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# The “Bad Girl” Turned Feminist: The Femme Fatale and the Performance of Theory

MICHELLE MERCURE



Michelle is a senior majoring in English. After graduation, she delightfully plans to continue her studies

in English as a graduate student at Simmons College in Boston, MA.

This paper—a revision of a much larger one that she completed with funding from a 2009 ATP summer grant—shaped her application for Simmons in many ways, as well as her professional goals. She is very thankful to have had Dr. Matt Bell as her mentor to share the experience. And grateful for his effort to guide her research in gender studies and film studies, which she hopes, now, to pursue at the graduate level.

**P**icture the murderous femme fatale Jane Palmer in Byron Haskin's 1949 film noir *Too Late for Tears*, as embodied by the talented actress Elizabeth Scott: gorgeous blonde locks, beautiful long legs and luscious thick lips, all dolled up in a shimmery evening gown fit for a Hollywood starlet and sporting a gaudy necklace that sparkles the way stars light up the night sky. Now, picture this dazzling figure stumbling over a balcony and plummeting to her untimely death after the police barge into her luxurious hotel suite in Mexico, accusing her of the murder of not one, but two of her husbands. Panicked by the accusation, she grabs two big handfuls of cash from the suitcase of money she possesses (the driving motivation for at least one of the murders, which she is guilty of). She darts away from the police, trips, and falls over the balcony, ending her life with a high-pitched, petrified scream. After she falls to her death, the money she has so desperately clung to disperses into the air, hovering around her dead body like snowflakes in a snow globe. The final image of the glamorous Jane Palmer culminates in a close-up of her hand: palm open, face up, with three bills strewn alongside it on the pavement where she meets her death.

Having the manipulative, greedy, seductive, murderous femme fatale fall to her death, as in this example, or perhaps be punished in some other manner—jail or marriage—is supposedly a distinctive characteristic of film noir, or at least this is what I anticipated prior to my examination of the femme fatale in the dozens of film noirs I set out to view. I anticipated that my analysis of the archetype of the femme fatale in classic film noir would reveal the following attributes: a female character who is beautiful and manipulative, cold and calculating, one who knows how to use her femininity in a way that can destroy men. I assumed that these women would epitomize evil, and that it would be a challenge for me to uncover their positive qualities by simply taking a feminist approach. However, the results of my analysis of film noir do not, in most cases, provide an example of a female character who is purely evil and deserving of such punishment; instead, I find it very difficult to know for certain the extent to which most of the femmes fatales I encountered are good or bad, *even the murderous, greedy Jane Palmer*. The femme fatale challenges the expectations of the viewer who anticipates that she will be purely evil, by *seeming* simultaneously good and bad.

This ambiguity represented in the archetype of the femme fatale provides a solution to one of the biggest concerns facing feminist theory today.

Within a patriarchal culture, voicing feminist theory in the very language used by that culture has presented a problem for feminist theorists who wish to communicate in a voice that has no affiliation with the patriarchal structure, one that will free women from its constraints. The patriarchal structure allows the male figure—the subject—in society to assume the dominant role and to retain all of the power, while the female figure is nothing more than an object meant to satisfy his desire; she is more or less a powerless figure in this structure, one with little or no voice. One way to hypothesize a solution to this problem of voicelessness is to create a unique voice for feminist theory—a language—that does not have any affiliation with the patriarchal structure. But this seems highly unlikely considering that *any* newly created voice (*any* newly created language) will inevitably be linked to the one conceived by the patriarchal structure, for it too must be conceived within it. Taking into consideration this inevitable link to the past, instead of rejecting the patriarchal structure as a source for change, feminists should embrace it and use it to their advantage. This is a much more feasible way to present a voice for feminist theory: to embrace the patriarchal language of the past and to revive the voice of feminist theory as it already exists there.

What I propose is a return to the archetype of the femme fatale in classic film noir. She voices feminist theory prior to its existence through her ability to perform, most expressively when she is seen as the spectacle in a musical performance. She displaces the role of the male subject by resisting his power to know whether she is good or bad, and to what extent she is good or bad. In the specific films I will address, she “acts” as the object of his desire by performing for him, but is she really performing for *him*, or does her performance serve another purpose, a more selfish one, perhaps? The male protagonist often appears frustrated by her performance, rather than satisfied by it. By denying pleasure for the male subject through her objectification as a spectacle on stage, she causes tension to arise in the subject and object of the patriarchal structure. This tension that the femme fatale causes neither “contests” the patriarchal structure, nor attempts to “converse” with it.<sup>1</sup> Instead, it speaks from within the patriarchal structure, without letting it understand her meaning. Exposing this voice that has been neglected offers feminism a unique way of communicating. Although my research for the extended version of this project focused on four classic film noirs, in the interest of conserving space, here, I will only be focusing on *Gilda* by Charles Vidor and *This Gun for Hire* by Frank Tuttle.<sup>2</sup> I am particularly interested in examining the archetype of the femme fatale from the perspective of a third-wave feminist, a perspective that is often in conflict with the views of 1970’s second-wave feminism, which argue that placing women in such roles as performer, actress, and sex symbol causes women’s oppression.<sup>3</sup> In my

view, such roles actually—and *actively*—resist oppression. By specifically looking at the musical performances by the femmes fatales in these films, I will show how the femme fatale “acts” out the theories of feminism prior to their emergence.

Before I begin my analysis of the femme fatale, though, I want to frame my research by looking at how prior scholarship has regarded this subject matter. I will begin by looking at the treatment of the genre of film noir, according to scholarly history. Classic film noir is restricted to a specific historical time period—the 1940’s and 1950’s. Some of the key characteristics of film noir are a male protagonist (usually a private detective), the element of criminality, a lack of morality, and an ambiguous plot. But there are other identifiable characteristics as well, such as the use of black and white film instead of color; discontinuity of time, in the forms of flashbacks or flash-forwards; strange camera angles; a voiceover, usually by the male protagonist; the use of wordplay, mostly in the form of double entendres; a nighttime setting; urban landscapes; roadways and cars; and, of course, the archetype of the femme fatale, a dangerously beautiful woman who leads men to their destruction. These characteristics, although they are not *all* present in every film noir (some contain many of them, while others contain only a few), help to create an aura of uncertainty that accurately reflects the time period in which these films were produced, making them identifiable as examples of film noir.<sup>4</sup>

Many changes in domestic and economic structures began to occur during this time in the United States (both during and after World War II), creating uncertainty in its citizens over both moral and structural issues in regards to their daily lives. For one, the fact that women were forced out of their newfound independence in the work place—achieved during World War II, when men went off to war and women dominated the workforce—and back into the domestic sphere led to a sense of confusion concerning the roles of women and men in the workplace and at home. Consequently, the duplicity of the femme fatale in film noir is often seen as a reflection of the confusing status of women in society at that particular moment in history.<sup>5</sup> The male protagonist is often confused by her duplicity: her beautiful and innocent outward appearance may mask corruption and evil.

The femme fatale is an actress in every sense of the word. She lies, cheats, double-crosses, even murders her victims, and then cries, screams, sings, or whispers words of affection to the male protagonist to win him over, only to double-cross him again. It seems that everything she says and does is a fabrication of the truth, and her motive (although it too is often ambiguous) is usually greed. If her act isn’t enough to snare the male protagonist into becoming infatuated with her,

leading him to his destruction, her outward beauty will usually do the trick. Some of the most prominent characteristics of the outward appearance of the femme fatale include a cigarette, long, sexy legs that often dominate the frame, thick, luscious lips, gorgeous, wavy hair that frames her face perfectly, and an attire that is often very flashy: fur shawls and coats, long gloves that extend to the elbows, evening gowns that shimmer and sparkle, clothing that reveals legs, cleavage, arms, back, and/or shoulders, and a sexy pair of high heels. But it remains unclear why her image is so important, and exactly who it is important to. Is it important to the femme fatale herself? Does she gain pleasure from the sight of her own beauty, or is it meant for the pleasure of others?

Where feminist film theory is concerned, the femme fatale in film noir, with her focus on creating a flashy outward appearance to attract the opposite sex and her inclination to perform for the male protagonist, is a primary example of how film has constructed society to view women primarily as objects (or vice versa—how society has constructed film to support this view of women). Laura Mulvey uses the term “to-be-looked-at-ness” to articulate the inseparability of the two structures (film and patriarchy) in *Visual and Other Pleasures*. She writes,

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (19)

The male is the active one; he is the one who looks. The female is the passive one, the one being looked at. Our society has been structured according to this division of “active/male” and “passive/female.” According to many second-wave feminists, the femme fatale supports this structure, not only by allowing herself to be looked at, but also by provoking such attention in the first place, and therefore she acts in no way as a role model for feminist theory; instead, she is seen as a primary example of how not to act onscreen. Her “performance” for the male protagonist entails passivity, placing the male in the active role of “looker,” rather than the passive role of “looked at.” It seems, for feminist theory at least, that the only solution is to reverse the two roles, to have the female become the active one—the looker—and the male become the passive one—the looked at. But before this can be achieved the patriarchal structure that defines our society—a structure that allows the male to occupy the position of power, and compels the female to act as his

object of desire and remain powerless—must be either changed or abolished.

My research suggests that taking another look at the femme fatale will make a new contribution, specifically to feminist film theory, one that allows the image of the femme fatale as spectacle—an image that has previously been a negative one for women—to occupy the dominant role, one usually reserved for the male figure in our patriarchal society. Through her musical performance of “Put the Blame on Mame,” Rita Hayworth, playing the role of Gilda in Charles Vidor’s 1946 film *Gilda*, exposes just how one might speak within the patriarchal structure without either “conversing with” or “contesting” it. In her second performance of “Put the Blame on Mame,” Gilda—who throughout the film has been falsely portraying herself as a promiscuous girl to make her ex-lover Johnny Farrell jealous—begins stripping off her clothes during the number as he watches, slowly removing her long, shiny black glove, swinging it around, and throwing it into the audience. She proceeds to do the same with the second glove, and then with her necklace. She would take her dress off, too, except in the words of Gilda herself, she’s “not very good at zippers.” After Johnny has Gilda dragged off stage, he confronts Gilda, saying, “What do you mean by it?” He cannot comprehend the meaning behind Gilda’s striptease. He then slaps her and storms off. Shortly after, Detective Maurice Obregon clarifies the situation for Johnny. He states, “Gilda didn’t do any of those things you’ve been losing sleep over. Not any of them. It was just an act, every bit of it. And I’ll give you credit. You were a great audience, Mr. Farrell.” The important point to make here is that Gilda has only been acting promiscuous; her performance is specifically designed for Johnny to see. And the fact that Johnny is unable to read the falseness of her performance (both on and off stage) reveals how Gilda uses the language of the patriarchal structure—her image as a spectacle—to practice the theories of feminism. She voices feminism through her performance by rendering it unreadable to the male subject that objectifies her, redirecting the power of the patriarchal structure to herself—the object.

Feminist film theorists might contest this claim. Mary Ann Doane, for example, suggests that the femme fatale is not an exemplary model for feminist film theory. She argues,

...the femme fatale is situated as evil and is frequently punished or killed. Her textual eradication involves a desperate reassertion of control upon the part of the threatened male subject. Hence, it would be a mistake to see her as some kind of heroine of modernity. She is not the subject of feminism but a symptom of male fears about feminism. Nevertheless,

the representation—like any representation—is not totally under the control of its producers and, once disseminated, comes to take on a life of its own. (2-3)

Here, Doane is suggesting that the femme fatale is more powerful as a figure that reveals that there is a patriarchal structure in place, one that gives priority to the male subject, than as a figure who shows how to speak from within that structure. She claims that the femme fatale should not be seen as “some kind of heroine of modernity,” but rather a “symptom of male fears about feminism.” And while the femme fatale certainly can be seen as a “symptom of male fears about feminism,” by the way she is often destroyed by the end of the film, signifying the “reassertion of control upon the part of the threatened male subject,” I would suggest, as Doane begins to suggest here, that her “representation—like any representation—is not totally under the control of its producers and, once disseminated, comes to take on a life of its own”: there is the possibility of more than one interpretation of the femme fatale.

In the case of Gilda, she is speaking a language indecipherable to her male subject, Johnny. It is indecipherable to Johnny because he is unable to know for certain which performance is the “real” one, her act on stage as a stripper or her act off stage as a promiscuous girl, because she is *always* “acting” for him. For example, in one scene, after Gilda tosses her cigarette in the direction of a passing guest at the casino, the guest tries to persuade Gilda to have a drink with him by commenting that the cigarette’s landing on him “means we’re gonna have a drink together.” She immediately responds by saying no, but seeing Johnny headed their way, she recants: “On the other hand, I’d love to.” Johnny doesn’t know that all of this is an act because Gilda doesn’t want him to know. The question is: why is Gilda always acting for Johnny, and why can’t he see it is all an act? The answers to these questions reveal Gilda as a “heroine of modernity.” By causing this tension for Johnny, Gilda prevents the satisfaction of his desire to control her. Gilda successfully uses her objectification to produce a pleasureless experience for her subject, a frustrating one, in fact. What she is really doing by performing for Johnny (on and off stage) is teaching him (and the viewer) a lesson: that his (and our) relationship with her should not be one of subject versus object, active versus passive.

And Johnny clearly does desire to control Gilda. Johnny marries Gilda in order to punish her for being promiscuous while her husband, Ballin Mundson, was still alive. Immediately after they are married Johnny brings Gilda to her new home where she is startled to see that a painting of her late husband is hanging there. Here, Johnny acknowledges his intent to control her in a voiceover: “She didn’t know then what was happening

to her. She didn’t know then that what she heard was the door closing in on her own cage. She hadn’t been faithful to him when he was alive, but she was gonna be faithful to him now that he was dead.” Johnny gets Gilda all wrong. First of all, he is mistaken about her infidelity; it was only an act. Second, he claims Gilda as his object—a possession—that he will keep in a “cage,” denying her independence. Here, he is being faithful to his dominant position in the patriarchal structure that gives all of the power to the male subject, but when Gilda performs “Put the Blame on Mame” for Johnny, stripping off her attire, frustrating him to the point where he slaps her, she is revealing that there is a gap in the structure, where she can show the male subject that it is a more pleasurable experience for both her and him when the woman is an active subject rather than a passive object.

According to Doane, this gap in the patriarchal structure that Gilda reveals is an interpretation only made possible through the feminist theoretical discourse that emerged long after the film was produced. She suggests that the incorporation of female spectatorship into cinematic discourse, a perspective that focuses on the female viewer’s identification with the images on screen instead of the male’s desire for the female as object on screen, is what allows “gaps, outlets, blind spots, excesses in the image” to express a feminist answer to the masculine structure. She writes,

It is all a question of timing. Feminist critical theory must be attentive to both the temporality of reading and the historicity of reading. What has to be acknowledged is that there are, in fact, constraints on reading, constraints on spectatorship. Social constraints, sexual constraints, historical constraints. If there were no constraints, there would be no problem, no need for feminist criticism. The difficulty is to hold on, simultaneously, to the notion that there are constraints and to the notion that there are gaps, outlets, blind spots, excesses in the image—to keep both in tension. (41)

That there is “temporality in reading” suggests that the interpretation of Gilda that is now available through the theories of feminism is one that might not have been possible prior to the emergence of such theories. Even though the “gap” Gilda reveals already existed, it could not be interpreted as voicing feminism prior to the emergence of this theory. In other words, although the voice of feminism has existed all along, it is a voice that has been severely neglected due to the “social constraints, sexual constraints, historical constraints” mentioned by Doane. Feminist theory, and specifically feminist film theory, should concern itself with investigating these “gaps, outlets, blind

spots, excesses in the image,” such as the one revealed by Gilda, to achieve a different perspective from which to view women in film, not as passive objects, but as active subjects, placing them on equal terms with their male counterparts.

How would this type of spectatorship Doane seems interested in differ from current spectatorship? Another feminist theorist, Teresa De Lauretis, voices her concern over this issue. She states, “The challenge to classical narrative cinema, the effort to invent ‘a new language of desire’ for an ‘alternative’ cinema, entails nothing short of the destruction of visual pleasure as we know it” (59). Although “a new language of desire” certainly is a goal that feminist film theory should strive for, “the destruction of visual pleasure as we know it” seems to be an unnecessary prerequisite for achieving this goal, and the “gaps” revealed by the femme fatale corroborate this. Gilda’s relationship with Johnny ends on a happy note, with the two of them reunited, Johnny finally understanding that her promiscuous act was *just* an act. But Johnny only comes to this conclusion through Detective Obregon’s observation of the situation. He never actually deciphers this information for himself. So is he really capable of hearing Gilda’s voice, seeing beyond the power of the constraints of the patriarchal structure, understanding the message behind the “gap” revealed by Gilda? And if not (which appears to be the case, considering there is no evidence of his coming to this conclusion on his own), is this really the best example of how to visualize “a new language of desire” in film? The answer is no. Gilda merely offers an example of how to use the (neglected) voice of feminism through her “act” that frustrates the male subject into becoming unable to decipher it. She does not offer the male subject (or film theory) any solution for how to *hear* her message. For this, we must turn our attention towards another film noir, Frank Tuttle’s 1942 *This Gun for Hire*, and another femme fatale, Ellen Graham.

The first image onscreen of the actress Veronica Lake playing the role of Ellen Graham is an image of her arm extending out from behind a wall in an audition hall at Fletcher’s Theatrical Agency. Her entire body follows, revealing a long, shimmery gown that is perfectly fitted to her slender frame, and gorgeous, lengthy, wavy blonde hair framing her soft white face. This is the grand entrance Ellen makes for her audition. She proceeds to perform magic tricks as she sings. While singing “Now You See It, Now You Don’t,” she makes billiard balls, cards, and herself, among other things, disappear and then reappear again while singing lyrics that seem to suggest that women’s love is very inconsistent. She sings, “Have you ever seen the love lights / In a lady’s eyes / And then suddenly watch it vanish away” at the start of her performance. Throughout the remainder of the song she repeats the chorus of the song: “Now you see it / Now you don’t / ...That’s love.” With this performance

Ellen is auditioning for a position that places her as an object meant to satisfy the desire of the male subject, a typical role for a woman in a film (or society) structured by patriarchy, yet through her lyrics Ellen suggests that you can see “...love lights / In a lady’s eyes / And then suddenly watch it vanish away,” which positions the woman in the role of control. It is the male subject who is at *her* mercy. She holds the ability to show “love lights” and then make it “vanish away.” The fact that Ellen’s performance is clearly meant to objectify her does not necessarily mean that she is not in the position of power. As in Gilda’s musical performance, her ambiguity gives her more power than her male subject, who fails to decipher the meaning behind the patriarchal discourse she speaks. But what happens when the subject fails to adhere to his position in the patriarchal structure, fails to objectify the object?

Ellen is not objectified by Philip Raven—the male protagonist in the film who kidnaps her after both the police and the men who hired him to kill a blackmailer begin tailing him—at all. And he won’t let her use her objectification, her skill of ambiguity, to subvert his power. Raven rejects her femininity (whether it is real or an “act” of femininity). When she places her hand on his shoulder and tries to reason with him, Raven reveals that he is on to her seductive act. Shaking her hands off of him, saying, “Come on, take your hands off of me. Button up, will ya? I’ll take care of Gates my way,” Raven clearly shows no desire to objectify her; he sees right through her ambiguity, realizes that her femininity can be used to control him if he falls into her trap. But the following morning, he strikes a deal with her, one that is made on both of their terms, without the need for her to “act” ambiguous. She will help him escape as long as he retrieves the chemical weapons that Gates possesses, so that no harm can be done with them. He is practicing feminism by resisting the desire to objectify her, and instead, attempting to communicate with her—through the patriarchal discourse offered to them—a message that is indecipherable to the patriarchal structure, because according to the (hetero) patriarchal structure the male subject *should* desire to objectify her.

And instead of having her perform *for* him as a passive object onstage, he asks her to perform *as* him by impersonating him so that he can escape the cops. Raven’s desire to have Ellen impersonate him does more than just help him escape the cops who are after him; it also transforms Ellen from a passive object to an active subject, revealing that the roles of men and women can be displaced within the patriarchal structure, even using the patriarchal structure. But it only transforms Ellen from passive to active in terms of how she is perceived by the patriarchal structure. Ellen is only looked at by the cops as active when she is wearing a disguise. As soon as Ellen crawls out from underneath

the immobile train she is hiding under, one of the cops removes Raven's hat from her and confirms her role as object by saying, "So old man Brewster was right. She is Raven's girl, huh. All right, Crane, I'll take over." In this cop's perception, Ellen is nothing more than "Raven's girl," as if to say Ellen can only be thought of as being someone else's possession—in this case Raven's. But if Ellen is perceived as active when she is wearing the disguise, then how can she so easily revert back to being passive once it is removed? There seems to be a problem with the perception of the onlooker who allows this distinction between passive and active to be made in accordance with her attire. The cops believe the act. They believe that Ellen in Raven's hat, striding across the railroad tracks, is in fact a man, Raven, because according to the patriarchal structure, a woman cannot occupy the place of the active subject; she must remain passive. And since Ellen's identity is revealed as woman, it only makes sense to the patriarchal structure that she is acting for her male subject—Raven—thereby occupying her role as passive object. The removal of the disguise can only reveal Ellen's power to the spectator who does *not* see her in terms of the patriarchal structure. Both Raven and the viewer know that Ellen willingly participates in Raven's escape, for her own benefit as well as his, that she is an active subject. To an onlooker like Raven, who sees her as an active subject, whether she is wearing a disguise or not, Ellen's power can be used to create a level of communication between the passive object and the active subject that is achieved through the patriarchal structure, yet indecipherable to it.

This representation of the ability to communicate a message between the active male subject and the passive female object within the patriarchal structure contradictory to the structure is how "a new language of desire" becomes available to the viewer who is able to decipher that message through contemporary feminist critical theory. In the words of Doane, "It is all a question of timing. Feminist critical theory must be attentive to both the temporality of reading and the historicity of reading." In other words, without feminist critical theory this interpretation would not be available. Even though the viewing of the relationship between Raven and Ellen has been available since 1942, when the film was produced, it is only through the present perspective of feminist theory that their relationship can be interpreted as the *practice of feminism*.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Jane Gallop's *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* for a clearer understanding of what Gallop means when she uses the terms "contest" and "converse" (134).

<sup>2</sup> There are other film noirs that feature a musical performance by a femme fatale, including dancing, singing and playing a musical instrument: Lauren Bacall as Vivian Rutledge in Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* (1946), Lizabeth Scott as 'Dusty' Chandler in John Cromwell's *Dead Reckoning* (1947), Jean Simmons as Diane Tremayne in Otto Preminger's *Angel Face* (1952), Yvonne De Carlo as Anna Dundee in Robert Siodmak's *Criss Cross* (1949), and Ann Blyth as Veda Pierce in Michael Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce* (1945).

<sup>3</sup> For more information regarding second-wave feminism and third-wave feminism see Estelle B. Freedman's *No turning back : The history of feminism and the future of women* and Deborah Siegal's *Sisterhood, Interrupted: From Radical Women To Grrls Gone Wild*.

<sup>4</sup> *A Panorama of American Film Noir (1942-1953)* by Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton offers a more elaborate definition of the term film noir.

<sup>5</sup> See Sara Evans's *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* and Andrea S. Walsh's *Women's Film and Female Experience: 1940-1950* for a broad overview of the history of women in America. For a more specific understanding of women in film, look at Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* and Ann E. Kaplan's *Women in Film Noir*.