

4. In a few of the films noirs, for example *Pick Up On South Street* (1953), the ending suggests that the lovers are to live happily ever after. However it can be argued that the mood created and the knowledge produced by the visual style of the film negates or undercuts the apparent happiness of the ending.
5. The notion of a 'structuring absence' is developed by the editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma* in their article on 'John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*': they write:

What will be attempted here through a re-scansion of these films in a process of active reading, is to make them say what they have to say within what they leave unsaid, to reveal their constituent lacks . . . they are structuring absences, always displaced . . . the unsaid included in the said and necessary to its constitution.

(*Cahiers du Cinéma*, No. 223, 1970, translated in *Screen*, v13 n3, Autumn 1972, pp5-44 and reprinted in the *Screen Reader*, No. 1, 1978.)

Women in film noir

Janey Place

The dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction is among the oldest themes of art, literature, mythology and religion in Western culture. She is as old as Eve, and as current as today's movies, comic books and dime novels. She and her sister (or *alter ego*), the virgin, the mother, the innocent, the redeemer, form the two poles of female archetypes.

Film noir is a male fantasy, as is most of our art. Thus woman here as elsewhere is defined by her sexuality: the dark lady has access to it and the virgin does not. That men are not so deterministically delineated in their cultural and artistic portrayal is indicative of the phallogentric cultural viewpoint: women are defined *in relation to men*, and the centrality of sexuality in this definition is a key to understanding the position of women in our culture. The primary crime the 'liberated' woman is guilty of is refusing to be defined in such a way, and this refusal can be perversely seen (in art, or in life) as an attack on men's very existence. Film noir is hardly 'progressive' in these terms.

It does not present us with role models who defy their fate and triumph over it. But it does give us one of the few periods of film in which women are active, not static symbols, are intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive power, not weakness, from their sexuality.

Myth

Our popular culture functions as myth for our society: it both expresses and reproduces the ideologies necessary to the existence of the social structure. Mythology is remarkably responsive to changing needs in the society: in sex roles for example - when it was necessary for women to work in factories during World War II and then necessary to channel them back into the home after the war.*

*See the contributions to this volume by Sylvia Harvey and Pam Cook.

Thanks for practical assistance to David Bradley (UCLA) and the Stills Department at the British Film Institute. Thanks for intellectual stimulus to members of the doctoral seminars in film, UCLA (on the basis of which work this article was originally written in 1975): Ron Abramson, Jacoba Atlas, Joe McInerney, Bill Nichols, Janey Place, Bob Rosen, Eileen Rossi and Alain Silver.

✓ We can look at our historic film heroines to demonstrate these changing attitudes: the strong women of 1940s films like Katharine Hepburn and Rosalind Russell (whose strength was none the less often expressed by their willingness to stand *behind* their men in the last reel) were replaced by the sex goddesses (Marilyn Monroe), virtuous wife types (Jane Wyman), and professional virgins (Doris Day) of the 1950s as the dominant cultural heroines. This is not to assert that these were the *only* popular movie stars of their times, but by the shift in relative importance of an archetype can be observed the corresponding change in the needs of the culture which produced them all.

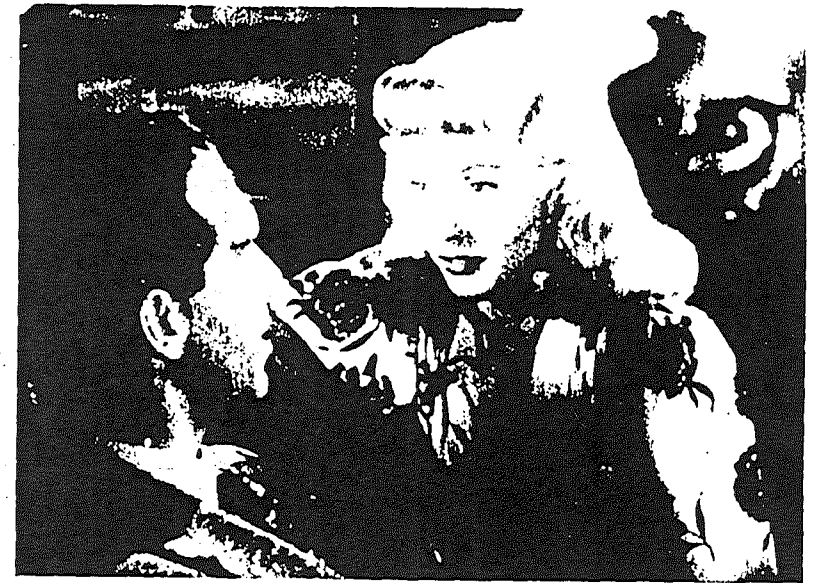
X Myth not only expresses dominant ideologies – it is also responsive to the repressed needs of the culture. It gives voice to the unacceptable archetypes as well: the myth of the sexually aggressive woman (or criminal man) first allows sensuous expression of that idea and then destroys it. And by its limited expression, ending in defeat, that unacceptable element is controlled. ✓ For example, we can see pornography as expressing unacceptable needs which are created by the culture itself, and allowed limited (degraded) expression to prevent these socially-induced tensions from erupting in a more dangerous form.

Two aspects of the portrayal of women in film noir are remarkable: first, the particular mix and versions of the more general archetypes that recur in films noirs; and second the style of that expression. Visually, film noir is fluid, sensual, extraordinarily expressive, making the sexually expressive woman, which is its dominant image of woman, extremely powerful. It is not their inevitable demise we remember but rather their strong, dangerous, and above all, exciting sexuality. In film noir we observe both the social action of myth which damns the sexual woman and all who become enmeshed by her, and a particularly potent stylistic presentation of the sexual strength of women which man fears. This operation of myth is so highly stylised and conventionalised that the final 'lesson' of the myth often fades into the background and we retain the image of the erotic, strong, unrepressed (if destructive) woman. The style of these films thus overwhelms their conventional narrative content, or interacts with it to produce a remarkably potent image of woman.

✓ This expression of the myth of man's 'right' or need to control women sexually is in contrast to the dominant version of it in 'A' films of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, which held that women are so weak and incapable they need men's 'protection' to survive. In these films, it is the woman who is portrayed benefiting from her dependence on men; in film noir, it is clear that men need to control women's sexuality in order not to be destroyed by it. The dark woman of film noir had something her innocent sister lacked: access to her own sexuality (and thus to men's) and the power that this access unlocked.

Movement and genre

Any claims for film noir's special significance in portraying fear of women (which is both ancient and newly potent, today and during the period which

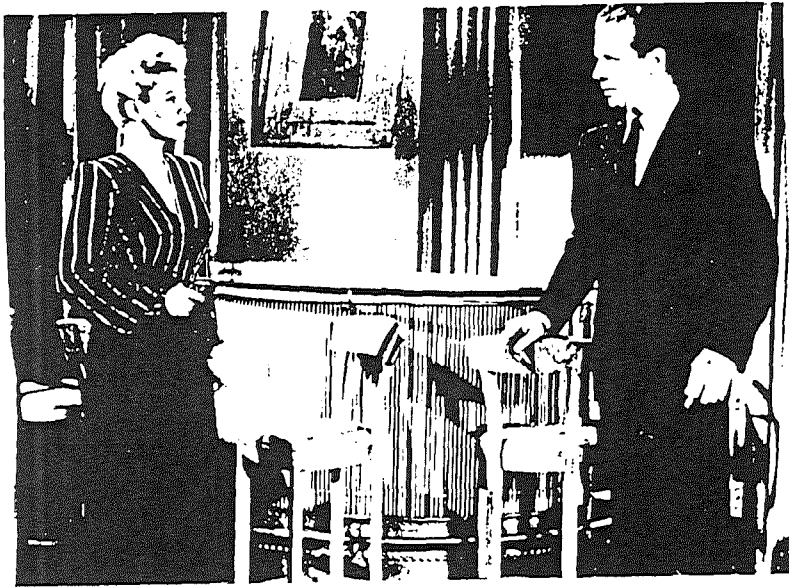


'It is not their inevitable demise we remember but rather their strong, dangerous, and above all, exciting sexuality.' Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*.

* produced film noir) must account for the particularly valid ties between film noir and the cultural obsessions of the United States during the 1940s and early 1950s. Film noir has been considered a genre, but it has more in common with previous film movements (e.g., German Expressionism, Soviet Socialist Realism, Italian Neo-Realism) and, in fact, touches every genre. For a consideration of women in film noir, this is more than a semantic dispute. Film movements occur in specific historical periods – at times of national stress and focus of energy. They express a consistency of both thematic and formal elements which makes them particularly expressive of those times, and are uniquely able to express the homogeneous hopes (Soviet Socialist Realism and Italian Neo-Realism) and fears (German Expressionism and film noir) brought to the fore by, for example, the upheaval of war.

The attitudes toward women evidenced in film noir – i.e., fear of loss of stability, identity and security – are reflective of the dominant feelings of the time.

F Genres, on the other hand, exist through time: we have had westerns from the early 1900s and in spite of rises and falls in their popularity, westerns are with us today. Genres are more characterised by their subject matter and their iconography than movements, and they can express a wide and changing



range of ideologies. The convention of the railroad in the western, for example, has changed radically from 1924 (*The Iron Horse*) when it symbolised man's hopes for progress, the uniting of the continent, and the building of a peaceful community in the West, to 1972 (Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*), when it was the economic imperative causing exploitation of the poor. Many gangster pictures now champion the criminals and westerns depict the West as corrupt and lawless instead of an innocent refuge from corrupt Eastern values and a pure environment in which to build a virtuous society.

Unlike genres, defined by objects and subjects, but like other film movements, film noir is characterised by the remarkably homogeneous visual style with which it cuts across genres: this can be seen in the film noir influence on certain westerns, melodramas (even musicals) and particularly the detective genre. This style indicates a similarly homogeneous cultural attitude, and is only possible within an isolated time period, in a particular place, in response to a national crisis of some kind.

The characteristics of film noir style, however, are not 'rules' to be enforced, nor are they necessarily the most important aspects of each film in which they appear; and no attempt to fix and categorise films will be very illuminating if it prescribes strict boundaries for a category. This leads to suppression of those elements which do not 'fit', and to exclusion of films which have strong links but equally strong differences from a particular category. Often the most exceptional examples of these films will be exceptional because of the deviations from the general 'norms' of the movement.

For example, in the classic film noir, *They Live By Night*, the strain of romanticism is far more important than that of the spider woman, who is in this film a minor character. The 'evil' Mattie who turns Bowie over to the police is even psychologically sympathetic – through love and loyalty to her imprisoned husband she is 'trading' Bowie for him. On the other hand, in as equally central a film, *Kiss Me Deadly*, no one, male or female, enjoys any of the transcending benefits of the romantic aspects of film noir. Only the victims Christina (Cloris Leachman) and Nick (the mechanic) are sympathetic: the rest are doomed only by their own greed. But after acknowledging that every film worth discussing is going to be 'exceptional' in some way and that their visual styles are going to vary, we can then go on to identify the visual and narrative themes that dominate film noir and influence countless other films made during the 1940s and early-to-middle 1950s in the United States.

* Often it is the films made from Raymond Chandler's novels, or films made by a director like Fritz Lang that have the most characteristic visual and narrative themes. Indeed, a film noir made by a strong director like Nicholas Ray may have more in common with one of his films that is not squarely in the film noir style than with other films noirs.

p.38 (top) '... the image of the erotic, strong, unrepressed (if destructive) woman.' Claire Trevor in *Farewell, My Lovely*.

(bottom): '... a particularly potent stylistic presentation of the sexual strength of women which man fears.' Jane Greer in *Out Of The Past*.



[write to darkness - shadowy - no into dark world]

The detective/thriller genre whose subjects are generally the lawless underworld, the fringes of society, crimes of passion and of greed, is particularly well-suited to the expression of film noir themes. The movement affected other genres: melodrama particularly, but there are westerns and even musicals that have distinctly noir elements. When the themes of the genre are not conducive to the noir mood, an interesting and confused mix results.

Ramrod (1947, directed by Andre de Toth) is such a western. Veronica Lake plays the typically aggressive, sexual 'dark lady' of film noir who causes the murders; Arleen Whelan is her opposite, the nurturing stay-at-home good woman. The usual stable moral environment of the typical western is lacking, and the noir influence is evident in the murky moral confusion of the male characters and in their inability to control the direction of the narrative. *Ramrod* has the open, extreme long shots characteristic of the genre, but the clarity they generally signify is undercut by the noir ambiguity.

The dominant world view expressed in film noir is paranoid, claustrophobic, hopeless, doomed, predetermined by the past, without clear moral or personal identity. Man has been inexplicably uprooted from those values, beliefs and endeavours that offer him meaning and stability, and in the almost exclusively urban landscape of film noir (in pointed contrast to the pastoral, idealised, remembered past) he is struggling for a foothold in a maze of right and wrong. He has no reference points, no moral base from which to confidently operate. Any previous framework is cut loose and morality becomes relative, both externally (the world) and internally (the character and his relations to his work, his friends, his sexuality). Values, like identities, are constantly shifting and must be redefined at every turn. Nothing - especially woman - is stable, nothing is dependable.

The visual style conveys this mood through expressive use of darkness: both real, in predominantly underlit and night-time scenes, and psychologically through shadows and claustrophobic compositions which overwhelm the character in exterior as well as interior settings. Characters (and we in the audience) are given little opportunity to orient themselves to the threatening and shifting shadowy environment. Silhouettes, shadows, mirrors and reflections (generally darker than the reflected person) indicate his lack of both unity and control. They suggest a *doppelganger*, a dark ghost, *alter ego* or distorted side of man's personality which will emerge in the dark street at night to destroy him. The sexual, dangerous woman lives in this darkness, and is the psychological expression of his own internal fears of sexuality, and his need to control and repress it.

The characters and themes of the detective genre are ideal for film noir. The moral and physical chaos is easily expressed in crime: the doomed, tortured souls seem to be at home in the violent, unstable milieu of the underworld. The dark woman is comfortable in the world of cheap dives, shadowy doorways and mysterious settings. The opposite archetype, the woman as

p.40 (top) '... expressive use of darkness.' *Double Indemnity*

(bottom): 'The dark woman is comfortable in the world of cheap dives, shadowy doorways and mysterious settings.' Googie Withers in *Night And The City*



'a contrast to the fringe world': the family home in *The Big Heat*.

redeemer, as agent of integration for the hero into his environment and into himself, is found in the innocent victim who dies for the hero (*The Big Combo*), the longsuffering and faithful lover of the loser hero (*Pick-up on South Street*, *They Live By Night*, *Night and the City*) or as a contrast to the fringe world itself (*The Big Heat*, *On Dangerous Ground*, *Out of the Past*).

The Spider Woman

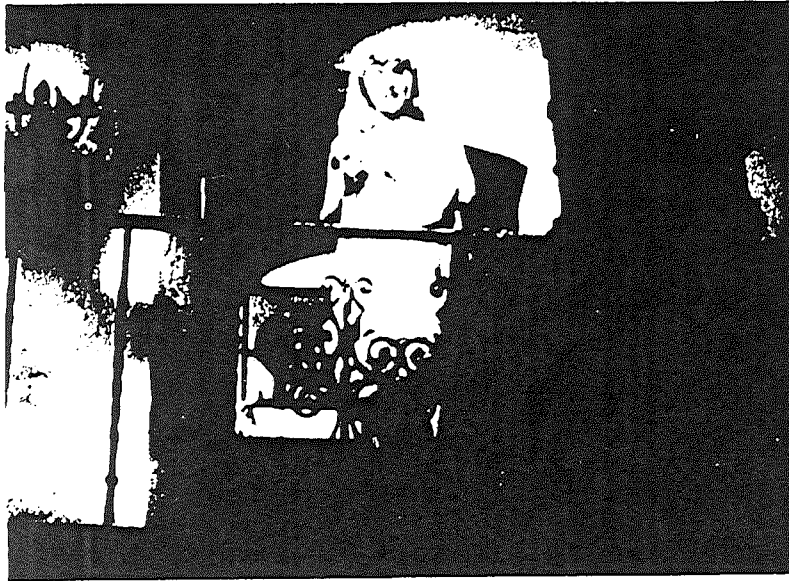
The meaning of any film image is a complex function of its visual qualities (composition, angle, lighting, screen size, camera movement, etc.), the content of the image (acting, stars, iconography, etc.), its juxtaposition to surrounding images, and the context of the narrative. Even more broadly, meaning is affected by ever-enlarging contexts, such as the conventions of a particular genre, of film generally, and of the time in which the film is made and in which it is viewed. It would be presumptuous and an impossible undertaking to attempt to establish a 'dictionary' of meanings within a system which is so bound for specific meaning to such complex elements and their interaction. Nevertheless, film noir is a movement, and as such is remarkably stylistically consistent. It thus becomes possible to identify recurrent visual motifs and their general range of meanings. Within these recurrent patterns, some drawn from conventions not specifically filmic, others specific to film generally, and still others to film noir or the detective film genre, the source and operation of the sexual woman's dangerous power is expressed visually.

The following illustrations are all comprised of these visual motifs, but the consistent meaning is not necessarily the entire meaning in any single image. A director — consciously or unconsciously — can use a convention against its usual meaning for expressive effect, as for example in *Laura*. The power to incite murder which is visually ascribed to Laura's magnificent portrait is revealed to be a product of the neuroses of the men around her, not of the power she wields. Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* is the most highly stylised 'spider woman' in all of film noir as she weaves a web to trap and finally destroy her young victim, but even as she visually dominates him, she is presented as caught by the same false value system. The huge house in which she controls camera movement and is constantly centre frame is also a hideous trap which requires from her the maintenance of the myth of her stardom: the contradiction between the reality and the myth pull her apart and finally drive her mad. The complete meaning of any single image is complex and multi-dimensional, but we can identify motifs whose meaning proceeds initially from common origins.

The source and the operation of the sexual woman's power and its danger to the male character is expressed visually both in the iconography of the image and in the visual style. The iconography is explicitly sexual, and often

Sunset Boulevard: Gloria Swanson as Norma Desmond emphasises the perverse, decaying side of film noir sexuality, with her claw-like hands, dark glasses and bizarre cigarette holder.





visual images of women in noir
phallic iconography
legs
dress
dominance in composition

explicitly violent as well: long hair (blond or dark), makeup, and jewellery. Cigarettes with their wispy trails of smoke can become cues of dark and immoral sensuality, and the iconography of violence (primarily guns) is a specific symbol (as is perhaps the cigarette) of her 'unnatural' phallic power. The *femme fatale* is characterised by her long lovely legs: our first view of the elusive Velma in *Murder My Sweet* (*Farewell My Lovely*) and of Cora in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is a significant, appreciative shot of their bare legs, a *directed glance* (so directed in the latter film that the shot begins on her calves, cuts to a shot of her whole body, cuts back to the man looking, then finally back to Lana Turner's turban-wrapped, angelic face) from the viewpoint of the male character who is to be seduced. In *Double Indemnity* Phyllis' legs (with a gold anklet significantly bearing her name) dominate Walter's and our own memory of her as the camera follows her descent down the stairs, framing only her spike heels and silk-stockinged calves. Dress – or lack of it – further defines the woman: Phyllis first is viewed in *Double Indemnity* wrapped in a towel,* and the sequinned, tight, black gown of the fantasy woman in *Woman in the Window* and the nameless 'dames' of film noir instantly convey the important information about them and their role in the film.

✓ The strength of these women is expressed in the visual style by their dominance in composition, angle, camera movement and lighting. ** They are overwhelmingly the compositional focus, generally centre frame and/or in the foreground, or pulling focus to them in the background. They control camera movement, seeming to direct the camera (and the hero's gaze, with our own) irresistibly with them as they move. (In contrast, the 'good' women of film noir and many of the seduced, passive men are predominantly static, both within the frame and in their ability to motivate camera movement and composition.) The *femme fatale* ultimately loses physical movement, influence over camera movement, and is often actually or symbolically imprisoned by composition as control over her is exerted and expressed visually: sometimes behind visual bars (*The Maltese Falcon*), sometimes happy in the protection of a lover (*The Big Sleep*), often dead (*Murder My Sweet*, *Out of the Past*, *Gun Crazy*, *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Double Indemnity*), sometimes symbolically rendered impotent (*Sunset Boulevard*). The ideological operation of the myth (the absolute necessity of controlling the strong, sexual woman) is thus achieved by first demonstrating her dangerous power and its frightening results, then destroying it.

* See opposite.

** Lighting and chiaroscuro can express the moral relationship between characters; in the still of Phyllis Dietrichson and her stepdaughter from *Double Indemnity* the women are contrasted and morally characterised; see p.107.

p.44 (bottom): 'The moral and physical chaos is easily expressed in crime.' John Garfield and Lana Turner in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. See also pp.58-9.

Often the original transgression of the dangerous lady of film noir (unlike the vamp seductress of the twenties) is ambition expressed metaphorically in her freedom of movement and visual dominance. This ambition is inappropriate to her status as a woman, and must be confined. She wants to be the owner of her own nightclub, not the owner's wife (*Night and the City*). She wants to be a star, not a recluse (*Sunset Boulevard*). She wants her husband's insurance money, not her comfortable, middle-class life (*Double Indemnity*). She wants the 'great whatsit', and ends up destroying the world (*Kiss Me Deadly*). She wants independence, and sets off a chain of murders (*Laura*). She wants to win a uninterested lover, and ends up killing him, herself, and two other people (*Angel Face*). She wants money, and succeeds only in destroying herself and the man who loves her (*Gun Crazy*, *The Killers*). She wants freedom from an oppressive relationship, and initiates events that lead to murder (*The Big Combo*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*). Whether evil (*Double Indemnity*, *Gun Crazy*, *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Night and the City*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*), or innocent (*Laura*, *The Big Combo*), her desire for freedom, wealth, or independence ignites the forces which threaten the hero.

Independence is her goal, but her nature is fundamentally and irredeemably sexual in film noir. The insistence on combining the two (aggressiveness

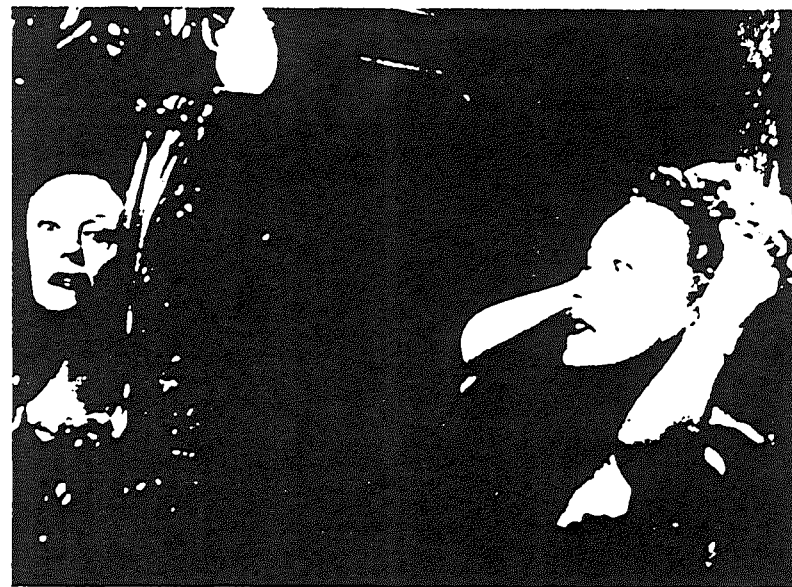
'... self-absorbed narcissism: the woman gazes at her own reflection in the mirror.' Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*. (See also p 61).



and sensuality) in a consequently dangerous woman is the central obsession of film noir, and the visual movement which indicates unacceptable activity in film noir women represents the man's own sexuality, which must be repressed and controlled if it is not to destroy him.

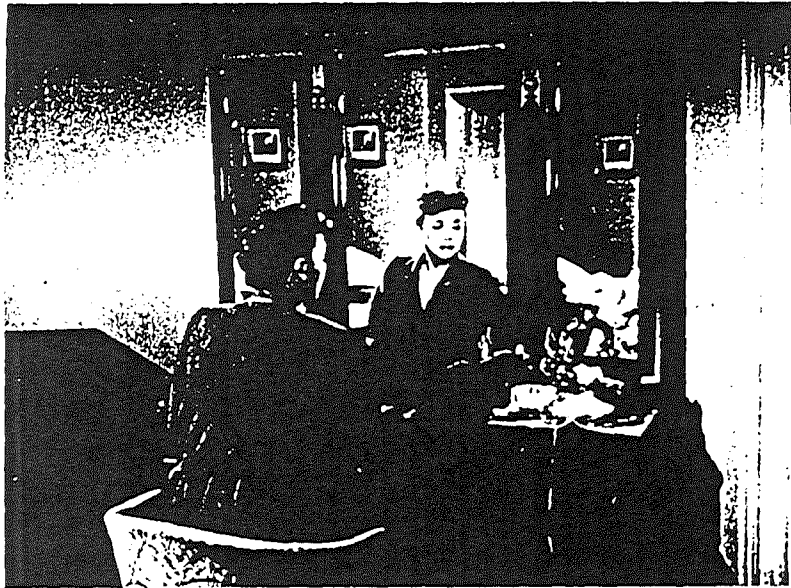
The independence which film noir women seek is often visually presented as self-absorbed narcissism: the woman gazes at her own reflection in the mirror, ignoring the man she will use to achieve her goals.* This attention to herself instead of the man is the obvious narrative transgression of Norma Desmond whose images – both reflected and pictures – dominate her mansion in *Sunset Boulevard*. She hires Joe Gillis to work on her script for her comeback, and she continues to insist he participate in her life rather than being interested in his. He dreams he is her pet chimp, and he actually becomes victim of her Salome. Joe finds an acceptable lover in Betty, the young woman who types while he dictates, smells like soap instead of perfume, dreams of his career, and is content to be behind the camera instead of in front. Self-interest over devotion to a man is often the original sin of the film noir woman and metaphor for the threat her sexuality represents to him.

Another possible meaning of the many mirror shots in film noir is to indicate women's duplicitous nature. They are visually split, thus not to be



'This attention to herself instead of the man is the obvious narrative transgressor of Norma Desmond...' *Sunset Boulevard*

* See for example the still from *Double Indemnity* where Phyllis is putting on lipstick (p 104).

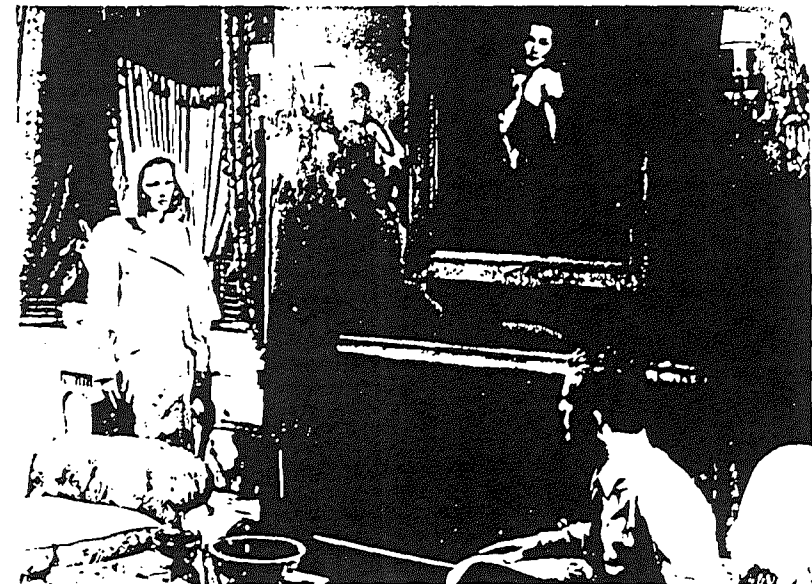


'Mirror images . . . seen in odd, uncomfortable angles help to create the mood of threat and fear.' *The Big Heat*

trusted. Further, this motif contributes to the murky confusion of film noir: nothing and no one is what it seems. Compositions in which reflections are stronger than the actual woman, or in which mirror images are seen in odd, uncomfortable angles, help to create the mood of threat and fear.

In some films the 'spider women' prove not to be so and are thus redeemed. Gilda and Laura are validated as individuals (Gilda was simply acting out the paranoid fantasies of her true love, Johnny and Laura was an innocent catalyst for men's idealisations), but the images of sexual power they exhibit are more powerful than the narrative 'explanation'. The image of Gilda we remember is the close-up introduction to her, with long hair tossed back over her head to reveal her beautiful face. Her song, 'Put the Blame on Mame, Boys' (for every natural and economic disaster to hit the world) is ironic, but stripping as she performs, the power she possesses as a sexually alive woman seems almost up to the task. Laura's beautiful, dominating portrait that haunts the characters and determines the action of the film when she is believed dead is the strongest visual image even when she reappears alive.

P.49 (top): 'The image of Gilda we remember is the close-up introduction to her . . .'
(bottom) 'Laura's beautiful, dominating portrait that haunts the characters . . .'



The framed portrait of a woman is a common motif in film noir. Sometimes it is contrasted with the living woman: in *Night and the City* Helen is a nagging, ambitious, destructive bitch, but her husband gazes longingly at her 'safe' incarnation in the framed portrait — under control, static, and powerless. Laura's portrait is compositionally dominating, inciting Mark's fantasies and giving visual expression to Waldo's idealised vision of her, but only when she unexpectedly turns up alive does further trouble ensue as she refuses to conform to the fantasies inspired by the portrait. In *Woman in the Window*, an elderly, respectable professor puts his wife and children on a train, and longing for adventure, dreams a beautiful portrait comes to life and involves him in murder. He is about to take his own life when he wakes up, cured of his longing for adventure. The lesson is obvious: only in a controlled, impotent powerless form, powerless to move or act, is the sexual woman no threat to the film noir man.

On the rare occasions that the normal world of families, children, homes and domesticity appears in film noir it is either so fragile and ideal that we anxiously anticipate its destruction (*The Big Heat*), or, like the 'good' but boring women who contrast with the exciting, sexy *femmes fatales*, it is so dull and constricting that it offers no compelling alternative to the dangerous but exciting life on the fringe.

The nurturing woman

The opposite female archetype is also found in film noir: woman as redeemer. She offers the possibility of integration for the alienated, lost man into the stable world of secure values, roles and identities. She gives love, understanding (or at least forgiveness), asks very little in return (just that he come back to her) and is generally visually passive and static. Often, in order to offer this alternative to the nightmare landscape of film noir, she herself must not be a part of it. She is then linked to the pastoral environment of open spaces, light, and safety characterised by even, flat, high-key lighting. Often this is an idealised dream of the past and she exists only in memory, but sometimes this idealisation exists as a real alternative.

Out of the Past is one of the best of the latter type: one woman (Ann) is firmly rooted in the pastoral environment, static, undemanding and rather dull, while the other (Kathie) is exciting, criminal, very active and sexy. In this film the lack of excitement offered by the safe woman is so clearly contrasted with the sensual, passionate appeal of the other that the detective's destruction is inevitable. Kathie appears out of the misty haze of late afternoon in a little Mexican town, walking towards the detective hero as he sits in a bar, waiting for this woman whose image has already been set up for him by the man she shot and ran away from, who wants her back at any cost. They later embrace against the tumultuous sea, a sudden rainstorm, and the dark rich textures created by low-key lighting.

p 51 *Out Of The Past* (top) 'one woman (Ann) is firmly rooted in the pastoral environment.' (bottom): '... the other (Kathie) is exciting, criminal, very active and sexy.'

noir world
choice
few
women to
leave home
threat -
we never
really know
who our
father is



The independent, active woman is often the primary noir element of noir-influenced films in other genres. In *Ramrod*, a western, and *Beyond the Forest*, a melodrama, the initial cause of the drama that results in death is a woman who will not 'stay at home' – Connie (Veronica Lake) on her father's ranch and Rosa (Bette Davis) in her small town with her doctor husband. Each woman is characterised sexually as aggressive and dangerous by the iconography and by the results of her actions. But because neither is centrally film noir, in *Ramrod* the quiet, waiting woman gets the man instead of aggressive Connie, and in *Beyond the Forest* Rosa's 'unnatural' ambition is powerful enough to cause only her own destruction. The intersection of the western and its noir influence is particularly interesting because in westerns women are generally genre objects representing home and stability rather than actors in the drama. Other examples of noir-influenced westerns are also characterised by active women and noir visual style: *Johnny Guitar*, *Rancho Notorious*, and *Forty Guns*.

The redemptive woman often represents or is part of a primal connection with nature and/or with the past, which are safe, static states rather than active, exciting ones, but she can sometimes offer the only transcendence possible in film noir. *They Live By Night* and *On Dangerous Ground* (both directed by Nicholas Ray, 1949 and 1950) are characterised by the darkly romantic element that can exist with the cynical. In the former film, the young lovers are doomed, but the possibility of their love transcends and redeems them both, and its failure criticises the urbanised world that will not let them live. Their happiest moments are outdoors in the sunlight, with 'normalcy' an ideal they can never realise because there is no place in the corrupt world for them. Mary (*On Dangerous Ground*) is not only cut off from the corruption of greed, money and power of the urban environment by living in a rural setting, she is further isolated (and purified) by her blindness. She teaches the badly disturbed and violent Jim to feel, and her reliance on him releases him from his emotional prison. Both characters are crippled – he emotionally and she physically – and need each other to achieve the wholeness of health. This interdependence keeps both characters and their relationship exciting, while other 'innocents' of film noir who exist only to contrast with the dangerous woman simply fade into forgetfulness.

Film noir contains versions of both extremes of the female archetypes, the deadly seductress and the rejuvenating redeemer. Its special significance lies in the combination of sensuality with activity and ambition which characterises the *femme fatale*, and in the mode of control that must be exerted to dominate her. She is not often won over and pacified by love for the hero, as is the strong heroine of the forties who is significantly less sexual than the

(top): *They Live By Night* Bowie and Keatchie are visually confined by lighting and composition as the outside world makes their love impossible.

(bottom): 'Mary (*On Dangerous Ground*) is . . . cut off from the corruption of greed, money and power of the urban environment by living in a rural setting.'



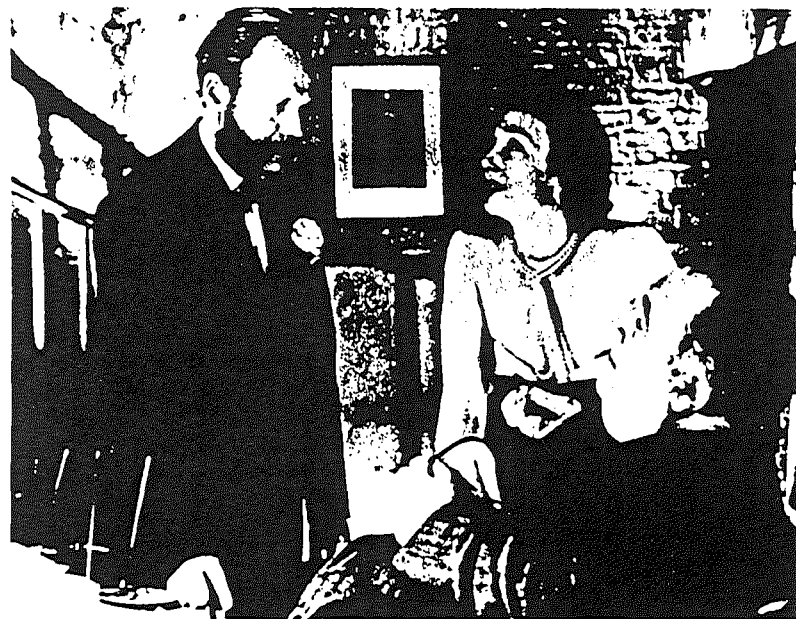
film noir woman. Indeed, her strength is emphasised by the general passivity and impotence which characterises the film noir male, making her a threat to him far greater than the career woman of the forties was, and thus only actual or symbolic destruction is an effective control. Even more significant is the form in which the 'spider woman's' strength and power is expressed: the visual style gives her such freedom of movement and dominance that it is her strength and sensual visual texture that is inevitably printed in our memory, not her ultimate destruction.

The tendency of popular culture to create narratives in which male fears are concretised in sexually aggressive women who must be destroyed is not specific to the forties to middle-fifties in the United States, but is seen today to a degree that might help to account for the sudden popularity of these films on college campuses, television, and film retrospectives. But despite their regressive ideological function on a strictly narrative level, a fuller explanation for the current surge of interest in film noir must acknowledge its uniquely sensual visual style which often overwhelms (or at least acts upon) the narrative so compellingly that it stands as the only period in American film in which women are deadly but sexy, exciting, and strong.

A note on illustrations pp. 55-67

The stills that follow provide further illustrations of the stylistic and iconographical motifs identified in Janey Place's article. They fall into eight groups:

- I 'the iconography is explicitly sexual . . . : long hair (blond or dark), makeup and jewellery.' p.55.
- II 'Cigarettes with their wispy trails of smoke can become cues of dark and immoral sensuality.' p.56.
- III 'Dress — or lack of it — . . . defines the woman.' p.57.
- IV 'the iconography of violence (primarily guns) is a specific symbol . . . of her "unnatural" phallic power.' p.58-9.
- V 'The framed portrait of a woman is a common motif in film noir.' p.60.
- VI Mirrors indicate narcissism or duplicity. p.61
- VII Women 'are overwhelmingly the compositional focus, generally centre frame and/or in the foreground or pulling focus to them in the background. They control camera movement, seeming to direct the camera (and the hero's gaze, with our own) irresistibly with them as they move.' pp. 62-4. In the shot from *Gilda* on p.64, Gilda's mere presence in the house throws a shadow over Johnny as he approaches.
- VIII 'The visual style conveys . . . mood through expressive use of darkness: both real, in predominantly underlit and night-time scenes, and psychologically through shadows and claustrophobic compositions which overwhelm the character in exterior as well as interior settings . . . The sexual, dangerous woman lives in this darkness.' pp.65-7



Googie Withers in *Night And The City*

Ava Gardner in *The Killers*

