

Femme fatale – film noir



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Film Noir is a reflection of, and reaction to, the world within which it was created. With the majority of the films shot from mid-ass through to late ass, Film Noir is a lens into the fears and values of that time and society. With the world coming to terms with the horror of what human did to human in World War II, the genre also had to deal with how the world at home had changed. We can see in the basic conventions of the genre these fears and realizations. Corrupt society, flawed men riddled with angst, and powerful and dangerous women: these characters work outside the law because they no longer trust its authority or effectiveness.

This all reflects that state of mind of the people and their need to re-establish order. Femmes fittles had to be brought to Justice in the end because society was not ready for a world where the 'good wife' does not win out. The femme fatal is to be seen as a dark warning of what happens when the family unit is corrupted. All men that fall into her web of seduction are also punished and held up for example. The society needed these examples to scare the 'little lady back into the kitchen. Phyllis Dietrich from Double Indemnity (1944) is a classic example.

She infiltrated her way into the Dietrich family by winning the trust of Mr. Dietrich, murdering his 'good' wife, and then seducing him to secure her place as his wife. She is not comfortable with the role of wife and merely sees it as a meaner to securing her future and disposing of his daughter. This is the worst type of corruption because she is using the traditional role of wife and in some way making a mockery of it to maneuver into being a widow and inherit his fortune. Because of this, she must be unwished; and

she is. An audience of the time was not ready to have a woman like her in the role of wife.

They needed to be reassured that women like her were not able to survive and prosper from their 'evil' ways. Human life as merely a casualty of crooked commerce also reflects the postwar disillusionment. In coming to terms with what we can do to each other in the war, the Film Noir films reflect society's doubt in human nature and show a world where corruption is commonplace... Characters' innuendo and constant cigarette smoking take the audience into a trenchant world where dirty deeds lurk within labyrinth locations and femme fittles lie in wait.

Film Noir was invented in a world suffering from post-war disillusionment and restricted by society's fears and angst. The conventions of the genre are embedded in the style and tastes of the day they were created in; modern Noir has been able to reinvent itself to reflect a changing society while maintaining the core aspects of the genre. The distinct style of fast-paced dialogue riddled with innuendo was a device for filmmakers and characters that enables them to live in a world where dirty deeds and seduction ran rampant.

Femme fittles like Phyllis Dietrich from *Double Indemnity* (1944) were able to seduce their prey with rapid dialogue... In a particular scene at the beginning of their relationship, Phyllis and Walter Neff's wordplay becomes so racy that she refers to him 'breaking the speed limit', something he is more than willing to do. She holds the power in the relationship from that start as she lets him speed to a certain level, then slows him down and

directs how far he can go. This shows a woman who is confident with her sexuality enough to seduce and take control...

However, Phyllis was restricted by how far she was able to go. The society was ready for her existence but not quite ready for her success. Her fate was always determined by society's fear of the modern woman. Her confidence and control were allowed to exist only as a warning of what can happen when a woman takes control. She is destined to be put in her place permanently by being killed off. The reverse of this can be seen in the case of a modern Noirs femme fatal, Wendy Crook in *The Last Seduction* (1994). The taste of the day was for a modern woman to win.

It was a world where girls can do anything, and Wendy is shown to do everything and get away with it. She does not bother with subtle wordplay and merely asks directly for what she wants and receives it. She seduces Mike to do her dirty work and kill her husband, Clay - something she has to do for herself because he is unable to do it. She then frames Mike for it. She gets away with everything - murdering Clay, setting up Mike - and then drives away with the money. She is from a society where the femme fatal woman does not need to be a warning, so she is allowed to exist and us