bringing death and mutability into the world [...] there is no dearth of psychoanalytic explanations for this association of women with death, ranging from chronic unconscious male fear of engulfment or even castration during sexual intercourse, to the difficulty of the boy child leaving the mother for another woman.<sup>96</sup>

The extent to which his body and desire are feminised is later revealed that he is the personification of Catherine's sexual desire. Catherine, while having sex with her husband, James, asks questions about Vaughan's body and what he would like to do with it, setting a sexual scenario that he

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<sup>94</sup> John Costello, *David Cronenberg*, 2000, p.30

<sup>95</sup> *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, 1999, p.XII

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xxii

subsequently enacts. By being penetrated by Ballard, Vaughan's body, as Cronenberg intends, is feminised. Therefore, his desire for death is not due to the castration complex, but due to his over-identification with the Mother. As the embodiment of an over-identification with the mother, Vaughan represents perverse sexuality, proven by his psychopathology.

Despite Cronenberg's treatment of desire as feminine, which is conspicuously misogynistic, the film's future noir elements allow the female characters to have their fair share of liberation. Catherine, as a wife in an open marriage, is willing to cross the boundary between life and death for sexual gratification. To a great degree, her quest for sexual pleasure controls the narrative thrust of the film, and her sexual fantasy about Vaughan becomes James'. She is therefore the controller of the narrative of 'the next one'. Meanwhile, Helen as a widow of the victim of the car accident caused by James, also challenges the notion of a victim, having been 'turned on' by it. Her newly found pleasure resulting from the accident develops into a fetish that, like the protagonist couple, lures her into a world of obsession with the penetrated and injured body. She is a post-feminist figure whose principle in life is better explained by the popular adage of 'been there, done that, bought the t-shirt'. Gabrielle's body sexily clad in an 'S&M' metal-and-leather outfit challenges the essence of scopophilia by stressing her vulnerability as an individual damaged by the flaw in her character. The effect of the portrayal of women in this way is a sickening voyeurism that challenges the viewers' identification with the characters, disorientating them as noir texts usually do. In the original script, 'it is obvious that they (Helen and Gabrielle) have become lovers'—a female bonding that signifies strength while everything else around them is falling apart.

Following noir tradition, the investigation of the female characters also exposes the instability and insecurity of the male characters. While having sex with her husband, Catherine vividly shows her interest in a scarred male body, asking her husband about Vaughan's penis. She imagines and questions about the penis, creating a lexicon that nullifies its symbolic power and displaces it in the realm of the real as a form of perversion or psychopathology, which is 'suffered' by Vaughan. Catherine's line of questioning, 'Is he circumcised? Can you imagine what his anus is like? Describe it to me', is emblematic of Foucault's philosophical understanding of 'knowledge is power'. Her wanting to know, as illustrated by the questions, puts her in the position of the determiner of knowledge, the holder of the truth. That is why, at one point, she suggests to her husband, 'I'd like to go back James ...', knowing what is ahead of her. In that vein,

the narrative engenders the idea that while scarification is associated with the vagina, it also generates interests that mystify a male body.

In conclusion, though the thrust of both films is towards scrutinizing female subjectivity, sexuality, and body, *Crash*'s bleakness sets it apart from *The Fly* as a future noir text. While the male protagonist in *The Fly* is resonant of the tragic hero whose greatness determines and informs how tragic his ending is later considered to be, it lacks both atmospheric anxiety and moral ambivalence which are two of the major defining criteria of a film noir. *The Fly*'s dark mood is the personification of the evil and abject essence within a human body, as manifested by the Bundlefly itself. The protagonist's disintegration, which culminates in his incarceration in a well-like prison, provides a closure and sympathy, giving a rather monolithic moral dimension to his fate. On the other hand, the ending of *Crash* leaves the audience disorientated and disillusioned. The characters, in pursuit of their ultimate sexual pleasure, culminating in a fatal death itself, are devoid of any moral standing or foundation. Their struggle represents a dormant anxiety that runs amok when triggered, leaving no space for moral speculation or anticipation. When their bodies are snatched by machines, the paranoia of 'Maybe the next one', which is embedded in future noir, begins.

### **Cyberpunk, Cyberspace and Cyborg: The Final Destination?**

Having begun as a literary movement in the late 1980s, cyberpunk has already been declared dead.<sup>97</sup> One reason for this is that cyberpunk is thought to have failed to live up to its own embarrassing 'pretension',<sup>98</sup> in which the effect of its 'grandeur' is a Barmecidal one. Part of this pretension is derived from its aversion to its generic ancestor's 'celebration of the possibilities opened by industrial capitalism'.<sup>99</sup> as Thomas Foster writes, 'cyberpunk attempts to distinguish itself both from traditional 'hard' science fiction and from the more literary and social science concerns of the New Wave of the 1960s and 1970s precisely by

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<sup>97</sup> Karen Cadora and Neil Easterbrook start their articles 'Feminist Cyberpunk' and 'The Arc of Our Destruction: Reversal and Erasure in Cyberpunk', respectively, with this declaration.

<sup>98</sup> Neil Easterbrook, 'The Arc of Our Destruction: Reversal and Erasure in Cyberpunk', *Science-Fiction Studies*, (19)1992, p.378

<sup>99</sup> Kevin Pask, 'Cyborg Economies: Desire and Labor in the Terminator Films', in *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End*, ed. by Richard Dellamora, 1995, p.183

focusing on the cultural implications of new technologies'.<sup>100</sup> Foster's argument has also drawn attention specifically to the notion of the body as a cultural identity, which raises questions concerning the status of the human body in postmodernist culture. My own view is that cyberpunk is irresistibly attractive precisely because it 'envisions human consciousness inhabiting electronic spaces, blurring the boundary between human and machine in the process'.<sup>101</sup> Contrary to the declaration of the death of cyberpunk, the sub-genre is still 'alive and kicking' due to its construction of a space for liberated 'female' characters.

One countervailing argument put by Foster is that there is a great body of criticism on cyberpunk written from the male point of view, which in turn suggests a reason for the lack of sufficient interest from a feminist perspective. A major criticism concerning cyberpunk lodged by feminist critics concerns hyper-masculinity, as cyberpunk texts are usually imbued with elements that highlight and disseminate misogynistic views of gender divisions. Technology, it seems, is mostly used to enhance the masculinity of a male body, as is evident in films like *The Terminator*, *Johnny Mnemonic* and *The Matrix*, in which the hyper-masculinised male body is central in the narrative trajectory, providing a sense of balance; whereas the female characters are usurped by the high-tech world. This argument supports Claudia Springer's claim that 'while popular culture explores boundary breakdowns between humans and computers, gender boundaries are treated less flexibly'.<sup>102</sup> 'Feminist cyberpunk', however, according to Karen Cadora, 'envisions something that feminist theory badly needs; fragmented subjects who can, despite their multiple positionings, negotiate and succeed in a high-tech world'.<sup>103</sup> The fragmented subject, according to feminist critics of cyberpunk and science fiction in general, is an expression through which female liberation can be found, pointing to a hybridity that defies gender categorisation.

One may ask, if a cyborg is a hybrid whereby gender differences are dissolved, how do I define a female character? This question is epistemological, and can be dealt with by looking at the definitional incoherence of gender. I would argue that to acknowledge hybridity is to acknowledge that gender dyad is inherently unstable or volatile. Therefore, the female character in cyberpunk is usually a transgressor, which is in

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<sup>100</sup> 'Incurably Informed: The Pleasures and Dangers of Cyberpunk', *Gender*, 18 (1993), pp.3-4

<sup>101</sup> Karen Cadora, 'Feminist Cyberpunk', *Science Fiction Studies*, 1995, p.357

<sup>102</sup> 'The Pleasure of the Interface', *Cybersexualities*, Jenny Wolmark, ed., 1999, p.41

<sup>103</sup> 'Feminist Cyberpunk', *Science Fiction Studies*, 1995, p.357

itself a marker for definitional incoherence. The adjectival 'female' is still applicable to a cyborg figure because it is the dominant term that characterises its subjectivity. In a hybrid subject, traces of other terms like masculinity, bisexuality and humanity are shown as supporting the dominant term, while recognising the efficacy of the terms in an effort to reassign them with new roles. In effect, the term 'female' cyborg is valid due to its dominant term that foregrounds the characteristic of a female in its very hybridity.

This section considers the perspectives on cyberpunk that have been outlined by Foster, viz., its relationship to its 'parent genre', science fiction; its links with postmodernism; and its interest from the point of view of cultural studies. The main objective here is to study the feminist perspective on cyberpunk, especially on the figure of a cyborg<sup>104</sup> in the context of future noir. To begin with, a cyborg figure can be seen as the translation of the fascination that cyberpunk has with the meshing of human and machine. The aim of this section is to investigate the representation of the 'female' cyborg figure within the future noir category of cyberpunk, and to analyse the interest cyberpunk sub-genre generates in the employment and manipulation of technology to provide an alternative space such as cyberspace and virtual reality. My objective is to find out how a female cyborg figure can be a liberating symbol for women as argued by feminist (socialist) critics like Haraway. My analysis, however, will centre on future noir texts.

When it flourished in the 1980s as a response to the 'changing icons of the time',<sup>105</sup> cyberpunk combined the anxiety of technological advancement with the unease generated by the tyranny of multinational companies whose tendency is to produce a dominantly male world view and to create marginalized groups, divided by gender, race, economic background, etc. In consequence, the significance of the interface between a man and machine that is regularly highlighted by cyberpunk texts, especially with regard to the fragmentation of the human self, has been taken in some feminist readings to demonstrate that cyberpunk is primarily to do with the dissemination of patriarchal values. My own interest is in quantifying this kind of judgement by asking whether it is feasible to discover the possible

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<sup>104</sup> Claudia Springer differentiates androids from cyborgs by defining the first as 'human-shaped robots or genetically engineered synthetic humanoid organisms, but they do not combine organic with technological parts [...] look like, and sometimes are indistinguishable from, humans [...] [for example] the replicants in *Blade Runner* [...] are genetically engineered organic entities and contain no technological components'. (1993, p.87)

<sup>105</sup> Edward James, *Science Fiction in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, 1994, p.193

liberatory 'voice' that a 'female' cyborg may embody, particularly in future noir texts. I would argue that future noir's concern with male angst and anxiety, coupled with its interest in the dark side of a morally collapsed society, provide a platform in which female characters can be liberated.

Cyborg imagery is often metaphorically used in cyberpunk texts to represent a fragmented gender identity, whose significance to feminist analysis has been theorized by Donna Haraway in her well-known essay 'A Manifesto For Cyborgs'. Haraway offers a feminist perspective on cyborg imagery by stressing its 'political myth' as a possible analytical manoeuvring, enabling a more critical view that 'resist[s] nostalgia and anti-technological biases that reproduce gender stereotypes'.<sup>106</sup> A cyborg is a hybrid identity, which as suggested by Haraway, 'denaturaliz[es] assumptions about the relation between the body and cultural identity, especially gender and racial identities',<sup>107</sup> situating cyborg imagery in a 'postgender and post-Oedipal world'.<sup>108</sup> Haraway's view affects not only the Western binary system with regard to gender division, but also situates the Otherness not outside the human body, but within it. By looking at some cyberpunk and future noir texts like Marge Piercy's *Body of Glass* and Duncan Gibbin's *Eve of Destruction*, I would like to put this argument to the test.

Feminist critics on science fiction and the cyberpunk sub-genre operate with a different perspective and they debate what cyborg imagery can offer to feminism, foregrounding its hybridity as a means of finding liberation. This is in contrast to male cultural critics who 'stress the ways that cyberpunk fictions reproduce the perspectives of their predominantly white male authors'.<sup>109</sup> The different viewpoint taken by feminist critics stems partly from the crisis within feminism's all-inclusive categorization of 'women', posing a pivotal question of what constitutes the category of 'women'. Judith Butler raises this issue in her theorization of gender as performative, and points out that the category of women as all-inclusive (or the so-called universalism) with regard to its failure to consider other variables such as the racial origin, social status and educational background of women is a perfunctory claim. This conception that the

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<sup>106</sup> in Thomas Foster, 'Incurably Informed: The Pleasures and Dangers of Cyberpunk', *Genders*, 18(1993), p.6

<sup>107</sup> Thomas Foster, 'Meat Puppets or Robopaths?: Cyberpunk and the Question of Embodiment', *Genders*, 18(1993), p.14

<sup>108</sup> in Thomas Foster, 'Incurably Informed: The Pleasures and Dangers of Cyberpunk', *Genders*, 18(1993), p.6

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

category of women is all encompassing, according to Butler, has recently been challenged, with the result that ‘the very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms’.<sup>110</sup> This argument is in line with Haraway’s theorization, which argues that the liberatory possibility of this subject can be found in cyborg imagery, which is also a fragmented and destabilized subject in postmodernist culture. Recently, Haraway has been under attack by feminists ‘for overemphasizing the positive political implications of cyborg imagery as a point of resistance to the dualistic thinking typical of Western modernity’.<sup>111</sup> Male cultural critics on cyberpunk and on Haraway, on the other hand, stress on the proliferation of cyberpunk writers who are mostly white and male as the prominent reason for its misogyny, prompting Andrew Ross, for instance, to label cyberpunk as ‘the most fully delineated urban fantasies of white male folklore’.<sup>112</sup> Ross and some of the critics have obviously overlooked the emergence of female cyberpunk writers such as Pat Cadigan and Marge Piercy.

Reminiscent of hard-boiled detectives, noir protagonists and, to a great extent, *femmes fatales* in the canonical noir texts, a cyborg figure can easily be situated in a future noir context. One common thread linking cyborg imagery and the bleak world in future noir is the idea of a destabilized and fragmented subject, i.e., ontologically uncertain, as a transgressive figure. Cyborg imagery opens up more doors for exploring and dismantling Western binary oppositions: this is achieved by functioning both as a literal figure and as a metaphor that mirrors both the transgressiveness of the cyberpunk sub-genre and the very essence or critique of the subjectivity it stands for. One of the progenies retained in future noir from its gothic inheritance is the existence of the Other, but the apparent twist inherent in future noir lies in the main assumption that the Other resides outside the body rather than inside. As I see it, the fragmented self may indicate a change of location of the Other that is also tantamount to the ‘Othering’ of self, which simultaneously challenges the existential definition of being, and is informed by the postmodern condition inherent in future noir. As a consequence, the Western tradition of binary opposition is also dissolved, intertwining and conflating the opposites into a hybrid entity. Postmodernist poetics are part of future noir’s dialectical approach in destabilising the subject, making it almost

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<sup>110</sup> *Gender Trouble*, 1990, p.1

<sup>111</sup> Thomas Foster, ‘Meat Puppets or Robopaths?: Cyberpunk and the Question of Embodiment’, *Genders*, 18(1993),p.15

<sup>112</sup> in Thomas Foster, ‘Incurably Informed: The Pleasures and Dangers of Cyberpunk’, *Genders*, 18(1993), p.6

compulsory in the understanding of post-human subjectivity. Therefore, whereas, in science fiction proper, the dynamic of dualism, for instance the culture and nature divide, alludes to the association of woman with nature, the same distinction and association is problematised by cyborg imagery.

A melting pot of cultural modes is crucial in translating future noir's varied metaphors, allowing them to 'capture' (Western) contemporary anxiety. They form a definitional parallelism that manifests itself especially in the way these modes literalise the cultural anxiety that they are dealing with. In cinema, the literal manifestation of the anxiety is partly informed by the nature of science fiction as a cinema of ideas, not characters, as discussed in the earlier section. Hinging on that, future noir, which represents an imaginative engagement with Gothic tales, science fiction, detective fiction, and the poetics of postmodernism, tends to be exploratory. In that vein, Scott Bukatman in his introduction to *Terminal Identity*, talks about how the images in science fiction films, especially the special effects, tend to be presentational, that is, exhibitionistic rather than voyeuristic.<sup>113</sup> Drawing from the films *TRON* and *Terminator 2*, Bukatman postulates that:

The invisible workings of electronic technology are made manifest, in varying ways and to varying degrees, but more importantly, the ontological anxieties of the present are endowed with a concreteness and literalness of form.<sup>114</sup>

Bukatman's treatment of the films as science fiction rather than future noir texts amounts to explicit tautology, limiting the critical and ideological potential that cyborg imagery has in the narrative. On the other hand, future noir, as a hybrid sub-genre, marrying science fiction's postmodernist extrapolative traits with noir's element of modernist realism, has the ability to push the imagined boundary even further than science fiction proper and classical noir can do. Future noir in effect can be both voyeuristic and exhibitionistic, blurring the taxonomic gaze. Brian McHale argues that:

SF, like postmodernist fiction, is governed by an ontological dominant, by contrast with modernist fiction, or among the genres or "genre" fiction, detective fiction, both of which raise and explore issues of epistemology and thus are governed by an epistemological dominant.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> *Terminal Identity*, 1993, p.14

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> 'Elements of Poetics of Cyberpunk', *Critique*, 1992, p.151



Future noir's generic connections with science fiction and the detective genre enables scientific invention/experimentation to be explored, investigated and commented upon, combining both ontological and epistemological questions and issues, highlighting one of the major characteristics of postmodern concern with parody and pastiche. Future noir is ceaselessly critical about this, and therefore irrevocably focuses on the exploration of new spaces by constructing a geographical location or a landscape in the 'inside' of the human body called the virtual space or the matrix, the very location that is often infiltrated by technological invention and intervention. Virtual space or the matrix provides a repository for a visual lexicon, whose purpose is to assist in the understanding of the effect this interface has at the level beyond the humanist physical body. The anxiety that lies 'inside', not outside, is a common dictum in future noir and cyberpunk, concurrently altering human's reality.

Cyberpunk constitutes an important part of future noir because, as Edward James argues, it is 'a response to a crisis in sf that had become apparent in the 1980s: a growing divergence between the traditional sf images of the future and the increasingly depressing reality'.<sup>116</sup> In that vein, cyberpunk, argues Kevin Pask, 'is the dystopian alternative to a considerably more cheerful vision of history, which, [...] also conditions the experience of postmodernity'.<sup>117</sup> In future noir's cyberpunk, the future is bleak indeed. This view is also shared by Brian McHale, who in discussing the overlap between the postmodernist poetics of fiction and cyberpunk poetics, argues that 'cyberpunk tends to "literalise" or "actualise" what occurs in postmodernist fiction as metaphor [...] in the extended sense in which the textual strategy or a particular use of language may be understood as a figurative representation of an "idea" or "theme"'.<sup>118</sup> If a cyborg figure is usually a metaphor for the Other in a postmodernist fiction, in cyberpunk, however, the beast of burden lies in the cyborg figure's ontological uncertainties and narrative thrust, foregrounding the demands of its metonymic origin. A cyborg figure, for that reason, IS the reflection in the mirror and also the mirror itself.

In *Cybersexualities* Jenny Wolmark discusses how the common interest within feminist and cultural theory is engendered by cyborg imagery. The literal representation of this recurrent anxiety borne out the

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<sup>116</sup> *Science Fiction in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, p.199

<sup>117</sup> 'Cyborg Economies: Desire and Labor in the Terminator Films', in *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End*, ed. by Richard Dellamora, 1995, p.182.

<sup>118</sup> 'Elements of Poetics of Cyberpunk', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 1992, p.150

figure of a cyborg, as discussed by Wolmark in her introductory chapter, is used to illustrate how a cyborg figure embodies the cultural and sociological curiosity about technological advancement that is believed to be controlling humanity. At the level of ideological representation, the narrative of bodily invasion or infiltration forms the basis for one of the major assumptions concerning the anxiety over the invasion of technology into human subjectivity and reality, that is, the total destruction of humanity as portrayed by cyberpunk's post-apocalyptic mise-en-scene, causing phenomenal paranoia. The theme of paranoia caused by the bodily invasion or alien infiltration is often found in science fiction texts which explore invasion narratives, such as the invasion of aliens from other planets (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), post-apocalyptic infectious deadly viruses or plague (*The Omega Man*), and people from different times or places in the time machine narrative (*The Time Machine*). This paranoia is inherited from gothic tales that apotheosise the battle between good and evil, in which the good normally prevails. A variation of this theme can be found in the revival of film noir in the 1970s, for instance Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*,<sup>119</sup> which captures this paranoia by means of personifying urban claustrophobia in the figure of Travis Bickle who is the epitome of social breakdown. At the heart of *Taxi Driver* as a neo-noir film, is the distrust towards politicians' abilities or efforts to solve social problems.<sup>120</sup> In cyberpunk films like *The Matrix* and *Johnny Mnemonic*, and novels like Pat Cadigan's *Mindplayer* and William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the use of invasion narrative is to explore the extent to which technological invasion can cause paranoia,<sup>121</sup> in contrast to *Taxi Driver*, this time at the more intimate level, that is, the human body itself. In contrast to hard science fiction, future noir does not romanticize heroic figures, but uses its extrapolative traits to comment on the protagonist's transgressiveness. As the figure of a cyborg mirrors the ultimate infiltration/invasion into the human body or space itself, it can be seen as the reflection of contemporary anxiety with regard to the ultimate boundary crossing.

The fusion between technology and a human body has resulted in the possible exploration of a new space called cyberspace, adding fluidity to human experience. 'Theorizing about cyberspace technology', argues Marjorie Worthington, 'has traditionally centered around two related

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<sup>119</sup> 1976. Columbia Picture Corporation.

<sup>120</sup> A political campaign is used by Scorsese to foreground Travis Bickle's enfranchisement or sense of alienation.

<sup>121</sup> The scare or paranoia of the technological 'coup' is also discussed by Lee Horsley in chapter six of her book *Fictions of Power*.

notions of what computer interaction presages: the postmodern dissolution of the subject and the technologically enabled flight from the physical'.<sup>122</sup> This observation is largely drawn from William Gibson's groundbreaking novel, *Neuromancer*, in which the male protagonist, Case, relies on cyberspace to escape from the physical limitation of 'the meat'—the 'prison of his own flesh' (p.12). The ability to disassociate oneself from one's body ties in with the possible inclusion and insertion of alien particles or materials into one's being, fragmenting the notion of self. For Case, cyberspace is an addictive drug from which he cannot divorce himself, and it becomes a defining feature of what he is. Possibly, Case's body as a frontier to be explored and used functions equally well as a metaphor for both the destabilised self and the anxiety that derives from it, signifying its ontological uncertainty. This instability and anxiety is expressed through the figure of a cyborg, and by using Claudia Springer's definition of a cyborg in *Electronic Eros*, it can also include Gibson's Case.

As the function of the body is no longer self-restrictive or unified, the characters' minds provide an alternative route for the understanding of the expression of (female) sexuality, self and desire. The articulation of this new way of looking at the fragmented self is founded on the idea that, as argued by Nancy Armstrong, '(sexual) desire exists in some form prior to its representation and remains there as something for us to recover or liberate'.<sup>123</sup> Noir's concern with the inwardness of a destabilized self allows the characters to push the boundary set by the mind further into the unknown. In the case of future noir, the unknown is usually represented in the body of a woman, which is also 'a metaphor for the uncertainty of the future—[... a] potentially creative and potentially destructive future'.<sup>124</sup> Noir's mood of angst and alienation, coupled with science fiction's ontological uncertainty, helps us to further scrutinise the ability to venture into the protagonists' minds. However, as these characters are mostly transgressors themselves, their minds mirror a disorientating view of their world. A cyborg figure that usually inhabits cyberspace, instead of marking the final destination of the feminist's struggle to empower female selves, provides a liminal space in which more liberatory female characters can be aptly situated. As a metaphor for the dissolution of self, it also innocuously represents the formation of a new identity that is more relevant to the understanding of female characters in future noir texts.

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<sup>122</sup> 'Bodies That Natter: Virtual Translations and Transmissions of the Physical', *Critique*, 2002, p.192

<sup>123</sup> *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, 1989, p.7

<sup>124</sup> Barbara Creed, 'Gynesis, Postmodernism and the Science Fiction Horror Film', *Alien Zone*, Annette Kuhn, ed., 1990, p.215

Additionally, it encapsulates the various forms of determination that many female characters in cyberpunk exhibit in order to survive in the 'posthuman' world where man and machine interface, and the future is bleak and alienating.

### The Post-apocalyptic Women

The major difference in the characterisation of Zira and Daena in *Planet of the Apes*, 1968<sup>125</sup> and 2001, respectively, is the fighting spirit or survival instinct that the latter has. Daena's fighting spirit or survival instinct, though closely related to the idea of impressing a modern female audience, is reminiscent of the story of the Amazon women. The story of a group of physically strong women, in the tradition of the Amazon women, has been extensively discussed by feminist science fiction and fantasy analysts in an effort to establish the relationship between femaleness and nature, to show how in science fiction, women can be powerful without sacrificing their nature. Feminist ecologists in particular pay a lot of attention to the way nature is celebrated by these all female tribal societies and how it can be the source of unity and power among them. In other words, the Amazon tribes not only connote the idea of ecological proximity, but also primitiveness as they rely on natural resources to survive. Some Amazon tribes in utopian science fictions usually celebrate women's community spirit by portraying a communal society as a way of empowering women, and at the same time to dislocate the Oedipal trajectory by not only bringing up the children of the 'tribe' among women themselves but also deleting men in the childrearing process. In *Body of Glass*, for instance, the discourse describing Nili as an 'amazon' (p.259) woman from 'a primitive place' (p.302) called 'Black Zone' (p.417) situated in a post-apocalyptic era evinces the novel's great interest in her proximity to nature and technology since she is brought up in a matrilineal society in which reproduction is mainly the result of cloning and 'artificial insemination' (p.259), and in which 'the little ones are raised by several mothers' (p.489). The interest in her subjectivity is also the result of her being a 'barbarian' (p.511) and 'savage' (p.512). This ironically links her to the post-apocalyptic society as the most principled character of all.

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<sup>125</sup> In the film the male protagonist's, George Taylor, comment on women is somewhat representative of the way women are perceived in a male adventure type of science fiction where the major concern is the protagonist's survival. Referring to Zira who is given to him as a mate, he elegantly says, 'You are not as smart as Steward. But you are the only girl in town'.

In embryo, the theme of ‘primitiveness’, as exemplified by Nili in *Body of Glass*, is often carried into post-apocalyptic narratives to signify three major concerns of the texts: the female characters’ affinity with nature, their symbiosis with technology, and the state of the world that they are in. Nili’s body is altered and augmented after birth to help her ‘to endure, to survive, to hold our land’ (p.267). Coming from ‘a primitive’ and extremely isolated place vis-à-vis the free and high-tech Tikva, she is expected to be a savage and a barbarian, and thus a character devoid of human traits. Ironically, she turns out to be the most admired by Malkah for her ‘principality’ (p.567) and her eagerness to build personal ties with fellow human beings. In addition to that, her isolated place of origin does not divorce her from technology, affirming a coherent symbiosis between her and technological advancement. By paying closer attention to her physical attributes, the narrative continuously unravels her mysterious origin and physical make up through frequent comparison with a cyborg, Yod:

Nili glared at him (Yod) out of her intense green eyes. Side by side with Yod, Nili actually looked more artificial. Her hair, her eyes were unnaturally vivid, and her musculature was far more pronounced. ‘I am the future’ (p.300)

The juxtaposition between her and Yod, often at the narrative level, reinforces not only the idea of her as a boundary crosser, but also reaffirms her symbiosis with technology. Nili transgresses the expectation of an amazon woman, post-apocalyptic narrative, and the constitution of a human, making her a stereotypical figure in a future noir text. The augmentation of her physical body foregrounds and signals the instability of human experience and, it therefore disrupts the definition of a human, a crucial trait of future noir’s tendency to identify her as an allegorical agent. The images derived from the destabilisation of the constitution of a human, and the atmosphere of chaos and disarray that they generate, reinforces the collapse of law and order in post-apocalyptic narrative. What this shows is that the primitiveness of the female character like Nili prevails even in the post-apocalyptic narrative to raise the question of her subjectivity and agency.

The chaos and terror of an apocalyptic society are often reflected in the association of women and primitiveness, especially by associating them with metaphysics. In *Ambient*, the Ambient ‘community’ uses ‘part of the Bible and a book called the Visions of Joanna in their services’(p. 157); Joanna being an apparent female prophet who prophesises that the Creator has created ‘one male, and evil; one female, and good—both driven quite

insane' (ibid.) In *Body of Glass*, Gadi once refers to Shira's grandmother, Malkah, one of the most important brains behind Tikva, as 'the original flying witch' (p. 512). In the *Matrix*, the oracle is a woman who prophesies the coming of the One. It can be said that by associating women with metaphysics, the post-apocalyptic narrative recalls the Fall narrative in which a woman is the cause of the Original Sin. This is characteristic of the pejorative treatment of women in the noir genre.

The intertwine of chaos and the primitiveness of a society that develops after a major catastrophe also allows the post-apocalyptic world to provide a new setting parallel to the urban nightmare of noir landscapes. The major similarity between the Amazon story and the post-apocalyptic world is rooted in the return of the primitive, recalling and evoking the primal fear that man has towards woman's independence; hence, the rejection/castration of women—a common theorization in the Oedipal Complex. Unlike the Amazon tribes that adhere to certain societal rules and regulations to ensure the stability of their tribes, the post-apocalyptic world, with the collapse of law and order, in contrast, can be seen as an arena for staging this archaic fear. One of the reasons why the Amazon women are physically strong lies in their need to protect their own tribe and preserve their values and orders. On the contrary, a post-apocalyptic world is a world engulfed with chaos, terror and anarchy, necessitating the idea that the female characters can learn to be physically strong in order to survive in this lawless society, as evident in the character of Avalon who is 'ready to kill, shameless [...] ready to die' (p.52). This is in response to, as in both *Ambient* and *Random Acts*, women are brutalized and treated with cruelty on the chaotic street of New York City. In one of the many brutal scenes on the street in *Ambient*, 'Droozies [...] had stripped a young girl, shaved her head, and, having daubed her in tar, trounced her with long poles' (p.55). Though the theme of primitiveness often foregrounds its association with the primal fear, the post-apocalyptic world lacks a more straightforward conceptualisation of man/machine interface; this undecidability calls for a different (psychoanalytic) question: *what happens to the female characters after the collapse of the law of the father?*

The condition in which the stability of the self is incessantly assaulted, by both the new conception of a human and the condition that the self is in, projects and allegorises a future noir of the post-apocalyptic world. The two main female characters in Jack Womack's debut novel *Ambient* are an extension of the crumbled world in *Random Acts of Senseless Violence*, his

later novel.<sup>126</sup> Unlike many post-apocalyptic women in other texts discussed earlier, the main female characters, Avalon and Enid, do not enhance themselves physically. Even for Avalon, whose strength is needed to protect her employer, Mister Dryden, her weightlifting is just ‘enough to stay fit’ (p.11). Their physical alteration, unlike that of other post-apocalyptic women, involves a certain form of subtraction or mutilation. As a Proxy, Avalon is required by law to have her teeth extracted so that she ‘couldn’t relieve frustration in an untoward manner’ (p.4). Enid has to have her body surgically mutilated so that she can be a part of the Ambient ‘society’ as the original Ambients, disfigured and mutilated at birth, were born as the result of ‘the accident’ (p.67) that resulted from governmental experimentation. The female bodies, as exemplified by Avalon’s and Enid’s body alterations, are used for different reasons. While Avalon’s physical appearance helps her in her survival by enabling her to seduce and build trust between her and the protagonist, O’Malley, and Mister Dryden, Enid’s physically altered body is political, that is, it demonstrates ‘the iniquity of a society that forced one to do such’ (p.68) since becoming an Ambient is ‘always subversive’ (p.67). Her body is therefore an allegory used to mirror the collapse of law and order in the society she is in.

The two main female characters in *Ambient*, Avalon and Enid, are also derivative of the ones normally found in the classical noir texts. Set in the post-apocalyptic world, *Ambient* uses the two female characters to represent the two types of female characters usually found in the classical noir texts, that is, the femme fatale and the redeemed woman, but with a twist especially with regard to the femme fatale. In this case, Avalon is initially portrayed as a cardboard copy of the stereotypical femme fatale who uses her sexuality to seduce the male protagonist and implicate him in her scheme to achieve her goal. Infatuated with her sexuality, O’Malley realizes that ‘she looked at me and rolled her eyes. She was a dream printed and punched’ (p.6). However, when it matters, Avalon proves her love by helping O’Malley to overcome their problem with Mister Dryden’s father. Unlike Avalon, Enid is the redeeming figure who, for him, ‘had kept me straight and narrow, made me continue school, found the funds that allow me to do so, stood by me at every time of pain’ (p.84).

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<sup>126</sup> As I see it, *Random Act of Senseless Violence* is written as a prequel to *Ambient*. The evidence can be found both in the location as well as the character Lola. Both novels are located in New York City, particularly Manhattan. *Random* chronicles the life of Lola who has to join the street gang to survive the crumbling city. Lola is mentioned in *Ambient*, already as an adult, who fights Avalon in the meeting.

As his sister, she also warns O'Malley of the danger of falling in love with Avalon and to get involved in his plan to kill Mr. Dryden's father:

As said, sight your own risk first. In her paw would you lay your soul? Do you fret that if you do she might leave you noddypeaked and bowelfettered? (p.78)

Like some redeeming female characters in noir texts, Enid functions both as the obligatory reality checker and a source of comfort for the noir protagonist who is trapped in a disintegrating society underlined by crumbling and collapsed buildings. *Ambient's* convoluted plot is also an important trait that contributes to its association with future noir's conventions.

The post-apocalyptic world is not only reminiscent of the noir world normally found in a classical noir text, but is also an extension of it. In lieu of the underworld that many noir protagonists venture into, *Ambient's* world is filled with crumbling buildings and out of order gadgets, functioning as an allegory for the collapse of democracy and the beginning of a new form of capitalist state under private ownership. In a world where 'only owners could afford' (p.89) luxuries, people mostly live either in dilapidated buildings or on the street, and street gangs are omnipresent and malevolent. If in the classical noir the dark side of society is lurking in the social underbelly, in *Ambient* on the other hand, crime appears on the surface due to the collapse of law and order, which creates a literal form of urban nightmare. In other words, the evil of the society is unveiled and it roams the street as it has never done before. At its worst, the post-apocalyptic world, as in *Ambient*, is able to restructure and re-represent society in a parody of the atmospheric world usually found in noir's construction of a city—dark, bleak and beguiled. This is reminiscent of the creation of noir's mood of alienation prominent in classical noir texts, as the inhabitants of New York City are becoming aliens in their own place and environment. The new faces of American society are also hierarchical: 'the owners and their servants; that of boozhies, the old bourgeois; that of what the government pegged the Superfluous'(p.22). This hierarchy is a perfect formulation for violence, terror and chaos on streets where the army is as dangerous as street gangs. The future noir world of the post-apocalyptic is embodied in the collapse of the social and political system, which in turn gives rise to hierarchy and culminates in anarchism.

Post-apocalyptic women also go through several changes as way of surviving the post-apocalyptic world. Their fighting spirits, dexterities and ingenuities signify their transgressiveness, that is, the ability and skill to survive by crossing the boundaries of gender roles and assignment,



thereby blurring Western binaries. In a post-apocalyptic society, a female protagonist is not a lone adventurer, neither physically nor mentally—or both, unlike the male protagonist in classical noir texts and future noir texts. Though Sara Connor in *The Terminator* and *Terminator: Judgement Day* exists in a pre-apocalyptic period, her physical and mental conversion is emblematic of that of the post-apocalyptic woman, whose survival instinct transforms her from a victim, i.e., the hunted, into a militant figure, i.e., the hunter. Her association with post-apocalyptic women lies in the fact that she has ‘seen’ a disastrous vision of the post-apocalyptic world, proven by the arrival of the terminator and her saviour (Reese) from that very world. In *Random Acts of Senseless Violence*, Lola Hart goes through a journey through life that changes her both physically and mentally, all due to her need to survive in a post-apocalyptic world. In Lola’s case, the post-apocalyptic world that she lives in brings out her ‘night mind’ (p. 7). Her rite of passage also stems from her need to avenge the death of her father. Nili in *Body of Glass* understands that to be able to survive in the post-apocalyptic world, she has to learn about it, as she confided to Shira:

I must do it. We know that if we open up to the world, we are going to have to deal with men. I’m supposed to find out what they like [...] Everything he does is out of my range of experience. Surely I’d learn a great deal about things completely foreign to us. (p. 345)

Besides that, though physically strong, Nili ‘did not look like a man. She was a busty woman, with broad hips and a tight waist’ (p. 488). Nili’s commitment to change shows her ability to transgress neo-noir’s contradiction and ambivalence towards a collapsed world without sacrificing herself: ‘I don’t sell or rent my body, by the organ or by the moment’ (p. 517), suggesting not only her strong character but also the dynamic of her relationship with technology.

The sense of community in post-apocalyptic narratives, in which women live in a communal way or support each other as a team, vis-à-vis noir’s convention of a lonely male protagonist’s adventure into the underworld, signals a crucial generic subversion. The complete collapse of social order, law and security in post-apocalyptic society has resulted in the dire need to work with others; a need understood by these female characters. Therefore, in many post-apocalyptic narratives, the female character almost always works with a confederate or an ally, be it a man, woman, machine or all of them. None the less, in critical moments, these female characters are allowed to take their own actions. In *Ambient*, Avalon is initially thought to have double-crossed O’Malley, but at the

end, she is the one who saves him and his sister, Enid, from Mister Dryden's father. Nili in *Body of Glass* comes from a closely-knit society, making it easier for her to form a bond with the people of Tikva. Lola in *Random Acts*, similarly, realizes the need for her to become a member of a gang in order to survive her collapsed society and city. Indeed, when she is found to be breaking one of the rules set by the 'Death Angels' she knows that she has to go beyond what her group permits, by eventually joining the 'evil' gang called Dcons, signifying the complete dissolution of all her values—making her able to assimilate into the chaos, terror and disarray.

The sense of community is also related to the way the women in the post-apocalyptic world react to technological advancement with their womanly (female) instinct, another aspect of (their) nature that most texts emphasise. Though in several cases their bodies are no longer natural, that is, either through addition or subtraction, this does not stop them from trusting their basic human instincts. In *Body of Glass*, the motivation behind the female protagonist, Shira's actions is palpably maternally driven (Who would have expected maternity to give you fangs and claws? (p.482)). Shira simply wants her son back. Malkah, who is Shira's grandmother, also strongly believes that 'every female fights for her young. And will kill for her young. We're still a part of nature, no matter how we've destroyed the world' (p. 527). In *Random Acts*, Lola's association with 'a night mind' is reinforced throughout the story, revealing her dark-side as she tries to cope with the chaotic environment she is in.

In short, post-apocalyptic women survive the nightmarish landscape and world that they live in by adapting to the needs of that time and place. They are ever ready to take charge of the situation if the need arises. Whereas some post-apocalyptic women rely on their instinct to survive, the others cope very well by forming a community they can lean on. They are also willing to alter their bodies, either through addition or subtraction, in order to survive. Their reliance on their natural instinct, though often closely related to primitiveness, reveals their ability to harmonize not only with nature but also with technological advancement, allowing them to live undeterred by the urban nightmare that is future noir.

## **The Doppelganger: Psychoanalysis and Cyborg Imagery**

One of Haraway's theorizations of cyborg imagery places it outside the Oedipal paradigm, which for her, enables feminist critics to perceive the image as free from 'forced signification', divorcing the body from its cultural identity. Nonetheless, this conception proves to be problematic as

it fails to explain or even to take into account some cyborg imageries that do exist within the psychoanalytic paradigm. The idea of a cyborg figure existing within the Oedipal trajectory is accountable for many doppelganger narratives, explaining the curious affinity a cyborg figure has with patriarchal value system. According to Freud, the idea of a doppelganger explains the uncanny, in which ‘experiences happen when once-repressed infantile complexes are somehow revived or when once-discarded primitive beliefs seem suddenly to be in operation’.<sup>127</sup> In Marge Piercy’s *Body of Glass*, a clandestine cyborg invented by Avram, named Yod, calls ‘his’ inventor ‘father’ in a desperate attempt to ‘establish a bond that may preserve me. How do I know he won’t decide to scrap me?’ (p.127). Though Yod needs training in social skills, reflecting his lack of cultural identity, his survival instinct to try to be accepted by his ‘father’ resembles the infantile struggle into the Symbolic. While training Yod to be socially apt, Shira realizes his uncanny physical and psychological resemblance with a human. Yod is also a surrogate ‘romantic’ figure taking the place of the protagonist’s (Shira) ex-husband, Josh (‘I already communicate with you better than I did with my husband. Oh, Shit!’ (p.139)). Yod’s increasing resemblance to a human collapses the binary between a human and non-human, but it does not enable him to escape from the Oedipal paradigm.

One of the effects of doppelganger narrative is the fragmentation of the female subject, resulting in what Lee Horsley termed as ‘seeing double’,<sup>128</sup> which gives or carries a prominent psychological tone to Duncan Gibbin’s film *Eve of Destruction* (1991). The portrayal of the female character as fragmented, usually by the use of two female characters antithetically juxtaposed with each other, is nothing new in the noir tradition. In a classical noir film like Robert Siodmak’s *The Dark Mirror* (1946), twin sisters are used to reinforce the two main types of female characters, the good girl and the femme fatale. In the context of the film, the image double is used to show the duplicity of one of the twin sisters. *The Dark Mirror* encapsulates the idea that opposing or antithetical personalities can easily be compared if they are in two physically identical bodies (both sisters are played by Olivia de Havilland), highlighting film noir’s connection with psychoanalysis. In such a narrative, the ‘evil’ sister is

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<sup>127</sup> In Joseph Francavilla, ‘The Android as Doppelganger’, *Retrofitting Blade Runner*, Judith Kerman, ed., 1991, p.5

<sup>128</sup> Lee Horsley uses this phrase to, among others, analyze some noir texts that deal with the ‘fragmenting of identity’ (2001, p.137). Her analysis includes Siodmak’s *Dark Mirror* in which she argues that the ‘creation of pairs’ is used to represent ‘opposing female types’ (ibid., p.138)

usually shot as a reflection in a mirror, foregrounding her ambiguity, duplicity, and fatality. The image or reflection in the mirror in effect is often associated with both the mental state and the darker side of the female character. More recently, the visual trappings of the femme fatale as an image in the mirror can also be seen in Barbet Schroeder's *Single White Female* (1992). In the publicity poster for the film, Herdy (Jennifer Jason Leigh) is shown staring menacingly at the audience—to portend fatalistic obsession—while Allie (Bridget Fonda) looks in the other direction pensively but vulnerably, an indication of her victimisation. Their images, placed next to each other, separated by the leaf of a door, are the iconic representation of women in a noir and neo-noir film.

The reworking of the theme of 'seeing double', buttressed by the use of the mirror image, is also employed in *Eve of Destruction*; the idea of a duplicated identity is highlighted at the outset of the film when Eve VIII appears on the screen looking at the mirror. It is apparent that her appearance on screen is for 'an audience', which the audience (in the cinema) then learns that Eve, in turn, is watched by Dr. Simmons, after whom she is modelled. This, in noir tradition, evinces the double-sidedness or fragmentation of Simmons' humanist being or subjectivity, epitomised by the cyborg that she builds and implants with her own memory (Both Eve and Dr. Simmons are played by Renee Soutendijk). The act of seeing is phenomenological as it is often associated with the sight organ, the eyes, through which the female character's consciousness is literalised or apprehended. In the context of the film, the right eye of the cyborg functions more than just an organ of sight; indeed, it is the main switch that can shut Eve's motor activities. Together, the implanted memories and faked eyes mean that Eve is a technological construct that defines her fragmented subjectivity.

The film's use of doppelganger narrative is also an attempt at dismantling the whore and angel dichotomy. As the cyborg Eve turns into a female destroying machine when her system is shot by a bank robber, she 'retrieves' the life of Dr. Simmons, signifying Eve's role as an embodiment, which in turn alludes to 'the return of the repressed'. Eve VIII, as a technological construct, becomes a sympathetic character who has no other choice (noir determinism) but to follow her own programmed system. Ironically, the more violent Eve gets, the more personal and intimate are the revelations made about Dr. Simmons' life and past, since what Eve does is a sheer reflection of Dr. Simmons' repressed desire. This figuring of feminine desire with a cyborg running amok has an ironic element to it. Dr. Simmons, in an effort to disavow the cyborg's physical resemblance to her, declares that 'She is more human than

machine'. By declaring Eve's 'human side', Dr. Simmons hopes to place the blame on the cyborg figure, and exonerate her 'memory' or desire ("We are not exactly alike"). However, the film refuses to exonerate Simmons by almost instantly and systematically constructing Eve as the Other, when after hitting a guy who abuses her on the road (She detests being called a bitch), the camera slithers inside Eve's body through her throat to reveal her robotic make up. Ironically, as Eve's violence intensifies, the more sympathetic a figure she becomes as she knows that she will be doomed at the end. Consequently, the division of angel and whore is blurred as Eve's irreversible actions reveal Simmons's internal guilt and fantasy: one by one, the elements of her guilt and fantasy are acted out by Eve. It is called a double-edged subjectivity when the sympathy lies with the Other and not with the human female character, which effectively dehumanises her too. In other words, the more dangerous the cyborg turns out to be, the more threatening it becomes, especially to Dr. Simmons herself as she knows that her personal image is turning into a public discourse. Due to that, her angelic image of a caring mother is overshadowed by her teenage sexual fantasy. In effect, the doppelganger narrative is used to destabilize Dr. Simmons' identity, culminating in the annihilation of Eve.

Memories installed in Eve's system, as Silverman observes in her analysis of Rachel in *Blade Runner*, 'work less to control than to construct her as a subject'.<sup>129</sup> In Eve's case, the memories implanted in her, viz., her teenage sexual fantasy, her revenge against her abusive father and her responsibility as a working mother, are straight from feminist psychoanalysis textbooks. In other words, Eve's being a cyborg does not enable her to escape from the whole Oedipal history. Her teenage sexual fantasy is related to the female castration complex—the 'discovery of the anatomical distinction between boys and girls, and the subsequent reading into that distinction of sexual difference'.<sup>130</sup> Therefore, the fantasy ends with the brutal murder of her fantasized subjects. When she goes back to 'her' father's place to take revenge on him, she declares, 'I saw you. I saw what you did!' In this case, she 'sees' not through her eyes but through her memory, that is, the repressed past that resurfaces.

Her identification with her abused mother brings to attention the negative infantile identification with the Mother as manifested by her refusal to be separated from her, thus turning her father into the hated figure instead. This hatred is transformed into the guilt of not being a good

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<sup>129</sup> Kaja Silverman, 'Back to the Future', *Camera Obscura*, 27(1991), p.120

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*

mother herself. Therefore, she tries to compensate for the lack that her mother represents by associating with 'her' son, Timmy, on the pretext of wanting to take care of him. In the end, when her vision, that is, the metaphor for her 'memory' is fading, Eve allows herself to be annihilated by Simmons herself. The death of Eve at the hands of Dr. Simmons is symbolic of the usurpation of her subjectivity by another subject. Therefore, doubly victimizing her. As Dr. Simmons is her inventor, she can be seen as the mother who inculcates patriarchal value systems to her daughter. Since the relationship between Dr. Simmons and Eve represents the negative Oedipus complex, the mother has to kill the daughter who refuses to be subjected to patriarchy.

In Albert Pyun's low budget film *Cyborg*, the three female characters, which include a Cyborg called Pearl Prophet, are symbolic of the past, present and future of the male protagonist, Gibson's (Jean-Claude Van Damme) apocalyptic world. *Cyborg* tries to represent twenty-first century America in which an incurable plague is killing people, and a violent anarchist is malevolently trying to prevent the data of the possible cure from reaching its destination. Combining the science fiction and martial arts genre together, the film uses the three female characters as the milestones of the narrative: Haley (Haley Peterson) as his connection with the past, Nady (Deborah Richter) as his present and Pearl Prophet (Dayle Haydon) as his future; thus reducing them to mere symbols within the narrative.

Haley, as Gibson's past, represents the motivation for his actions, that is, revenge for the brutal killing of his girlfriend and her youngest brother. The locket that she wears is used as a proof that she once belonged to Gibson's nightmarish past. As a past, Haley is passive, only able to 'look' when Gibson is tortured. In the end, when Gibson leaves Pearl safely in Atlanta, he walks away with Haley. This represents a closure, or the end of his revenge, which in a way suggests his reconciliation with his past. Nady, as an active female character, represents his struggle in the present time. She is strong willed and insists on their need for each other. At one stage she questions Gibson's attitude towards her, "Do you think that a woman is still not worth saving?" This can be taken as her way of saying that the present world or time is still worth saving by Gibson. As the present is morbid and malevolent, it has to end, which is signified by Nady's death. Pearl, half human and half robot, is a cyborg that is responsible for carrying the much sought after data of the remedy for the plague. Leaving her with no choice, she agrees to carry the data because according to her, "Plague is a choice so much. We lost our humanity. We lost our purpose [...] there's no meaning in this world. I want to change

that". This theme, in which the cyborg is more 'human than human', is also discussed by Susan Doll and Greg Faller in their discussion of the film *Blade Runner*. As the symbol of the future, she needs to be helped, but she declines his offer, believing that she is safer with the anarchists. In all situations that she is in, Pearl does not seem to want to 'fight', and in this sense, she is a passive character. Even at the end of the film she admits that, "It's strange, but I think he is the real cure of this world". As this final note actually comes from a female cyborg celebrating a masculine character, it evinces the idea that it is generally accepted that patriarchy is the saviour of the world. This film's apparent closure is a reflection of its lack of noir mood or conventions.

### **Revisiting Female Desire and Fatal Sexuality: A Real Trip in Virtual Reality**

Virtual Reality<sup>131</sup> is often associated with computer technology, that is, with the advent of computer imaging software and the Internet. 'Mapping cyberspace, or the landscape of a virtual world,' argued P. Chad Barnett, 'is difficult because like the multinational capitalist system that it is an extension of, Virtual Reality cannot be completely known'.<sup>132</sup> Paul Cogley in his study of narrative discusses the development of computing technology by looking at how computer images are able to influence the 'active *nature* of narrative readership'<sup>133</sup>, and in so doing problematises the concept of authorship that 'seem[s] to encourage interactivity and a "participatory culture"'.<sup>134</sup> A computer simulation game, for example, allows a player to escape the real world to partake of a virtual world where s/he has a certain degree of control. In addition to that, the ability that internet technology has in transferring information at a supersonic speed virtually everywhere, via the World Wide Web (WWW), has created a new kind of anxiety, relating to the alteration of the kind of experience people have with regard to their own understanding of the world. The new computer technology, in effect, creates a kind of verisimilitude that allows the formation of a virtual world, that is, a computer-generated reality.

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<sup>131</sup> This phrase was coined by Jaron Lanier in the late 1980s to refer to 'an environment in which reality is simulated through computers and in which the body can experience artificially generated data as though they were coming from the real world' (in Danni Cavallaro, *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture*, p.27)

<sup>132</sup> 'Reviving Cyberpunk: (Re)Constructing the Subject and Mapping Cyberspace in the Wachowski Brothers' Film *The Matrix*', p.367

<sup>133</sup> *Narrative*, 2001, p.206

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p.208

This section seeks to establish how the loss of agency and individual autonomy are linked with cyberpunk's use of virtual reality as the metaphor for a female body and desire, associating women with nature. In addition to its focus on the representation of the female characters and femaleness, the analysis will also concentrate on visual metaphors surrounding virtual reality itself, and its intersection with noir sensibilities and conventions. The need for such an investigation arises, as argued by Joan Gordon, since 'feminist science fiction has veered away from these activities, all of which allow us to shape and manage our futures rather than escape them'.<sup>135</sup> To begin with, the section is further divided into two sub-sections: (i) a brief look at the exegesis of virtual reality, especially pertaining to the wider issue of the impact virtual reality has on the male protagonists and the relevance this has for the female characters, focusing on the debate surrounding the loss of agency and autonomy; (ii) an analysis of female-authored texts, namely, Kathleen Bigelow's *Strange Days* and Pat Cadigan's *Mindplayers*. This is to investigate whether or not these female authors have succeeded in reforming, parodying or appropriating the cyberpunk sub-genre in an effort to liberate the female characters.

### **Virtual Reality and the Loss of 'Male' Agency or Autonomy**

The advent of virtual reality highlights and engenders the shift from the science fiction genre's interest in the Other to the ontological questioning of a human, as the discourse of science and technology is more visceral than ever. Seen as one of the ramifications of science fiction's interest in 'soft' science, cyberpunk's affinity with the visceral is achieved by constructing a techno-based reality that can be both emotively and psychologically attached to a human physical body. The shift in the thematic concern of the cyberpunk sub-genre is demonstrated in Gibson's fiction, which, observes Carol McGuirk,<sup>136</sup> 'turns from technology's impact on human destiny to examine at a closer range its power to gratify human desire'. William Gibson introduces characters who 'jack in' through wires connected to their brains to experience the 'consensual hallucination', an out of body experience within the matrix, so that for

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<sup>135</sup> Joan Gordon, 'Yin and Yang Duke It Out', in Larry McMaffery, ed., *Storming the Reality Studio*, 1991, p.199

<sup>136</sup> The "New" Romancer: Science Fiction Innovators From Gernsback to Gibson', in George Slusser and Tom Shippey, eds., *Fiction 2000*, 1992, p.113



example in the male protagonist's (Case's) case (in *Neuromancer*) he is able to escape the constraint of the 'meat'. The severance from the 'meat' is an effort, as discussed by George Slusser,<sup>137</sup> to breach 'The Frankenstein Barrier', a term used 'to create an antinomial relationship between terms like *machine* and *organism* [...] [whereby] the curious inversion occurs, in which it is now the thingness of the organic itself that rises up to block the attempts of technology to make things in general'. Gibson's Case seamlessly blurs the distinction between human and machine, allowing 'The Frankenstein Barrier' to be breached.

Case's departure from 'The Frankenstein Barrier' is synonymous with his refusal to follow the linear history of a human body and to allow human specificity, highlighting his status as a posthuman hybridised 'body', where 'the past and future lived as present crisis'.<sup>138</sup> According to Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston in *Posthuman Bodies*, the posthuman is a condition whereby 'singularities ceased to anchor the ways in which we think',<sup>139</sup> advocating the plurality of the body. This crisis is one of the main contributory factors to the major anxiety that implicates the human body in postmodern narrative. In her study of future noir texts, Lee Horsley<sup>140</sup> asserts that:

The sources of anxiety in fantasies of this kind are most often to do with external control (socio-political fatality) rather than inescapable inner demons (psychological fatality). The boundaries between inner and outer worlds are breached, producing fragmentation and the dissolution of a coherent self and raising radical questions about the nature of beings (what is the essence of the human?). The intersection with the noir thriller, however, is more evident in the way this metamorphosis into the 'posthuman' foregrounds the issue of agency, bringing the protagonists to wonder, not without cause, whether they retain free will and individual autonomy.

Although I agree only partly with Horsley, her observation points to the need to re-think the agency and autonomy of the 'posthuman' characters in the new spatial and temporal conditions created by technological advancement, usually embodied in virtual reality. This demand on the posthuman is derived from a new and intolerable situation arising out of the 'antihuman evil', whereby 'either the promise of an

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<sup>137</sup> 'The Frankenstein Barrier', *ibid.*, p.49

<sup>138</sup> Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, 'Introduction: Posthuman Bodies', in Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, eds., *Posthuman Bodies*, p.4

<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*, p.8

<sup>140</sup> *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.231

apocalyptic entrance into a new evolutionary synthesis of the human and the machine, or an all encompassing hallucination in which true motives, and true effects, cannot be known'.<sup>141</sup> My view point differs from Horsley, as I will argue that the sources of anxieties in fantasies of this kind also stem from the old Western adage of male fear of female power and independence—the inner demon that she is referring to. One may ask, if the 'loss of control' is a conception that is applicable to male noir protagonists, since Horsley's analysis is primarily based on male characters like William Gibson's Case in *Neuromancer* and Rudy Rucker's Cobb Anderson in *Software*, how is this relevant in the context of female characters? To answer this question, I will frame the analysis of the female characters by situating it within the context of the male identity to arrive at the argument concerning the function of the female characters in virtual reality.

To begin with, Scott Bukatman defines virtual reality as 'a cybernetic paraspaces comprised of real-time interactive data' that 'significantly extends the sensory address of existent media to provide an alternate and manipulable space'.<sup>142</sup> His definition, while foregrounding the shift in spatial and temporal significance in cyberspace, when linked or compared to Horsley's analysis of future noir, intersects at the emphasis on 'the loss of autonomy' in virtual reality. Despite the 'manipulable space', not only does virtual reality fragment the essence of self but it also makes invisible human actions; it therefore contributes to the dissolution of a human and its 'power' or agency. Actions are no longer kinetic but psychological, involving layers of consciousness. The over-reliance on the psychological, as opposed to the kinetic, allows for the transference of experiences within virtual reality to be exhibited or exteriorised to others through the sharing of cyberspace, rendering the characters more vulnerable than they thought they were as 'the regulator of experience (ego? Self? Spirit?) can no longer accept any experience as worth more than any other. The only standard is thrill'.<sup>143</sup> George Slusser conceptualises this change:

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<sup>141</sup> Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., 'Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism', in Larry McCaffery, ed., *Storming the Reality Studio*, p.191

<sup>142</sup> In *Terminal Identity*, pp.186-187

<sup>143</sup> Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., 'Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism', in Larry McCaffery, Ed., *Storming the Reality Studio*, p.191

All our present boundaries fall, and observer and observed become part of a same network, bid now to “interface” instead of merely to interact. But with these changes the boundaries between illusion and reality also fall.<sup>144</sup>

In a nutshell, consciousness in cyberspace as embodied in virtual reality is no longer private, but public—shared in a network of information.

In some cases, the ability to access virtual reality can also be used to enhance one’s quality of life. Through the link of his mind to cyberspace, Gibson’s Case connects with others including his contacts and sources in the underworld, thus allowing him, to some extent, to free himself from the prison set by the ‘meat’. In some instances, virtual reality also has medical value, as the mentally retarded Jobe Smith (Jeff Fahey) in *The Lawnmower Man*<sup>145</sup> is cured by drug-enhancement and virtual reality, empowering him against the people who bully him. The advantage of accessing virtual reality can also be seen in the female characters’ freedom of movement, transcending physical and cultural boundaries. In *Body of Glass*, the free city of Tikva protects itself from the Corporation by establishing its own security devices in the net. Virtual reality in cyberspace is important in *The Body of Glass* especially for Malkah, Shira’s grandmother, who is physically weak because of old age, as it provides her with the opportunity to form personal and professional relationships, enabling her to continue to protect Tikva. Malkah also uses cyberspace for sexual gratification and liberation, tying relationships with men, women and the cyborg called Yod, which would not be possible outside of the realm of virtual reality.

Besides its advantages, accessing virtual reality is not without its repercussions, either mentally or physically. The protagonist, having accessed cyberspace, puts him or her self at risk of an unwanted intrusion. The transfer of consciousness entangles the protagonist in a web of information that exposes him or her to every possible kind of threat, which in some cases can cause the death of the physical body.<sup>146</sup> This kind of threat is often found in the narrative of mental invasion, a narrative employed by Pat Cadigan in *Mindplayers* and, to an extent, in Warchowski’s *The Matrix*. In *Mindplayers*, mental invasion is experienced by the female protagonist, Allie, who is eventually admitted to hospital after she is ‘attacked’ by one of her patients. The theme of mental invasion

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<sup>144</sup> ‘Introduction: Fiction as Information’, in George Slusser and Tom Shippey, eds., *Fiction 2000*, p.1

<sup>145</sup> Dir. Leonard Brett, 1992

<sup>146</sup> Scott Bukatman in *Terminal Identity* differentiates this by calling the ‘real’ body an ‘objective body’ and the projected image the ‘phenomenal body’, p.187

is also prominent in *The Cell*<sup>147</sup> where a psychotherapist, Catherine Deane (Jennifer Lopez), is implicated (in his mind) when the serial killer's damaged personality tries to overpower her in the virtual world, putting her life at stake. A variation of this theme is also explored by Allan Moyle in *X-Change*,<sup>148</sup> a film set in the not so distant future, when consciousness swapping is used as a means of transportation. The male protagonist in the film has to race against time to find his body that has been stolen by a terrorist, and failing to do so will result in the death of his body. In *Neuromancer*, which is dubbed as the quintessential cyberpunk text by Bruce Sterling, the protagonist, Case, faces unprecedented loss of his ability to be reinvigorated, resulting in him being galvanized into actions outside of the realm of virtual reality. In this desperate time, Case is warned by Armitage that:

You have time to do what I'm hiring you for, Case, but that's all. Do the job and I can inject you with an enzyme that will dissolve the bond without the sacs. Then you'll need a blood change. Otherwise, the sacs melt and you're back where I found you (p. 60).

In the tradition of sci-fi horror films, Jobe Smith, the human guinea pig in *The Lawnmower Man*<sup>149</sup> metamorphoses into an evil-like creature due to the drug-enhancement and virtual reality experimentations that are carried out on him.

In many cyberpunk texts that deal with the need of the characters to jack into cyberspace, these characters are usually physically altered with added body parts, namely the deck, to connect the mind with the computer technology; breaching the binary opposition between human and machine that results in the foregrounding of the irrevocable interface. Mutated and fragmented, resulting in the production of a hybrid subject, that is, a posthuman, this interface amalgamates science fiction's speculative and noir's extrapolative traits together, raising epistemological and ontological questions about the constitution of a human. The focus on the posthuman produces a new rhetoric that treats the body as a site where, according to what a feminist theorist, Zoe Sofia, calls 'the collapse of the future onto the present',<sup>150</sup> it is concomitantly consigned to the role of the Other.

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<sup>147</sup> Dir. Tarsem Singh, New line Cinema, 2000

<sup>148</sup> Trimark Pictures, 2000

<sup>149</sup> This film is based loosely on Stephen King's book. But King was reportedly not involved in the production of the film.

<sup>150</sup> In Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., 'Futuristic Flu, or, The Revenge of the Future', in George Slusser and Tom Shippey, *Fiction 2000*, 1992, p.27

Posthuman characters are transgressors who are usually iconic figures in noir texts—functioning as mirrors of a destabilized self and a corrupted world. *Body of Glass* foregrounds these functions by gradually breaching the difference between human and cyborg, alluding to epistemological and ontological references regarding the human itself. By the same token, Cronenberg's *Existenz* carries the transgression a step further with the use of a deck called a 'bio port', that is attached to the 'metaflesh game pot' to jack into the virtual world, an extension that is both organic and infantile as the port resembles an umbilical cord and feeds the character into the virtual world. Having been 'reborn' in the virtual world, that is, through the replication of their humanistic selves, the characters sense of a unified self is thus disintegrated.

Virtual reality therefore can be seen as a new symbolism that informs the fragmented self as a commodified body, within a late capitalist or post-industrial Western society. The replication of the body and mind, a recurring theme in the narrative of virtual reality, signifies the malleability of self in the late capitalist sensibility. A variation of this theme is prominent in *Dark City* and *The Thirteenth Floor* in which the male protagonists suffer from a kind of amnesia and are implicated in a crime that they may or may have not committed, trapping them in the labyrinth of a vertiginous journey into the unknown. *Dark City* and *The Thirteenth Floor* foreground the theme of alienation through their use of radical visual imageries which are influenced by Gothic's visual feast—*Dark City* with gothic structured buildings and *The Thirteenth Floor* with modern skyscrapers that are glorified with spectacular camera movements, giving a certain eerie monstrosity to them. These visual images have two functions: one, as a metonymic visualization of the paranoia generated by the virtual landscape, signifying the lone investigators' hermetic journey into the world or environment that they cannot understand; two, as a symbol of phallic supremacy, an extension of the late capitalist state. In both instances, the narrative devices involve the duplication of phallic symbols usually embodied in the skyscrapers or high-rise buildings. The use of this kind of imagery also 'convey[s] a deep sense of confusion, uncertainty, and excess'.<sup>151</sup> Gothic's fascination with excess is materialised here through replications.

The theme of replication runs through the narrative of both films, amplifying the characters' conflicts, which lie both inside and outside themselves. In *Dark City*, the image of the buildings mushrooming within a matter of seconds reinforces this theme: buildings are duplicated,

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<sup>151</sup> Dani Cavallaro, *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture*, 2000, p.xx

forming a fabricated world that threatens the male protagonist's subjectivity. He becomes more alone and alienated as the buildings keep surfacing in a manner resonant of the multinational capitalist system's mass production that reduces the unique role and existence of individuals into what McCaffery categorically calls "'tangible products" [...] that are essentially reproductions and abstractions—images, [...], information, [...], memories, styles, simulated experiences, and copies of original experiences'.<sup>152</sup> The narrative device of the film hinges largely on Gothic imageries, making it hard to ignore the symbolism of the aliens as inner demons, literalised by the science fiction genre. Likewise, in *The Thirteenth Floor*, the male protagonist's subjectivity is at stake upon the revelation that he is actually a 'tangible product', a replicated self whose existence is neither physical nor metaphysical, negating and dissolving the history of his own body and self. The different layers of the virtual world that he inhabits and ventures into are also truncated, limited, simulated and deadly. The fabricated world brings together noir's moods of alienation and determination, leaving him alone to make sense of his surroundings.

Virtual reality posits the question of what is real and what is not whilst simultaneously negating its binary, putting the existential dilemma of the noir protagonist in the loop of indefinable human characteristics and experiences—an affinity that cyberpunk has with the tradition of noir narrative. Barnett asserts that 'being inside it [virtual reality] means being part of a technological sublime that can be conceived but not represented or known'.<sup>153</sup> Cyberpunk, with its affinity to the science fiction genre, uses technology to give this 'reality' a definition, as when Morpheus in *The Matrix* opines, 'If real is what you can feel, smell, taste and see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain'. Trapped within the not-knowingness (noir determinism) and the curiosity to comprehend the unknown (noir fatalism), Neo has to first realise 'the difference between knowing the path and walking the path' to be able to insert and assert his own agency and autonomy in the world that he inhabits. However, his inability to quantify the ambivalence further fragments the subjective nature of his being. Neo and many protagonists in the virtual world know that the world they inhabit is fragmented, but they have no power or control over it. Their existential dilemma alludes to the nature of their autonomy, embedded in a detective/lone cowboy narrative, where an individual journey takes place to find the missing piece of the puzzle in an effort to quantify their hermetic sense of incompleteness. Like Neo,

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<sup>152</sup> 'Introduction: The Desert of the Real', in *Storming Reality Studio*, 1991, p.4

<sup>153</sup> 'Reviving Cyberpunk: (Re)Constructing the Subject and Mapping Cyberspace in the Wachowski Brothers' Film *The Matrix*', p.368

Murdoch in *Dark City* and Douglas Hall in *The Thirteenth Floor* are seduced into trying to solve this dilemma, becoming submerged deeper and deeper in a hole of darkness, suggesting a spiralling paranoia that virtual reality can generate. None the less, the moment Neo comprehends what Barnett calls the ‘postmodern sublime’,<sup>154</sup> he is able to fight the Sentient Agent. Similarly, when Murdoch and Hall realize the technological sublime that they are in, they begin to comprehend and transcend the boundary of this virtual world. However they are not fully liberated, as building on Hollinger’s theorization, Barnett argues that ‘if virtual reality becomes the primary reality, then the body is at risk of being absorbed into its own technology [...] and the subject, as it is known in contemporary reality, may be lost forever’.<sup>155</sup>

The omnipresent ontological and sociological uncertainties are the *raison d’être* of cyberpunk’s important iconic figure, an anti-hero protagonist who transgresses the real and the virtual reality to survive the collapse of law and order that the post-apocalyptic world of cyberpunk often embodies. An anti-hero figure mirrors a refusal to be part of the commodified world, a lone struggle with the power structure, and more importantly, ambivalence towards the sense of what is universally right or wrong, regularly working within the paradigm of what Bruce Sterling calls ‘counterculture’ and ‘antiestablishment feelings’.<sup>156</sup> For instance, Gibson’s protagonists are largely cyberspace cowboys whose job is to hack the net, like Bobby and Jack in *Burning Chrome*. Carol McGuirk observes that ‘Jack’s prosthesis is emphasized [...] as the visible sign of the wounded humanity’,<sup>157</sup> qualifying him as a transgressor that mirrors the collapse of the society, reminiscent of the hard-boiled detective figures in Hammett and Chandler’s novels. In a world where laws are increasingly precarious, the only moral values or ‘the truth’ that the protagonists adhere to are their own. The rebel characters in Wachowskis’ *The Matrix*—Neo, Trinity, Morpheus, et al.—are computer hackers. Only through hacking do they realize the difference between the real and the matrix, a very complicated concept that Morpheus tries to explain not through words, but through being in a matrix himself. The characters in *Body of Glass* turn into cyberspace hackers to protect Tikva after they themselves are being hacked and attacked by the corporation. The inter-changeability of roles from the hunted to the hunter, and vice versa, is omnipresent in many noir

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p.369

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., ‘Cyberpunk and Neuromenticism’, *ibid.*, p. 183).

<sup>157</sup> ‘The “New” Romancers: Science Fiction Innovators from Gernsback to Gibson’, in George Slusser and Tom Shippey, eds., *Fiction 2000*, 1992, p.113

texts, not only to give agency to the protagonists but also to add complicity to their actions. A sense of complicity adds a certain moral dimension to their existential dilemma without them necessarily trying to resolve it, which consequently reflects and intensifies the status of these protagonists as transgressors in the noir world. The dynamic of the symbiosis between the protagonist's moral struggle and the collapse of his surrounding is where the intersection between virtual reality and noir conventions is most palpable.

Pierce argues that films like *Dark City* and *The Thirteenth Floor* use a detective structure 'as the framework of activity in the material world within which the greater struggle takes place'.<sup>158</sup> Along with the 'greater struggle' that these male protagonists have to endure, which is related to both the material world that they are in and the investigation that they have to carry out: what Horsley calls 'external control (socio-political fatality)',<sup>159</sup> is the essence of a conflict that lies within themselves: what Horsley refers to as 'inescapable inner demons (psychological fatality)'.<sup>160</sup> The interweaving of both themes constitutes noir's brooding and ominous atmosphere, reflecting the films' affinity with the gothic tradition of creating a dehumanised environment. Fred Botting aptly observes:

The loss of human identity and the alienation of self from both itself and social bearings in which a sense of reality is secured one presented in the threatening shapes of increasingly dehumanised environments, machinic doubles and violent, psychotic fragmentation.<sup>161</sup>

In *Dark City*, the identities of the characters, perhaps except for the male protagonist, are fragmented as the aliens shift their roles based on the concoction of different memories that they have gathered in order to understand human nature. The male protagonist's (John Murdoch) main struggle is in trying to make sense of what is happening around him, the existential dilemma prominently inherent in noir's protagonist. Informed by Gothic imageries, his investigation is a symbolic examination of himself: the contest between good and evil as represented by his 'fight' with the reigning aliens is the literalised battle within himself or his own psyche. In effect, the battle between good versus evil is one of many Gothic conventions being assimilated into the science fiction genre that helps to characteristically define 'future noir'. Noir narrative, however,

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<sup>158</sup> *A Literary Symbiosis*, 1983, p.211

<sup>159</sup> *The Noir Thriller*, p.231

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> *Gothic*, 1996, p.150



problematizes the binary with the employment of an anti-hero protagonist, rendering absurd the question of right and wrong. Meanwhile, *The Thirteenth Floor* poses a different kind of ontological question: What happens when the virtual character assumes his/her own agency? The film demonstrates the complexity of such a question by centring the subjectivity of the virtual subject, a non-humanistic human, allowing him to transgress the boundary of the world that he inhabits. Douglas Hall's reaction towards his 'fictional' status as a being signals his subjectivity and agency, yet it lacks the dynamic of individual autonomy. The different layers of reality in this film also radically question the credibility of reality, creating a paranoid vision of the world the protagonist inhabits. So does its use of technology as metaphor for the alienation that he gradually experiences. The revelation and discovery that he is part of the virtual world created by a 'human' establishes the fact that there is something beyond the investigation itself, posing a different question concerning human subjectivity, agency and autonomy. The film's answer to this question reflects its ambivalence towards both the notion of what is real and what is not, as well as what is a human and what is a non-human, culminating in the conflict between the human and the virtual subject. The result is a devastating ending with the death of the human, as the replicated self takes over his world, and in this case, his life with his wife.

The technology of virtual reality in both films reinforces the theme of transcendence, a predominant theme that, argues Veronica Hollinger, points 'cyberpunk back to the romantic trappings of the genre at its most conventional'.<sup>162</sup> Building on the investigative narrative structure, the immediate requirement is for the male protagonists to find out the truth about the crimes they are accused of, subsequently leads to the discovery of their 'true' identities. The palpable solution to this inherent conflict mainly lies in the male protagonists' ability to transcend the boundaries being presented to them, and in so doing they need female figures, that is, their love interest, to provide both a romantic closure and a sense of stability. In other words, at the centre of this conflict and investigation is a female character who functions as a symbol of stability that the male character is looking for. The main female character in *Dark City*, Emma Murdoch/Anna (Jennifer Connelly), for instance, has postmodern sensibilities and paradoxes written all over her, recalling the image of both a femme fatale and a redeemed woman, a symbolic and literal representation of Murdoch's struggle. At the end of the film, when she is

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<sup>162</sup> 'Cybernetic Deconstructions: Cyberpunk and Postmodernism', in Larry McCaffery, ed., *Storming the Reality Studio*, 1991, p.206

finally united with Murdoch, in spite of her different memories, she still provides the hope that he is longing for. The meeting scene is fully romanticized so as to reinforce this idea, reflected by the familiar view of crystal clear sea water that highlights her pivotal role as the centre of stability, and consigns her to the traditional role of a redeeming woman. Moreover, the romantic interest in *The Thirteenth Floor* comes straight from the femme fatale mould of the classical noir films: desirable yet duplicitous. Jane Fuller (Gretchen Mol), as the central female character, generates a sense of mystery that needs to be solved by the male protagonist, a common narrative trajectory in noir's generic treatment of women as a male fantasy. In this sense, her role is, in essence, very conventional, that is, as the love interest for the male protagonist. Female characters like Emma Murdoch and Jane Fuller epitomize the deep-seated anxiety embedded in noir narrative with regard to the function of the female characters in virtual reality.

Noir anxiety concerning the female figure is carried into most cyberpunk texts especially via their use of virtual reality, staging the infantile fear of a woman's power by using a more subtle rhetoric to camouflage the apprehension she generates. In other words, through cyberpunk, the essence of a human is dissolved and fragmented; the culprit for causing this fragmentation and dissolution, however, is found in female figures and desires, continuing and reinforcing the long-lived Western binary system. One way of surviving the threat that a female figure generates is to divorce nature from the industrial, or sometimes to fragment nature with the use of technology. The inexorable intermingling of natural and mechanical in *Neuromancer* creates not only amusing visual imagery, but also, importantly, underlines a departure from human kind's need for nature. Case's addiction to cyberspace is a formidable sign of his effort to disassociate himself from his body/nature which serves as a feminine symbol that he needs to get rid of to reclaim his masculinity. Unlike his body, the matrix, that is, the technological, enables him to resume his agency, and in an amplified desire to feel his existence, he makes love to his physically dead girlfriend. Cyberspace for Case is profound, and nature is rendered obsolete. Cyberpunk's portrayal of the human body through virtual reality is atavistically and intimately related to technology, so that it can be presented not only as a threat to the male protagonist's masculinity and life, but also treated as a rather dispensable subject.

What *Neuromancer* exemplifies is cyberpunk's consistent reference to the binary of machine and organism in its discourse of virtual reality. Along with cyberpunk's interest in a human body, this association is resonant of science fiction's preoccupation with associating women with

nature—emotional, irrational, duplicitous and dangerous. In an electronically ridden world, a female identity is also informed by cyberpunk's interest in breaching the binary of the organic and mechanical, resulting in a farrago of visual metaphors. The perplexing metaphor is a reflection of not only the genre's ambiguous treatment of a female body and sexuality but also its ambivalence towards them. The ambiguity and ambivalence are enabling factors for permitting female or feminist cyberpunk writers to re-conceptualise the metaphors surrounding the virtual world itself, infiltrating into cyberpunk's conventions to foreground the issues related to feminist struggles.

Some female authors and directors of cyberpunk texts appropriate this convention by looking at issues that are germane to feminist concerns, like privacy and security. Central to the breach of privacy is the collapse of one's security. Cyberpunk's strategy in 'responding to the [...] challenge of a new information driven world'<sup>163</sup> exposes the fragility and vulnerability of one's privacy, germinating a kind of anxiety that, in a few instances, represents a threat to the constitution of a human. In William Gibson's *Burning Chrome*, Chrome's security is breached through the net, that is, cyberspace, by the narrator, Jack, and his associate, Bobby, who are cyber hackers aiming to destroy Chrome's Home of Blue Light, leaving her in financial ruin. Johnny in Gibson's *Johnny Mnemonic* laments:

We're an information economy. They teach you that in school. What they don't tell you is that it's impossible to move, to live, to operate at any level without leaving traces, bits, seemingly meaningless fragments of personal information. Fragments that can be retrieved, amplified [...] (1988, p.30)

Pat Cadigan's *Mindplayers* also raises the issue of security with the portrayal of a female protagonist who is a reluctant 'mindplayer' who believes that 'reality affixing' is a 'mindrape' (p.15), 'like a perfect crime—the locked room, no way in or out, but somehow, someone gets in anyway, looks at every single thing in the room and gets out again' (p.17). The rape rhetoric is also prominent in Cadigan's 'Rock On' in which Gina, a sinner, is forced into sharing her 'rock 'n' roll visions straight from the brain'.<sup>164</sup> Whereas Gibson's concern is solely at security level, Cadigan adds another dimension to it by associating the issue of security with one of the

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<sup>163</sup> George Slusser, 'Introduction: Fiction as Information' in George Slusser and Tom Shippey, eds., *Fiction 2000*, 1992, p.9

<sup>164</sup> Pat Cadigan, 'Rock On', in *Storming the Reality Studio*, p.53

major concerns in feminism, that is, rape. This issue will be further discussed later.

One starts to ponder then, whether virtual reality always has to be purely about metaphors for technology in a multinational capitalist system? My analysis of some cyberpunk texts reveals that similar to the narrative in many noir texts, it is about investigating female desire and sexuality, the very essence of noir building blocks. To put the case in motion, I will look at Cronenberg's *Existenz* to demonstrate that the visual metaphors in virtual reality can also be analogous to a female body and sexuality. In Cronenberg's *Existenz*, the collapse of the boundary of the real and virtual obdurately refuses to reconcile with the characters' understanding of their world. *Existenz* does not offer any recuperative reading of the difference between reality and the virtual, giving the world that they inhabit a more definitely dangerous, primal, and dark noir quality. This boils down to the fact that the game is designed by a woman, the film's narrative trajectory and mise-en-scene exposing her vulnerability, inner thought, desire and sexuality. Allegra (Jennifer Jason Leigh) may have designed the game, but she does so at the expense of her own privacy and security. As signified by the ending of the film when the role reversal takes place, the hunted becomes the hunter in two conflated 'realities', the audience and the characters alike are left confused and disorientated.

One of the reasons why the characters in *Existenz* fail to transcend the technological sublime is because of the nature of the virtual world that they are in. The Cronenbergian nightmare world is infantile, primal and organic; with visual symbolisms that evoke both science fiction's preoccupation with associating woman with nature and noir's omnipresent trope of 'woman as the construction of a male fantasy', consigning her into the role of the castrated Other. The weapons are made of organic materials, like bones and teeth; the events take place in archaic buildings and surroundings (old church, country gas station, abattoir-turns-laboratory, forest), evoking the primal fear often associated with gothic horror imageries; the animals, like the sinister two-headed amphibious mutations and the whimsically exotic dish in the Chinese restaurant, signal the return of the repressed, the animalistic desire that is hidden by Allegra's shy and taciturn characterization. More importantly, the game bioport, the product of Allegra's invention, is biologically and organically constructed, a metaphor for giving birth. As in many other Cronenberg films such as *The Fly*, *Crash* and *Videodrome*, the narrative surreptitiously exposes and constructs female desire and sexuality by referring to their instinctive nature, undermining their subjectivity. This dangerous desire

and sexuality, as in the tradition of the femme fatale, are a male protagonist's perdition that will suck him into the spiralling paranoia landscaped in noir nightmare.

Ted: We are both stumbling around together in this unformed world, whose rules and objectives are largely unknown, seemingly indecipherable or even possibly nonexistent, always on the verge of being killed by forces that we don't understand.

Allegra: That sounds like my game, all right.

Ted's (Jude Law) observation likens virtual reality to a female body and sexuality in noir tradition: mysterious and exudes the kind of threat and ambivalence that both seduce and entangle the male protagonist. As in *Existenz*, virtual reality takes precedence over the real world, fragmenting the essence of the self as it is eventually absorbed by technology. Allegra's desire, as literally manifested in the world within the game called *Existenz*, is synonymous with the desire of the femme fatale in classical noir texts—duplicitous, dangerous, and fatal. And there is no way out of its fatality, as many noir protagonists in classical noir texts finally find out, and are doomed, as it is too late to do anything. The virtual reality in *Existenz* is the technological manifestation of this fatalistic female desire, trapping the characters and audience alike. As a result, it is impossible to discern which reality is the real one:

Ted: It's none of your business who sent us here! We are here and that is all that matters ... God, what happened! I didn't mean to say that.

Allegra: It's your character who said it. It's kind of a schizophrenic feeling, isn't it?

But which reality one is in does not really matter since once one is enticed by it one is already doomed. Ted's allowing his body to eventually be penetrated defies his previous claim that 'I have this phobia about having my body penetrated'. This penetration suggests that the game is a threat to his masculinity, and him succumbing to it can be fatal, reflecting that his subjectivity is being usurped by the very technology that he is involved in. He survives the ordeal due to the fact that he has feminised his body and desire, harmonizing with that of Allegra.

For that reason, virtual reality as a metaphor maps out the journey in the Oedipal paradigm, a transient stage before venturing into the Symbolic Order. Virtual reality is then used by the authors and directors to construct a repudiated figure, using the female characters as the means of achieving this motif. In Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Case's journey in the Oedipal stage

is to assist Molly and the artificial intelligences, *Neuromancer* and *Wintermute*. His identification with these characters takes him into the ‘consensual hallucination’, enabling him to submerge himself within the boundary that represents the female self, identifying himself with the ‘mother’. In the matrix, the identification with the ‘mother’ puts Case’s masculinity at stake, intensified by his dissolving self. Originating from the latin word *mater*, matrix can mean both mother and womb, which in Lacanian terms extends ‘the thrill of metaphoric escape into the comforting security of our mother’s womb’.<sup>165</sup> The happy ending in which he is united with Molly reaffirms his masculinity and heterosexuality. In the Oedipal paradigm, the mother has to be repudiated so that the male child can gain a more healthy relationship with the father, and to embrace the law of the father. The mother is therefore seen as a duplicitous figure—powerful, and destructive—like a bird of prey. Carol McGuirk aptly observes:

Gibson’s female characters often use high technology to create a new image or an alternative self (the lens implants of Molly Millions and Rikki Wildside; the AI afterlife that Marie-France Tessier-Ashpool fashions for herself). Gibson’s men often use technology to recover parts of a lost self: Case’s psychological dependence on union with the matrix in *Neuromancer*; Automatic Jack’s myoelectric arm in “Burning Chrome”.<sup>166</sup>

McGuirk’s juxtaposition is illuminating as it underlines the very binary that cyberpunk has been purportedly trying to eliminate between male and female. By associating women with ‘a new image’, ‘an alternative self’, the ‘AI afterlife’, and ‘the lens implant’, McGuirk evokes the image of a fabricated female self often associated with the dangerous, ghostly, false, cunning, domineering and deceitful mother who preys on her son. On the other hand, the images associated with Case and Jack are of phallic significance, reinstating their masculinities. Castrated in virtual reality, these male characters are in dire need of reinvigoration.

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<sup>165</sup> Claudia Springer, ‘The Pleasure of the Interface’, in Jenny Wolmark, ed., *Cybersexualities*, 1999, p.37

<sup>166</sup> ‘The “New” Romancer: Science Fiction Innovators from Gernsback to Gibson’, in *Fiction 2000*, George Slusser and Tom Shippey, eds., 1992, p.113

### ***Mindplayers* and *Strange Days*: Is It The Same Old Story?**

In the fatalistic universe of film noir, personal choices (however limited by hazardous circumstances) are all that matter. Disoriented by an ever-changing present, fleeing from a terrifying memory or dreading what may come in the onrushing future, a man has no foothold beyond his freedom to make decisions, judgements that are true or unfaithful to his beliefs.<sup>167</sup>

Bob Stephens' idea about personal choices helps to conceptualise a noir protagonist's existential dilemma and survival either in a morally collapsed world, on a dark mean street, or in the underbelly of criminal society. In neo-noir texts, personal choices raise the alarming need for immediacy in actions, foregrounding the issue of individual autonomy and agency often fragmented in postmodern narrative. Morally, spatially and temporally transgressive, neo-noir texts recognize the fatalism experienced by the protagonists due to the mobility of these elements. This fatalism is exacerbated in the texts that deal with the technology of virtual reality, where space and time are crushed into one another until they reach the point of no return. Bob Stephens' observation on the predicament of the male protagonists in (classical) film noir also directly points to a lack of critical interest in the transgressive female characters, especially the ones appearing in female-authored texts.

For that reason, I will be looking at two female-authored texts to see how virtual reality is used to represent views on technology and the way the female characters are presented within that technology. Pat Cadigan's *Mindplayers* and Kathryn Bigelow's *Strange Days*<sup>168</sup> deal with the use of virtual reality in a totally different context to that of male authors', and it is appropriated to suit their purposes as females. My own view is that the texts represent the two extreme ways in which the two female authors deal with the ambivalence of cyberpunk, particularly in terms of its representation of the central female characters' attitude towards virtual reality. Whereas Bigelow handles *Strange Days* in a manner that is similar to that of many male directors, that is, by focusing on the 'egalitarian toughness' of a male dominated world, Cadigan's *Mindplayers* concentrates on virtual reality at a very personal level, equipping her female character not with physical strength to deal with violence, but the ordinariness that, observed Joan Gordon, 'represents no female principle, just a human

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<sup>167</sup> Bob Stephens, "'Out of the Past': Timeless Noir", [www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/e/a/1997/09/05/WEEKEND12865.dtl](http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/e/a/1997/09/05/WEEKEND12865.dtl), 07/04/03

<sup>168</sup> The screenplay of *Strange Days* was written by James Cameron and Jay Cocks. The first is Bigelow's erstwhile husband.

coping mechanism'.<sup>169</sup> Bigelow's physically strong female character is evidence of a feminist agenda that according to Martin Priestman, 'has been to challenge repressive gender stereo-typing by putting a woman into a role usually thought as archetypically masculine, and showing her succeeding against the odds'.<sup>170</sup> On the contrary, Cadigan's hardboiled female character is reminiscent of a hardboiled male protagonist whose deadpan attitude also ironically reveals his vulnerability. Cadigan's Allie in *Mindplayers* is evidence of a post-feminist view of addressing 'female weaknesses as human'.<sup>171</sup> Though they may have different ways of representing the female characters, both texts reveal a significant similarity especially in terms of their attitude towards virtual reality itself.

Virtual reality in *Strange Days* is not only an extension of the real world, but it is also a provocative detailing of events in the near future world of urban nightmare reminiscent of the mean streets of classical noir. Bigelow's noir world is chaotic at both levels—personal and public—and its fusion mirrors the blurring of privacy and publicity. *Strange Days* uses virtual reality to deliberately blur this binary opposition, provoking an anxiety that is related to technological intervention into someone's private experience through a gadget called SQUID (an acronym for Superconducting Quantum Interference Device), which records full sensory personal experiences straight from the 'cerebral cortex'. Bigelow captures this visceral experience with jarring camera movements, resulting in a sleazy visual narrative that treads a very fine line between parody and extrapolation, reflecting the film's critical view towards the technology of virtual reality. This attitude finds its apt expression in one of the most disturbing scenes of the film in which Iris (Brigitte Bako) is forced to watch her own murder. The radical shift of point of view from the perpetrator to the victim destabilises the narcissism and voyeurism often associated with what Laura Mulvey calls 'visual pleasure', calling into question the nature of spectatorship with regard to possible pleasures created by virtual reality. Exemplifying one of the major treatments of female characters in noir films, i.e., as victims, the shift in point of view highlights Bigelow's effort at reworking the genre's conventions. Bigelow, moreover, represents this structured anxiety by producing images that challenge the viewers' (including Nero's) sense of stability, and continues with the bombardment of similar images to create a nauseating and

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<sup>169</sup> Joan Gordon, 'Yin and Yang Duke It Out', in McCaffrey, ed., *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham and London: Duke U.P., 1991, p.199)

<sup>170</sup> in *Crime Fiction from Poe to the Present*, 1998, p.56

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*



gruesome experience. This she manages, breaching the boundary of privacy and publicity, by creating a more intimate viewing proximity, creating a sense of disgust at the act of watching itself, rather than at the murdered female body. In my view, Bigelow's main intention is for the audience to be forcefully drawn by this proximity to carefully think about their position, as their willingness to infiltrate the private will make an extraction from the whole incident more impossible, leading them to feel complicit in the murder itself.

Bigelow is consistent in reminding the characters and audience alike of the difference between virtual reality and the real world. *Strange Days* relies heavily on this distinction to create an appropriate distance that is needed to ponder its prominent thematic concern, that is, that the sharing of one's personal reality will only be made possible by one's willingness to let go one's own. Csicsery-Ronay opines that 'the distance required for reflection is squeezed out as the world implodes; when hallucinations and reality collapse into each other, there is no place from which to reflect'.<sup>172</sup> The movement inward is analogous to the spiralling paranoia caused by the level of intimacy in the visual detailing of events that makes the viewer feel complicit, if no distance is allowed. Instead, for Bigelow, granting audiences the distance at which they have the vantage point means that they are therefore constantly reminded of this by the characters, as exemplified when Mace (Angela Bassett) tells Lenny Nero (Ralph Fiennes):

This is your life, right here, right now! It's real time, you hear me? Real Time! Time to get real, not playback. You understand me!

This effect is important in order for *Strange Days* to work as a cautionary tale at a level above the usual narrative of a murder mystery. When audiences are constantly reminded of their act of watching, and feeling complicit with the act of, for example killing itself, they become unwilling witnesses, distancing and disorienting them from the voyeuristic pleasure of the female body. By the same token, having made the audience complicit with the narrative while simultaneously making them aware of the difference between the two realities, the narrative calls into question what is private and what is not, focusing and relying on the camera's ability to provide a voyeuristic view of the first only to be negated at the end.

*Strange Days* uses the fusion of privacy and publicity, which is made possible by virtual reality to challenge the concept of a coherent self, that

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<sup>172</sup> 'Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism', p.190

is, a conception that regularly occurs in the exegesis of the theorization of gender oppression. In the post-industrialised world where everything including the body and mind is 'commodifiable' for public consumption, changing human meaning and subjectivity along the way, the characters' agency and autonomy are at stake. Donna Haraway theorizes that:

For Westerners, it is a central consequence of concepts of gender difference that a person may be turned by another person into an object and robbed of her or his status as subject. The proper state for a Western person is to have ownership of the self, to have and hold a core identity as if it were a possession. That possession may be made from various raw materials over time, that is, it may be a cultural production, or one may be born with it. Gender identity is such a possession. Not to have property in the self is not to be a subject, and so not to have agency.<sup>173</sup>

When Lenny offers a male client a selection of someone's memories, he also offers him someone's reality, regardless of gender, cultural or sexual orientation. The sharing of someone else's memory or reality poses two important questions: what happens to the subject whose memory or reality is traded? And what happens to one's self when sharing another person's reality or memory? The answer to the first question alludes to the dissolution of the self. On the other hand, the answer to the second question refers to the multiplication of the self. Both, nevertheless, refer to the posthuman condition that produces what Bruce Sterling calls 'hopeful monsters'.<sup>174</sup> Either dissolved or multiplied or both, the humanist self is deconstructed or constructed by technology to the extent that it has lost its autonomy and agency. In Lenny's case, though he sells people's memories or realities, he is addicted to his own 'recorded' memories, a drug-like substance that he regularly uses to escape from the 'real' world where he is a broken-hearted man. We can see that in the virtual world that he is addicted to, a recorded image of his ex-girlfriend, Faith (Juliette Lewis), displays a certain form of sexual submission that reinserts and reinforces Nero's masculinity. What this full sensory recording does is to reveal his inability or failure to feel and recall his own experiences, relying on technology to reinstate his ability as a human who can 'remember', but memories made tangible deny him a monolithic linear history of his body and life. Like his fragmented memory, his inability to control his real

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<sup>173</sup> *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 1991, p.135

<sup>174</sup> in Veronica Hollinger, 'Cybernetic Deconstructions: Cyberpunk and Postmodernism', p.206

world alludes to the postmodern subjectivity in which a fragmented subject loses his/her autonomy and agency.

Bigelow overtly models her two central female characters, Faith and Mace, after the two types of female characters in film noir. Her reliance on tradition and convention alludes to the postmodern situation of concentrating on the surface<sup>175</sup> rather than depth. This dichotomy is inherent in this film especially when referring to both central female characters. As argued by Hollinger, 'surface is content',<sup>176</sup> an anxiety inherent in postmodern conditions. Faith evokes this postmodern concern for surface: her history is told from Lenny's point of view, signifying her as a body with no real history. The fact that her image on the screen is a duplicated image from an already duplicated source consigns her character to a multiple fragmented self. The narrative trajectory, furthermore, relies heavily on Lenny's obsession with her image, signifying his fragmented self and its affection for the surface. If in the virtual world Nero still 'possesses' her, in the 'real' world, she steadfastly and incessantly tells him that 'IT'S OVER!' between them. Her very condition as a fragmented self that inhabits the surface underlines the anxiety of a cyberpunk text. On the contrary, Mace's character is a three-dimensional character with memory (history), life (present) and a plan (future). Mace's history is told from her own point of view, granting her an identity; hence a unified self. Perhaps for that reason, she refuses to take part in Lenny's SQUID. She also exhibits physical and psychological strength, demonstrating and exerting her autonomy in the chaotic world.

The victimization of female characters in the noir tradition is paradoxical, often alluding to the idea that active female sexuality (usually embodied in femme fatale figures) challenges the male's passivity, a recurring theme that Bigelow tries to foreground here. Nero is reminiscent of the male protagonists of the classical noir films, like Jeff Bailey in *Out of the Past*,<sup>177</sup> whose obsession with the femme fatale culminated in his fatal ending. Frank Krutnik in his analysis of masculinity in *Out of the Past* concludes that:

This is not so much the story of a transgressive femme fatale as it is that of a 'tough' hero who causes his own destruction through a willing abnegation of his 'responsibilities as a man' [...] What is important here,

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<sup>175</sup> In an interview with Larry McCaffery, William Gibson acknowledges his fascination with Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* and the possibility of Hammett's turning him on 'to the idea of *superficiality*' (*Storming the Reality Studio*, p.269)

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p.213

<sup>177</sup> Dir. Jacques Turner, 1947

then, is not so much Kathie, and her status as a machinating woman, but rather the problems engendered by the conflict between Jeff's desire to escape his responsibilities and the power of patriarchal law which decrees the acceptable positioning of the identity and desire of the masculine subject.<sup>178</sup>

Krutnik's observation is relevant to how Nero is represented by Bigelow. His obsession with his ex-girlfriend, Faith, signals his willingness to abnegate his responsibilities as a man. Therefore, although Faith is seen as the object of his desire, or the victim of his voyeuristic desire, she also signifies his lack of control. Nero's lack of control is his existential dilemma that develops into his main motivation to explore the virtual world where he can still have what he cannot get in the real world. When these factors turn into an obsession, they overtly mark his 'masochistic fantasy'<sup>179</sup> towards Faith, a noir cliché that is used by Bigelow to empower Faith, and subsequently negate Nero's masculinity. In one of his encounters with Faith, she concedes that 'I like the feeling of someone watching me', which subjugates Nero's virility by challenging even his gaze at her. Bigelow's main aim is to represent masculinity as problematic and fragmented, the antithesis of the unified masculinity often represented by a tough talking noir protagonist like Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*.

Faith's association with the surface, a postmodern condition that can be empowering to her characterisation, along with Mace's ability to demonstrate her autonomy and agency, represent not only *Strange Days*' ambivalent attitude towards technology but also Bigelow's ability to appropriate the genre. By juxtaposing the humanist with the anti-humanist's view of the subject, Bigelow manages to highlight the adverse effect of technological intervention into one's self, culminating in the fragmentation of self; hence, the loss of autonomy and agency. However, Bigelow's reliance on pastiche and on the postmodernist tradition of inverting conventional noir representations of the female characters succeeds in liberating them from both the virtual world and the genre itself. The final scene where Lenny and Mace end up kissing each other in the crowd is a typical Hollywood happy ending, signifying her role as a redeeming figure for the picaresque male protagonist. Perhaps Bigelow's commercial interests held her back a little, but this is nothing new as this can also be found in many classical noir films that finish with such a 'soft ending'.

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<sup>178</sup> *In a Lonely Street*, 1997, p.106

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p.109

The existential dilemma faced by Allie, the female protagonist in Cadigan's *Mindplayers*,<sup>180</sup> is related particularly to her 'unique brain organization' (p. 12). Importantly, Cadigan establishes this relationship in the early part of the novel to prefigure the sense of noir determinism at play, the organic forms of visual imagery that she employs in the virtual world, i.e., the world inside Allie's mind, and the postmodern irony that is lurking at every corner of the narrative. Allie realizes that the event that started with her thrill seeking attitude ('I did it on a dare' (p.3)) turns into an intractable 'Mistake Time' (ibid.), signalling her journey into a more profound level of her being. Cadigan structures the sequence of events in such an order so as to found Allie's characterization in a tradition similar to that of an alienated noir protagonist whose life is a struggle between making sense of his surroundings and deciding what is morally truthful to himself. Cadigan, on the contrary, reverses the fate of her protagonist by de-alienating her from her surroundings, allowing her to function in the realm that she has become increasingly familiar with.

Allie's ability to venture beyond the limitation of her skin into the realm of her psychic, a virtual world created and shared with her clients, marks the ultimate interface between her body and the machine that makes the journey possible. To a certain extent, the connection made in the virtual world means that her mind is also exposed to other people, and this exposure of her mental space ostensibly signals her increasingly vulnerable condition, depriving her of her agency and autonomy. Allie's mind is portrayed as a data space where social interactions and activities take place, functioning as plot devices that, as Carol McGuirk observes, 'magnify character vulnerability by increasing the possibility—and consequences—of serious psychic damage'.<sup>181</sup> At the beginning of the novel, her loss of autonomy, therefore, can be seen as the result as well as the reflection of the social malaise that she is in, where she loses her control over her own mind due to her initial thrill-seeking attitude and reluctance to cooperate with the agencies of law enforcement, the Brain Police. However, as Scott Bukatman notes, 'to become substantial, one must become insubstantial: one must enter the cyberspatial realm',<sup>182</sup> a postmodern irony that Cadigan employs in earnest to liberate her female protagonist without making her larger-than-life as a character. Allie's reaction to 'mindplaying' is indeed a typical human reaction, if one were put under similar circumstances. And like any of us, Allie's major concern

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<sup>180</sup> This is Cadigan's debut novel.

<sup>181</sup> 'The New Romancer', in George Slusser and Tom Shippey, *Fiction 2000*, p.119

<sup>182</sup> *Terminal Identity*, p.195

is her own privacy and safety, a recurring theme that dominates Allie's refusal to have her reality affixed.

The novel foregrounds the theme of mental invasion to highlight Cadigan's concern with the blurring of privacy and publicity in Allie's life. The theme of mental invasion, one of the most prominent themes in cyberpunk narrative, is dominant in this novel since its female protagonist 'lead[s] an awfully mental life' (p.11), locating the narrative, most of the time, in her mind. For that reason, Cadigan underlines the issue of mental invasion with the right to privacy for her protagonist, a punk attitude to reflect Allie's anti-establishment mentality, that is, her refusal to let her brain to be accessed by the Brain Police or affixed by Segretti, her attorney. 'Okay. But I am not willing. I just want to make sure *you're* clear on *that*', evinces the fact that in principle, she refuses any invasion into her mind. Allie's deadpan attitude does not stem from her refusal to have technology intervening into her mind, as she is already a user of such technology, but the fear that she has 'of going naked mind to naked mind with someone' (p.17) in a place that she regularly refers to as 'home', a private space. This fear generates a further conflict of interest between herself and the authority, which she finally has to succumb to: 'The choice is really no choice at all' (p.39), but with consistent resistance: 'mandatory reality affixing still went against my grain as much as it had the day Paolo Segretti had told me I had to go through it with him' (p.197). This is emblematic of a noir determinism that typically sends a noir protagonist into a world that gradually engulfs him or her. Indeed, throughout the story, Allie is aware of the degree of openness of her personal life, thinking at one point that, 'I had no doubt the old fox could have wormed his way into my personal data; most employers can' (p. 229). My view is that Allie's experience with technology that enables her to be a mindplayer echoes Cadigan's personal view on technology, when in an interview, she reasons that 'I believe that any tool is only as good as the people that use it',<sup>183</sup> putting the responsibility on the human and not the technology that it embraced.

Cadigan's view of technology, hence, is expressed through how she portrays Allie's refusal to yield to any sign of vulnerability, permitting her to feel 'alert but calm, no longer burdened with a physical body' (p.19), comfortably ensconced in the virtual world. The strategy of harmonizing Allie with the realm of virtual reality is used to reinforce and privilege her autonomy. By locating the events of the novel mostly in the realm of the

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<sup>183</sup> Miss M, 'An Interview with Pat Cadigan', [www.t0.or.at/pcadigan/intervw.htm](http://www.t0.or.at/pcadigan/intervw.htm) (07/04/03)

virtual, Cadigan allows Allie to find a new form of liberation and empowerment. Allie is not overwhelmed by the experience in the inside of her head, i.e., her psyche, as for her, her newly found self has been a positive and enriching revelation and discovery. She concedes that the experience creates a surface tension that strengthens her

*Allieness*, the container that was me and the me that the container contained, and which materials went into the container and which into the thing contained—it was the most powerful sense of identity I'd ever had in my life. (p.20)

The newly constructed identity in the virtual reality formed in her head, consequently, signals her reclamation of her lost of autonomy and agency. The '*Allieness*' is the visual manifestation of the essence of her being, showing her reconciliation with her own self and the technology that she inhabits and embraces, which is important for her to survive the uncertain and fragmented world.

Suggesting female harmony with nature, the metaphors of virtual reality in the novel are organic and archaic. The visual atmosphere employed by Cadigan is not definitively noir, but is an amalgamation of noir atmospheric darkness and science fiction's wonder: 'The inside of the headhole was dark and pleasant smelling, like a field after a light spring rain' (p. 19), setting up a mood of adventure, inviting, mysterious and potentially fatal. Her subsequent exposure inside her mind allows her to see a

Perfectly ordinary blue sky (maybe with a hint of the depth of that midnight blue behind the light day color); the field went as far as I could see in front of me. Behind me was more countryside but it was different, unbounded, grass grown up freely, the land rolling, the horizon obscured by haze (p. 21).

In other words, Cadigan celebrates nature, indicating her apotheosis of women's association with nature. Since the association with nature is considered Allie's 'point of departure' (ibid.), her response to events in virtual reality significantly shows how comfortable she is to the extent that she 'behaved as though I were in real reality' (p.57). When she grows more familiar with her mental surroundings, she conjures up the image of a cathedral, an image that is familiar and sacrosanct, signifying her journey into a more private part of her mind, a more pure essence of herself. Her encounter with the portrait of her great-grandmother is a symbolic milestone of her journey home, into her motherland, which in

Freudian terms represents our 'earliest *heim*'.<sup>184</sup> These symbolic representations of her inner thought, along with her meeting with the 'Alerted Snake of Consequence'—a sign that she has to be alert in her mental state—are indications of the organic nature of her virtual reality. The sense of familiarity that she develops towards her virtual reality also helps to de-alienate her from her surroundings, producing a sense of community that assists her in understanding her capability. Unlike the classical noir protagonist, Allie is a protagonist for whom the sense of community is important, as organically represented by a pool, a mental landscape jointly constructed by a number of minds, where her interactivity with others regularly takes place.

However, the effect of technology is quick to catch up with Allie, dissolving her humanist subjectivity whilst creating a new posthuman subjectivity. After the first session with her attorney she is left with an aftertaste. Then, when she goes through the process of dream-feeding, she develops a phobia related to space, or claustrophobia. Left with no choice, she has been warned that 'once you have taken the trip, you're never the same again (p.39). However, she is also quick to take charge of her own life: 'If I have to dream my life away, I might as well be in the pilot's seat. Or at least the navigator's' (p.91). The desire to be in charge can be taken as her willingness to leave her humanist subjectivity, and allows her fragmented self to form a new subjectivity of multiple selves within the realities that she inhabits. In other words, Allie's desire to be in charge constitutes her agency and autonomy, yet it also gives her independence a veneer of desperation. She realizes that 'I had a past but everything in it seemed to be receding from me faster than the speed of light' (p.109). Her realization points to her body politics, to the need to recognize the history of her body, regardless of whether it is important anymore or not. This is an element of postmodern pastiche that requires the association with the past and future to represent the present conflict.

The ending of the novel highlights both its attitude towards technology that Cadigan tries to present, and also Allie's status as a noir protagonist. While treating one of her clients, Allie is tricked into his reality through his trying to merge with her. It is her subjectivity that is dissolved, resulting in the destruction of the coherence of her mind. As Glass-Skull announces: 'You're transformed. You're polluted, stained, dyed, altered. And you will never be the same' (p. 266). Ultimately, she experiences a total fragmentation whereby, as she herself regretfully declares, 'I didn't

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<sup>184</sup> Claudia Springer, 'Pleasure of the Interface', in Jenny Wolmark, ed., *Cybersexualities*, 1999, p.37



know anything at all, outer, inner, or in between', bringing her into a moment of 'post-mindplay depression' (p.275). George Gella associates "the moment of depression" of "the hardboiled detective" with his alienation and essential loneliness',<sup>185</sup> a natural fate of a romantic hero's doomed solitude. Yet, Allie also realizes the importance of recognizing 'The Alerted Snakes of Consequence', the fact that she has become 'the accumulation of everything [she has] done' (p.268), a postmodern hybrid self. What this gloomy end represents is reminiscent of the ubiquitous ending in many noir texts. Martin Priestman asserts that:

This closing sense of having become sullied by an alien set of values is not at all that different from Marlowe's reflection at the end of *The Big Sleep*: 'Me, I was part of the nastiness now'.<sup>186</sup>

And in the tradition of a noir protagonist, her experience is cathartic, reconciling her own moral code with her existence: 'You are not the Allie you were. But you *are* Allie just the same' (p.275).

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<sup>185</sup> 'The Hardboiled Detective Novel', in Robin W. Winks, ed., *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 1988, p.110

<sup>186</sup> *Crime Fiction From Poe to the Present*, 1998, p.58

## CONCLUSION

As I have claimed in the introduction, my book centres on the representation of the “other” female characters in neo-noir films and noir crime novels. The word “other” is used both to exclude and include the femme fatale figure who is an iconic figure in the noir genre. While the inclusiveness and exclusiveness of my project with regard to these female characters signals the eclecticism of my book, it also presents a challenge in concatenating my findings. Therefore, in this chapter, I would like to draw together the findings of my analysis—providing brief answers and explanations to my enquiries—by looking at my study chapter by chapter.

In the introductory chapter I proposed that I was interested in looking at the conventional shift from noir to neo-noir with regard to the representation of the female characters. To a certain extent, this proposal was crucial as a strategy to circumvent the “what seems to be a never ending” debate about the status of noir as a genre. Through my readings and observations, I tended to agree with the treatment of noir as a genre, which means, I have treated neo-noir as its natural expansion or subversion, or sub-genre. I briefly traced the development of the noir genre to the neo-noir sub-genre to establish the link between a femme fatale figure and other female characters; this was important in giving meaning to their connection and representation. Having argued that the significance of my analysis lies in the lack of a combined study of female characters in both literary and cinematic noir, I also pointed out that my study took the neo-noir genre outside classical noir’s American context. This was made possible not only because of the influence of postmodernist culture’s interest in pastiche and parody, but also because of neo-noir’s hybridity, which imparts to it characteristics beyond a specific generic boundary.

I organised my chapters into two thematic focuses: one, narratives and space; two, the female self/body.

Chapter one discussed serial killer narratives and the dynamic of space with regard to the representation of the female characters. To understand their connection, I used the conceptions of privacy and publicity as the theoretical framework for my analysis. In my analysis, I have argued that in the serial killer narrative, the fascination with what Mark Seltzer called the “wound culture” was attributable to the origin of male fear of the

vagina. I also suggested that the representations of women as embodiments in the classical noir texts, were traceable in the gendering of the psycho-sociological divisions that linked women with privacy and men with publicity, which illuminated the ideological pressure that, in the serial killer narratives, consigned these female characters to the victims' position. This led me to discover that the fascination with a wounded female body had become metonymically relevant, especially in identifying with the crime scene itself, a location where private desire and public interest collided and a place where gender divisions were dissolved. Moreover, I used two female characters in two classical noir films, Phyllis (*Double Indemnity*) and Kathie (*Out of the Past*), as examples to show how the sexuality and desire of the femmes fatales was used to eroticise the crime and the crime scene. Therefore, as serial killing was also about invading one's private space, the eroticisation of the crime scene through its link with female sexuality and desire could be seen as counter-reactive to feminist struggle to bring privacy into publicity. My argument lies in the idea that the fetishism associated with the serial killer, the wounded body, and seriality was a patriarchal strategy of undermining the liberal feminist's slogan "The Personal is Political". I have also suggested that the noir conventions, with their unsettling and disturbing endings, managed to blur the binary opposite of victim and perpetrator.

In answering the question regarding the liberatory possibility of the female characters, I decided to look at several issues with regard to the serial killer narratives and their spatial construction of the representation of the female character. I demonstrated how the masculine ideology surrounding a serial killer figure and his female victims, as propagated by the myth surrounding Jack the Ripper, was in dialogue with the evisceration of the female characters. I argued that with the shift in the epistemological status of the serial killer, his figuration as a metaphor for "something else" had mutated into a metonym for social trauma or cultural wound, which further reinforced the female/victim equation. Then, I suggested, through my analysis of the literary and cinematic noir serial killer texts, that the literary and cinematic constructions of the serial killer subvert the myth surrounding a serial killer by portraying him as more human than monstrous. This subversion also highlighted the backlash against female liberation and a flagrant effort to redress the boundaries set by patriarchy, hence reclaiming private and public boundaries.

To show how noir conventions subverted and appropriated the private/public schism, and how these affected the construction of the female characters, I further structured my study of the female characters in serial killer narratives by dividing the detailed analysis of the texts into

three sections. Section one focused on the male serial killer and female investigator. The female investigator, I argued, was a transgressive figure, not only because she mirrored a generic subversion, but also because she generated the tensions in the ideological struggles between her and the male serial killer, in her effort to save female victims, and also she represented the clash in the symbolic functions of a woman as a strong investigative female figure and as a victim. Through my analysis, I found out that unlike non-noir serial killer narratives that used space to differentiate the victim from the perpetrator, the noir serial killer narratives refuse to accept this logic by creating a labyrinthine plot that blurred the binary opposition of the hunter and the hunted. I discussed how, for example, in the novel and film *The Silence of the Lambs*, two forms of doubling that took place between Starling and Lecter (neo-romance structure), and Starling and Jame Gumb (*doppelganger*) created a sense of complicity in the audience and the female investigator alike. Meanwhile, in my analysis of the film *Copycat*, I discovered that the female character's use of humour allowed her to defend herself against her subjugation by the narrative. *Copycat*, I have argued, interlocked the binary opposite of privacy and publicity to establish the female bond between its two female protagonists. Section two analyses female serial killers in the novels *Dirty Weekend* and *The Eye of the Beholder*. In my analysis, I demonstrated that the threat posed by these female serial killers lies not only in their mobility, which was a sign of transgression that enabled them to manipulate their space in achieving their goals, but also in their characterisation as post-feminist self-reflective humans who celebrated their "otherness". In the case of *The Eye of the Beholder*, I argued that the female serial killer's cynicism allowed her to undermine the investigator's gaze. The last section of this chapter looked at the perceptual space and victim narrative in Susanna Moore's novel *In the Cut*, and I also compared this novel with its film version. My finding, especially by comparing the different ending of the texts, revealed that the proximity between the reader and the female character was more intimate vis-à-vis the distance created by the film, allowing the female protagonist in the novel to be more sympathetic, hence progressive, than her cinematic counterpart.

Chapter three explored the debate surrounding spatial construction in revenge narratives. The perpetual struggle for the male avenger to (re)insert and (re)assert control over space, I have argued, remained a crucial defining impulse in noir revenge narrative, and this reinsertion signalled the epistemological trauma associated with femmes fatales or female avengers in general, foregrounding the characters' existential anger

at patriarchy. In doing so, I also established the link between the femme fatale figure and a female avenger, claiming that the most conspicuous link lies in the underlying ideological consciousness that structured these characters—the discursive link between the epistemology, sexuality and violence. I also argued that the focus on the female avenger’s eroticised body consequently trivialised the act of revenge itself, foregrounding the film’s meta-psychology of fulfilling the male audience’s fantasy. Additionally, I argued that the eroticisation of the female body in neo-noir texts was derivative, alluding to its [s]exploitation and erotic thriller roots that expressed patriarchal desire of fetishising a female body.

Through my analysis, I discovered that revenge becomes an expression of the female avenger’s existential dilemma that was rooted in the celebration of difference, which alluded to the failure of community and the failure of agency. I defined the failure of community as related to the competition for space among the female characters. In order to see how the failure of community was linked with the debate surrounding space, I looked at the conception of space from the gothic genre to illustrate how space in the noir tradition also presented the ideological pressure that oppressed women. I went on to argue that the difference between the failure of community in the gothic and noir tradition was that while the first reinforced masculine ideology, the latter signified an escape from patriarchal entrapment. The failure of agency, I suggested, underlined key narrative turns that saw the shift of function in the motive for taking revenge. By using the novel *Dirty Weekend* and the film *Ms. 45*, I illustrated how the shift of function in the motive for taking revenge signified the appropriation of agency by someone who had been a victim under the patriarchal value system, marking the point of reversal in noir revenge narratives. My analysis revealed that female avengers’ revenge was not simply an expression of aggressive agency; it was, in essence, a symbolic act of rewriting the feminine script. By comparing the avenging figures in the sensational, horror and exploitation genres, I argued that the female protagonists in noir revenge narratives were given a benighted dignity, which was a defining feature of a noir existential protagonist.

To study these characters in detail, I further divided this chapter into two categories—the juveniles and the wronged women. In the juvenile section, I looked at two neo-noir novels, Daniel Blythe’s *The Cut* and Jack Womack’s *Random Act of Senseless Violence*, showing how the loss of agency has resulted in the different positions that the juvenile female characters assume within the narrative, the first as a target of revenge, and the latter’s appropriation of agency facilitated her process of “becoming”, enabling her to take revenge. By comparing the juvenile female character

in a gothic text and noir text, I argued that while the first represented epistemological nervousness—and hence was regressive—the latter represented the text's epistemological uncertainty, which marked the fluidity and transgressiveness of the character's gender roles. In *Random Act of Senseless Violence*, I argued that the female protagonist's process of becoming a postmodern self was completed once she implemented her revenge. The central argument in the second section, viz., the wronged women, was that the dominant masculine ideology in classical noir was completely destabilised in neo-noir texts, not by the femme fatale but by the wronged women. To investigate the difference between the representation of women in noir and neo-noir texts, I looked at the notion of noir's romantic fatalism, arguing that while noir texts used the strategy of negation, neo-noir, on the other hand, used the strategy of appropriation. I also argued that the relationship between the femme fatale figure and the wronged women found its expression in their association with space, usually linked together by a male protagonist who eventually corrupted the sanctity of domestic space, i.e., home. By employing a postmodern critical perspective, I read the notion of home in a neo-noir text as paradoxical, alluding to its new metaphorical and metonymic dynamism, allowing it to function as a muse that reinforced its fluidity; thus creating a new myth that was useful for the wronged women.

For the second section, I built my argument around the need to reclaim the female body. This section is divided into two chapters.

In chapter four, my argument centred on the notion that the neo-noir women's fragmented subjectivity enabled them to mobilise beyond patriarchal categorisation of gender roles. To answer the fundamental question of this chapter, that is, is gender difference still relevant in neo-noir texts? I started my analysis by looking at the notions of desire and transgression to arrive at my conclusion that the female self/body in neo-noir texts was defined neither by the physical boundary of a biological female body nor by its culturally defined gender. I did this by returning to the question of gender relevancy by building up my analysis around the understanding of the structure of desire, which in Western culture was figured as feminine, as explained by psychoanalysts like Freud, Lacan and Julia Kristeva. I revisited the theorisation of the gaze and identification to illustrate how the coupling of neo-noir moods and style, and the text's postmodern structure allowed for the body to dissolve into irrelevance, and enabled the expression of the female self to prevail, hence a female character's status as a transgressor. I pointed out that it was the postmodern paradox that permitted the re-inscription of female desire to take place by foregrounding gender distinctions and by the emphasis on

liberation over dominance. Furthermore, I also employed the concept of performativity, as theorised by Judith Butler, to move beyond gender prescriptions set by the Freudian Oedipus Complex. The view that gender roles were “processual” in the theory of performativity enabled me to form a theorisation of the female transgressors who, freed from the idolisation of masculinity as the standard of normalcy, subverted gender expectations in neo-noir texts.

To chart some of the transgressive “female” characters with regard to the representation of the female body or self, this chapter was further divided into the following categories. One, the misfits, which looked at postmodern “femme fatale” figures and neo-noir’s affinity with pastiche, parody and satire to create what Kate Stables called “a creature of excess”. I argued that these neo-noir women were defined less by their presence and more by their performance, a palpable resonance of the post-feminist agenda of celebrating difference. I found, by looking at these tough female characters, that the creation of this new hybrid of female characters alluded to their new epistemological meanings that allowed them to have mixed consciousness of the world they inhabit. Two, the cross-dresser and the transsexual, which looked at “male” characters performing “female” roles to challenge not the objectification of a gazed-at subject, but the stability of the gazer itself. I argued that the stability of the gazer was challenged especially because of the fragmented nature of the object gazed at. Three, the investigator, which referred to female investigative figure. My analysis of the female investigative figures revealed that their portrayal with excessive femininity mocked the exaggerated masculinity that their male counterparts were imbued with. Lastly, this chapter looked at lesbian characters to expand the discussion of the display of the female body in excess. All of these sections used the theory of performativity to explain the liberatory possibilities that these female characters experienced, especially in allowing the texts to investigate and destabilize the notion of a hegemonic masculine gaze.

Chapter five took my analysis beyond the theory of performativity to look at the notion of female self or body by examining the debate surrounding the man/machine interface. The texts that were used in this chapter ranged from science fiction texts to future noir, which were both useful in demonstrating how the mood and conventions inherent in neo-noir texts could further complicate the binary opposition of human and machine by exacerbating their ontological uncertainty. I briefly looked at the representation of the female characters in the science fiction genre to establish the possible link they had with their female counterparts in the noir genre. I located a link in the Culture=Male equation, as suggested by

Joanna Russ, to understand their subordination within the narrative. I suggested that we looked at the alternative world, the association between women and nature, and the different attitude the science fiction genre had towards technology itself in order to understand such a portrayal of women in science fiction. I also discovered that the Women=Nature equation provided the link between the representation of women in the science fiction and noir genres, which inevitably harked back to their shared lineage in the gothic tradition. I also found out that the use of technology as an analogy for the treatment of women in the science fiction genre mirrored the existential fear men had towards women. This fear stemmed from the female characters' ability to embrace technology, which means the emphasis was on their "similarity" rather than "difference" with the male characters.

In tracing a variety of female characters available in the future noir sub-genre, I also looked at the relationship between the future noir sub-genre and postmodernism. Building on Brian McHale's theorisation of postmodernism, I argued that postmodernism as a discursive construct enabled us to establish its reference, allowing, despite its tendency to destabilise the meaning of a text, us to derive meaning from the text. I also argued that what made a film like *Twelve Monkeys* a future noir and not a science fiction proper was not just its visual and narrative style, but its organisation of what Brian McHale called the "ontological dominant" as the "principle of systematicity". In effect, postmodernism exposed the ideological instability of the text, which was the result of the competing ontological and epistemological focuses, allowing the female character to find her own voice not at the structural level, that is through role reversal, but at the ideological level, that is by mirroring—through the emphasis on sameness—the male protagonist's fragmented subjectivity.

In tracing the man/machine interface, I focused on David Cronenberg's films to illustrate how the more intimate relationship between machine and a human body in recent years reflected the contemporary body culture and politics that dissected both the body and mind of the main characters, bringing to the fore the Western dualism. This section tried to answer the question of what would happen when the human body itself undermined the traditional meaning of a human being. I argued in this section that the shifting of the scape-goated Other from the outside to the inside of a human body in the future noir sub-genre as illustrated by Cronenberg's *Crash*, which resulted in the formation of a hybrid subjectivity, required the text to ask a very different ontological question. I have suggested that future noir's inherent poetic of postmodernism not only de-constructed the traditional meaning of gender it also re-constructed the constitution of a



human as it interfaced with machine, marking future noir's tendency to use this interface as an expression of its technological determinism.

My analysis took me to another future noir territory, which was, the cyberpunk narrative. I investigated the definitional incoherence of gender to answer the principal question of this section, that is, since a cyborg as a hybrid figure represents the dissolution of gender identity, how do I define a female character? I argued that the adjectival "female" was still applicable to a cyborg figure because it was the dominant term that characterised its fragmented subjectivity. By looking at the notion of the Other, I theorised that the fragmented self in postmodernism, coupled with neo-noir convention, indicated a change of location of the Other—from the outside to the inside of a female body—that was tantamount to the "Othering" of the female self/body, creating a post-human subject instead. I also argued that the fusion between technology and a human body added fluidity to the post-human's experience, allowing it to venture into new spatial location, viz., cyberspace.

I continued my analysis by looking at post-apocalyptic women and the doppelganger narrative. In the post-apocalyptic section, the question of what would happen to the female characters after the collapse of the Law of the Father was answered by my argument that these women survived the apocalyptic world not only by being physically and mentally strong, but also with a strong sense of community and agency. In the doppelganger narrative section, I argued that one of the effects of such narrative was the fragmentation of the female subject, which according to Lee Horsley, resulted in the theme of "seeing double". Through my analysis of the film *Eve of Destruction*, I discovered that this type of narrative was effective in doubly victimising the female protagonist, whereby the death of the cyborg figure in the hand of her female inventor signified the usurpation of her subjectivity by another subject.

The subsequent sections of this chapter looked at the notion of virtual reality. I investigated the notion of virtual reality in relation to the loss of male agency or autonomy. In answering the question of the relevancy of Lee Horsley's analysis on the male characters with my investigation of the female character, I proposed that these female characters should have been situated within the context of future noir's postmodern subjectivity. I argued that the female characters' ability to access virtual reality enabled them to transcend physical and cultural boundaries, granting them more freedom of movement. I also discovered that noir anxiety concerning a female figure was carried into most cyberpunk texts via the use of virtual reality, a spatial-temporal location for the staging of the infantile fear of a woman's power. I draw a conclusion that some cyberpunk texts, like

Cronenberg's *Existenz*, were similar to the narrative in many noir texts, in the sense that it investigated female desire and sexuality. The final section of this chapter looked at two texts by a female author and director to illustrate how the two different approaches to virtual reality, with Bigelow's female character influenced by feminism, and Cadigan's female character informed by post-feminism, determined the intensity of their agencies. I argued that Bigelow's reliance on pastiche and on the postmodernist tradition of inverting conventional representations of the female characters succeeded in liberating her from the virtual world and the restriction of the generic boundary itself. Meanwhile, Cadigan's approach of constructing her female protagonist parallels the male protagonist in the noir tradition, who was engulfed with existential despair and angst, foregrounding her inability to survive in the virtual world. In this sense, Cadigan's protagonist, Allie, was closer to the definition of a classic noir protagonist than Bigelow's Mace, which was evident in Allie's becoming sullied with the noir world.



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