



Introduction

Noir films have frequently been understood to reflect a societal malaise and as the *femme fatale* remains one of noir's defining elements, this research project puts forth the argument that the *femme fatale* is the reaction of the film industry to the changing gender dynamic in society.

This project utilizes information from the post-war era to make a case for the condition and discontent of women then. The hypothesis that the *femme fatale's* character and death is a result of male anxiety primarily builds on Alfred Adler's theory of the inferiority complex and Laura Mulvey's theory of female sexualization and male control. *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), and *Out of the Past* (1947) are used to illustrate this argument.

Research Question

What is the relationship between changes in society and the form and popularity of the *femme fatale* in noir films?

Methods

This project examines information about the post-WWII era in order to see how the lives of women changed during the war and what resulted of those changes. Then the project looked at the portrayal of the *femme fatale* in several films considered to be exemplars of noir to see whether a connection could be made with what was concluded about the position of women in society and the depiction of the *femme fatale*.

Women in 1940s American Society

- Female labor force increased by 57% (6.5 million women)
- By 1945 there were nearly 20 million women in the workforce
- After the war, women were seen as "excess workforce" and pushed out of the workplace
- 25.5% increase in divorces between 1944 and 1945 and a projected 550,000 divorces in 1946 alone
- Fear that end of the "traditional family" was near, for which women were blamed
 - Departure from traditional gender roles was seen as responsible
 - Economic incentives as women were accused of seeking alimony

Femmes Fatales in Noir Films

- Male-dominated Hollywood as a result of the studio system
- Economic and sexual independence
- Dissatisfaction with conventional route of mother and wife
- Hyper-sexualization
- Ending by death or marriage
- Films
 - Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbra Stanwyck) in *Double Indemnity*
 - Marie Derry (Virginia Mayo) in *The Blue Dahlia*
 - Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer) in *Out of the Past*

Discussion

Socioeconomic changes during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath resulted in a shift in society that saw women looking to define themselves outside of their relationships to men whether in the workplace or in the home. Facing the postwar disillusionment brought on by economic instability and war trauma, men soon realized that it would be difficult for society and women to return to the way things were before the war and felt their traditional dominance within society threatened. As a consequence of the male-dominance of the film industry, these concerns were reflected on-screen in noir films through the form of the *femme fatale* as men tried to reckon with their concerns over the role of women in society. The *femme fatale* with her economic incentives and lack of interest in men as romantic partners can be seen as a caricature of American women at the time and what their interests were thought to be. Her criminality and the blame noir film plots tend to lay heavily on her reveals what a transgressive figure the *femme fatale* was and what sort of a serious threat she was thought to pose to the structure of society. The death of the *femme fatale* is then inevitable as, through their on-screen male proxy, male creators attempted to regain control of the female first through her sexualization then through her killing.

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