

The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and Communication

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Article title: {<ET>The Femme Fatale on Screen}

<AU>Christa van Raalte

<AF>Bournemouth University, UK

First author: Full name and affiliation; plus email address if corresponding author

Dr Christa van Raalte, Bournemouth University, cvanraalte@bournemouth.ac.uk

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<ABS>This introduction to the *femme fatale*, as a cinematic and critical phenomenon, will explore the ways in which feminist film criticism has read and re-read this figure, and the ways in which both the figure itself and the critical readings it has engendered, have articulated ideas of gender, sexuality, and power. The cinematic *femme fatale* is associated primarily with the *film noir* of the 1940s–1950s, in which context she is commonly read as articulating male anxieties about the position of women following World War II, and as symptomatic of deeper anxieties around female sexuality and agency. At the same time critics have recognized in her a potential for resistance and an expression of female empowerment notwithstanding the often tragic consequences of her ambitions. In the decades that have followed, the figure of the *femme fatale* has proved an object of endless fascination for filmmakers, audiences, and critics alike. Although most notably revived in *neo-noir*, she is also to be found diverse cultural contexts and genres, each time articulating a slightly different set of values and generating a slightly different set of critical debates.

<KW>[female empowerment](#).

<A>Defining the *Femme Fatale*

<FO>The *femme fatale* has been, and continues to be, an important focus of debate for feminist film criticism—particularly, although not exclusively, in the Anglo-American context. Although primarily associated with Hollywood’s *film noir* movement in the 1940s–1950s, she has since become a key reference point for filmmakers, audiences, and critics alike, crossing boundaries of genre, period, and nationality to permeate the wider culture. Through her construction and deconstruction, both filmmakers and critics have used the *femme fatale* to articulate ideas around gender, sexuality, power, and the relationships between them. She is a contradictory and contested figure, however, both as she appears in the films themselves and as she is re-presented within film criticism: in the former she is typically represented as unreliable and unstable notwithstanding her powerful on-screen presence; in the latter she has been read as an expression of misogyny, as a site of resistance, and at times as both at once.

<P>Although immediately recognizable, the *femme fatale* remains remarkably resistant to definition. For Doane (1991), she is an elusive shape-shifting figure, while for Cowie (1993), she is less a figure at all than a “catchphrase” for (largely male) anxieties around sexual difference and sexual desire. In a similar vein, Farrimond (2017) suggests that the term is evocative rather than descriptive and attempts to define her therefore constitute an unproductive distraction. Nevertheless, most critics can agree on a few key features that are usually associated with the *femme fatale* on screen: she is an explicitly sexual woman; she is powerful—usually over men; she (or those around her) cannot be trusted; she is enigmatic, frequently becoming the object of investigation that drives the narrative. Visually she is associated with an excessive display of feminine sexuality, but also with obscured or reflected shots, close-ups in particular, that reinforce a sense of mystery and deception as well as heightening her desirability. Grossman (2009) has argued, however, that while sexuality is a key component of the *femme fatale*’s persona, it is not, in fact, her main appeal; rather it is her ruthless pursuit of her own desires

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that makes her such a simultaneously compelling and vilified character. Certainly the perennial fascination she holds for feminist critics seems to depend as much on her narrative agency (however curtailed) as it does on the expressive centrality of her image.

<A>Origins of the *Femme Fatale*

<FO>The *femme fatale* has her origins in religious, mythological, and literary archetypes, such as the Medusa, Salome, and Morgan Le Fay. She comes into focus as a clearly recognizable type, however, toward the end of the 19th century, articulating anxieties around modernity and industrialization as well as shifting gender roles (Bronfen, 2004). This development coincides not only with the appearance of the “new woman” and the growth of the suffrage movement, but also with a period of new, and unsettling, class and economic mobility (Stott, 1992). It also coincides with the birth of psychoanalysis, a foundational discipline for feminist film criticism. Visually, as Doane notes, the *femme fatale* of this period is associated with the movements of decadence, symbolism, and art nouveau. Beneath this “decorative excess” (Doane, 1992, p. X), however, she is a sterile figure who, in a period that fetishizes productivity, produces nothing. The *femme fatale* of fin de siècle culture is a liminal, “unheimlich” [uncanny] figure, associated with anxieties around race and empire, as well as sexuality. More than just a toxic combination of beauty and wickedness, for Stott (1992) she represents not only the “other”, but “chaos, darkness, death” (p. 37) and the unsettling realm of the unknown. Yet setting aside her symbolic value, the literary *femme fatale* of this period is not without interiority. Indeed Bronfen (2004) has warned against a critical tendency to read her as merely “acted upon,” effectively reproducing her as fetish, while overlooking the tragic self-awareness that marks a figure such as Zola’s *Nana*.

<A>The *Femme Fatale* in Film Noir

<FO>While the “man-eater” or “vamp” is to be found as a stock figure in melodramas of the silent era, and dangerous women are featured in films of the 1930s, the *femme fatale* comes to prominence in the Hollywood of the 1940s and early 1950s within the body of crime dramas and thrillers that critics have since classified as *film noir*. As Place (1978) notes, *film noir* provides the ideal environment for the *femme fatale*. The sensual, expressionistic, visual style of the films emphasizes her powerful screen presence, while the paranoid plots work to position her as mysterious, surrounded by a web of disguise and deceit. Conversely the liminal figure of the *femme fatale* provides the ideal central image for the *film noir*, concerned as it is with the margins of society and the limits of conventional morality. Thus the presence of the *femme fatale* is consistently cited as a defining feature of *film noir*, while subsequent usages of the *femme fatale*, both in culture and in commentary, are most commonly made with reference to *film noir*.

<P>Like the films in which they appear, however, the *femme fatales* of this period are far from a homogenous set. They include gangsters molls (*The Big Heat*, dir. Fritz Lang, 1953), saloon girls (*Rancho Notorious*, dir. Fritz Lang, 1952), and desperate housewives (*The Reckless Moment*, dir. Max Opuls, 1949); some are irredeemably wicked (*Double*

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Indemnity, dir. [Billy Wilder](#), 1944) while others are more sinned against than sinning (*Gilda*, dir. [Charles Vidor](#), 1946), or already dead (*Laura*, dir. [Otto Preminger](#), 1944), and at least one is quite literally no more than a male fantasy (*Woman in the Window*, dir. [Fritz Lang](#), 1944). Again, like *film noir*, the *femme fatale* is a retrospective critical formation, rather than an institutional category. Contemporary commentators were interested in the quality of “toughness” displayed by women in the thrillers of the period, and noted that it was the “bad girls” that offered the most appealing roles for female stars—roles they assumed would likewise appeal to female audiences. It was only with the birth of feminist film criticism in the 1970s, however, that the complex ideological status of the *femme fatale* became a focus for debate.

<A>Feminist Film Criticism and the *Femme Fatale*

<FO>E. Ann Kaplan’s edited collection *Women in Film Noir* (1978) brought together for the first time a set of essays that explored the *femme fatale* from a feminist perspective, introducing key debates that were to underpin feminist scholarship in this area for the next four decades. These focused primarily on the women in classic *film noir* but also engaged with critical questions raised by the *neo-noir* movies of the period such as *Klute* (dir. [Alan J. Pakula](#), 1971) and *Chinatown* (dir. [Roman Polanski](#), 1974). While acknowledging the fascination she wields for audiences, irrespective of gender, these critics largely see the *femme fatale* as embodying a patriarchal image of female sexuality. For them, her potential as a site of resistance is [realized](#) primarily when read “against the grain,” to disrupt and [defamiliarize](#) patriarchal discourse. [Gledhill \(1978\)](#) outlines how reading the *femme fatale* as an ideologically charged construct, rather than a representation of social reality, reveals the mechanics of the text whereby the woman becomes the object of investigation. The fractured image produced by proliferating points of view contributes to the [characterization](#) of the *femme fatale* as unstable and unreliable as much as any actual diegetic evidence to that effect. Moreover, the tendency for female stars to appear in explicitly performative roles serves to highlight the fundamentally artificial nature of the image, which in turn reinforces the idea the woman herself is concealed somewhere behind that image. [Place \(1978\)](#) makes a similar point about the use of mirrors and reflections to signify duplicity as well as narcissism. She describes, moreover, how the power of the *femme fatale* is constructed through the way in which her image dominates shot composition and camera movement—and conversely, how her ultimate loss of control is signified by composition and conventions that imprison her, visually, within the shot ([e.g.](#), with bar effects, or physical domination by the male characters).

<P>While acknowledging that the films in which she appears are far from progressive, [Place](#), on the whole, sees the *femme fatale* in a positive light. She argues that the powerful image of the *femme fatale* is more memorable than the punishment meted out to her by the narrative, and her description of that power as a “combination of sensuality with activity and ambition” (1978, p. 52) suggests a degree of agency embedded in the image itself. [Johnston \(1978\)](#), by way of contrast, takes an approach more closely aligned with [Laura Mulvey’s \(1975\)](#) theory of the male gaze, wherein spectacle and action are explicitly

separated within the narrative economy. Her psychoanalytical reading of *Double Indemnity* renders the *femme fatale* as fetish—a male fantasy designed to erase the split between knowledge and belief: a symptom of male anxiety about sexual difference.

This more [skeptical](#) view is echoed in Richard Dyer's (1978) assertion that it is her unknowability, rather than her sexuality, that really defines the *femme fatale*. He suggests that *film noir* typically works through the use of point-of-view and [voice-over](#) to establish the male lead (however unsympathetic) as the point of identification for the viewer. Dyer suggests that in *Gilda* the star persona of Rita Hayworth works to disrupt this dynamic, along with a defining scene that he reads as undermining the reliability of the male discourse within the film. His essay illustrates two key axioms that are implicit throughout this collection (and made explicit by Gledhill): that meaning is not immanent in these texts, but created in the act of reading; and that the ideological impact of the *femme fatale* varies between texts (as well as readings), at times confirming cultural stereotypes, and at others foregrounding their operation.

However contested in the context of the films, there is no questioning the power of the *femme fatale* in the context of feminist film criticism. Hanson and O'Rawe (2010) argue that the figure is seductive for critics as she is both alluring and distracting. Indeed, she has become in many ways emblematic of feminist film scholarship itself, and a key reference point for work which, quite often, has its critical focus elsewhere: Doane's 1982 article on the masquerade is one such example. The work is actually about female spectatorship, however, the *femme fatale* provides an effective metaphor illustrating how an excess of femininity [destabilizes](#) the image, forming a mask that exists at a distance from the self. Doane's book, *Femme Fatales* (1991), is again, not exactly about the eponymous archetype yet the author finds her to be of critical relevance to feminist discourses, because of her ambiguous relationship with power, subjectivity, and agency. This is closely tied to the visual ambiguity produced by the proliferation of veils, literal and otherwise (smoke, shadows, [etc.](#)), that partially cover the face of the *femme fatale* in so many iconic shots, at once inviting and repelling the exploratory gaze of the viewer. For Doane (as for Dyer), the *femme fatale* derives her power principally from her unknowability: the threat she represents cannot be predicted or managed precisely because it cannot be fully understood. Nevertheless, this power is, for Doane, divorced from agency, with the *femme fatale* positioned as its carrier: the *femme fatale* is thus clearly positioned, not as a feminist figure but as a manifestation of male anxieties about feminism. Not all critics have accepted this interpretation, however. Cowie (1993) has argued that the view of *film noir* as a "male" genre is mistaken, and overlooks the extent to which adventurous, sexually active female characters speak to female fantasies. More recently, Grossman has set out to rescue the *femme fatale* from her paradoxically passive position as the unknowable eternal feminine. She resists her construction as either "misogynist projection" or "transgressive female force" because both reduce her to the status of a symbolic object (2009, p.5). She notes the limits of psychoanalytical readings as divorced from the social world and makes a case for a return to more socially and historically situated readings of classic *film noir*. What is [at](#) stake, here,

for Grossman goes beyond film criticism as she considers that “misreadings” of women in *film noir* fuel a counterproductive discourse in the wider culture.

<A>The *Femme Fatale* beyond Classic *Film Noir*

<FO>Both the classic *film noir* and the *femme fatale* have proved influential forces in cinematic culture over successive decades. Although by no means confined to Hollywood, it is in the US mainstream that this influence is most apparent, particularly in *retro-noir* (films set in the 1940s and 1950s which imitate the style of the originals) and *neo-noir* (films set in the contemporary world that borrow thematically, stylistically, and structurally from classic *noir*). The *femme fatale*, however, while most commonly found in movies with a *noir* aesthetic is by no means confined to these. Indeed, as Farrimond (2017) has noted, there are a great many more manifestations of the *femme fatale* to be found in the Hollywood of the 1990s onward than in the period most closely associated with her. The 1970s saw something of a *noir* revival both fueled by, and reigniting, critical interest in the original movement. Hanson (2010) suggests that the women in these films qualify less as *femme fatales* than “good-bad” girls, however, in part because they inhabit narratives that explicitly address issues of independence and agency. In the 1980s, the *femme fatale* crossed genre boundaries, making a number of notable appearances outside *neo-noir*, perhaps most famously in Ridley Scott’s science fiction *noir* *Blade Runner* (1982), where the mysterious Rachel is costumed and filmed to resemble a 1940s film star, in keeping with the period aesthetic that pervades the “future” LA of the film. This exemplifies Yvonne Tasker’s (1998) observation of how many such films reference the period iconography of *film noir* as though to bury anxieties about the present in a romanticized past. By contrast the famously misogynistic thriller *Fatal Attraction* (dir. Adrian Lyne, 1987), echoes *film noir* more in its plot, and the construction of its flawed hero, than in its visual style, presenting its *femme fatale* Alex as a very contemporary threat. This film was the focus of Susan Faludi’s discussion of Hollywood in her influential book *Backlash* (1992), and with some justification as the notion of the “bunny boiler” was to enter popular culture. The use of the Glen Close character in the lampooning of Hilary Clinton’s political ambitions in 2008 exemplifies Julie Grossman’s concerns about the negative impact of the *femme fatale* myth in the real world.

<P>A very particular variety of *femme fatale* dominates the *neo-noirs* of the 1990s. Erotic thrillers like *Basic Instinct* (dir. Paul Verhoeven, 1992), *The Last Seduction* (dir. John Dahl, 1994), and *Disclosure* (dir. Barry Levinson, 1994), feature highly sexualized female leads who are also presented as explicitly active subjects, fully aware of and in control of their own power. Tasker (1998) notes that a great many of these *neo-noirs* are set in a professional context foregrounding power dynamics, rule breaking, and the pleasures of forbidden sex. She argues that these films articulate male anxieties about women in the workplace along with a less defined paranoia about gender and power in the modern world. Thus, in her discussion of *Disclosure*, as well as noting the pivotal representation of the successful working woman as inherently immoral and sexually

aggressive, she draws attention to the extent to which the film, along with its beleaguered hero, struggles to make sense of who does and does not have power.

Writing with the benefit hindsight, Helen Hanson (2010) explicitly positions the 1990s *neo-noirs* as products of postfeminism, a cultural context in which female empowerment is at once assumed, celebrated, and commodified—although represented as decidedly problematic in these films. That the career successes of these *femme fatales* cannot be disentangled from their sexuality, makes this “empowerment” problematic for feminist critics too. Farrimond notes that *third-wave* feminists are more inclined to embrace aggressive or performative expressions of female sexuality as empowering, and attributes the proliferation of *femme fatale* figures since the 1990s, in part at least, to the way in which they speak to postfeminist culture. She *recognizes* that Doane’s notion of the *femme fatale* as the “carrier,” rather than the subject of power, is echoed in the idea of the “hollow” postfeminist heroine who, despite the appearance of agency, is in fact “a vacant shell onto which notions about female power can be projected”(2017, p. 10). Nevertheless she maintains that the resulting ambiguity accounts for much of the *femme fatale*’s power, and for her potential to offer resistant meanings for audiences and critics. Farrimond questions the critical focus on the erotic thriller and the emphasis on “backlash” as a framework for reading the modern *femme fatale*, suggesting that this tends to exclude alternative perspectives. She argues that different genres *mobilize* the figure of the *femme fatale* in different ways and to different ends and that while *noir* remains an important reference point, her significance in other genres has been overlooked.

Twenty-first century *femme fatales* have proved natural subjects for films with a *postmodern* emphasis on fractured identity. Christopher Nolan, for example, a director very much influenced by *noir* aesthetic and structures, offers two particularly enigmatic *femme fatales* in *Memento* (2000) and *Inception* (2010)—the first largely unaware of her role, the second, like several of her classic noir forbearers, already dead. Meanwhile David Fincher’s *Gone Girl* (2014) is explicitly constructed around the unknowability of its female lead, onto whom male characters project their fantasies, while the characters, and the text itself, manifest an altogether precarious grip of reality. But the figure of the *femme fatale*, is also referenced and exploited in a much wider range of mainstream films that may not at first glance seem to provide a conducive environment. For example, the spy movie *Salt* (dir. Phillip Noyce, 2010), although it presents its star first and foremost as an action heroine, draws liberally on the visual and narrative tropes that *characterize* the figure of the modern *femme fatale*. Thus, the film has a structure and a tagline (“Who is Salt?”) designed to create confusion around her identity, makes judicious use of the illegible or veiled close-up at key moments, and introduces spiders as a bizarre plot device that appears to self-consciously reference the “spider-woman” of classic noir.

The range of films featuring female characters that draw on the mythology surrounding the *femme fatale* is matched only by the range of responses in contemporary feminist film criticism. Hanson and O’Rawe’s (2010) edited volume, for example, offers perspectives on early cinema as well as classical and recent Hollywood, along with explorations of the *femme fatale* in European and world cinemas. Meanwhile

Farrimond's book includes work on *retro-noir*, teen movies, and science fiction, as well as addressing bisexuality and fragmented identities in *neo-noir*. Notwithstanding her origins in a very specific set of ideas around [White](#), heterosexual femininity, latterly the *femme fatale* has provided a lens through which to explore anxieties around race, age, sexual orientation, and national identity as well as the more central concerns of gender and power, as exemplified by some of the texts recommended in the [further reading](#) for this entry.

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While every version of the *femme fatale* must be understood in relation to her specific historical and cultural context, every version also draws much of her power from the culturally overdetermined myth she conjures up. For feminist film critics she represents "a manifestation of an endlessly unfulfilled desire" (Hanson & O'Rawe, 2009, p.7), constituting something very like a fetish for feminist film criticism itself. Hers is certainly a presence that will continue to inspire new cinematic interpretations and new critical readings for some time to come.

[<XREF>See Also](#)

[IEGMC016](#)

[IEGMC059](#)

[IEGMC063](#)

[IEGMC087](#)

[IEGMC092](#)

[IEGMC096](#)

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<X>Further Reading

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<BIO>Christa van Raalte is currently based in at Bournemouth University. Her research