

Re-reading the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: an evolutionary perspective

Deborah WALKER
University of Auckland

Introduction

Feminist film theorists have read the *femme fatale* and other manifestations of femininity through constructionist and psychoanalytical frameworks whose basic premises are 1) that gender is culturally constructed 2) that the roots of desire and pleasure are unconscious and function according to specific Oedipal scenarios of repression and displacement, specifically that 3) the visual focus on the female form in film is a clear instance of fetishisation arising from unconscious castration anxiety (eg. Mulvey, 1975, 1981 in Mulvey 1989; Hayward, 2000: 447-48). In this paper, I will propose a broad, cross-cultural and trans-historical overview of the fatale (using examples from classic and contemporary American, French and Asian film noir) that largely contests the above premises and builds an alternative view, using insights from the emerging field of evolutionary psychology.

What is evolutionary psychology?

Evolutionary psychology is the application of evolutionary principles to the study of the mind (Tooby and Cosmides, 1992: 3). Evolutionary psychology (EP) posits that the human mind, as much as the body, is to a large extent a product of Darwinian evolution (random genetic variation, non-random selection) and thus subject to natural and particularly sexual selection. (Natural selection is what drives evolution: individuals within a species will vary genetically, making some better suited to their environment and therefore more successful at surviving and reproducing offspring. Sexual selection means that intra-sex competition for mates will favour the evolution of certain gender-specific traits.) EP maintains that psychological attributes which proved adaptive, that is which conferred significant benefits in terms of survival and reproduction in the environment in which our hunter-gatherer

ancestors had evolved as a species¹ are present today in the form of evolved, content-specific, information-processing modules designed to solve specific ancestral problems. Such problems, which arose from the situation of living in social groups with long-term pair bonds and combined male and female parental investment, include optimizing mate selection for both sexes, enhancing paternal certainty for males, ensuring optimal resources for the survival of offspring, acquiring language, detecting cheaters, guessing what others are thinking and evaluating risks (Campbell, 2002: 8-9).

Why evolutionary psychology?²

The paper will look at ways in which evolutionary psychology can inform readings of the fatale. Before beginning the discussion proper, however, I will outline briefly my reasons for preferring this framework over canonical constructivist psycho-analytical approaches. Undeniably, constructivism has outlined and raised important questions about the social mechanisms that modulate human development & behaviour. But despite its ability to map such existing social mechanisms, notably gender roles, constructivism is powerless to explain why and how they have developed the way they have, with both striking differences and remarkable similarities across cultures and throughout history. More importantly, it

¹ Known as the environment of evolutionary adaptedness or EEA. For the genus *Homo* the EEA corresponds very roughly to the mid Pleistocene period which lasted from 1.8 million to 11,000 years ago.

² For over a decade now, a small but growing number of scholars (most notably Joseph Carroll, Brett Cooke, Nancy Easterlin, Michelle Sugiyama and Brian Boyd) have been using an evolutionary approach to art and literature: for an overview, see Joseph Carroll, 'Literature and Evolutionary Psychology', Handbook of evolutionary psychology (D. M. Buss. Hoboken, NJ, John Wiley & Sons, 2005): 931-952. More recently, a number of cognitivist film theorists have also begun to draw on adaptationist principles: see Joseph D. Anderson and Barbara Fisher Anderson, Eds., Moving Image Theory: Ecological Considerations (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), foreword by David Bordwell.

cannot tell us why these mechanisms are so notoriously resistant to change. Feminist constructivist and psycho-analytical theories³ can detail and/or replicate the oppressive practices of patriarchal cultures and their transmission, yet they cannot explain how patriarchy came about or why it is and ever has been such a dismally prevalent feature of human cultures everywhere, at least since the advent of agriculture⁴ and possibly before.

Moreover, constructivist explanations for gender differences (and sexual orientation) begin with a demonstrably false assumption: namely, that gender is first and foremost a cultural construct. Such a premise flies in the face of over a century of empirical biological and psychological research (notably the role of genetic transmission and sex hormones in brain development, morphology, personality and behaviour) not to mention common sense. And even if one accepts such constructivist insights as Judith Butler's into the performative dimension of gender (as both assigned by culture in a process of 'forced reiteration of norms' and a site of endless contestation by individuals who refuse such assignment in favour of other performances: Butler and Salih, 2004: 344), this still begs two central questions: why do particular individuals choose to either perform or contest assigned roles and why is gender performativity so cross-culturally uniform at the statistical level? Finally, the premise that gender is a cultural construct can be defended, but only in the sense that

³ In respect to the psyche, an evolutionary approach would posit the unconscious as being largely a product of innate, evolved mental modules and libidinal mechanisms, which are indeed subject to processes of repression and displacement (particularly where social conditioning runs counter to evolved preferences) but whose precise functioning is yet to be fully revealed.

⁴ The movement from a hunter-gatherer to agrarian lifestyle led to a loss of self-sufficiency for women and the ability of a few men to monopolize resources and power. "In the past 10,000 years, women, unlike their primate sisters, became economically dependent upon males. The survival of their children depended increasingly upon maintaining a strong bond with a provisioning man." Anne Campbell, *A Mind of Her Own : The Evolutionary Psychology of Women* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 247.

culture itself is a *consequence* and not simply the cause of the evolved (driven by genes responding to experience) human brain.

Call me old-fashioned...

While the evolutionary argument may be seen as essentialist, in no sense does it deny the importance of culture, the environment and individual agency.⁵ *Au contraire*. EP recognises that gender roles are undoubtedly and often unjustifiably reinforced by culture, and undoubtedly entail a degree of performance: more or less conscious role-playing. However, they also have a biological substratum which is the product, not of a lifetime of experience, nor even of hundreds of years of culture, but of two million years of evolution.⁶ Evolution is the end product of nothing other than the interplay of individuals striving for survival and reproductive success with their environment. And where *Homo sapiens* is concerned, the single most decisive element of our *environment* is other humans and culture. Evolutionary theories seek to discover mechanisms of the mind that enable culture/learning to take place and to explain how and why human cultures evolved in the particular ways that they have.

Evolutionary psychology looks primarily to uncover human universals: the emotions and strategies that are common and central to all human experience. While recognising that specific manifestations will often be culture-dependant and may need environmental input to be activated, for example, as in language (Pinker, 1994), EP posits that the specific ways in which the environment will affect individuals (of any given species) also depend on their

⁵ See Matt Ridley, Nature Via Nurture : Genes, Experience, and What Makes Us Human, 1st ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2003) for an accessible well-documented survey.

⁶ Many of our emotional systems, including our sexual emotions, evolved much earlier, although their human form was settled in terms of its current parameters, if not its underlying mechanisms, in the last two million years.

genetically determined information-processing capacity. Likewise, with sex and gender differences, EP seeks not to negate the influence of cultural factors in their expression but to explain how and why fundamental, cross-cultural human gender differences came about. Neither is this to argue for the status quo. Evolutionary psychology does not maintain that any behaviours that can be explained in terms of natural or sexual selection are desirable. The common accusation against biologically and/or evolutionary based theories is that they are reactionary. This is a serious misreading. To equate the natural with the good is to commit the naturalistic fallacy, a fundamental error of scientific reasoning which contemporary evolutionists take great pains to avoid.⁷ EP describes what is as a function of what has been, over the long period of human evolution, not what should or can be. It does NOT assume that behaviours considered to be adaptive, such as male promiscuity and oppressive control of females, are either good or unchangeable.

Males and Females: similarity and difference

The following discussion will be premised on the existence of a certain number of evolved, innate (genetic) though often environmentally triggered and/or culturally reinforced (or repressed) differences between males and females.⁸ It should be noted that the sex differences in question here must be seen as statistical phenomena, not prescriptive norms, and may not necessarily apply to any given individual. (A major challenge for feminism lies precisely in isolating and explaining statistical gender differences without succumbing to

⁷ Moreover, contemporary evolutionary psychology must not be confused with Social Darwinism, an outdated and long discredited misapplication of Darwinian theory. And although evolutionary psychology originally developed (by Tooby and Cosmides, during the 1980s) out of socio-biological enquiry, it has since become a distinct field that should not be confused with human socio-biology. Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, "Conceptual Foundations of Evolutionary Psychology," Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology, ed. David M. Buss (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2005) 14.

⁸ See Steven Pinker, The Blank Slate (London: Penguin, 2002) 337-71 for an overview.

essentialist overstatement or the reactionary misapplication of moral judgments, i.e. the naturalistic fallacy.)

On one hand, evolutionary thinkers have underlined the prevalence of gender similarities in humans as arising out of the shared pressures of natural selection, like disease, predators and famine. However, they have also attempted to isolate and explicate gender differences as arising from the differential workings of sexual selection on human males and females:

Where the sexes differ most clearly, it is the result of sexual, not natural selection. The strategies that enhanced reproductive success for females were not identical to those that enhanced it in men. Through sex-linkage and sex-limitation, evolution has coupled genetically encoded adaptive strategies to the sex of the individual receiving them (Campbell, 2002: 12)

In the remainder of the paper, I will argue that evolved, gender-related adaptive strategies can be seen to underlie the construction of the fatale as feminine archetype.

The fatale as unruly woman and feminine archetype

I will read the fatale, in her many varying guises and disguises, as an archetype of femininity, from both an evolutionary and mythological perspective. Indeed, I would argue that the power of myth itself stems from its ability to encapsulate ancient, evolved human traits within archetypal figures.

Susan Hayward (2005) suggests that the single defining trait of the fatale, apart from her seductiveness, may well be her uncontrollability. Hayward has notably pointed out that in Judeo-Christian cultures, the fatale's origins can be traced back, through numerous cultural manifestations to Jezebel, Salomé, Delilah, Eve and finally to Lilith, the original unruly

female.⁹ In evolutionary terms, this primeval feminine unruliness, this wild and unfixable female sexuality would correspond to the period preceding the development of monogamous pair-bonds and male parental investment, well preceding the advent of patriarchal cultures therefore, in which females as well as dominant males would have had multiple partners. The existence of such a period can be inferred from a number of observable facts. Firstly, (both male and) female promiscuity (and the absence of pair-bonds/durable monogamous relationships) is the socio-sexual arrangement observed in chimpanzees and bonobos (pygmy chimpanzees), our closest relatives. Humans are among the few mammals (3-5% out of some 4,000 species) and more importantly, are (with gibbons) the only apes, to have developed monogamous pair-bonds at all, however tenuous (Schuiling, 2003: 55). Presumably, this was a relatively late development... Secondly, a degree of female promiscuity as a long-standing feature of our species can be reliably deduced from key features of male anatomy and physiology, namely the moderately large size of testes in human males (compared, for example, to the relatively tiny testes of gorillas, who monopolise harems of faithful females) and the presence of killer and blocker sperm, both of which indicate corresponding levels of sperm competition (Shackelford et al., 2005). Thirdly, as in most species that have evolved long-term mating strategies, resulting pair-bonds are of variable duration and monogamy by no means implies unwavering fidelity. Finally, female sexual “unruliness” is evident in the trans-historical and

⁹ “Some say that God created man and woman in His own image on the Sixth Day, giving them charge over the world but that Eve did not yet exist ... God then formed Lilith, the first woman, just as He had formed Adam, except that He used filth and sediment instead of pure dust ... Adam and Lilith never found peace together; for when he wished to lie with her, she took offence at the recumbent posture he demanded. 'Why must I lie beneath you?' she asked. 'I also was made from dust, and am therefore your equal.' Because Adam tried to compel her obedience by force, Lilith, in a rage, uttered the magic name of God, rose into the air and left him.” Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths* (New York: Doubleday, 1964) 65-69. In this version of the myth, Lilith subsequently had many demon partners and bore multitudes of demon offspring which were killed by God.

cross-cultural prevalence of oppressive mate guarding practices (from restrictive dress codes to sequestration, physical and genital mutilation) and intense male sexual jealousy.¹⁰

The unruly femme and male paranoia

These same factors clearly belie the convenient patriarchal myth of innate female chastity versus male promiscuity.¹¹ As does the fatale herself. Her essential unruliness also explains readings of the fatale as embodying male fears of female sexuality (eg. Place, 1980: 41; Doane, 1991: 103; Maxfield, 1996). From an evolutionary perspective, male fears of uncontrollable female sexuality, sexual jealousy and mate guarding tactics can be seen to stem from the evolution of pair-bonds, male parental investment and consequent fears over paternity certainty. Human males always run the risk that their sexual, emotional and economic investment in a female partner and her children will be repaid by betrayal – cuckoldry, resulting in a serious waste of resources and genetic opportunity through the unwitting investment in another man's offspring, or even in genetic suicide if the man bears no offspring of his own. Paternity uncertainty is theorized to be the ultimate, evolutionary cause of male sexual jealousy, and as such, need not be consciously registered.

¹⁰ Studies on differential feelings of jealousy in men and women suggest that although both are troubled by infidelity with equal intensity, men are relatively more worried by sexual infidelity; women by emotional: David P. Schmitt, "Fundamentals of Human Mating Strategies," Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology, ed. David M. Buss (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2005) 266, Lorne Campbell and Bruce J. Ellis, "Commitment, Love and Mate Retention," Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology, 433-34. For a comprehensive review of studies and literature to date, see Brad J. Sagarin, "Reconsidering Evolved Sex Differences in Jealousy: Comment on Harris (2003)," Personality and Social Psychology Review 9.1 (2005). Somewhat predictably, men reveal themselves to harbour more deep seated fears over paternity certainty and probably loss of status, women over withdrawal of resources and protection; though both fear emotional abandonment, betrayal and loss of status to some extent.

¹¹ Although females do tend to be less promiscuous than males, as would be expected, given that it is to females' reproductive advantage to expend more time and energy on maternal parental effort (ensuring the survival and reproduction of a necessarily limited number of children), whereas the optimal strategy for males is to invest less in parenting and more in mating effort, which can potentially result in the passing on of one's genes to a large number of offspring. Various studies indicate that extra-pair mating in humans is around 50% for men, 30% for women: David M. Buss, Evolutionary Psychology: The New Science of the Mind (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999) in G.A. Schuiling, "The Benefit and the Doubt: Why Monogamy?," Journal of Psychosomatic Obstetrics and Gynecology 24.1 (2003): 57.

Put differently, intense sexual jealousy in men has its evolutionary roots in the fact that men can never be entirely sure that their children are their own, while female duplicity (real or suspected, emotional or explicitly sexual) is the proximal or immediate, consciously registered cause. In *noir*, as a distillation of the dangers of the male-female dynamic, a major source of narrative tension arises from the male protagonist's uncertainty surrounding the fatale's honesty, more specifically, her emotional and/or sexual loyalties. This, in my opinion, is the fundamental and somewhat obvious underlying motive for the noir hero's obsessive investigation of the femme that has been the subject of so much critical discussion (eg. Doane, 1991: 91; Gledhill, 1998: 28). This is what is at the heart of the "endemic epistemological uncertainty" (Dyer, 2002: 110) theorized as being simultaneously embodied in the femme and fundamental to the ethos of noir. According to patriarchal ideology, the surface beauty of the female form should be a mirror that reflects both the woman's moral purity and her man's status. The femme has the potential to negate both, since she may be a devil in disguise whose treachery will undermine the male's virility, the core of his identity. The mirror no longer reflects a single discernable truth.

Paranoia as Visual investigation

The question of the femme's duplicity (as well as her narcissism) is thus typically signified in noir by the use of mirrors, the quintessential visual reference being the climatic hall of mirrors scene in *The Lady from Shanghai* (Welles, 1948). Truth and knowledge are concealed and replaced by the enigma of the femme as multiplication of appearances, a multitude of faces, each one of them apparently false, each progressively shattered. Questions of the moral or criminal guilt or innocence of the femme – What is she hiding? Can she be trusted? Is she a gold-digger? A cold-blooded killer? Both? Surely such an angelic form

could not lie? - must be read in terms of the fundamental issues of emotional/sexual fidelity. Sex is indeed what underlies epistemological uncertainty and male paranoia in noir, though not in any Freudian or Lacanian sense. In evolutionary terms, it is sexual jealousy and ultimately uncertain paternity that make the fatale “simply a catchphrase for the danger of sexual difference and the demands and risks desire poses for the man” (Cowie, 1997: 125).

As well as the use of the mirror, the obsessive close-framing of the femme’s enigmatic facial features, when not simply emphasizing her desirability, are reflective of the same paranoid emotional/sexual investigation. As in *Lady from Shanghai*, Otto Preminger’s *Laura* (1944) is emblematic of these processes, though in this film, it is Laura’s life-size portrait that replaces the mirror. Here (unlike Welles’ incessantly masochistic close framing of Rita Hayworth), the close-up is used parsimoniously, almost exclusively to reveal the true motive of the detective protagonist’s investigation: ostensibly legal, in reality emotional. During the first (flashback) section of the film, Gene Tierney (in scene 22 minutes out of 45) is generally framed in wide or mid shots, the investigative mode being subtly suggested by three zoom-ins to MCU. Framing becomes progressively tighter following Laura’s reappearance (45 minutes into the film), when her status as object of desire is complicated by MacPherson’s suspicions of her. The interrogation scene, the most closely framed in the film, in which Laura is ‘grilled’ at the police station, uses both mise en scene, shot scale and diegetic lighting to signify the obsessively personal nature of MacPherson’s enquiry. ‘Grilled’ (3 minutes) consists of a series of six CUs on Laura alternating with invasive two shots as she seeks to prove her innocence and avoid the detective’s sadistic, semi-accusing gaze. The scene reveals that, as much as his investigation of her as possible murder suspect, MacPherson’s deepest doubts centre on her emotional loyalties, his final question is the

crucial one: is she in love with the other man (Shelby Carpenter) or not? Following this scene, once the hero is sure of the femme's innocence and affections,¹² once fears over her possible fatale status have been dispelled and that (like Gilda) she "didn't do any of those things...", the camera can relax: the final section (11 minutes) contains only 3 CUs on Tierney (showing her progressive realisation of Waldo's monstrous, criminal nature) and the one, brief kiss between the newly constituted couple is filmed in un-erotic, fully lit mid-shot.

For both protagonist and spectator alike, the question of the femme's loyalty is the crucial and fundamental issue in film noir, and not an unconscious Oedipal investigation of sexual difference, as psychoanalytical accounts have claimed. It is for this reason that the blackest of classic noirs--*The Strange Loves of Martha Ivers* (Milestone, 1946), *Out of the Past* (Tourneur, 1947), *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Garnett 1946), *The Lady from Shanghai*--are those in which the duplicity of the fatale is either established beyond a shadow of a doubt, or worse still, remains unanswered (Constable, 2005), creating a vortex of "epistemological uncertainty" and paranoia into which the narrative swirls and disappears, most often taking both hero and fatale with it.

Paranoia and Risk

"I knew I had hold of a red-hot poker..." (Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity*)

¹² Like Gilda, as Angela Martin has noted, Laura "only expresses *anything* of the femme fatale inasmuch as that is projected through the behaviour of the men around her. Her attraction for them becomes 'fatal', not because of anything she does, but because they make the mistake of thinking they can own her..." Angela Martin, "Gilda Didn't Do Any of Those Things You've Been Losing Sleep Over!": The Central Women of 40s Films Noirs," *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan, New ed. (London: BFI Pub., 1998) 212-13. (*original emphasis*).

Gauging, winning and keeping the heart of the fatale... a risky business. All of which begs the question of why the noir hero falls for her in the first place, particularly when the narrative often provides him with a choice. Why is it that he wavers between and almost invariably prefers the sexy, mysterious, uncontrollable, potentially treacherous fatale over the homely promise of maternal security and sexual fidelity offered by the good woman or ingénue (*Out of the Past*; *The Killers*, Siodmak 1946; *Vertigo*, Hitchcock 1958)? The proximal narrative cause is that the noir hero is blinded by lust (desire and/or greed) so that he is unable to discern or be deterred by the fatale's duplicity.

In terms of ultimate causes, I will offer a brief, partial response. The most desirable members of both sexes, those with the highest mate value, represent a costly and potentially dangerous investment, precisely because they are the objects of intense competition. They are the hardest to get and even harder to keep, tending to make the least reliable partners because they are heavily solicited by potential lovers and because, knowing they can attract any number of high quality mates, can easily afford the risk of abandoning an existing relationship. There is therefore an unconscious correlation between desirability and unreliability, for both men and women: danger is sexy. And vice versa.

In the case of the fatale, her volatility, dangerous appeal and status as feminine archetype are thus intimately causally connected. (One could say the same of the less common figure of the *homme fatal*, but that is another story.) Moreover, I would argue that the dangerous challenge represented by the femme is ultimately linked to the physical risks males have

always had to take, and have therefore evolved to enjoy taking, in order to compete for and monopolise sexual access to the most desirable (young and beautiful) females.¹³

High-risk competition by males for young, beautiful women is particularly the case in societies where the latter are typically the married property of older, dominant (wealthy) males. In noir, this phenomenon feeds into the classic scenario of the handsome hero becoming involved with the seductive, possibly treacherous young wife of an older, usually wealthy man whom she wishes him to eliminate (*Double Indemnity*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *La bête humaine*, Renoir, 1938; *Human Desire*, Lang 1954), a point to which we will return presently.

Woman as spectacle:

Feminists have long deplored the reduction of woman in film to visual surface and erotic spectacle, her imprisonment within the frame as largely passive object of the male gaze. In this section, I will present the fatale as both subject and object, within the context of an

¹³ On a hormonal level, increased risk-taking behaviours in males, particularly in adolescents, correlates strongly with increased levels of testosterone and has been the subject of extensive research. See for example, C. R. Badcock, *Evolutionary Psychology : A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, Mass.: Polity Press : Blackwell, 2000) 8-9, J. Dabbs, & Dabbs, M., *Heroes, Rogues, and Lovers: Testosterone and Behavior*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000). In terms of the evolution of male risk-taking behaviours and their connection to sexual competition, I offer two examples. Firstly, studies of hunting practices in hunter-gatherer societies suggest that men hunt primarily for the status and increased mating opportunities successful hunting provides, and not simply to provision their legitimate spouse and offspring with a source of calories and protein Bobbi S. Low, *Why Sex Matters: A Darwinian Look at Human Behaviour* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) 115. Secondly, studies of the Yanomamo have found that men who have killed in inter-tribal raids have greater chances of attracting wives and mistresses Napoleon A. Chagnon, *Yanomamö : The Last Days of Eden* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992). In Ridley, *Nature Via Nurture : Genes, Experience, and What Makes Us Human* 240.

evolutionary explanation for the trans-cultural status of woman as visual spectacle as arising out of the specific dynamics of human sexual selection.

In many bird species, of which the peacock provides the most flamboyant example (see Ridley 1994: 127-64), it is the male who is visually adorned to provide the erotic spectacle, parading about in the hopes of being chosen as a mate by the dowdy, homely, brown-feathered female. The peacock's tail is the visual means by which the male indirectly advertises the quality of his genetic contribution to the female in the form of sperm. Crucially, this is his only contribution, since he provides no material resources, taking no part in nest-building or rearing the young. He is the quintessential playboy, using his physical charms to obtain as many mates as he can, opting entirely for quantity over quality since he will literally, love 'em and leave 'em. In humans, the situation is (usually) different. This is due to the simple, highly unusual and momentous fact that our species has evolved long-term pair-bonds and male parental investment. Since men have opted to largely restrict their mating efforts to one woman for whose offspring they provide resources, it has become in their reproductive interest to choose the best available woman in whom to invest, i.e. the most desirable partner in reproductive terms. As in the case of the peacock, though inversed in terms of gender, the means of gauging female reproductive fitness in humans have been primarily (though not solely) visual. Of course, women also appraise men visually. However, in most cultures, since it is heterosexual men who monopolise resources and power, women's value has been seen almost exclusively in terms of visually coded reproductive fitness and it is the female body that has become the primary site of visual spectacle. Empirical, cross-cultural research confirms the common sense intuition that men place greater emphasis on physical beauty than do women. In terms of the attributes most sought after in a mate, although both men and women value physical

(beauty), intellectual (intelligence, humour), moral (kindness) and economic (wealth) qualities; wealth and status are typically rated higher by women while physical beauty is typically rated higher by men (Buss, 1989). The emphasis on feminine beauty and the construction of woman as visual spectacle, as quasi-universal features of our species, can thus be seen to represent the evolutionary price women have been forced to pay (unwittingly perhaps) in exchange for male parental investment: the establishment of pair-bonds (durable love relationships), protection and provision of material resources.

Which brings us to examine the precise nature of the visual spectacle, i.e. the specific attributes of feminine beauty, particularly as they relate to the fatale. Fashion trends and cultural variation notwithstanding, evolutionary psychology posits that in humans as in other animal species, there exist a number of universal features of physical sexual attractiveness, which are essentially markers of reproductive fitness: for women, the potential to bear, and for men, the potential to father, protect and provide for many fit, healthy offspring. In women, unsurprisingly, these visual markers include: youth (indicating optimum reproductive potential); regular features, clear skin and shiny hair (absence of parasitic infestation); firm, full breasts; and a low waist-hip ratio (absence of an existing pregnancy). In other words, cross-culturally recognized definitions of feminine beauty equate broadly to visual markers of health and female reproductive fitness (Sugiyama, 2005). The make-up and tight-fitting or suggestively flowing costumes that are the sartorial hallmark of the fatale, the sensual lighting and framing of her face and body, are unambiguously designed to accentuate and display these features. Andrew Spicer's description of Ava Gardner as Kitty Collins in *The Killers* sees the figure as possessing "a dreamlike sensuality, the apotheosis of mythical femininity, sexy and feline, with her sloe-shaped eyes, curvaceous high cheekbones, cleft chin, full, upturned mouth, all an open

sexual invitation... reclining suggestively... attractively lit to accentuate the lines of her body.” (Spicer, 2002: 91). The ability of the fatale to capture the scopophilic gaze of the male protagonist and both male and female spectator alike, the explanation for her physical allure and source of her power, is ultimately (in evolutionary terms) that her seductive beauty and youth represent the epitome of feminine reproductive fitness. Of course, differentially gendered and sexually orientated spectatorial desire will mean that the scopophilic drive (present in females as well as in males, despite patriarchal restrictions on women’s looking) may derive from one or other of two causes: either the desire to possess or the desire to *be* the fatale, or in some cases, both. Either way, psychoanalytical explanations for scopophilia as voyeuristic sadism and fetishistic over-investment in the image of the fatale as iconic signifier of Oedipal angst (her tight-fitting, elongated dresses causing her body to resemble the phallus, whose lack can thus be disavowed, allaying unconscious castration anxiety in the male etc., etc.) are as redundant as they are comically improbable.¹⁴

From spectacle to subjectivity

Male control of female sexuality is facilitated and perpetuated by female passivity and selfless solicitude, which qualities are therefore commonly elevated in patriarchal ideologies to the highest of feminine virtues. The fatale’s power, her appeal and simultaneous threat lie in the fact that she cheats the system by using her status as feminine icon to eschew the so-called feminine virtues of passive obedience and selfless solicitude, daring to combine feminine beauty and intelligence with sexual assertiveness and (so-called) masculine agency.

¹⁴ On the other hand, psychoanalytical readings of the fatale that draw on Deleuze’s theorization of masochism, in particular Gaylyn Studlar, "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema," Women in Film Noir, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1998) appear to provide a more plausible account of the visual and sexual power of the fatale. In their emphasis on the primacy of the mother, masochistic theories are perhaps less incompatible with an evolutionary perspective.

She exploits her position as visual object as a means to power. In this sense, the fatale can remind us of the inherent, etymologically inscribed reversibility of subject-object relations in human interaction: the capacity to be an active subject depends on the simultaneous capacity to become an object (of desire), subjected to the desiring gaze of the other. As a number of writers have pointed out, the fatale is simultaneously an archetypal object of desire in patriarchal terms of the gaze while also daring to wield the gaze herself, claiming agency and committing the cardinal sins of active disobedience and selfish desire: wanting and getting things for herself (Place, 1998: 56). Instead of graciously bestowing her beauty on her legitimate spouse as an asset for his enjoyment and reproductive success, she uses it as a tool or as a weapon in the sex-war, to obtain either a genetically superior mate (stronger, more physically, morally and/or intellectually attractive) or her own independence.

What does the femme want?

“Lots of money and a little love” (Dora/Simone Signoret, in *Manèges*, Yves Allégret, France, 1950)

Human males provide two types of interdependent, sometimes overlapping resources to females: material and genetic, that is, money and love. Put differently, in terms of ultimate evolutionary causes, men are attractive to women because 1) they may possess the wealth and status that will ensure the provision of food and protection to a woman and her offspring or 2) they may display certain desirable genetic attributes (again, important for provision of food and protection) like general health and physical strength i.e. handsomeness, increasing the likelihood of fathering off-spring with similar qualities.

The ideal male from a female perspective, is therefore the Prince Charming who possesses both material and social resources (wealth and status) and genetic fitness (strength, handsomeness, etc.). Since most males sadly fail to live up to this ideal, women are often forced to choose between a good provider and a genetically superior mate. In a number of classic French noirs the fatale pursues the optimal female reproductive strategy within monogamous patriarchy, that is to marry a provider, who will often be genetically inferior (old, probably physically weak and/or unattractive), either bleed him of his money and attempt to replace him with a genetically superior lover (*Manèges*); or simply persuade the lover to get rid of the husband so that the adulterous pair can share the resources (*La bête humaine*; *Ascenseur pour l'Echaffaud/Lift to the Scaffold*, Louis Malle, 1959). Interestingly, in the latter films, the genetically inferior spouse is also constructed as morally and/or intellectually deficient: stupid, miserly or corrupt, thereby positioning the spectator more or less on the side of the criminal lovers.¹⁵ In this way, the desire of the fatale constitutes an open challenge to aspects of patriarchal morality and authority. Moreover, the adulterous fatale heroine is not always constructed as lacking in moral scruples. In *Thérèse Raquin*, she has been forced by poverty and a sense of moral obligation to marry a sickly, mean-spirited cousin, to whom she remains faithful for fifteen years before succumbing to the persistent charm of a virile foreigner. Here, it is precisely the fatale's sense of responsibility that prevents her from leaving a loveless childless marriage, tragically resulting in the husband's murder as well as her own and her lover's demise.

In these films, illicit, romantic (genetically driven) love is seen as morally purer than traditional (resource or status driven) marriage by which older men monopolise access to

¹⁵ In Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques* (1955), by contrast, the more sinister twist is that it is the good wife who has the resources and must therefore be eliminated. Since she is not constructed negatively, here it is the murderous fatale and her lover who appear monstrous.

the most desirable women. Admittedly, in the classic period, the threat to the established order is partially contained by means of narrative punishment (the death or imprisonment of the fatale and/or her lover). Only partially however, since (in all the above French filmic examples except *Manèges*), the narrative resolution as punishment is constructed as unjust, reinforcing the spectator's identification with or sympathy for the fatale as *fatalitaire* (the unwittingly instrument of doom for her lover and/or herself) and her partner in crime as tragic lovers, thereby questioning the order that condemns them.

Of course, the American spider-woman fatale often takes the above strategy even further still, seeking to ditch the lover too and keep all the resources for herself, in a triple refusal of monogamy, maternity and emotional attachment in any form. I would suggest that it is this emotional poverty rather than simply her desire for a measure of financial independence that condemns her as monstrous and justifies (positions the spectator to accept) her narrative punishment. It has been argued that classic noir insidiously conflates the two, equating the fatale's desire for material independence with emotional coldness in order to cajole women back into the kitchen and re-establish patriarchal order. Such a reading is nonetheless counterbalanced by the presence of fatale-like characters in other American films of the classic era, in whom professional assertiveness and financial independence are combined not with ruthless, duplicitous egotism but warmth, sincerity (*Laura*, Vienna in *Johnny Guitar*, Ray, 1954) and/or maternal devotion (*Mildred Pierce*, Curtiz, 1945).

The violent femme: myth, wish fulfilment, warning

The ruthlessness and violent criminality of the fatale (eg. *Out of the Past*; *Double Indemnity*; *Les diaboliques*; *Gun Crazy* (Lewis, 1950); *Black Widow* (Rafelson, 1987); *Basic Instinct* (Verhoeven, 1991); *The Last Seduction* (Dahl, 1994)) stand in stark contrast to social reality and point to her construction as patriarchal myth. Not that women are incapable of homicidal violence.¹⁶ But, unlike the psychopathic grandeur of the murderous adulteress or spider-woman, real-life female criminality is mostly on a small scale, subsistence level consisting of low risk, low gain property crimes. Women most often offend to survive, to feed themselves and their families; men, on the other hand, most often engage in high-risk criminal behaviour in order to attain status, which elevates their chances in the mating game (Campbell, 2002: 221-22). Moreover, though many fatale figures are portrayed as violent killers, whether out of sexual jealousy, passion or cold ambition, in reality of course it is men who are statistically more likely to rape, seriously wound or murder, particularly in “crimes of passion” (Archer, 2000). Of 214 jealousy-motivated partner homicides in Canada, the husband was the killer in 195 (Daly and Wilson, 1988).

In the light of the above, the violence of the fatale would seem to serve a triple purpose. Firstly, as noted, she may be a site of displacement for male violence which may be disavowed and projected onto the body of the bad woman (Williams, 1993). Secondly, the fatale may well provide a salutary outlet for repressed female anger and violence at multiple forms of patriarchal injustice (Pidduck, 1995). This sentiment is also undoubtedly behind feminist comments that what women retain of the fatale is not her narrative punishment but her magnificent agency and challenge to patriarchal supremacy (Place, 1998: 48, 63). Thirdly, the challenge takes on new proportions in a number of more recent international noirs (*L'été meurtrier* / *One Deadly Summer*, Jean Becker, France 1983; *Bound*, A & L

¹⁶ And, of course, noir also foregrounds male violence and criminality.

Wachowski, USA, 1996; *Daebakno-yeseo maechoon-badaka tomaksalbae danghan yeogosaeng ajik Daebakno-ye Issda / Teenage Hooker Became Killing Machine in Daebakroh*, Gee-woong Nam, Korea, 2000) that reinvent the fatale as avenging angel. *Teenage Hooker* gives a particularly graphic rendition of this figure.¹⁷ In her reconstruction scene, the young Hooker is tellingly positioned and framed to resemble an angelic Madonna figure surrounded by a halo of light. In the final, delirious revenge scene, she dances seductively for the teacher, lifts her school-girl skirt to reveal a giant dildo-machine-gun, then forces it into his mouth before pulling the trigger. The reversal of power relations and none too subtle symbolism are reinforced cinematically by the suspenseful mise en scene and use of an extreme low camera angle on the bad father figure of the teacher, now ironically powerless, terrified, immobilized and totally at the mercy of the girl he had so ruthlessly exploited and sought to annihilate. The femme as violent avenger is an unambiguous warning to patriarchal cultures: that men continue to disregard, exploit and oppress women at their own peril.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to re-read the femme in film noir as embodying multiple manifestations of archetypal femininity that is a product, not of cultural conditioning or Oedipal scenarios, but of our evolution as a species, particularly in terms of the vicissitudes of sexual selection and ensuing battle of the sexes. In opting for a broad, overview approach as opposed to a close-reading, the intention has been give a sense of a) the cross-cultural, trans-historical dimension of the femme b) the range and depth of her myriad constitutive elements and dynamics.

¹⁷ A young student and occasional prostitute falls pregnant to her teacher who has her murdered. She is subsequently revived and rebuilt as a cyborg who takes revenge on her killers, one by one, ending with the teacher.

I have intentionally prioritised discussion involving points of divergence with canonical theory. Nonetheless, many of my conclusions overlap with existing feminist readings and I hope to have demonstrated that an evolutionary approach can also be profoundly feminist. I have read the femme as an archetypal and iconic constellation of evolved female strategies designed to attain agency and power in a male-dominated world. As such, she indeed figures an on-going crisis of masculinity in contemporary cultures, representing a threat, a defiant challenge and a necessary warning.

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