



Women in Film Noir: A Reflection of Postwar Society's Evolving Gender Roles

Erica Waldron¹

¹University of Oregon, Robert D. Clark Honors College, Research Mentor: Dr. Ulrick Casimir



Introduction

During World War II, American society experienced a momentous shift in gender roles as more than six million women stepped out of the traditional domestic sphere and transitioned into the wartime economy. Following the resolution of the war, the government and sects of society alike pushed for a return to conventional gendered spaces. Within this period of widespread societal contention and postwar disillusionment, the dark and fatalistic genre of film noir grew in popularity. Film noir brought with it a host of archetypal character. Among the most distinguished were those of the enigmatic femme fatale and the domestic femme attrapéé.

Research Question

How do the noir films of the 1940s and 1950s interact with and reflect the evolving gender roles in postwar America?

Methods

Cinema and cultural studies lenses were used to perform a close analysis of the noir films *Gun Crazy*, *Out of the Past*, and *The Reckless Moment* in relation to the historical, and sociopolitical context from which they cannot be separated.

Findings



Gun Crazy's femme fatale, Laurie, performing with revolvers for her job.



Out of the Past's femme fatale, Kathie, moments after her demise.

1. Femme Fatales and the Break from Domesticity

- Femme fatales stepped beyond the limits of social law, bypassing traditional storylines of romance and domesticity for a restless ambition of money and freedom. Their defiant actions manifest at a more extreme level than in reality, as femme fatales usually bring the leading man to ruin or his death in their fight against male domination. These drastic actions echo the steps taken by American women leaving behind the constraints of domesticity and tradition.
- The way femme fatales are punished in noir is reminiscent of societal backlash against the progressive shift of gender roles. They are not allowed to walk free after overstepping the bounds of acceptable behavior, instead femme fatales are constrained by marriage, imprisoned, tortured, or murdered.

2. Femme Attrapeés and Traditional Gender Roles

- Femme attrapeés are engrossed in their familial duties and therefore reflect the return to tradition to which society wished to revert. Instead of breaking free from conventions, these characters are loyal and docile women who fulfill the expected roles of partner, wife or mother.
- They are permitted to survive noir narratives because their actions are deemed acceptable when compared to what society at the time viewed as the ideal behavior of women.



Gun Crazy's femme attrapéé, Ruby, cooking with her three children nearby.



Femme attrapéé, Ann, departing town in the final shots of *Out of the Past*.

3. Film Noir's Criticism of Gendered Ideals

- Even though noir films allow femme attrapeés to survive the films' finales, the genre offers a denigrated depiction of this idealized lifestyle. Instead of being represented as content with their role of stay-at-home nurturer, the mothers in film noir are instead depicted as overwhelmed or trapped by their maternal obligations.



Overwhelmed femme attrapéé, Lucia, breaks down in *The Reckless Moment*.

Conclusion

- Close examinations of noir films reveal that female film noir characters' interactions with narratives of crime, love and family reflect contemporaneous societal concerns about progressive gender roles.
- Femme fatales reflect the women who have defied norms whereas femme attrapeés mirror the women who reassumed traditional gender roles.
- The tragic end of the femme fatale echoes the backlash to the changing place of women. The femme attrapeés' survival reflects the desire to return to and acceptance of traditional gender roles
- Not even conventional family life escapes film noir's tendency towards criticism.
- Noir was originally popular in the mid 1900s, but its ability to capture and reflect on societal occurrences through the art of film remains critical today as society continues to evolve.

References

Auerbach, Jonathan. "American Studies and Film, Blindness and Insight." *American Quarterly*, vol. 58 no. 1, 2006, pp. 31-50.

Boozer, Jack. "The Lethal Femme Fatale in the Noir Tradition." *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 51, no. 3, 1999, pp. 20-35. JSTOR

Bronfen, Elisabeth. "Gender and Noir." *Film Noir*, edited by Homer B. Pettey and R. Barton Palmer, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2014, pp. 143-163. JSTOR

Gun Crazy. Directed by Joseph Lewis, King Brothers Productions, 1950.

Harvey, Sylvia. "Woman's Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir." *Women in Film Noir*, edited by Ann E. Kaplan, BFI Publishers, 1980, pp. 22-34.

Lang, Robert. "Lucia Harper's Crime: Family Melodrama and Film Noir in 'The Reckless Moment'." *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1989, pp. 261-67.

Lule, Jack. "Movies and Culture." *Understanding Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Libraries, 2016, pp. 343-49.

MacLean, Nancy. "The 'Second Wave' or the End of the Family Wage?" *A Companion to Post-1945 America*, edited by Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig, Blackwell Publishing, 2002, pp. 235-254.

May, Elaine. "Containment at Home: Cold War, Warm Hearth." *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. Basic Books, 2008, pp. 19-38. ProQuest Ebook Central

McEuen, Melissa A. "Women, Gender, and World War II." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*. 2016.

Purvis, Tony. *Get set for media and cultural studies*. Edinburgh University Press, 2006, pp. 6-91.

Out of the Past. Directed by Jacques Tourneur, RKO Radio Pictures, 1947.

Santana, Maria. "From Empowerment to Domesticity: The Case of Rosie the Riveter and the WWII Campaign." *Frontiers in Sociology*, vol. 1, no.16, 2016, pp. 1-8.

Schrader, Paul. "Notes on Film Noir." *Film Genre Reader II*, edited by Barry Keith Grant, University of Texas Press, 1995, pp. 213-226.

Silver, Alain. "Introduction." *Film Noir Reader*, edited by Alain Silver and James Ursini, Proscenium Publishers, 1998, pp. 3-15.

Storey, John. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Fifth ed. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019, pp. 7-54.

The Reckless Moment. Directed by Max Ophüls, Walter Wanger Productions, 1949.

Wager, Jans. "Dames and Driving." *Dames in the Driver's Seat: Rereading Film Noir*. University of Texas Press, 2005, pp. 1-48. ProQuest Ebook Central

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Casimir for introducing me to the world of film noir, without his guidance this research would not have been possible. I would also like to thank Elizabeth Peterson for all her help in uncovering vital sources.