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Author

Stulman, Valerie

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Valerie Stulman

“There is no one true version of which all the others are but copies or distortions.
Every version belongs to the myth.”
Claude Levi-Strauss, The Structural Study of Myth

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Film noir is a relatively small group of films, which span the years between World War II and the late 1950s. These films share a number of stylistic conventions which include the use of various permutations of stereotypical bad girl/femme fatale and good girl/household nun (Martin 207) type characters. In most of these films, women and their sexuality are considered to be (as Freud believed) “a dark continent” (Breger 331), symbolically “Other” (Leitch 1283), outside the norm, therefore not ‘normal.’ This phallogentric bias permeates film noir (as well as most film up until that point, and since,) and “reflects the normal status of women within contemporary society” (Harvey 38). However, due to noir’s topsy-turvy nature, where contradictions, nightmares, narrative disconnects, and role reversals abound, “the normal representation of women as the founders of families undergoes an interesting displacement” (38).

This displacement came about in society and film noir in part as a reaction to the horrifying effects of World War II on America and the survivors of the Nazi terror. The changes wrought by such devastating emotional and psychic scars on this population are reflected throughout noir films. And, because there is no ‘normal’ in much of film noir narrative, what was previously considered to be normal in society, is now abnormal in the world of noir. Included among them are the notions that the authority of police is always suspect, and the overwhelming/constant goodness of wives/mothers and their domain (family) might be an illusion. As such, “the absence of normal family relations in these films... hints that important shifts in the position of women in American society [have begun.]” (38). Women such as Laura Hunt, in Laura (1944), Mildred Pierce, in Mildred Pierce (1945) and Kathy in Out of the Past (1947) are all women who in various ways

push past the prescribed boundaries of 1940s 'normal' womanhood. They are empowered outside of the heretofore considered singularly legitimate and 'normal' realm of family, and in doing so break ground for all American women, who in coming decades will go on to re-define themselves as more than one-dimensional stereotypes. These women in film noir are multi-faceted and very fully human.

Regarding women, in 1974, Molly Haskell wrote, there is a "big lie" which has been "perpetrated on Western society... [It is] so deeply ingrained in our social behavior that merely to recognize it is to risk unraveling the entire fabric of civilization" (Haskell 1). The lie: "women's inferiority"(1). Haskell goes on, "in the movie business we have had an industry dedicated, for the most part, to reinforcing the lie"(2). And yet, the 1930's and 40's were a time in Hollywood when interesting women's parts were plentiful. Despite the women's film, precursor to today's chick flick, which tempered the fantasy of love and family "with the rationalization needed to justify the disappointments of marriage, Hollywood mostly promoted a romantic fantasy of marital roles, and chronically ignored the facts" (3). Not so with film noir.

It creates a world which often doesn't make sense, is filled with contradictions, nightmares, narrative disconnects and role reversals. Borde and Chaumeton, in Towards A Definition of Film Noir, state that film noir is, "nightmarish, weird, erotic, ambivalent and cruel" (18). In addition to the American male post-war crisis of the mid 20th century, noir is also influenced by immigrant, European male filmmakers who were creatively rooted in "the nineteenth century's vein of grim romanticism...and the murky, fog-filled atmosphere of pre-war French movies" (Higham and Greenberg 27). Imports such as Lang, Siodmak, Preminger, and Wilder brought with them an expressionistic (27), "dime

store Freudian” (Haskell 165) way of looking at the world. Many of them survived of the horrors Hitler, losing family, friends, property, status, sometimes everything. As such, film noir expressed all that they had been through and all that they knew, offering again and again examples “of abnormal or monstrous behaviour, which defy the patterns established for human social interaction” (Higham and Greenberg 35). But, when it came to women, their perspective remained constant, paternalistic at best, misogynistic at worst. Their use of psychological motifs and underpinnings were heavily influenced by the brilliant father of modern psychology, Sigmund Freud. But, Freud is no champion of women; rather he is a perpetuator of Haskell’s ‘big lie.’

Psychoanalyst/professor Louis Breger says in his biography of Freud that Freud’s, “specific theories about female psychology never progressed very far from the prejudices of his childhood” (330). He goes on to talk about Freud’s famous “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, in which he states, “ . . .women—partly owing to the stunting effect of civilized conditions and partly owing to their conventional secretiveness and insincerity—are still veiled in an impenetrable obscurity” (331). These attitudes towards women are evidenced over and over again in film noir. Even in the face of total annihilation from such demon enemies as Hitler, the ‘big lie’ persists, at least on the surface.

If women in film follow a prescribed stereotype, so to do men. Prior to film noir, the male hero was classic, romantic someone not “devoid of the moral framework” (Porfirio 83) which is so evident in a film noir protagonist. Much of noir’s ideological bias idealizes alienation and a cynically existential view of life. This life-view is usually espoused by the ubiquitous man-hero, who almost always has a somewhat murky past.

Alain Silver in the introduction to his Film Noir Reader, talks about a “crisis of masculinity in Film Noir,”(Silver 5) stating that it seems to originate from a struggle in Judeo-Christian patriarchal structures at the mid-point of the 20th Century, due to “unprecedented social upheaval of two world wars compounded by economic turmoil and genocides on every continent” (5). As such, it can be deduced that the aforementioned ‘crisis of masculinity’ certainly helped to open up the doors for possible shift in the purview of women’s roles in America.

Regarding women in film noir, in 1955, Borde and Chaumeton state, “There is ambiguity surrounding the woman: the femme fatale who is fatal for herself. Frustrated, and deviant, half predator, half prey, detached, yet ensnared, she falls victim to her own traps”(22). This thinking, which is commonly thought of as legitimate regarding noir, is as out of date as a ‘bobby soxer in a poodle skirt.’ With the evolution of feminist/queer theory, a deeper look at the film noir unknowable ‘Other’ (women) hints at a coming shift in their state/place in society.

It started with women going out and working while their men were at war; it continued with them making ‘head of household decisions’ while the same men were away, at the same war. And, when they came back, the divorce rates increased significantly” (Anderson 1). Women were no longer complacent; they were getting ready to break out of their patriarchally assigned stereotypes. Women liked working and earning money. They liked the power/empowerment that came with it. They were neither “the exciting, childless whores, nor the boring potentially childbearing sweethearts” (Harvey 38) who are constant throughout film. Women wanted to be and have more. Their new found desire for independence seemed to be a revelation to men, one that was

more often than not filled with astonishment and a touch of horror. The norm in film noir is, according to Richard Dyer, is that women are:

above all else unknowable. It is not so much their evil as their unknowability (and attractiveness) that makes them fatal for the hero. To the degree that culture is defined by men, what is, and is known, is male. Film noir thus starkly divides the world into that which is unknown and unknowable (female and again by inference only, that which is known [male]. (Dyer, Resistance 116)

But, the women of noir are only unknowable to men. They are only a ‘dark continent’ to men. As Helene Cixous says in her seminal essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” “The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable—it is still unexplored only because we’ve been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable” (Cixous 2048). And, a few bold people in Hollywood in the 1940’s were willing, even wanted to explore the ‘dark continent’ and legitimize the full range of female behavior.

While much of the Hollywood machine continued to perpetuate the ‘big lie’ by juxtaposing the noir femme fatale as one possible ‘unknowable’ danger from within, a number of women stars, writers and producers were active in making noir films; they sometimes struggled, argued with male colleagues, but in hindsight, ultimately succeeded in promoting women as multi-faceted beings who could do more than make babies, beds and eggs. One such example is the film Laura.

Ambitious and beautiful career girl/woman Laura Hunt in the Otto Preminger directed film Laura (1944) is often characterized as a femme fatale by contemporary male film critics. And, therein lies the problem. As writer, professor, film editor Angela Martin says:

Inevitably, both the definition of the generic term and the definition of the ubiquitous femme fatale were essentially determined by film theory when it was still male-dominated... The mythic femme fatale, or literally fatal woman means such things as, (1) causing or capable of causing death, (2)

ruinous, disastrous, (3) decisively important, (4) destined, inevitable. The femme fatale carries all these levels of meaning, hence the easy slippage from deadliness to sexuality as weapon... (206)

Gene Tierney plays the title role of Laura as ambitious, spunky, and kind. She also seeks business success, financial independence and love. She is not a murderess, everyone loves her, and yet she is still considered to be a femme fatale. Although she strives to break out of the mold of the prescribed female role her mother and everyone else has in mind for her, she does it legitimately. First, Laura, as is typical in business, works hard, takes a risk and gets a mentor. Most successful men in business rise through corporate ranks precisely through the aid of such helpers. Aspiring male business-moguls usually garner success through hard work, being in the right place at the right time, and being helped by mentors. Mentorship often comes to men by way of their automatic membership in that ubiquitous male institution called 'the boys club.' The difference with Laura Hunt is that when her spunk and risk taking attracts interest, and garners her a mentor, the male who steps forward to help is not one to be trusted, at least not from the standard patriarchal perspective. It is suggested through actor mannerisms and visual metaphor that this mentor, played by Clifton Webb, is a homosexual, which makes him 'Other' too, and as deviant as she. The deviance is proved when Laura's mentor ultimately is revealed to be the murderer of the film. Although Laura is not the murderer herself, she is considered to be a femme fatale because her beauty and charm is so overpowering that naturally it would drive any man, but most especially a deviant, to murder.

The moment Laura re-enters the scene after a long weekend absence and supposed death, she is framed in white light and dressed in a lightly colored suit. She looks more like an angel than a possible murderess. And so, the 'big lie' is in action

again. For here is where tough, muscled, handsome Detective MacPherson, played by Dana Andrews, comes into play. He's previously only seen Laura as an oversized painting which hangs above the fireplace of her expensively decorated apartment and fantasized about her romantically. When she returns, he now gets to take the fantasy painting and put it on its feet, literally. Laura, who shimmers in white light and moral superiority, is as unreal in her re-appearance as is her painting. "The angelically glowing woman is an extreme representation precisely because it is an idealization...[and] The ideal itself [is] unstable, at once attracting and repelling both men and women" (Dyer White 127-130). If a woman like Laura is morally superior, then she is also trapped by the moral obligation and demands placed upon her for being placed on such a high pedestal. The Hollywood 'big lie' is again perpetuated when a little later in the film, Laura quickly becomes attracted to Detective MacPherson, (after realizing that her gigolo fiancé, played by Vincent Price, is really a 'no-goodnick') when he brings her groceries and offers to make breakfast. But, Laura deftly steps up to the domestic/patriarchal plate by saying, "Suppose you set the table while I get breakfast... My mother always listened to my dreams of a career sympathetically, then taught me another recipe." Laura, successful businesswoman, is, underneath it all, really just looking for domestic bliss. This interestingly sets the stage for the conflict many women will face in later decades when they are forced to choose between career and family, or try to find a way to do it all.

Laura was originally written as a stage play by Vera Caspary, who was a screenwriter, novelist, magazine writer, and member of the Communist Party. She decided to write it "in order to get away from politics.... The play was finished in

October 1941: Pearl Harbor was bombed in December, and a week later Caspary was laid off by Paramount, where she had been working as a screenwriter” (Martin 211).

Ultimately, Otto Preminger convinced 20th Century Fox to purchase it. But later, Caspary had a dispute with Preminger after looking at the screenplay, which she did not write. Although there are three credited screenwriters, (one of them being a woman) the two men, Jay Drattler, and Samuel Huffenstein are considered to be primary:

She [Caspary] believed that he [Preminger] had turned her play into a commonplace detective story, dulling the characters, especially Laura... and when she told Preminger that editors in New York had asked her to write another sexy heroine like Laura, he replied, according to Caspary, that Laura has no sex. She has to keep a gigolo. (211-212)

So, just because Laura attracts the wrong man, and isn't married, she is sexless, but because of her beauty, dangerous to men. The same could be said for Joan Crawford in Mildred Pierce.

Mildred Pierce, another film noir/women's movie, was released in 1945, and although no women are listed in the screenwriting credits on film, Ann Martin states in the appendix to her essay on central women characters in film noir, that indeed there was a woman screenwriter, Catharine Turney (223), along with the credited Randal MacDougall.

In this film, Mildred, like Laura, has ambitions to succeed, but not because she wants to do more than fulfill her dutiful role as a wonderful wife and mother. She goes after business success precisely so she can be a better mother. In fact, the entire movie is about Mildred Pierce legitimizing her ambition in the name of motherhood. When Mildred Pierce's husband storms out after she accuses him of being a philanderer, (which the film never states to be true) Mildred goes out and builds an empire, so she can take care of her children and provide them with all they need to grow and prosper. Only thing

is, they don't grow or prosper in any acceptable fashion. One child dies, and the other turns into a money grubbing, teenage sociopath. So, the message of this film is not for women to be all that they can be, but rather it demonstrates in great dramatic detail how dire the consequences can become, if a woman strays too far from her righteous path. It's further insinuated that Mildred becomes too man-like when she learns to drink like one:

Ida: You never used to drink during the day.

Mildred: I never used to drink at all, just a little habit I picked up from men.

Ida: Oh men, I never yet met one of them who didn't have the instincts of a heel. Sometimes I wish I could get along without 'em.

Mildred: You've never been married have you, Ida?

Ida: No, when men get around me, they get allergic to wedding rings. You know, big sister, good ole Ida. You can talk it over man to man. I'm getting awfully tired of men talking to me man to man.

Mildred: I'll have mine straight.

Ida: If you can take it, I can.

The message here is that they can't take it. They are no better off being without men than any woman is. Ultimately, your man, whether philanderer or gigolo, should be wearing the pants. Women have no business drinking their whiskey straight, or during the day. There is even one scene where Mildred wears a little top hat on her head, instead of one of the more feminine hats of the day, which were so popular. She also ends up marrying her gigolo/alcoholic boyfriend in more of a business deal than a love match. Mildred thinks that the marriage will help her relationship with her eldest daughter. Instead, the girl ends up having an affair with him and killing him later. Even though Mildred is not a femme fatale in the traditional sense, men die literally and metaphorically because of her. They are not expected to be responsible for their own actions. Interestingly, by the end of the movie, Mildred re-unites with her first husband, who has turned out to be solid, true-blue, and completely misunderstood. The message again: women should give up their

lives as pseudo-men and be loyal, even if it takes their real husbands awhile to find their footing.

The good news is that Mildred is neither passive, nor a victim. She is filled with grim determination, smarts and a will to succeed. If she's not the perfect mother, neither is her husband/ex-husband/soon-to-be-husband the perfect father. Her love is never questioned, and her intelligence is never doubted. Certainly, she is a woman in need of a better ending, but sadly, women like her will not get such choices, or alternative endings for another twenty years or so.

But, what about the real femme fatale in film noir? Clearly, there are true murderesses, gun-toting women who use their beauty, charms and revolvers to get what they want. Women like Kathy, played by Jane Greer in Out of the Past, exemplify this classic femme fatale character. There is no one more cool or collected than Kathy. Whether on the run from her gangster husband, or with him, she has a plan, freedom. But, the freedom she desires is not only an escape from a repressive marriage, it is a freedom that is characterized by a desire for complete independence, a freedom which must include financial security, romance and love (one separate and different from the traditional trappings of marriage and babies) on her terms. This is a woman who takes action, even tries to run the show. Towards the end of the movie, she tells Whit (her real love interest,) played by Robert Mitchum, that she's in control now. Like Laura Hunt, and Mildred Pierce, she breaks out of prescribed boundaries, but the difference here is that she steps outside the jurisdiction of the law and all that is moral in contemporary society, so her dream is bastardized, and therefore made illegitimate.

Most important, is the commonality shared between Laura, Mildred and Kathy. They are three active women, each considered to be a femme fatale who is “interesting to feminist film theory because she is a powerful image, takes action, is not passive, and therefore is positive. She also, clearly, expresses a masculine view of female sexuality”(Martin 208). Men in film noir view themselves as heroes, and so these women are inevitably antagonists, but only because the men see themselves as victims. The message: any and all men would be blinded by such great female beauty and charm, that he couldn't help but be duped, victimized, even to the point of getting himself killed. The great archetype of the femme fatale, after all, is that of seductress first, killer later. And yet, when looked at from a perspective that differs from the predominant, patriarchal perspective of American society, the truth is that these women are the real heroes because they are willing to take action, to stand up and be counted, to go against the grain.

As Michel Foucault declares in his seminal essay, Truth and Power, “it's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power... but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time” (1670). Everyone suffers and is victimized by a hegemony that imposes their truth as the one and only ‘true-truth.’ And so, if you ask any average, everyday woman for an opinion about women in film noir, there's a very good chance that she might say... way to go!

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