‘Pragmatically Bad’ Women: Looking at the Contemporary Femme Fatale

Rosie Clare Couch

Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
(English Literature)

School of English, Communication and Philosophy
Cardiff University

September 2022

Contents

Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to thank Cardiff University, Exeter University and the South West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership. Thank you to my brilliant supervisors, Dr Becky Munford and Professor Helen Hanson for their expertise and support throughout the completion of this thesis. Becky's undergraduate and postgraduate modules at Cardiff University played a huge role in shaping my research interests. Her guidance and encouragement when writing my MA dissertation and applying for the Doctoral Training Partnership were absolutely invaluable. Becky's support has been vital to this thesis, and not only because of her broad expertise on contemporary women's writing, popular culture and contemporary feminism(s). Helen's extensive knowledge on women and film consistently provided alternative and thought-provoking ideas that helped enormously in taking this project to where it is today. Additionally, thank you to Professor Holly Furneaux for joining my supervisory team at a later stage in the thesis writing process and offering excellent insight. Every meeting with these exceptional women was an absolute joy. While the last four years have been incredibly challenging for a number of reasons, I could not have asked for a better or more inspiring team. I am so grateful.

To my family. To Dad, Jack, Gemma, Laurence, Isobel, Juliet and all of the aunties and cousins, thank you for your encouragement and resolute belief in my abilities. To Ella, Charlotte and Josie, thank you for all of the conversations about the work, for checking in, for reminding me to take a break, for understanding and never shying away from the tough topics. To the rest of my friends, thank you for providing misguided and much-needed distractions. Thank you to Osei, for making me laugh and helping to untangle my thoughts. For all of the coffees and for always bringing back a treat from the shop.

Lastly, thank you to my Mum. My best friend, confidante and loudest supporter. I can remember calling to tell her that I had been awarded the funding to complete this research. She was just as excited as I was, and so proud. Her confidence in my power to accomplish whatever I set my mind to has carried me through. There's nothing left to say that she didn't already know. To mum, for everything.

Abstract

The femme fatale is a persistent cultural fantasy, emerging across film, television and literature during times of gendered social upheaval. She is elusive, seductive and dangerous. While critics of film noir have positioned the figure as a cultural effect of masculine anxiety and a signifier of changing social roles, others have argued for the potency of the figure – her strength and sexual allure – beyond the confines of narrative conclusion. In turn, studies of the femme fatale of the 1980s onwards have situated the figure in reference to a backlash against feminism, with the hyperviolent, hypercompetent femmes of this era representing concurrent anxieties regarding agentic career women. In the twenty-first century, the feminist potentialities of the femme fatale continue to demand critical attention.

From Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012) and its filmic adaptation (2014) to Emma Cline's *The Girls* (2016), Sam Levinson's *Assassination Nation* (2018), the 2018 series of *Killing Eve* and Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2021), this thesis assesses how far the contemporary femme fatale can be read as a feminist analytical tool. I argue that the twenty-first century femme fatale continues to refract discourses around feminism and femininity, from *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*'s (2015/2016) girlish subversion of the postfeminist ideation of domestic bliss to *Good Girls*' (2018-21) fatally deconstructive mums-on-the-run. Spanning genres and modes, this thesis explores the re-emergence of the twenty-first-century femme fatale, situating the promise and disappointment of the contemporary figure alongside the rise and decline of the #MeToo movement.

Introduction: Femmes Fatales Past and Present

The femme fatale is a vexed, provocative figuration of femininity, inciting and reigniting feminist critical debate. She is an ongoing cultural pattern, a cycle, a discursive tool with persistent links to the social and cultural position of feminism and femininity. The femme fatale is a common fixture of film noir and neo-noir Cinema. She is reflective of psychoanalytic discourses regarding enigmatic femininity. She is contradictory, devious, powerful. The femme fatale is, as Janey Place suggests, 'as old as Eve and as current as today's movies', spanning eras, modes and genres to the present day.[1] Inscrutable and yet everywhere, the femme fatale has tenaciously seduced our cultural repertoire. While the figure has been traced alongside historical changes as an 'anxiety pointer', a signifier of societal unrest and gender trouble, she has also been read as a mode of femininity with potent feminist potential.[2] Her critical currency lies in the fact that she 'never really is what she seems to be' – an enduring ambiguity which speaks to her position as an expression of masculine anxiety, but also the potential for feminist recuperation.[3]

In our twenty-first-century moment, the femme fatale is proliferating with renewed ferocity across literary and visual modes. In this thesis, I explore literary, filmic and televisual representations of the fatal woman in the twenty-first century. From the girlish women of domestic noir to criminal mothers of *Good Girls* (2018-21), this project assesses the relationship between the femme fatale and past and present feminist discourses and discourses around femininity more broadly. In turn, this exploration illuminates how and where the femme fatale is engaging with particular discourses around feminism and femininity in the twenty-first century, thus telling us more about where her feminist potencies lie and the futurity of the femme fatale as a feminist analytical tool. My research both addresses and refigures the critical claim that the femme fatale acts as a cultural signifier, reflecting and refiguring 'discourses around "woman"'.[4] In her discussion of 'bad women' in contemporary visual culture, Julie Grossman is careful not to suggest that all representations are 'critique oriented', and instead indicates that 'sexism may sometimes be bound up in the operations of the femme fatale while this figure also manages to deconstruct patriarchy'.[5] The

---

[1] Janey Place, 'Women in Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 47-68 (p. 47).
[2] Kate Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing the *Femme Fatale* in 90s Cinema', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 164-82 (p. 171).
[3] Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 1.
[4] Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice', p. 165.
[5] Julie Grossman, *The Femme Fatale* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), p. 11.

critical positioning of the femme fatale as a figure that stands 'outside the male order and represent[s] a challenge to it', as the active subject of feminine fantasies and feminist resistance, is central to my thesis.[6]

The term 'pragmatically bad' originates from author Gillian Flynn's defence of *Gone Girl*, the novel from which this research project originates, and with which it begins.[7] Through this project, I draw a lineage between the femmes fatales of film noir who 'challenge' the 'male order' and contemporary 'pragmatically bad' incarnations of fatal femininity.[8] When asked how the contemporary femme fatale Amy Dunne could possibly be seen as feminist – taking into account critical accusations of internalised misogyny and problematic sexual politics – Flynn's response indicates a recognition of postfeminist narratives of empowerment, as well as the need for more complex feminine characterisation:

> Is it really only girl power, and you-go-girl, and empower yourself, and be the best you can be? For me, it's also the ability to have women who are bad characters … the one thing that really frustrates me is this idea that women are innately good, innately nurturing […] there's still a big pushback against the idea that women can be just pragmatically evil, bad and selfish.[9]

Through Flynn's words, we can trace how contemporary formations of the femme fatale might illuminate, and push against, twenty-first century attitudes towards 'acceptable' modes of femininity, aligning with Grossman's positioning of the figure as a means of deconstructing patriarchy, even if their characterisation is not specifically 'critique oriented'.[10] Additional definitions of 'pragmatic' – to be 'busy', 'active', and intrusive' – also inflect my reading of the femme fatale throughout this thesis.[11] These terms speak not only to the figure's infamous ambiguity, but also to her movement across literary and visual forms.[12] The framework of 'pragmatically bad' femininity conjures a theoretical lens through which we can assess the credibility of the twenty-first century femme fatale as a feminist analytical

---

[6] E. Ann Kaplan, 'The Place of Women in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 81-88 (p. 81).
[7] Gillian Flynn, qtd. in Oliver Burkeman, 'Gillian Flynn on her Bestseller Gone Girl and Accusations of Misogyny'. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/01/gillian-flynn-bestseller-gone-girl-misogyny [accessed 10th June 2017].
[8] Kaplan, 'The Place of Women in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*', p. 81; Flynn, qtd. in Oliver Burkeman, 'Gillian Flynn on her Bestseller Gone Girl and Accusations of Misogyny'.
[9] Flynn, 'Gillian Flynn on her Bestseller Gone Girl and Accusations of Misogyny'.
[10] Grossman, *The Femme Fatale*, p. 11.
[11] Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'pragmatic'. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/149289?rskey=hN3z61&result=1#eid [accessed 28th October 2018].
[12] Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'pragmatic'. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/149289?rskey=hN3z61&result=1#eid [accessed 28th October 2018].

tool, as well as how formations might shift across literary, televisual and filmic modes. Grossman identifies how '[f]antasies of women are sociohistorically based and thus affected by the position of women in any given cultural moment'.[13] With this statement in mind, I will now move on to chart the specific fantasies, or 'cycles', of fatal femininity that have been identified by critics: Eve and the femme fatale, the nineteenth-century femme fatale, the femmes fatales of film noir and neo-noir, and the contemporary femme fatale.

As Old as Eve: Biblical Femininities and the Nineteenth-Century Femme Fatale

To say that the femme fatale is 'as old as Eve' is to situate the figure as a culturally and historically encoded representation of feminine dissent. According to Roche Colman, it is Eve's nakedness and the effect of her words on Adam when persuading him to eat the forbidden fruit that concretises connections between Eve and fatal femininity.[14] This thematic focus on temptation and seduction is echoed throughout further comparisons between the two figurations. While Karen L. Edwards positions 'tempting a man' as 'the defining action of the femme fatale', Holly Morse argues that the name Eve is now 'synonymous with titles such as temptress, femme fatale, and fallen woman'.[15] In this context, Eve is positioned as overtly powerful. Her seductive capacities are so compelling that they provoked the fall of man. On a different scale, the same can be said of the femme fatale who tempts and lures men to their eventual ruin. Despite the power lent to Eve (and thus fatal femininity), she is, Morse highlights, 'repeatedly portrayed as the inferior of man'.[16] This central contradiction is a theme that courses throughout this critical overview. Representing both sex and destruction, the femme fatale of classic noir is both desirable and dangerous. An intriguing threat that must be carefully managed. A threat to what exactly? Stevie Simkin contextualises the utilisation of 'the beautiful but deadly woman' in 'the earliest Judaeo-Christian scriptures and Greek myths' as a means of 'aiming to justify misogyny'.[17] Positioning Lilith – who was not created from Adam's rib and refused to lie beneath him – as a more accurate prototype of fatal femininity, Simkin identifies two key features of the femme fatale as she continues to be

---

[13] Julie Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for Her Close-Up* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 3.
[14] Roche Colman, 'Was Eve the First *Femme Fatale*?', *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 42.1 (2021), pp. 1-9 (p. 1).
[15] Karen L. Edwards, 'The Mother of All Femme Fatales: Eve as Temptress in Genesis 3', *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts* , eds. Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 35-44 (p. 43); Holly Morse, *Encountering Eve's Afterlives: A New Reception Critical Approach to Genesis 2-4* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 1.
[16] Morse, *Encountering Eve's Afterlives*, p. 1.
[17] Stevie Simkin, *Cultural Constructions of the Femme Fatale: From Pandora's Box to Amanda Knox* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 21.

understood today. [18] The fatal woman embodies an overt sexuality and a refusal to acquiesce to patriarchal rule.[19] The image of the unruly woman, Simkin continues, is constructed against her 'polar opposite: […] the maternal, the chaste and the virginal'.[20] This binary pattern of the virgin and the 'whore' is deeply entrenched in Western culture.[21] As with any conceptualisation, this ideological framing of femininity is also utilised as a controlling, fixative strategy. Eve, Lilith, the fallen woman and the femme fatale are part and parcel of the same underlying theme: women who transgress patriarchal constructions of femininity are not to be trusted.

The nineteenth century provides a key historical moment for tracing this particular figuration of femininity in literary texts. The femme fatale becomes a signifier of a range of Western anxieties.[22] From the seductive, social climbing Becky Sharp of William M. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-48) to Bram Stoker's depiction of woman as vampiric succubus in *Dracula* (1897), the construction of fatal femininity in Victorian literature can also be seen to reflect anxieties over women's changing social position.[23] Jennifer Hedgecock locates readers' interest in the Victorian femme fatale within the thematic realms of obscurity and transgression, suggesting that 'unlike the meek domestic woman of the nineteenth century, the femme fatale scares, threatens, but never wearies the reader, arousing an increased curiosity about her, to untangle her mystery'.[24] In contrast with Rebecca Stott, who focuses on the emergence of the late-Victorian femme fatale, Hedgecock argues that 'the femme fatale is equally prevalent in mid-Victorian fiction', emerging as a 'literary signpost of the changing roles of women in the nineteenth century, a period when middle-class women begin organizing more radical feminist movements'.[25] Citing texts such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and Wilkie Collins' *Armadale* (1864), Hedgecock argues that the femme fatale of this period is constructed in a different and 'more complex'

---

[18] Simkin, *Cultural Constructions of the Femme Fatale*, p. 27.
[19] Simkin, *Cultural Constructions of the Femme Fatale*, p. 27.
[20] Simkin, *Cultural Constructions of the Femme Fatale*, pp. 5-6.
[21] Simkin, *Cultural Constructions of the Femme Fatale*, p. 6.
[22] Appearing at the 'intersection' of these concerns, the nineteenth-century incarnation of the femme fatale recurs alongside the 'emergence of degeneration discourses, invasion anxieties, and an increase in the classification of the abnormal and pathological'. See Rebecca Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), p. 30.
[23] William M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (New York: Everyman Library, [1848] 1991); Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (New York: Oxford University Press, [1897] 1996).
[24] Jennifer Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat* (Amherst, NY: Cambria press, 2008), p. 1.
[25] Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature*, pp. 2-3.

form than the 'vampires or she-devils characterized by late-nineteenth-century novelists'.[26] While this rendering of fatal femininity is 'often rewarded for her unscrupulous scheming, reaping the benefits of wealth from men who she guilefully destroys', Hedgecock points out that 'her victory is usually short lived'.[27] Further locating the femme fatale as a foreshadowing of 'later protests against society's treatment of women', Hedgecock's reading of the mid-Victorian femme fatale positions the figure as a symptom of, and reaction to, contemporaneous feminist discourses.[28] Heather Braun's study, *The Rise and Fall of the Femme Fatale in British Literature, 1790-1910*, takes up a similar position, charting the figure's ascension and decline – 'formally, historically, and ideologically through a selection of plays, poems, novels, and personal correspondence' – alongside 'crucial shifts in thinking about gender, sexuality, and exoticism' within this particular epoch.[29] Braun's text follows the patterns weaved by the femme fatale across the long nineteenth century, from the early supernatural ballads of poets such as John Keats through to novels including *Vanity Fair* and *Great Expectations* (1861).[30] The fatal woman, Braun continues, 'was a ready symbol for a variety of cultural concerns including sex, aggression, disease, madness, foreign contagion, and social degeneration'.[31] In the latter half of the century, fictional 'femme fatales who were eventually punished for their deviant acts of seduction' mirrored 'parallel epidemics of prostitution, pornography, and venereal disease'.[32] Focusing on works such as Oscar Wilde's 'Salomé' (1894), Braun closes her study with the suggestion that femme fatale texts of the late nineteenth century – where the fatal woman was 'always just on the verge of erupting' – represented a deferral of desire that foreshadowed the re-emergence of the fatal woman in film noir texts of the mid-twentieth century.[33]

Despite differing claims regarding the temporality, popularity, and agency of the nineteenth-century femme fatale, the figure's propensity to reflect anxieties regarding women's increasing demand for social visibility – as well as broader concerns regarding

---

[26] Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (New York: Penguin Classics, [1862] 1998); Wilkie Collins, *Armadale* (London: Oxford University Press, [1864] 1989); Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature*, p. 2.
[27] Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature*, p. 1.
[28] Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature*, p. 3.
[29] Heather Braun, *The Rise and Fall of the Femme Fatale in British Literature, 1790-1910* (Lanham, MA: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), pp. 1-2.
[30] John Keats, *Lamia*, ed. Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1820] 1990), pp. 305–23; Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Edgar Rosenberg. New York: Norton, [1861] 1999).
[31] Braun, *The Rise and Fall of the Femme Fatale in British Literature, 1790-1910*, p. 2.
[32] Braun, *The Rise and Fall of the Femme Fatale in British Literature, 1790-1910*, p. 2.
[33] Oscar Wilde, 'Salomé' in *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays* (New York: Penguin, [1894] 2003), pp. 65–100; Braun, *The Rise and Fall of the Femme Fatale in British Literature, 1790-1910*, p. 11.

gender and sexuality and degeneration – can be traced across these critical works. Each study also draws attention to the femme fatale as enigma, a narrative device that draws readers' enduring interest in the figure while also culminating in her eventual 'punishment' at the level of the text. Mary Ann Doane's *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* bridges the nineteenth-century formations of the femme fatale and her relationship to psychoanalysis. According to Doane, the femme fatale 'emerges as a central figure' within the nineteenth century, 'in the texts of writers such as Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire and painters such as Gustave Moreau and Dante Gabriel Rossetti'.[34] For Doane, it is crucial to take into account the 'confluence of modernity, urbanization, Freudian psychoanalysis and new technologies of production and reproduction (photography, the cinema) born of the Industrial Revolution' that shaped the femme fatale of this period.[35] As with Hedgecock, Braun and Stott, Doane positions the femme fatale as a signifier of anxiety, relating specifically to changes in 'the understanding of sexual difference in the late nineteenth century'.[36]

The work of Sigmund Freud is highlighted as a key example of the kinds of discourses shaping conceptions of sexual difference. Freud's lecture 'Femininity' famously epitomises his figuration of woman as a site of anxiety and mystery:

> [t]hroughout history people have knocked their heads against the riddle of femininity […] Nor will *you* have escaped worrying over this problem – those of you who are men; to those of you who are women this will not apply – you are yourselves the problem.[37]

Doane identifies how, due to Freud's further positioning of the 'non-localizability' of women's sexuality – 'spread out over the body, signified by all of its parts' – woman is positioned as enigmatic, defined as 'other' to man, whose sexuality is 'in place [as] a reassurance of mastery and control'.[38] Consequently, woman is situated on the 'other side of knowledge' in Freudian discourses.[39] Woman is out of place, confounding the 'relation between the visible and the knowable' – a site of 'epistemological trouble'.[40] If woman obfuscates knowledge about sexuality, calling into question what can truly be *known*, one can

---

[34] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[35] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, pp. 1-2.
[36] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, pp. 1-2.
[37] Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XXII (1932-36)*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, [1933] 1995), pp. 112-35 (p. 113).
[38] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, pp. 102-3.
[39] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 103.
[40] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 103.

only rely upon what can be *seen*. As Doane indicates, this pattern of thinking entails that 'claims to truth' rely 'to a striking extent on judgements about vision and its stability or instability'.[41] According to Doane, it is due to the femme fatale's particular relationship with sight and knowledge that, despite the figure's 'literary and pictorial' origins, cinema provides a 'hospitable home' for the figure in the consequent constructions of mid-twentieth-century film noir.[42] The overtly visual display of film noir provides the perfect space for presenting (and concealing) the enigmatic femme fatale.

The Classic Femme Fatale of Film Noir

Whether we picture *Double Indemnity*'s Phyliss Dietrichson, concealing her gaze, or *Scarlet Street*'s (1945) Katherine 'Kitty' March appearing in the doorway, the visual impact of the 'classic' femme fatale of film noir reverberates in how we imagine femmes fatales to this day.[43] The mid-twentieth-century femme fatale thus stands out as another key moment when tracing the figure's appearances prior to the twenty-first century. Though her proliferation within film noir was striking, this reappearance of fatal femininity still carries the ideological complexities of previous formations, specifically in reference to feminism and women's sociocultural mobility and visibility.

Double Indemnity, dir. Billy Wilder (Paramount Pictures, 1944); *Scarlet Street*, dir. Fritz Lang (Universal Pictures, 1945)

[41] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[42] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 103.
[43] *Double Indemnity*, dir. Billy Wilder (Paramount Pictures, 1944); *Scarlet Street*, dir. Fritz Lang (Universal Pictures, 1945).

Doane highlights that the femme fatale of film noir is still 'situated as evil and is frequently punished or killed' within the majority of texts.[44] In *Double Indemnity* and *Scarlet Street*, for example, both femmes fatales are murdered by their duped lovers at the close of the film. For Doane, this eventual 'textual eradication' places the figure as a 'symptom of male fears about feminism', rather than 'the subject of feminism'.[45] In turn, Place situates film noir as 'a male fantasy', alongside 'most of our art'.[46] Like Doane, Place suggests that the genre – where woman is 'defined by her sexuality' – is 'hardly 'progressive' in these terms'.[47] Representations of the femme fatale do not 'present us with role models who defy their fate and triumph over it'.[48] Like Place, Doane indicates that 'it would be a mistake to see [the femme fatale] as some kind of heroine of modernity'.[49] The femme fatale's 'textual eradication' is seen by both Doane and Place respectively as 'a desperate reassertion of control on behalf of the male subject', signifying that 'men need to control women's sexuality in order to not be destroyed by it'.[50] Here, the femme fatale is positioned as an exercise in masculine wish-fulfilment, a patriarchy-approved fantasy of femininity where 'unacceptable' women are punished for stepping out of line. We can trace this exact dynamic back through nineteenth-century modes of fatal femininity before meeting it once again with culturally entrenched ideas about Eve and feminine defiance.

The Motion Picture Production Code also influenced the kinds of narrative conclusions allotted to the femme fatale. Also known as the Hays Code, this set of guidelines was adopted in 1930 and more forcefully established in 1934. The code, concerned with censorship, banned the depiction of 'interracial and homosexual relationships […] adulterous romantic sexual affairs, and marginalised people of colour onscreen'.[51] Importantly, for the femme fatale, the code additionally sought to constrain 'women's roles to encourage feminine domesticity, sexual appeal to men, and heterosexual marriage'.[52] As Sheri Chenin Biesen identifies, the majority of censors working at this time were men, meaning that 'Hollywood films often faced a gender-racial-sexuality-bias in US film industry censorial

[44] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 2.
[45] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, pp. 2-3.
[46] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47.
[47] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47.
[48] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47.
[49] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 2.
[50] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 2; Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 49.
[51] Sheri Chenin Biesen, *Film Censorship: Regulating America's Screen* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2018), p. 5.
[52] Biesen, *Film Censorship*, p. 5.

organisations and in their representational constraints'.[53] While it is crucial to outline critiques of the femme fatale as a male fantasy, Doane and Place maintain that the figure has broader feminist potential when read in contradiction with, or as a challenge to, this backdrop of misogyny. Notably, in a point I will return to throughout this thesis, the femme fatale is not overtly positioned as a potential challenge to the racism and homophobia also present within the restrictions of the code. In the 1978 introduction to the collection *Women in Film Noir*, a second-wave feminist project of (re)reading the genre, E. Ann Kaplan describes the positioning of women in another generic form, the Western – where women are 'fixed in their roles as wives, mothers, daughters, [and] lovers', providing the 'background for the ideological work of the film […] carried out through men' – in order to highlight film noir's 'specific treatment of women'.[54] In film noir, Kaplan continues, women are not typically 'placed safely in any of the familiar roles mentioned above'.[55] Given that this categorisation of feminine roles is 'so necessary to patriarchy as we know it', this 'displacement' both 'disturb[s]' and 'provide[s] a challenge' to the 'patriarchal system'.[56] Within her later introduction to the new edition in 1998, Kaplan readdresses some of the arguments proffered in the earlier text, suggesting that the 'evil', sexually manipulative femme fatale can also be read to perform a conservative function, constituting a 'message to men to stay away from these sexy women – to settle for the homegirl'.[57] Furthermore, in their chapters, both Place and Sylvia Harvey also argue that the femme fatale finds meaning from, or at least juxtaposes, differing representations of 'good' femininity. For Place, noir 'contains versions of both extremes of the female archetypes, the deadly seductress and the rejuvenating redeemer'.[58] In turn, Harvey's focus on the 'absent family' in film noir reads 'the expression of sexuality and the institution of marriage' as 'at odds' with one another, associating 'boredom' and 'sterility' with the married state and, consequently, wives.[59]

An analysis of the subversive capacities of film noir as a genre and of women in film noir more broadly, is beyond the reach of this study. Indeed, as Grossman identifies in her 2009 text *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for Her Close-Up*,

---

[53] Biesen, *Film Censorship*, p. 5.
[54] E. Ann Kaplan, 'Introduction to 1978 Edition', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 15-19 (p. 16).
[55] Kaplan, 'Introduction to 1978 Edition', p. 16.
[56] Kaplan, 'Introduction to 1978 Edition', p. 16.
[57] E. Ann Kaplan, 'Introduction to New Edition', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 1-14 (p. 10).
[58] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 63.
[59] Sylvia Harvey, 'Woman's Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 35-46 (pp. 42-3).

'sexualized[sic] and/or highly intelligent and competent women' in film noir and 'popular cultural commentary' have been critically categorised as femmes fatales, at the forfeit of 'more nuanced and sympathetic readings'.[60] It is possible, a number of critics reiterate, to assess constructions of the femme fatale beyond the realms of patriarchal fantasy. Doane indicates that 'like any representation', modes of fatal femininity are not 'totally under the control of [their] producers and, once disseminated', analysed, (re)interpreted, 'take on a life of [their] own'.[61] Combining the thematics of tragedy, or 'fatal misrecognition', with the generic ties of film noir, Elisabeth Bronfen suggests that situating the femme fatale as 'a stereotype of feminine evil, as a symptom of male anxiety, or as a catchphrase for the danger of sexual difference' marks her as an 'encoded figure', existing only to be 'acted upon'.[62] Instead of reading the femme fatale as a 'fetish, projection, or symptom', Bronfen asks: 'what if […] one were to treat her instead as the subject of her narrative?'[63] For Bronfen, this alternative approach to femme fatale narratives should also entail a reading of the figure as a 'separate subject who has agency'.[64] While, as I will go on to discuss in chapter three of this thesis, the concept of 'agency' in feminist terms is somewhat vexed – muddled with both postfeminism and neoliberalism's focus on individual choice – Bronfen locates the basic definition of agency, 'the capacity to act', as crucial for locating feminist readings of the femme fatale as a subversive, powerful figure.[65] Bronfen's analysis thus stands as another example of reading the femme fatale in opposition to analyses which position the figure as a static product of film noir's 'male fantasy'.[66] Similarly, Place looks beyond the regressive function of the femme fatale's eventual narrative closure in noir, focusing instead on the genre's 'uniquely sensual visual style' and its legacy: an enduring image of femininity where women are 'deadly but sexy, exciting and strong'.[67]

Even when we are reading the feminist capacities of the noir femme fatale against her eventual narrative fixture – 'through death, incarceration, and occasionally normative

---

[60] Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir*, p. 1. Deconstructing the 'phantom' of the femme fatale, Grossman's study illuminates the 'complex psychological and social' identities of film noir's leading women, moving away from analyses which position said characters as 'opaque' or static, 'to be labelled and tamed by social roles and institutions' (p. 21).
[61] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 3.
[62] Elisabeth Bronfen, 'Femme Fatale: Negotiations of Tragic Desire', *New Literary History*, 35. 1 (2004), 103-116 (pp. 104, 114).
[63] Bronfen, 'Femme Fatale', p. 114.
[64] Bronfen, 'Femme Fatale', p. 114.
[65] Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'agency'. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/3851?redirectedFrom=agency#eid [accessed 29th November 2018].
[66] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47.
[67] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 63.

romance' – the question of whose fantasy the figure might be fulfilling is inextricably linked to the sociocultural contexts of a given text's dissemination.[68] For example, Place traces the popularity of the agentic, powerful fatal woman of film noir against the need for 'women to work in factories during World War II' before being 'channel[ed] […] back into the home after the war'.[69] Echoes of Kate Stables' positioning of the femme fatale as an 'anxiety pointer' can be traced through Place's assertions, as well as Doane's description of the figure as 'a symptom of male fears about feminism'.[70] Though in Place's example the dangerous, sexually driven woman is represented in order to be destroyed and thus controlled through the filmic narrative, Elizabeth Cowie proffers another positioning of this particular fantasy.[71] Arguing against the critical positioning of noir – and the femme fatale – as solely a product of masculine desire, Cowie states that the 'fantasy of the woman's dangerous sexuality is a feminine as well as masculine fantasy', with its pleasure lying 'precisely in its forbiddenness'.[72] According to Cowie, the femme fatale's punishment is not a condition of the Production Code or patriarchy; it is demanded by the fantasy itself. '[I]n the punishment', Cowie surmises, the reality of the forbidden wish is acknowledged'.[73] One might argue that the *threat* of punishment alone satisfies the desire for the forbidden element of the femme fatale fantasy. However, as Kaplan identifies, 'fantasies are not monolithic' across genders.[74] 'Feminist spectatorship or feminists' sexual identification with images in noir and neo-noir films' will not adhere into one coherent narrative, Kaplan explains, and due to the 'generational, racial, class and sexual orientation differences among women', film noir can be seen to invite 'the playing out of *various* gender fantasies' (emphasis in original).[75] The femme fatale of film noir may well speak to 'male unconscious needs' while simultaneously inviting feminist spectators who view the figure 'as their own fantasy'.[76] It is here that we see a glimpse of where the twenty-first-century femme fatale, constructed by women, might take on new shape – borrowing from the past and yet imbued with the concerns of the present.

---

[68] Katherine Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and American Cinema* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 14.
[69] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47.
[70] Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice', p. 171; Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, pp. 2-3.
[71] Place. 'Women in Film Noir', p. 48; Elizabeth Cowie, '*Film Noir* and Women', in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London and New York: Verso, 1993), pp. 121-166 (p. 136).
[72] Cowie, '*Film Noir* and Women', p. 136.
[73] Cowie, '*Film Noir* and Women', p. 136.
[74] Kaplan, 'Introduction to New Edition', p. 10.
[75] Kaplan, 'Introduction to New Edition', p. 10.
[76] Kaplan, 'Introduction to New Edition', p. 10.

The Neo-Noir Fatale: Agency, Violence and Postfeminism

Before we arrive into the twenty-first century, there is another key era of femmes fatales to contend with. Striking in her violence and sexual display, we have the femme fatale of neo-noir cinema. Notable examples from this period include *Basic Instinct*'s ice-pick-wielding Catherine Tramell, or *The Last Seduction*'s ferociously business-like Bridget Gregory.[77]

Basic Instinct, dir. Paul Verhoeven (TriStar Pictures, 1992); *The Last Seduction*, dir. John Dahl (ITC Entertainment, 1994).

Kaplan pinpoints neo-noir as another moment where we find 'a space for the playing out of varied gender fantasies'.[78] The neo-noir femme fatale aligns with postfeminist discourses, both temporally and critically. Criticism regarding this parallel falls into two major strands. Firstly, studies position the highly mobile, powerful and ruthless femme as agentic to the point of political disengagement, and thus in line with the individualistic tenets of postfeminism. Secondly, these features, combined with the figure's ferocity, situate her as a cathartic outlet of rage fantasies for some feminist spectators.

One way in which this version of the femme fatale has been read is through the critical lens of 'backlash'. Susan Faludi's 1992 text, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, underpins these readings. Faludi surveys the messages levered towards women through popular and media culture at the 'close of the twentieth century', considering the

[77] *Basic Instinct,* dir. Paul Verhoeven (TriStar Pictures, 1992); *The Last Seduction*, dir. John Dahl (ITC Entertainment, 1994).
[78] Kaplan, 'Introduction to New Edition', p. 10.

contradictory statements received: 'the struggle for women's rights is won […] you may be free and equal now […] but you have never been more miserable'.[79] Describing said messages as a 'bulletin of despair' – 'posted everywhere – at the newsagent's, on the TV set, at the cinema, in advertisements and doctor's offices and academic journals' – position working women as 'suffering 'burn-out' and succumbing to an 'infertility epidemic", while single, childfree women are 'grieving from a 'man shortage' […] 'depressed and confused".[80] What Faludi is outlining here are the absolute hallmarks of postfeminist rhetoric, later described by Angela McRobbie as an urge to move 'beyond feminism' – which is 'no longer needed' – to a 'more comfortable zone where women are now free to choose for themselves'.[81] One of Faludi's key examples of the backlash thesis in 1980s cinema is *Fatal Attraction* (1987), a film positioned by Julianne Pidduck as the catalyst of the 'resurgence' of the femme fatale figure in 1990s cinema.[82] Faludi traces the genesis of *Fatal Attraction* from James Dearden's 1979 short film *Diversion*, a story intended to 'explore an individual's responsibility for a stranger's suffering' and examine how a 'man who inflicted pain, no matter how unintentionally, must eventually hold himself accountable'.[83] As this narrative was reworked into *Fatal Attraction* – with 'escalating economic stakes in Hollywood in the 1980s' making 'studio executives even more inclined to tailor their message to fit the trends' – it took on a new form, positioning the independent career woman as an outright, monstrous threat to the structure of the nuclear family.[84] 'With each rewrite', Faludi explains, 'Dearden was pressured to alter the characters further, with the husband becoming 'progressively more loveable', and 'the single woman more venomous'.[85] What we are left with in the final cut is a desperate, ruthless 'bunny boiler' who is eventually killed by the wife of the man with whom she is having an affair. In contrast to *Diversion*'s intended exploration of moral accountability, *Fatal Attraction*'s ending shows us that 'the attraction is fatal only for the single woman'.[86] The final shot of the film shows us 'a framed family portrait, the family

[79] Susan Faludi, *Backlash: America's Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Vintage, [1992] 1993), p. 1.
[80] Faludi, *Backlash*, p. 1.
[81] Angela McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime', in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 27-39 (p. 33).
[82] *Fatal Attraction*, dir. Adrian Lyne (Paramount Pictures, 1987); Julianne Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme: (Dis)Figuring Feminism, Family, Irony, Violence', *Cineaction*, 38 (1995), 64-72 (p. 65).
[83] *Diversion,* dir. James Dearden Faludi (Dearfilm, 1979); Faludi, *Backlash*, p. 146.
[84] Faludi, *Backlash*, p. 141.
[85] Faludi, *Backlash*, p. 147.
[86] Faludi, *Backlash*, p. 152.

restored', forcefully reinstating the postfeminist message that feminist liberation had denied women 'marriage and motherhood' – that they were 'unhappy because they were too free'.[87]

Fatal Attraction, dir. Adrian Lyne (Paramount Pictures, 1987)

[87] Faludi, *Backlash*, pp. 151, 141.

Such discourses seek to position feminist efforts and achievements as the cause of women's unhappiness, or at the very least a restriction on how women seek to define their own femininity. The suggestion that the gains of feminism were causing women to suffer, to quote Samantha Lindop, functions as an attempt to 'restabilise [patriarchal] gendered power structures'.[88]

While *Fatal Attraction*'s conclusion, with its focus on punishing the 'bad woman', might seem more at home with the denouements of mid-twentieth *Double Indemnity* and *Scarlet Street*, other iterations of the femme fatale in this period are ultra-violent, highly agentic, ruthless and unpunished. With this in mind, another strand of postfeminist discourse that informs the neo-noir femme fatale involves the valorisation of a particular mode of femininity, often conceived in terms of whiteness, thinness, professional power and sexual display. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra indicate how postfeminist culture's 'centralization of an affluent elite', while 'certainly entail[ing] an emphatic individualism', also serves to 'confuse self-interest with individuality', positioning 'consumption as a strategy for healing those dissatisfactions that might alternatively be understood in terms of social ills and discontents'.[89] Tasker and Negra's critique of postfeminist texts thus identifies a lack of engagement with 'women's experiences and social health', as well as 'class, age, and racial' politics.[90] Also positioning postfeminism as 'a patriarchally grounded, media inspired concept' that shies away from 'political engagement', Lindop argues that the femme fatale of neo-noir is employed as a mechanism through which such discourses operate in popular culture.[91] Specifically focusing on the 'individualistic' nature of the figure's 'performance of subversive actions', Lindop indicates that the '1980s and 1990s *fatale* acts as a medium for emergent popular cultural discourses' around women and empowerment.[92] For Katherine Farrimond, the femme fatale proffers the 'ideal figurehead for postfeminist cultures since the early 1990s'.[93] Due to the fact that she is 'often rewarded for her ambition and avarice' coupled with how the figure 'delights in a highly performative sexualised femininity with little to no regard of the societal constraints placed upon a woman's choices', the femme fatale of this period exemplifies a 'cluster of highly visible contemporary feminisms and

---

[88] Samantha Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 11.
[89] Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 'Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture', in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 1-25 (p. 2).
[90] Tasker and Negra, 'Introduction', p. 2.
[91] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 11.
[92] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 44.
[93] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 8.

postfeminisms'.[94] Farrimond highlights how much of the criticism around the late-twentieth-century figure connects the 'hard professionalism of the psychotic neo-noir femme fatales' with a 'cultural backlash to the gains achieved by second wave feminism'.[95] Simultaneously, the 'questionable pleasures of postfeminist culture' are also a driving factor of this particular resurgence as well as, according to Farrimond, 'the rise of the contemporary femme fatale'.[96]

Pidduck's study of the fatal women of 1990s cinema also comments on the potential for reading the femme fatale as nothing more than a 'patriarchal sleight of hand', before identifying how these 'questionable pleasures' might be read through a feminist lens.[97] While the 'hyperbolic overkill' of scenes in films like *Basic Instinct* can be explained through anxieties around women's increasing social mobility, Pidduck argues for an 'emotional and fantastical excess' within these sequences that evades such justifications.[98] Though Pidduck admits that the proliferation of hyper-violent femmes fatales in this period is in tension with the sociocultural realities of gender-based violence, she maintains that there is still pleasure to be found in this particular formation of fatal femininity:

> Where in our everyday lives as women we are bombarded by the evidence of our increasing vulnerability, poverty, and limited social power, the fatal femme's embodied social, sexual, and physical powers offer an imagined point of contact, if not simply identification – an imagined momentum or venting of rage and revenge fantasies – the importance of which cannot be underestimated.[99]

Here, a certain level of political disengagement actually works on behalf of the fantasy itself. The power afforded to the femme fatale takes viewers beyond the fact of their lived realities and offers 'moments of supreme pleasure for the feminist spectator'.[100] Though possibly 'fleeting', the femme fatale thus provides an 'empowering fantasy of transcendence to bolster up our imaginary reserve'.[101] There are traces of Cowie's rearticulation of the noir femme

---

[94] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 8.
[95] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 8.
[96] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 8.
[97] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 8; Pidduck, 'The 1990s Fatal Femme', p. 72.
[98] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Fatal Femme', p. 72.
[99] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Fatal Femme', p. 72.
[100] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Fatal Femme', p. 72.
[101] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Fatal Femme', p. 72. See also, Suzy Gordon, 'The Problem of 'Anxiety' in Psychoanalytic-Feminist Approaches to Noir', in *Neo-Noir*, eds. Mark Bould, Kathrina Glitre and Greg Tuck (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2009), pp. 203-220. Speaking to this contradiction between lived experience and fantasy, Gordon's critique of the positioning of anxiety in psychoanalytic-feminist approaches to noir suggests that the films *The Last Seduction*, *Crush* (1992) and *In The Cut* (2003) stand as a 'gendered articulation' of 'anxiety as a mark of the contradictions entailed in 'being' simultaneously in historical and psychical worlds' (p. 217). The femme fatale of Neo-Noir is thus presented as 'a cipher for the specific contradictions involved for women inhabiting a post-feminist movement in which male violence prevails and yet fantasies of female violence (as well as sexual and economic autonomy) abound' (p. 217). When viewing these films, we are seeing an 'exposure or elaboration of these complexities, of the conditions under which a

fatale as a feminine fantasy in Pidduck's assertion here. Though the neo-noir femme fatale goes unpunished, the dissonance between her agentic, violent ways and women's lived realities provide a pleasurable, cathartic experience with real life psychical implications.

However, for Stables, the 'collective fantasy' that Pidduck's reading proffers – in its positioning of the neo-noir femme fatale as 'mistress of all as she mutilates the male body on our behalf' – does not dull the more 'detrimental' messages that the fatal women 'puts into circulation'.[102] This particular formation of the femme fatale is 'fabricated from (and speaks to)' a number of 'current and conflicting discourses around 'woman".[103] Stables reads this iteration of the femme fatale as the product of a number of possible meanings. While some promise to take the figure away from her potentially regressive function – her alignment with postfeminist discourses regarding whiteness and thinness for example – each movement away is countered by an adherence to patriarchal narratives regarding acceptable femininity. For Stables, while 'some of these discourses speak to, and for women', the 'dominant voice' within this era of cinema 'remains that of patriarchy'.[104] Linda Ruth Williams's study of the 'scorned' and 'scorning' femme fatale in neo-noir revenge narratives takes up a similar position, focusing on the 'sexualised contradictions' of the figure in relation to contemporary feminism(s).[105] Though Williams also speaks to the 'pleasures of the 'unbalanced' woman' and the potency of revenge fantasy, the contradictions surrounding her formation mean that this mode of fatal femininity 'looks both new and old at the same time'.[106] As the femme fatale of neo-noir might seem to break new ground, patriarchy has not quite loosened its grasp.

Parallels emerge across this review of film noir and neo-noir criticism. Feminist critics of film noir consider whether the femme fatale was a product of patriarchal anxiety – there to fulfil a particular regressive function in the hero's journey – or whether her narrative and visual excess can be read against the grain of this particular context, becoming the enduring image of the figure during this period and beyond. Feminist critics of neo-noir find themselves within a similar bind. The femme fatale of this moment certainly appears differently. She more often than not goes unpunished for her actions. She is excessive and

---

historical reality of violence is lived psychically' (p. 217); *Crush*, dir. Alison Maclean (Hibiscus Films, 1992); *In the Cut*, dir. Jane Campion (Columbia Pictures, 2003).

[102] Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice', p. 179.

[103] Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice', p. 179.

[104] Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice', p. 179.

[105] Linda Ruth Williams, 'A Woman Scorned: The Neo-Noir Erotic Thriller as Revenge Drama', in *Neo-Noir*, eds. Mark Bould, Kathrina Glitre and Greg Tuck (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2009), pp. 168-185 (p. 183).

[106] Williams, 'A Woman Scorned', p. 183.

exceptional in terms of her violence and economic power. These formations have been critiqued by some for their political detachment and alignment with postfeminist rhetoric. For others, it is the possibilities of such detachment that make this particular mode of fatal femininity such a pleasurable proposition. Importantly, this theorisation of disengagement does not mean that the figure holds no currency for feminist thought and debate. Instead, it is the fantasy proffered by such an agentic display of femininity that can and does offer an imaginary outpouring of rage for feminist spectators, causing 'supreme pleasure' and providing the means to 'bolster up our imaginary reserve'.[107] Additionally, as the neo femme fatale emerges in the 1980s, she brings features of previous formations along with her. She attracts and dupes the men around her. She provides a threat to the coherence and centrality of the nuclear family. A mix of images, discourses and meanings – some satisfying previous feminist demands, some seemingly in alliance with patriarchy, some incredibly contradictory – this formation further speaks to the enduring ambiguity of the figure. It is here, and in the re-emergence of the femme fatale during moments where women's social visibility and mobility are present in public discourses, that the femme fatale of the twenty-first century holds particular promise for feminist enquiry. As a mobile, enigmatic figure, the femme fatale offers up potential for exploring open, unfixed formations of femininity that reflect and refract concurrent sociocultural discourses. As we enter the twenty-first century, neo-liberal and popular modes of postfeminism still stake a claim on the modes of femininity highly visible in cultural productions. However, there is also a glimpse of something else entirely.

1990s to Postmillennial: The Contemporary Femme Fatale

In critical studies of the contemporary femme fatale, movements away from individualistic narrative conclusions and towards collectivity are positioned as a satisfying shift for feminist spectators. Farrimond identifies how, across genres, the contemporary femme fatale is constructed 'in dialogue with and against cultural and critical memories' of earlier incarnations in classic noir'.[108] One key narrative difference – following on from the ultra-agentic femmes fatales of the 1990s – involves femme fatales who 'get away with', or escape retribution for, their subversive, violent actions. In her chapter on the teenage femme fatale, Farrimond's focus on the films *Wild Things* (1998), *Mini's First Time* (2006), *Spring Breakers* (2013) and *Knock Knock* (2015) illuminates how contemporary representations of

[107] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Fatal Femme', p. 72.
[108] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 163.

fatal femininity are still wrestling with postfeminist rhetoric around sexuality, identity and empowerment.[109] For *Wild Things* and *Mini's First Time*, Farrimond writes, any narrative 'celebration of young feminine agency and intelligence' are 'consistently undermined by an unquestioning representation of the teenage girl as sexy rather than sexual', as well as the way that such a limited form of 'power' is placed 'above solidarity and friendship with other girls'.[110] Farrimond admits that, in *Spring Breakers* and *Knock Knock*, the 'inscrutability and blankness' of the girls' friendships might 'not be a productive end in itself'.[111] That being said, these narratives proffer the possibility that the (teenage) femme fatale 'might enjoy a victorious ending arm in arm with another girl', moving away from postfeminist and neoliberal discourses around individual success.[112]

Lindop's study of postfeminism and the femme fatale in neo-noir cinema also looks at twenty-first-century texts, thinking particularly about the '*filles fatales*' of *Brick* (2005), *Hard Candy* (2005) and *Stoker* (2013).[113] Lindop argues that these films 'articulate anxieties about gender destabilisation', as well as the 'increasing power and centrality of girls in contemporary Western culture'.[114] Though Lindop goes on to highlight moments where protagonists 'usurp patriarchal domination' – a subversion that also occurs at the level of the filmic narrative where the fatal girls are, unlike the vast majority of film noir and neo-noir, 'the focus of the narrative' – the dominant effect of the films discussed points to postfeminist rhetoric.[115] *Hard Candy* in particular, in its construction of the 'all-powerful, active, castrating, rape avenging final girl' Hayley, is read to bolster the 'dominant perception that feminism is a thing of the past and that girls have achieved all the power they need and more'.[116] Each text's 'close alignment with horror' is also positioned as a clear indicator of their connection with a 'notable intensification of fears about the potential of adolescent girls' in our contemporary cultural moment.[117] Though the context has changed, Lindop's reading of the contemporary femme fatale thus aligns with those of the femme fatale of film noir. The

---

[109] *Wild Things*, dir. John McNaughton (Columbia Pictures, 1998); *Mini's First Time,* dir. Nick Guthe (First Independent Pictures, 2006); *Spring Breakers,* dir. Harmony Korine (A24, 2013); *Knock Knock*, dir. Eli Roth (Lionsgate Premiere, 2015); Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 90.
[110] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 90.
[111] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 91.
[112] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 91.
[113] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 124; *Brick,* dir. Rian Johnson (Bergman Lustig Productions, 2005); *Hard Candy*, dir. David Slade (Lionsgate Films, 2005); *Stoker,* dir. Park Chan-Wook (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2013).
[114] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 123.
[115] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 124.
[116] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 123.
[117] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 124.

figure is still positioned as an 'anxiety pointer', a 'symptom of male fears about feminism'.[118] At the close of their text, Lindop's analysis of *In the Cut* – positing that the film's engagement with feminist discourses subverts the 'dominant ideologies circulating in mainstream culture' – leads them to the question: 'What comes after postfeminism?'.[119] Farrimond's study ends on a similar note of continuity, noting that the ongoing proliferation of representations of the femme fatale in the twenty-first century entails that the figure's 'potential for challenging simplistic understandings of the depiction of female power […] cannot be ignored'.[120]

Both Lindop and Farrimond's conclusions point to a sense of futurity, with Farrimond in particular situating the ambiguity of the femme fatale as an important focus for feminist critics. Farrimond's suggestion that the 'vexed nature of the femme fatale and the politics of her representation' make her a 'vital figure for contemporary feminism and film studies' aligns with Helen Hanson's positioning of the figure's 'ambiguity' as the feature which 'affords the figure such an enduring currency' across cultures and contexts.[121] When, as Stacy Gillis suggests, the femme fatale is understood as 'a constellation of tropes and characteristics emerging from concerns about women and power', this thesis asks: how is the contemporary femme fatale responding to contemporaneous feminist rhetoric? How does the twenty-first-century femme fatale refract and reflect discourses around femininity?[122]

I started the research for this project in 2018, a year proclaimed to be the 'Year of the Woman' in an Anglo-American context. Li Zhou explains the basis of this term, as well as its parallels to the year 1992. 2018 and 1992 have both been called the 'Year of the Woman' due to the 'surge' of women running as senators and representatives to Congress in the United States, and winning, in both years.[123] If 1992 and 2018 are connected in their status as 'Year(s) of the Woman', they are also linked as particular points within femme fatale 'cycles' – with the late-twentieth century broadly situated as a key period for neo-noir and erotic thriller cinema, and 1992 specifically as the year *Basic Instinct* was released. We can

---

[118] Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice', p. 171; Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, pp. 2-3.
[119] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 165.
[120] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 170.
[121] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 169; Helen Hanson, 'The Big Seduction: Feminist Film Criticism and the *Femme Fatale*', in *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts*, ed. Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 214-28 (p. 225).
[122] Stacy Gillis, 'Cyber Noir: Cyberspace, (Post)Feminism and the *Femme Fatale*', in *The Matrix Trilogy: Cyberpunk Reloaded*, ed. Stacy Gillis (London: WallFlower Press, 2005), pp. 74-85 (p. 84).
[123] Li Zhou, 'The striking parallels between 1992's "Year of the Woman" and 2018, explained by a historian' (2018). Available at https://www.vox.com/2018/11/2/17983746/year-of-the-woman-1992 [accessed 1st July 2022].

therefore trace the notable (re)emergence of the femme fatale during these moments alongside the context of women gaining power at a considerable rate in American politics. Zhou additionally identifies that in 1992:

> much like 2018, the country was grappling with a series of high-profile sexual misconduct cases. Clarence Thomas was confirmed to the Supreme Court even after Anita Hill levied sexual harassment allegations against him. Bill Clinton had won the White House while being dogged by allegations of infidelity. And women, broadly, were furious.[124]

Therefore, the proliferations of fatal femininity in our current sociocultural context and that of the 1990s speaks not only to an uptick in women's political presence, but also a collective rage towards, and pushback against, a climate where men abuse positions of power.

Grossman's 2020 'Quick Takes' study of the femme fatale situates contemporary incarnations of the figure within this cultural milieu of women interrogating existing power dynamics, specifically within the context of the #MeToo movement. Grossman highlights how the femme fatale 'prods discussion and conversation about social roles and power dynamics that remain – pre- and post-#MeToo – important contexts informing depictions of "bad" women'.[125] Whilst #MeToo is now a well-known movement, phrase, and hashtag within our cultural lexicon – a tweet by actress Alyssa Milano led to the hashtag gaining viral status in 2017 – it is crucial to remember that the movement itself was started by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 as a means of connecting 'survivors of sexual assault to the resources they need in order to heal'.[126] Despite the fact that the #MeToo movement was started by a black woman, it has been criticised for its focus on white women, with Burke herself stating that 'the media doesn't really care about the stories of black women and the stories of women of color [sic]'.[127] Burke goes on to identify that black women 'don't feel comfortable coming forward' about their own experiences because 'they haven't seen themselves' in the #MeToo 'narrative'.[128] Burke's statements illustrate how the popularisation of a feminist movement can enable a harmful slippage into postfeminist ideations of white femininity – a critique of the contemporary femme fatale that runs through this thesis – and consequently highlight the importance of intersectionality in contemporary feminist criticism and activism.[129]

---

[124] Zhou, 'The striking parallels between 1992's "Year of the Woman" and 2018, explained by a historian'.
[125] Grossman, *The Femme Fatale*, p. 11.
[126] Aisha Harris, 'She Founded Me Too. Now She Wants to Move Past the Trauma' (2018). Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/arts/tarana-burke-metoo-anniversary.html [accessed 25th January 2019].
[127] Tarana Burke, qtd. in Harris, 'She Founded Me Too. Now She Wants to Move Past the Trauma'.
[128] Tarana Burke, qtd. in Harris, 'She Founded Me Too. Now She Wants to Move Past the Trauma'.
[129] See also, Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1.8 (1989), 139-167. Intersectionality, a critical approach founded by Crenshaw in 1989, seeks to 'develop a

Karen Boyle's *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism* recognises the division between the online and offline movement, pressing the importance of understanding #MeToo within the sociocultural contexts and histories of Anglo-American feminist activism.[130] With reference to Burke, Boyle also acknowledges the exclusory practices of the #MeToo movement, suggesting that 'an increased mainstream profile' can lead to the 'flattening out of the intersectional specificities and demands of the work'.[131] In *Me, Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism*, Alison Phipps explores this tension in more depth, with the title of the text itself marking a critique on #MeToo's centring of white and privileged women's concerns.[132] The resultant message, as the movement is 'built on and co-opted from the work of women of colour, while refusing to learn from them or centre their concerns' is 'not 'Me, Too' but 'Me, Not You'.[133] The fact that the contemporary femme fatale has (re)emerged within the #MeToo cultural milieu is particularly striking. While the limitations of the movement are important to assess, it is still the case that, as Grossman notes, the femme fatale is an important and timely 'pattern of representation that can reveal or expose the absurdities of gender exploitation and the traumas associated with gender bias' – all pressing concerns that have been reinvigorated by the contemporary context of the #MeToo movement.[134] Given the femme fatale's consistent adherence to certain (white, thin, conventionally attractive) modes of femininity, especially within the context of postfeminism, the question of intersectionality brought about by critiques of the #MeToo movement animates this thesis. The femme fatale figure has always been concerned with visuality, whether in terms of her relationship to discourses around sex, sight and knowledge, or in her insistent reappearance in parallel with feminist activism. Boyle's critique of popular feminism, which is 'fundamentally about being *seen* – as a feminist, supporting feminist issues – rather than, necessarily, about *doing* feminism' is thus particularly relevant when thinking about the contemporary femme fatale as a feminist analytical tool (emphasis in original).[135] Is the femme fatale emerging in our current cultural moment as a static signifier

---

Black feminist criticism' that departs from the 'tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis' (p. 139). Black women's exclusion from 'feminist theory and antiracist policy', Crenshaw argues, occurs because 'both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender' (p. 140).

[130] See Karen Boyle, *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot, 2019), pp. 8-9.

[131] Boyle, *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism,* p. 33.

[132] See Alison Phipps, *Me, Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), p. 2.

[133] Phipps, *Me, Not You*, pp. 2-3.

[134] Grossman, *The Femme Fatale*, p. 15.

[135] Boyle, *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism*, p. 2.

of unrest, reciting the same narratives as modes gone by, or is she actively deconstructing patriarchal discourses?

In considering these questions, we arrive at another. A consistent feature in critical perspectives on the femme fatale is the question of whose fantasy the figure reflects, or is created to fulfil. In this thesis, I focus mainly on texts written or directed by women – with the exception of Sam Levinson's *Assassination Nation* and the filmic adaptations of *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*.[136] Through this conscious focus, I am asking: what happens when women write the femme fatale? What kind of shifts in characterisation can be detected in this authorial shift, and how might these shifts change the figure's engagement with contemporary feminism(s)? How do critical studies on looking and being seen alter the feminist potentialities of the femme fatale? Given that this project focuses on literature, film and television, spanning genres such as domestic noir, comedy drama, spy thriller and psychological fiction, how do formations of the femme fatale – and her relationship to contemporary feminism(s) – shift across generic and formal modes? With this in mind, how do feminist capacities of the figure operate across adaptations? And, finally, where can we situate the futurity of the femme fatale?

Chapter Overview

Chapter one, **'**Girls Behaving Badly: *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*', explores the feminist potentialities of the 'girled' fatale. Focusing first on Gillian Flynn and Paula Hawkins' literary texts, this chapter argues that the discourses of mobility and flexibility invoked in contemporary discourses around girlhood might also find meaning in reading the 'girlish' femmes fatales of domestic noir fiction. This chapter also argues that the novels evoke postfeminist discourses in order to dismantle them through a thematic engagement with memory and re-vision, thus forming a backlash against the postfeminist backlash. The second part of this chapter focuses on the filmic adaptations of both texts, considering how narrative 'truth' might be 'girled', or made malleable and flexible, through the use of flashbacks. This rejection of epistemological certitude thus aligns with discourses around the

[136] *Assassination Nation*, dir. Sam Levinson (BRON Studios, 2018); *Gone Girl*, dir. David Fincher (Twentieth Century Fox, 2014); *The Girl on the Train*, dir. Tate Taylor (Dreamworks Pictures, 2016). Following Doane's positioning of film (and film noir specifically) as the ideal space for the formation of the classic femme fatale, it is particularly striking to see prominent filmic examples of fatal femininity emerging in productions directed by men. While in Chapter One, I trace how the adaptations of *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* pick up on and reanimate previous discourses regarding the femme fatale, Chapter Two explains the limitations of Levinson's text in its representation of the teenage femme fatale.

femme fatale, as well as the novels' project of revision. This chapter concludes by introducing the idea of violence as a feminist strategy within the context of #MeToo.

Chapter two, '"We All Want to Be Seen": The Teenage Femme Fatale in *The Girls*, *Girls on Fire* and *Assassination Nation*', continues my discussion on discourses around girlhood, moving on to look at the teenage femme fatale specifically. In the first section of this chapter, I argue that each text constructs Joey Soloway's theorisation of the 'gazed gaze'. Positioning the teenage fatale as a double-gazed figure – with discourses around being looked at informing criticism on both the teenage girl and the femme fatale – this section argues that the 'gazed gaze' is weaponised within these texts as a means of deconstructing masculine ways of looking. The second section of this chapter utilises Felicity Colman's concept of the 'transversal' gaze as an alternative way of thinking about the role of looking and being seen in processes of becoming-woman. Noting the absence of the 'transversal' gaze in Sam Levinson's *Assassination Nation* – peculiar, given that this idea particularly lends itself to film form – this chapter concludes with a discussion of the link between gender and authorship in contemporary femme fatale texts.

Chapter three, 'Mums on-the-run and "Plot Killers": Fatal Motherhood in Laura Lippman's *Sunburn*, Darcey Bell's *A Simple Favour*, and Netflix's *Good Girls*', questions the supposed incompatibility of the femme fatale and motherhood, positioning the protagonists of Lippman's and Bell's texts alongside the television series *Good Girls* as contemporary examples of fatal motherhood. Each text in this chapter explores ideas of criminality, with mothers 'on-the-run'. Aligning Jacqueline Rose's statement that mothers are never 'what they seem, or are meant to be' with Doane's positioning of the femme fatale – who 'never really is what she seems to be' – this chapter utilises the thematic thread of mums-on-the-run as a means to explore how the protagonists in each text evade fixed constructions of femininity and patriarchal narratives regarding motherhood.[137] Additionally, drawing on and redeploying Deborah Frances-White's critique of contemporary televisual women as 'plot killers', this chapter argues for the feminist potentialities of fatal motherhood written by women.[138]

Chapter Four, '"She Doesn't Have a Signature But She Certainly Has Style": Putting Clothing to Work in *Killing Eve*, *Boy Parts*, and *Promising Young Woman*' explores the role

---

[137] Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), p. 18; Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.

[138] Deborah Frances-White, 'Dangerous Women on Film with Nat Luurtsema and Guest Yasmine Akram' (2018), The Guilty Feminist [Podcast]. Available at http://guiltyfeminist.com/episodes/ [accessed 10th November 2018].

of clothing, and costuming, in the narrative trajectories of the contemporary femme fatale as a working woman. In this chapter, women take up several occupations – from photographer and barista to assassin and vigilante. Thinking about how clothing is 'put to work' by the femmes fatales in each text – or, in turn, how the women working on each text costumes the characters with certain purposes in mind – this chapter assesses what happens when the femme fatale is in 'possession of', or 'controls the effect of, her own image.[139] Remobilising my previous discussions of the 'transversal' gaze, this chapter positions the swapping of clothing in *Killing Eve* as evidence of clothing as a discourse between women, holding the possibility of new modes of becoming-woman. This chapter also assesses the limitations of the feminist analytical work performed through styling, engaging with discourses around sexual violence and revenge, before questioning whose fantasy the contemporary femme fatale is working to fulfil. These tensions lead into the conclusion of the thesis, where I return to the topic of the femme fatale and narrative conclusions. Considering thematics of failure alongside the contemporary feminist climate following the 2022 Depp vs Heard case and overturning of Roe vs Wade, as well as discourses around race and representation, I assess where the femme fatale might be heading next.

[139] Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 127.

Chapter One - Girls Behaving Badly: *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*

From *Gone Girl* (2012) to *The Girl on the Train* (2015), *The Girls* (2016) to *Girls on Fire* (2016), it is impossible to ignore the amplification of 'girl stories by and about women' in the twenty-first century.[1] Bad girls are overwhelming bookshop shelves. It is clear from the proliferation of such texts that contemporary audiences are interested in, or seduced by, unruly femininity.[2] Whereas Robin Wasserman accurately identifies this proliferation of 'girl stories' as a 'cultural moment that's spilled across genre and medium', Flynn and Hawkins' texts – *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* – are primarily discussed in relation to the emergent literary genre of 'domestic noir'.[3] The generic term 'domestic noir', coined by Julia Crouch, refers to literature which 'takes place primarily in homes and workplaces' and 'concerns itself largely' with women's experiences.[4] Crucially, the narratives explore and address the 'broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants'.[5] Whilst genre is not necessarily key to my discussion of Flynn and Hawkins' texts and their filmic adaptations, Crouch's definition does work to highlight how certain generic forms present the potential for feminist, analytical approaches towards fatal femininity. Against the traditionally masculine narrative drive of classic film noir, domestic noir's focus on women's experiences and, in the case of *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*, self-narration, marks the genre as an intriguing 'home' for the pragmatically bad femme fatale.

Given domestic noir's focus on women's experiences of the home and the workplace, how do we read Flynn and Hawkins' overtly 'girled' formations of femininity? In her discussion of *Gone Girl*, Emma V. Miller suggests that, when employed in reference to women, the use of the term '*girl*' is both 'patronising and infantilising' (emphasis in original).[6] There is more nuance and feminist potential to be drawn from discussions of the

---

[1] Robin Wasserman, 'What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?' (2016). Available at https://lithub.com/what-does-it-mean-when-we-call-women-girls/ [accessed 5th January 2019].
[2] Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Broadway Books, 2012); Paula Hawkins, *The Girl on the Train* (London: Black Swan, [2015] 2016); Emma Cline, *The Girls* (London: Penguin, 2016); Robin Wasserman, *Girls on Fire* (London: Little Brown, 2016). All further references to *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* are to these editions and will be given parenthetically within the body of the chapter;
[3] Wasserman, 'What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?'; Julia Crouch, 'Genre Bender' (2013). Available at http://juliacrouch.co.uk/blog/genre-bender [accessed 7th April 2019].
[4] Crouch, 'Genre Bender'.
[5] Crouch, 'Genre Bender'.
[6] Emma V. Miller, '"How Much Do You Want to Pay for This Beauty?": Domestic Noir and the Active Turn in Feminist Crime Fiction', in *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, ed. Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 89-113 (p. 97).

'girling' of fatal femininity, particularly in reference to the boom in critical discourses around girlhood since the 1990s. As Lindop identifies, the academic focus on the 'deadly girl' is 'negligible' when considered against the 'mounting centrality' of the figure in film noir from the late-twentieth century onwards, as well as 'the overwhelming centrality of girls in popular culture as a whole'.[7] Whilst discourses on girlhood have received an abundance of academic attention, there has been little focus on how such criticism has merged with constructions of the femme fatale figure in the twenty-first century. If, as Stables argues, the femme fatale consistently 'represents and uniquely reflects current discourses around 'woman'', what readings can be drawn from the 'girling' of the femme fatale?[8] To what extent can we read the contemporary 'girled' fatale as a figure with feminist currency? And, with the filmic adaptations of *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* in mind, how might the 'girling' of fatal femininity interact with the process of adaptation?

Girling Noir: Girlhood, Postfeminism, and the Femme Fatale

Farrimond describes how, whilst girls appeared in classic film noir, they 'did not operate as femme fatales'.[9] Instead, girls were constructed as innocuous beacons of purity against which the fatal woman may collide and contrast, her malevolence increasing in comparison. This particular dynamic is illustrated in *Double Indemnity* (1944) through the characterisation of step-daughter Lola and the 'deadly and exotic' femme fatale Phyllis Dietrichson.[10] In her psychoanalytic reading of the film, Claire Johnston suggests that whilst Dietrichson and Lola 'resemble each other in age and general appearance in a striking way', Lola 'represents the social order […] the family, [and] her role of daughter, subject to the Law of the Father'.[11] In contrast Dietrichson is marked by an 'incongruity' with her social role of 'suburban housewife', representing 'excess' and the 'castration anxiety' that positions her as a vehicle for Walter Neff's 'Oedipal transgression'.[12] Due to Dietrichson's transgressive actions, and 'the erotic drives she represents', she must 'become subject to the law – she must be found

---

[7] Samantha Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 3.
[8] Kate Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing the *Femme Fatale* in 90s Cinema', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 164-82 (p. 165).
[9] Katherine Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and American Cinema* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 59.
[10] Sylvia Harvey, 'Woman's Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 35-46 (p. 39).
[11] Claire Johnston, 'Double Indemnity', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1998), pp. 89-98 (pp. 92-5).
[12] Johnston, 'Double Indemnity', p. 93.

guilty and punished'.[13] Crucially, Johnston's reading goes on to suggest that the threat of unruly femininity is not only removed from the narrative, but is thoroughly reconciled through Lola. Lola, Johnston continues, restores "woman' as good object for the patriarchal order', entailing that 'the trouble' caused by Dietrichson's transgressive actions, and 'woman' more broadly, is 'contained in its rightful place' by the narrative conclusion.[14] Here, then, the girl is employed as a tool to contain feminine transgression and reinforce patriarchal constructions of femininity.[15]

This particular formation of girlhood in cinema shifted dramatically with the late-twentieth-century neo-noir film. Lindop and Farrimond describe the teenage fatales of this epoch as 'powerful young women who are not yet *femmes* but are just as deadly as their adult counterparts', armed with the 'traditional arsenal of an evil scheming mind, cruel single-mindedness of purpose and sexual allure at their fingertips'.[16] Both Lindop and Farrimond read this emergence of the powerful girl fatale as reflective of the contemporaneous proliferation of discourses around girlhood. For Lindop, the transgressive 'filles fatales' are symptomatic of a discourse 'where girls have become central to the notion of female empowerment'.[17] In turn, Farrimond relates the 'increased interest in the behaviour of teenage girls in popular and academic writing' and the 'increased visibility of popular girl-centric feminisms' to texts' movement away from 'the straightforward demonization' of the fille fatale.[18] As Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters identify, popular culture has held a 'long-standing fascination' with the girl as a 'harbinger of change and transformation'.[19] Sharing this perspective, in *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* Anita Harris discusses how young women are 'constructed as a vanguard of new subjectivity' in the early twenty-first century.[20] The 'changes in possibilities and expectations for young women' following second wave feminism are reflected across sociocultural spheres, 'from the sassy

---

[13] Johnston, 'Double Indemnity', p. 93
[14] Johnston, 'Double Indemnity', p. 96.
[15] See also, Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 99, *Baby Doll*, dir. Elia Kazan (Newtown Productions, 1965), *Lolita*, dir. Stanley Kubrick (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1962), *Lolita*, dir. Adrian Lyne (Pathé, 1997). Lindop cites *Mildred Pierce, Baby Doll* and both adaptations of *Lolita* as further examples of the fille fatale. However, as Lindop identifies, Veda is 'punished for her crime', Lolita 'dies in childbirth at 17', and Baby Doll is 'used and then dumped', thus also highlighting how constructions of transgressive girlhood in twentieth-century cinema are subjected to the same textual closure as the femme fatale figure.
[16] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 93; Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale,* p. 59.
[17] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema,* p. 99.
[18] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 66.
[19] Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 106.
[20] Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

icons of the culture industries to the proliferation of government-funded girl power programs'.[21] The 'take-charge dynamism' of the girl figure translates into the 'savvy, self-inventive, and extremely formidable' qualities of the 'adolescent *neo-noir fatale*', further illustrating how the femme fatale mediates cultural and social discourses around femininity.[22] When, as Doane suggests, the femme fatale of classic film noir was 'not the subject of feminism but a symptom of male fears about feminism', and, on the other hand, 'girls' and 'sites of becoming a woman' are positioned as 'crucial' to the 'future-directed' politics of feminism, the 'girled' fatale is a key point of feminist enquiry.[23]

However, both the girl figure and the 'girled' fatale have also been aligned with postfeminist rhetoric. According to Projansky this positioning is due, in part, to the fact that the critical and cultural focus on girlhood 'coincides chronologically with the proliferation of discourse about postfeminism'.[24] Given the transformative potential of the girl – and her aptitude for futurity – it should come as no surprise that unlike the femmes fatales of classic noir, the teen fatale frequently escapes retribution for her 'transgressions'.[25] Whilst holding potent feminist potential for constructions of fatal femininity, this absence of punishment simultaneously speaks to the individualistic and apolitical representations of subjectivity which are, in turn, characteristic of postfeminist discourses. Focusing on *Mini's First Time* (2006) and *Wild Things* (1998), Farrimond explains how 'representations of valorised bad girls reflect the problematic nature of postfeminist culture'.[26] Whilst in these films the victorious girls 'triumph' over 'male representatives of patriarchal control', the success is secured 'at the expense of other female characters and female solidarity'.[27] Furthermore, the 'particular investment' in valorising the 'successes of the teenage girl' is exclusively understood in terms of 'whiteness, thinness, sexual desirability and conventional beauty'.[28] As such, the 'themes, pleasures, values, and lifestyles' and ultimately successes of the girl

---

[21] Anita Harris, 'Introduction', in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2004), pp. xvii – xxv (p. xvii).
[22] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 99; Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris, *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 19.
[23] Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 2-3; Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 9.
[24] Sarah Projansky, 'Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections on Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminism's Daughters', in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular* Culture, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 40-72 (p. 42).
[25] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema,* p. 99.
[26] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 80.
[27] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 80.
[28] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 76.

figure are assumed to be 'somehow universally shared' and 'universally accessible'.[29] Postfeminist media texts' lack of sustainment with 'women's experiences and social health' is rendered at the level of the filmic narrative here, where the valorisation of 'exceptional individuals' entails that 'there is no space for the empowerment of girls as a group'.[30] Instead, as Lindop suggests, this 'self-affirming, individualistic stance' opposes 'feminist ideas of collectivist action'.[31] We can also trace this valorisation of specific modes of girlhood in Harris's model of the ideal 'future girl' – a figure with 'power, opportunities, and success'.[32] In such narratives, the work of feminism is effectively 'taken into account', with no interrogation of how 'success' might be inextricably linked to factors such as race, ability, and class.[33] When the girl figure is lauded for her ability to 'take charge of her life, seize chances, and achieve her goals', the 'formidable' and 'victorious' teen fatale can be read to imply that the work of feminism is no longer needed. [34]

Despite this vexed context, discourses around girlhood provoke new possibilities for studies of the femme fatale. As suggested by Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris, whilst the cultural utilisation of the girl is marked by ambivalence, 'the same circumstances which have seen girlhood become a receptacle for social anxieties about change' have also indicated 'new possibilities' for 'feminist theory and practice'.[35] In a similar vein, Doane states that 'like any representation', the femme fatale is not under the 'control' of those who produced her and 'once disseminated' is open to readings which subvert the ideological premises on which she was created.[36] Building on Lindop's theorisation of a 'backlash reaction to postfeminism's own backlash against feminism', this

---

[29] Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 'Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture', in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 1-25 (pp. 1-2).
[30] Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 'In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Studies', *Cinema Journal*, 44.2 (Winter, 2005), 107-110 (p. 107); Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 80.
[31] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 123. Building on this idea, Meenakshi Gigi Durham suggests that whilst girl heroines may disrupt masculine hegemony, their 'challenges to patriarchal interests are subsumed within a powerful discourse of complicity with dominant norms of femininity, sexuality, race, class, and the disciplining of the female body, all in the interests of capital'. Whilst Durham contends that in the 'new mediated forms' of girlhood proliferating in popular culture 'a number of political and ideological crosscurrents are at play', the privileging of normative ideals of feminine beauty 'effectively vitiate the radical potential they offer'. See Meenakshi Gigi Durham, 'The Girling of America: Critical Reflections on Gender and Popular Communication', *Popular Communication*, 1.1 (2003), 23-31 (p. 30).
[32] Harris, *Future Girl,* p. 1.
[33] Angela McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime', in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 27-39 (p. 28).
[34] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 1; Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 99; Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 76.
[35] Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris, *Young Femininity*, p. 216.
[36] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 3.

chapter argues that whilst postfeminist rhetoric has problematised the figure of the girl, the current proliferation of 'pragmatically bad' girl narratives are working to problematise postfeminist and patriarchal discourses.[37] Before her textual closure, the femme fatale thrives when she is one step ahead, harbouring 'a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable'.[38] Although the 'girled' fatale's evasion of punishment has been read as individualistic and apolitical, I argue that there is untapped feminist potential reading the contemporary femme fatale's transgressions in line with the discourses of 'becoming' and 'futurity' that are critically associated with girlhood. Driscoll identifies that in the twenty-first century girlhood is understood as 'an idea of mobility preceding the fixity of womanhood'.[39] The 'mobility', 'changeableness' and 'instability' of the girl figure, when considered in reference to the femme fatale's infamous ambiguity, invites a reading of the 'girled' fatale as a site where constructions of femininity are not fixed or fated.[40]

The adaptations of fatal femininity explored within this chapter illustrate a movement between categories of 'girl' and 'woman' – a slippery 'girling' of femininity. Wasserman suggests that if there is a 'thematic message encoded' in the contemporary proliferation of "girl' narratives', it is the focus on the 'transition from girlhood to womanhood, from being someone to being someone's wife, someone's mother'.[41] Whilst the two modes are not mutually exclusive – of course, one can still be *someone* as well as being a wife or a mother – the point Wasserman makes speaks to the fixity of categorisations such as 'wife' and

---

[37] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, pp. 162-3.
[38] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[39] Driscoll, *Girls*, p. 47; See also, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, [1980] 1987). Deleuze and Guattari also theoretically position the girl as a transitory figure. Likening the girl to the 'block of becoming that remains contemporaneous to each opposable term, man, woman, child, adult', she is figured as 'an abstract line, or a line of flight' (p. 305). For Deleuze and Guattari, 'girls do not belong to an age group, sex, order, or kingdom: they slip in everywhere, between orders, acts, ages, [and] sexes' (p. 305). Whilst this formulation of the girl, as Munford and Waters identify, utilises the same 'language of flexibility, malleability and change' as Harris' discussion 'of the 'future girl', Deleuze and Guattari's theorisations have been problematised by feminist critics (Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, p. 107). Referring to the work of Alice Jardine, Elizabeth Grosz, and Rosi Braidotti, Driscoll locates the cause of critique in 'both the absence and presence of gender in Deleuze's work', within and beyond *A Thousand Plateaus* (Driscoll, *Girls*, p. 191). Whilst the 'deployment of "becoming-woman"' is located as a 'positive departure from established hierarches', Driscoll suggests, the process is denoted as 'only a stage in a chain of becomings', suggesting a 'fixed linear path', the 'course of which makes woman redundant' (Driscoll, *Girls*, pp. 191-2). Whilst Driscoll's discussion continues in relation to the work of Simone de Beauvoir, identifying that whilst Deleuze's theorisations do not 'inhere in the proposition "Woman"', in *The Second Sex* Beauvoir also prioritises 'becoming over the destination' and 'sees "Woman" as an undesirably fixed identity' (Driscoll, *Girls*, pp. 196-7). See also Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans, and ed. H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, [1949] 1997).
[40] Driscoll, *Girls*, p. 47; Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'mobility'. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/120494?rskey=igDZJj&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid [accessed 4th January 2019].
[41] Wasserman, 'What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?'.

'mother' within a patriarchal society. '*Girl*', Wasserman continues, 'attunes us to what might be gained and lost' along this 'fixed linear path'(emphasis in original).[42]. The 'girling' of femininity, crucially, 'raises the possibility of reversion'.[43] Here, Wasserman's theorisations draw attention to the traditionally linear understanding of feminine subjectivity, whilst making an important point about how the 'girling' of femininity questions this linearity, and the fixity of 'woman' as category. If, in the eminent words of Simone de Beauvoir, 'woman is not a completed reality, but rather a becoming', girlhood as a mode of becoming-woman holds transformative potential for feminist readings of the 'girled' fatale.[44]

Whilst this positioning of the girled fatale enables a feminist critique of fixed constructions of femininity, Wasserman's focus on the re-visitation of girlhood is also productive – for discussions of both the generational tensions within feminist discourse(s) and the cyclical return of the femme fatale figure – in its destabilisation of temporal boundaries. If '*girl*', as Wasserman suggests, 'raises the possibility of reversion', then the 'girling' of 'woman' requires a 'looking-back', and a subsequent recognition that the past is not stable or fixed (emphasis in original).[45] Similarly, the contemporary redeployment of the fatale figure is, in itself, a dialogue with previous incarnations of unruly, transgressive femininity. Each cycle produces adaptations of the femme fatale tradition, entailing that constructions emerge as a 'constellation of tropes and characteristics', speaking to past and present 'concerns about women and power'.[46] Additionally, the analytical work performed by the 'girled' fatale indicates that, like fatal femininity, feminism refuses to be condemned to the past. Rather, feminism interrupts our contemporary moment because, as Munford and Waters suggest, 'its business remains unfinished'.[47] As such, the 'girled' fatale acts as 'a hinge between old and new, present and future', creating a dialogue with intergenerational tensions and indicating the enduring significance of feminist discourses.[48]

The potentiality of revising the past is evident across feminist criticism, especially within texts broadly belonging to the second wave of feminism. As Munford and Waters suggest, 'second wave feminism engaged in an enormous feat of remembering'.[49] Adrienne Rich's concept of 're-vision' stands as a central example of such second-wave discourses:

---

[42] Wasserman, 'What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?'; Driscoll, *Girls*, p. 192.
[43] Wasserman, 'What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?'.
[44] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 66.
[45] Wasserman, 'What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?'.
[46] Stacy Gillis, 'Cyber Noir: Cyberspace, (Post)Feminism and the *Femme Fatale*', in *The Matrix Trilogy: Cyberpunk Reloaded*, ed. Stacy Gillis (London: WallFlower Press, 2005), pp. 74-85, (p. 84).
[47] Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, p. 171.
[48] Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, p. 107.
[49] Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, p. 29.

> Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text with a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.[50]

Re-vision - the understanding of the 'assumptions in which we are drenched' - is, according to Rich, part of woman's 'refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society'.[51] The 'girled' fatale is, I suggest, an enaction of this 'refusal', urging a reconsideration of both the feminist potentialities of the mobile, changeable femme fatale who survives, and the 'assumptions' which permeate narratives of 'bad' femininity.[52] As a redeployment of the femme fatale figure and a reassessment of the 'transition from girlhood to womanhood', constructions of the figure enact this process of re-vision.[53] Tenacious in her refusal of textual and ideological closure, the 'girled' fatale is indicative of how, in the words of Wasserman, 'the persistence of girlhood can be a battle cry'.[54] The first section of this chapter focuses on Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* and Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train*. In line with Rich's emphasis on 're-vision', Gayle Greene suggests that the use of memory is of particular importance for feminist fiction, as 'forgetting is a major obstacle to change'.[55] Whereas Greene's study focuses on fiction by Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, and Toni Morrison, the texts explored within this chapter may not immediately strike their readership as feminist canonical texts. I argue that whilst *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* initially appear as 'light entertainment' – constructing the 'retrograde' and 'forgetful' modes of femininity often associated with postfeminism's

---

[50] Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *College English*, 34.1 (Oct, 1972), 18-30 (p. 18).

[51] Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', p. 18. See also, Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism: An Introduction', in *Re-vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles, CA: The American Film Institute, 1984), pp. 1-17. The cruciality of revisiting the past in Rich's approach has also been utilised by feminist film scholarship, following just over a decade later. Building on Rich's theorisations, Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams' introduction to *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* focuses on 're-vision' to imply 'not only the sense of a rewriting of earlier feminist formulations but also the sense of recovering, reclaiming vision […] both seeing differently and wrenching the "look" (and the "voice") from their previous structures' (p. 14). 'Seeing difference differently' and 're-vising the old apprehension of sexual difference' was central to this critical adaptation of re-vision, along with the possibility to 'multiply differences, to move away from homogeneity' (pp. 14-15). Furthermore, in 'Introduction: "Re-Vision"?: Feminist Film Criticism in the Twenty-first Century', in *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, ed. Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 1-9, contemporary critics Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer seek to 'continue, within the landscape of popular movies of the twenty-first century, the project set forth by [Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams], whose goal was "re-vision"' (p. 1). Therefore, we are able to read an ongoing feminist tradition of re-vision which, in itself, remembers and revises existing feminist discourse across literary and filmic disciplines.

[52] Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', p. 18.

[53] Wasserman, 'What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?'.

[54] Wasserman, 'What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?'.

[55] Gayle Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', *Signs*, 16.2 (Winter, 1991), 290-321 (p. 298).

obfuscating project of 'both disremembering and forgetting' – the narratives work to engage with feminist discourses around re-vision and memory.[56] From Amy's play of identities to Rachel's transitional liminality, the texts construct 'retrograde' and 'forgetful' modes of 'girled' femininity in order to question fixed constructions of 'woman' and postfeminist discourses around empowerment.[57] The 'girling' of Amy and Rachel, I will argue, heightens their propensity to, like the femme fatale of film noir, stand 'outside [of] the male order and represent a challenge to it'.[58]

In line with Greene's suggestion that feminist texts 'formally and structurally' unsettle 'our relation to the past', the next section of this chapter focuses on how the texts' cinematic adaptations complicate and 'girl' the 'epistemological drive of narrative'.[59] Alice Ridout suggests that, 'to some extent', adaptations are 'inherently nostalgic' in their choice to 'return to a previous text rather than start afresh'.[60] Whilst the idea of a 'return' is discursively productive for discussions of the femme fatale, I will also explore how departures in the adaptative process interact with the adaptations' feminist potential.[61] As Robert Stam suggests, adaptation is often critically approached with 'profoundly moralistic' terms such as '*infidelity*, *betrayal*', and '*violation*' (emphasis in original).[62] My reading will mobilise these critical theorisations of betrayal – highly pertinent in discussions of the femme fatale's infamous duplicity – and 'return' in order to explore how the filmic adaptations of *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* mediate the 'present questions and needs' of contemporary feminism(s).[63]

Postfeminist Fantasies

Agnieszka Piotrowska questions the coupling of *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*, suggesting that the texts have 'little in common except for the 'girl' in the title' and their 'first person', 'polyvocal' narrative style.[64] The frequent connection drawn between *Gone*

---

[56] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 38; Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, p. 29.
[57] Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, p. 29.
[58] E. Ann Kaplan, 'The Place of Women in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 81-88 (p. 81).
[59] Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 292; Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[60] Alice Ridout, *Contemporary Women Writers Look Back: From Irony to Nostalgia* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), p. 135.
[61] Ridout, *Contemporary Women Writers Look Back,* p. 135.
[62] Robert Stam, 'Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation', in *Film Adaptation,* ed. James Naremore (London: Athlone Press, 2000), pp. 54-76 (p. 54).
[63] Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 305.
[64] Agnieszka Piotrowska, *The Nasty Woman and The Neo Femme Fatale in Contemporary Cinema* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 47.

Girl and *The Girl on the Train* is due, Piotrowska suggests, to the 'proximity' in which the novels were published, and the 'thriller-like genre' of their subsequent filmic adaptations.[65] Whilst it is true that the close proximity of the text's publications speaks to a 'growing market for such tales', I argue that the 'girl' in each title is a highly significant point of comparison, with implications that run beyond contemporary publishing trends.[66] In her narrative prime, the femme fatale is, as Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe suggest, 'durable, malleable and resistant to definition'.[67] Such language simultaneously evokes the discursive context of 'flexibility, malleability and change' discussed in relation to contemporary girlhood.[68] With this discursive context in mind, the 'girling' of the femme fatale is crucial to her feminist potential. Both of the protagonists in *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* enact the 'possibility of reversion' outlined by Wasserman, subverting the set 'transition from girlhood to womanhood, from being someone to being someone's wife'.[69] In *Gone Girl*, Amy consciously rejects the 'persona' of what she describes as 'Average Dumb Woman Married to Average Shitty Man', and disappears from the home she shares with her husband Nick (*Gone Girl*, p. 234). In *The Girl on the Train*, Rachel, who is divorced, unemployed, and struggling with alcoholism, has been unwillingly cast out from the domestic sphere. Positioned outside of the 'fixity of womanhood', their identities are 'girled': Amy becomes the 'gone girl', and Rachel becomes 'the girl on the train'.[70] The liminal, girled positions assumed by Amy and Rachel, outside of normative romance and domesticity, allow them to effectively bring man to 'his destruction' or, at the very least, teach him a lesson he will not forget.[71]

Prior to the girling of Amy and Rachel's identities, each text constructs an ideation of romantic coupledom and postfeminist subjectivity. Throughout the first half of *Gone Girl*, Amy's voice is solely constructed through her metafictive diary entries. From sugar-coated first kiss to idyllic domestic bliss, the diary entries begin as a recollection of Nick and Amy's 'perfect togetherness'.[72] In the novel, Diary Amy muses: 'I've gotten so retro, at one point, I

---

[65] Piotrowska, *The Nasty Woman and The Neo Femme Fatale in Contemporary Cinema*, p. 47.
[66] Sarah Hughes, 'The Gone Girl Effect Sparks Year of Flawed Women Behaving Badly' (2015). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/03/gone-girl-effect [accessed 28th October 2018].
[67] Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe, 'Introduction: 'Cherchez la femme', in *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts*, ed. Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 1-8 (p. 3).
[68] Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*', p. 107.
[69] Wasserman, 'What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?'.
[70] Driscoll, *Girls*, p. 47.
[71] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47.
[72] Piotrowska, *The Nasty Woman and The Neo Femme Fatale in Contemporary Cinema*, p. 48.

will probably use the word *pocketbook*, shuffling out the door in my swingy tweed coat, my lips painted red, on the way to the *beauty parlor*' (p. 39, emphasis in original). The evocation of this specifically 'retro' mode of femininity emerges, to quote Munford and Waters, despite 'feminism's political successes in the 1970s and beyond' in interrogating and discrediting 'precisely these models of femininity'.[73] Diary Amy's playful association with this retrograde feminine aesthetic consciously speaks to the housewife figure as 'a convenient cultural shorthand for oppressed womanhood'.[74] In another entry, Diary Amy states: 'I have become a wife, I have become a bore, I have been asked to forfeit my Independent Young Feminist card. I don't care' (p. 38). McRobbie suggests that postfeminist rhetoric actively evokes feminist discourse to suggest that it is 'no longer necessary'.[75] In Diary Amy's claim, feminism is not only 'evoked' but explicitly elucidated.[76] Through Amy's mocking conceptualisation of an 'Independent Young Feminist card', we can ascertain that, alongside McRobbie's positioning of the young postfeminist female subject, she appreciates the 'layers of meaning in her assertion; she "gets the joke"' (p. 38).[77] Her delight in performing this particular image of 'un-liberated domestic femininity' further positions feminism as a constraint on feminine 'success', indicating how postfeminist rhetoric promises 'a movement beyond feminism to a more comfortable zone where women are now free to choose for themselves'.[78] This movement 'beyond', however, is crucially achieved by looking back to the image of the 'oppressed' housewife, indicative of how postfeminist rhetoric works to 'restabilise gendered power structures'.[79]

Whereas Amy's diary valorises domestic, 'unliberated' femininity, in *The Girl on the Train*, Rachel idealises romantic coupledom. Each day, Rachel catches the 8:04 train into London and sits within a certain carriage. At the same point in nearly every commute, the train draws to a halt at a red signal. Anticipating this stop, Rachel's carefully selected vantage point (carriage D) allows her to look at the 'perfect, golden couple' occupying her 'favourite trackside house' (pp. 18-19). Meanwhile, her previous home, located a few doors down, lurks in her peripheral vision. While Rachel does not know the inhabitants of her 'favourite trackside house' – she names them 'Jason and Jess', though they are later revealed to be the

[73] Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture,* p. 10.
[74] Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, p. 71.
[75] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 33.
[76] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 33.
[77] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 33.
[78] Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, p. 71; McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 33.
[79] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 33; Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, p. 71; Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 11.

characters Megan and Scott – they come to represent an image of idyllic, domestic love (p. 18). However, when speculating that 'Jason and Jess' have 'gone for a run together', parenthesised recollections interrupt her reverie, working to indicate the anxieties that provoke Rachel to fantasise about the couple: '(Tom and I used to run together on Sundays […])', she recalls (pp. 19-20). Rachel subsequently admits:

> I don't know their names […] They're a match, they're a set. They're happy, I can tell. They're what I used to be, they're Tom and me, five years ago. They're what I lost, they're everything I want to be (p. 26).

Her fantasy is therefore a distraction from, and a symptom of, her own liminal position. McRobbie suggests that the postfeminist subject, 'loosened' from the 'ties of tradition and community', is free to 'earn an independent living without shame or danger'.[80] However, such 'choices' also give rise to 'new anxieties'.[81] 'There is', according to McRobbie, 'the risk that she might let the right man slip from under her nose […] the risk that, partnerless, she will be isolated, marginalized from the world of happy couples'.[82] Rachel's mournful perspective on her own liminality, and her longing to return to the domestic sphere, are therefore indicative of how postfeminist culture works to revalorise the 'conventional desires' previously critiqued by feminist discourses.[83] Crucially, however, Rachel is not only isolated from the 'world of happy couples' – she is also excluded from highly traditional notions of successful femininity.[84] She states, 'let's be honest: women are still only valued for two things – their looks and their roles as mothers. I'm not beautiful, and I can't have kids, so what does that make me? Worthless' (p. 112). The framework of feminine success reinvigorated within this claim, previously 'investigated and debunked by second wave feminists', is therefore symptomatic of the 'collective amnesia' perpetuated by postfeminist culture.[85] Alongside Amy's revalorisation of retro modes of femininity, Rachel's yearning to return to the domestic sphere aligns with the intimation in postfeminist media texts that the 'home', and the ideological fixity it represents, 'is perhaps not such a bad place after all'.[86]

---

[80] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 36.
[81] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 36.
[82] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 37.
[83] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 37.
[84] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 37.
[85] Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, p. 10; Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 298.
[86] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 135.

Feminist Backlash: Memory and Invention

Greene suggests that feminist texts mine 'the past to discover play rather than place'.[87] They construct 'a view of the past not as fixed and finished' but 'connected to the present', taking on 'new meaning in response to present questions and needs'.[88] Whilst *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* initially construct postfeminist modes of subjectivity, their detectable engagement with feminist discourses regarding memory works to problematise associated notions of 'political amnesia'.[89] The epigraph to Greene's essay, taken from Monique Wittig's influential *Les Guérillères* (1969), whilst belonging to a significantly distinct discursive mode, is strikingly relevant to the feminist critiques enacted within *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*.[90] Wittig writes:

> He has stolen your wisdom from you, he has closed your memory to what you were, he has made of you that which is not which does not speak which does not possess which does not write […] He has invented your history […] But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent.[91]

In *Gone Girl*, following the revelation of her husband's infidelity, Amy finds herself 'with a new persona, not of [her] choosing': 'Average Dumb Woman Married to Average Shitty Man' (p. 234). Rather than allow Nick to define her through this 'predictable', 'average' 'tale', she 'rewrite[s] [her] life a little', re-writing 'history' through the metafictive diary and re-inventing herself through an array of personas (pp. 234-7).[92] In *The Girl on the Train*, Rachel discovers that when she experienced blackouts from excessive drinking – 'hours lost, never to be retrieved' – Tom would 'invent' her 'history', filling in the temporal gaps with fictional accounts of her violent, disorderly behaviour (p. 97).[93] In order to reconstruct her

---

[87] Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 305.
[88] Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 305.
[89] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 31.
[90] Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 298.
[91] Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, trans. David Le Vay (Boston: Beacon Press, [1969]1989), pp. 110-11, p. 89.
[92] Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, p. 111.
[93] Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, p. 111. The relationship between women and alcoholism is highly fraught with connections to pregnancy and motherhood. Describing the motivation for her alcoholism, Rachel states that 'the thing about being barren is that you're not allowed to get away from it. Not when you're in your thirties' (p. 111). Because it was not Tom's 'failure', he did not feel the same way as Rachel, entailing that she 'felt isolated in [her] misery' (p. 112). She 'became lonely, so [she] drank a bit, and then a bit more' (p. 112). 'I lost and I drank and I drank and I lost', Rachel claims (p. 112). As Jan Waterson identifies, the connection between women's alcohol consumption and pregnancy/motherhood is culturally entrenched, not least within the phrase 'mother's ruin' (Jan Waterson, *Women and Alcohol in Social Context: Mother's Ruin Revisited* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 2). 'When we speak of 'mother's ruin'', Waterson suggests, 'we tend to think of gin', and the efforts to 'terminate unwanted pregnancies' in the 'eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' (Waterson, *Women and Alcohol in Social Context*, p. 3). This connection between 'mother's ruin' and alcohol misuse also extends to the image of 'drunken mothers neglecting their children as they pursue their own gratification' (p. 4). Rachel's alcoholism is also intrinsically linked to the maternal. However, it is her inability to become a mother that first motivated her alcohol misuse, rather than the rejection of pregnancy and motherhood. She started to drink out of loneliness, and continues to do so in order to forget her 'failure[s]' – to make life more manageable

identity, and to bring Tom 'to his destruction', she has to remember.[94] From Amy's metafictive self-authoring to Rachel's unreliable investigative narration, therefore, we can trace the emergence of a self-narrating femme fatale who grapples with and obstructs male characters' attempts to 'destroy' her. Whereas classic film noir constructs the femme fatale from a masculine perspective, rendering woman as 'not entirely legible', domestic noir's articulation of women's experiences enables the subversion of patriarchal narratives regarding illegible femininity.[95] Illustrative of this subversive shift, Amy and Rachel's narratives effectively wrench 'the "look"' and, crucially, 'the "voice"' from 'their previous structures' – a recuperation of agency, or 're-vision', made all the more significant by the fact that they are constructed in novels written by women.[96] The focus on memory and invention in Wittig's theorisations is also highly relevant to discussions of the femme fatale figure. Whilst the classic femme fatale was a masculine invention, contemporary incarnations emerge as a 'constellation of tropes and characteristics'.[97] Carrying this ideological history, and mediating contemporary discourses around femininity, the postmillennial fatale figure is an amalgamation of memory and invention.[98] It is through a thematic and stylistic focus on both memory and invention that Amy and Rachel are equipped to 'present a challenge' to postfeminist rhetoric, and the patriarchal 'male order' that lurks beneath.[99]

Nick's actions threaten to tell a definitive 'tale' about Amy, to 'invent' her 'history' (p. 234).[100] It is through the diary that Amy writes a 'different story, a better story' in order to reclaim control over the construction of her identity and incriminate Nick in the process (p. 234). From the invocation of domestic bliss to the final declarative nail in the coffin '*this man might kill me*' (p. 205, emphasis in original), the metatextual diary is intended to be read,

---

(p. 112). Referring to her drunken state – 'Drunk Rachel' – in the third person, Rachel states that 'she has no past, no future. She exists purely in the moment' (p. 145). This particular erasure of past and future links to Waterson's further comment that alcohol 'kills time', both in a social, literal sense but also in terms of memory loss (Waterson, *Women and Alcohol in Social Context*, p. 1). Through drinking, then, Rachel erases past and present – she removes herself from linear notions of time. Wasserman's comments on the linearity of women's lives – 'the transition from girlhood to womanhood, from being someone to being someone's wife, someone's mother' – illuminates the necessity of Rachel's timeless, drunken state (Wasserman, 'What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?'). She does not want to remember the past, and she cannot move forward to the traditional feminine roles of wife and mother. Despite her rejection of linear time, her attempts to erase her past entail that Rachel is stuck – fixed within a void, killing time.

[94] Janey Place, 'Women in Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 47-68 (p. 47).

[95] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.

[96] Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism: An Introduction', p. 14; Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', p. 18.

[97] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, pp. 2-3; Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, p. 110; Gillis, 'Cyber Noir', p. 84.

[98] Gillis, 'Cyber Noir', p. 84.

[99] Kaplan, 'The Place of Women in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*', p. 81.

[100] Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, p. 111.

Amy suggests, as 'some sort of Gothic tragedy' (p. 238).[101] Despite *Gone Girl*'s twenty-first-century context, traces of Betty Friedan's second wave polemic *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) are identifiable in Amy's constructed deterioration of this idyllic fantasy. In mid-twentieth century America, Friedan suggests, the suburban housewife was 'the dream image of the young American women' and an exemplification of 'true feminine fulfillment [sic]', concerned only with 'her husband, her children, her home'.[102] Diary Amy's reflection on meeting Nick – '*oh, here is the rest of my life. It's finally arrived*' – echoes this particular ideation of feminine fulfilment, whilst implicitly evoking the finite status of an existence based on such a definition (p. 30, emphasis in original). After hearing that Nick's mother is unwell, the couple relocate to his Missourian hometown, into a house that 'screams Suburban Nouveau Riche' (p. 4). Amy's first line upon arrival at their the new house – 'Should I remove my soul before I come inside?' (p. 4) – echoes Friedan's discussion of 'the problem that has no name': the specific dissatisfaction felt by the suburban housewife who exists 'only for and through her husband and children', with no separate identity of her own.[103] As Amy's once 'limitless' world is 'shrunk' to the 'cozy [sic] walls of home', the postfeminist suggestion that 'home is perhaps not such a bad place after all' is called into question through the evocation of second wave feminist discourses.[104] Here, as her self-conscious narration invokes twenty-first century feminist discourses in order to interrogate contemporary postfeminist concerns, Amy emerges as an analytical amalgamation of invention and memory.

---

[101] See Helene Meyers, *Femicidal Fears: Narratives of the Female Gothic Experience* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001). Meyers positions the Gothic as 'a literary site where fear of female annihilation is a plot convention' (p. ix). Focusing on the contemporary female Gothic in relation to contemporary feminism(s), Meyers' exploration of femicidal texts 'weave[s] a story of the necessity for, and the difficulties of, refusing to be a victim' (p. 2). As Meyers suggests, for 'feminist critics concerned about violence against women', the 'challenge' is to interrogate 'cultural formations that underwrite femicide without essentializing[sic] women as victims' (p. 1). In *Gone Girl*, Amy's refusal of victimhood, and the reclamation of her own 'story', is actually draped in overtly gendered culturally signified modes of female victimhood. Or, as Eva Burke suggests, Amy constructs herself as the 'victimised or missing woman', and thus exhibits a 'masterful exploitation of well-worn feminine tropes'. See Eva Burke, 'From Cool Girl to Dead Girl: *Gone Girl* and the Allure of Female Victimhood', in *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, ed. Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 71-86 (p. 73).

[102] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, [1963] 2001), p. 18. Friedan's text does problematically focus only upon white, middle-class models of femininity. However, as Munford and Waters suggest in *Feminism and Popular Culture*, the recurrence of such constructions aligns with the twenty-first century 'reinvigoration' of models of femininity which 'belong to the image repertoire of "pre-feminist" cultural productions' (p. 11). For a further critique of Friedan see bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto, 1982), in which hooks addresses Friedan's critical neglect of 'the poor black and non-black women who are most exploited by American economics' (p. 146).

[103] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique,* p. 47.

[104] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 44; Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 135.

Amy actively constructs the 'problem' of her disappearance, and by extension her identity, as a riddle to be solved.[105] The fact that she is missing, and the fictitious diary entries that construct the first part of her voice within the novel, position Amy as the site of a 'certain discursive unease' for her husband Nick and readers alike.[106] Doane identifies that the classic femme fatale has 'power *despite herself*' through the 'epistemological trauma' that she constitutes (emphasis in original).[107] The threat that she carries is indicative of the Freudian 'riddle of femininity': the threat that woman, as an embodiment of sexual difference, presents to man.[108] Mirroring how the feminine body is positioned as a site of mystery, Nick pictures 'opening [Amy's] skull, unspooling her brain and sifting through it' – a highly visceral image that would enable him to finally 'catch and pin down her thoughts' (p. 3). The overtly violent and invasive quality of this imagery also corresponds to the classic femme fatale's aggressive textual closure: the elimination of the threat of sexual difference.[109] Whilst the diary works as a tool to incriminate Nick, the anniversary treasure hunt that Amy leaves in her wake revives the politics of sexual difference associated with the classic femme fatale in order to make them work to her advantage. With clues such as '*Picture me: I'm a girl who is very bad, I need to be punished and by* punished *I mean* had', the treasure hunt riddles refer to and 'girl' the narrative closure of the fatal woman (p. 215, emphasis in original). The '*need to be punished*' functions both on the level of sexual play, as well as the '*need*' to punish, obstruct, or eliminate feminine transgression in order for masculine hegemony to resume (p. 215, emphasis in original). By actively constructing herself as an enigma, Amy is not the passive '*object*' of a 'masculine discourse' (emphasis in original).[110] Instead she is, simply, always one step ahead, employing fixed constructions of femininity in order to deconstruct them from within.

With a background of writing personality quizzes, Amy is well versed in the shifting potentiality of identity. Throughout her life Amy has played a multitude of roles, including:

---

[105] Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XXII (1932-36)*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, [1933] 1995), pp. 112-35 (p. 113).
[106] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[107] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, pp. 1-2.
[108] Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity', p. 113.
[109] See also, Miller, '"How Much Do You Want to Pay for This Beauty?". Miller identifies how 'the head and the brain' have become a 'new site of bodily concern in contemporary crime fiction' (p. 102). 'Whereas', Miller continues, 'the sexual appeal of the woman has long been understood as that which is most threatening to the male gaze and therefore worthy of mutilation and objectifying', in *Gone Girl* it is 'Amy's extraordinary brain that Nick 'attempts to fetishise' (p. 102). In rendering the 'cerebral physical', Miller suggests, Nick attempts to 'reduce [Amy's] intellect to something fragile and vulnerable to violence' (p. 102).
[110] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 13.

> Amazing Amy. Preppy '80s Girl. Ultimate- Frisbee Granola and Blushing Ingenue and Witty Hepburnian Sophisticate. Brainy Ironic Girl and Boho Babe (the latest version of Frisbee Granola). Cool Girl and Loved Wife and Unloved Wife and Vengeful Scorned Wife. Diary Amy (pp. 236-37).

Amy's pragmatic self-invention renders her identity as changeable and flexible. It is her propensity to shift, to adapt, that allows her to be 'successful'.[111] This play between different roles aligns with Harris's theorisations regarding the 'can-do girl' and postfeminist narratives of 'success'.[112] Harris identifies that the image of the 'independent, successful, and self-inventing' young woman is also highly associated with discourses around 'girlpower'.[113] This kind of 'girlpower', Harris suggests, 'constructs the current generation of young women as a unique category of girls who are self-assured, living lives lightly inflected but by no means driven by feminism'.[114] However, the relationship between Amy's shifting personas and discourses around the femme fatale entail that her characterisation can be read as more than 'lightly inflected' by feminism.[115] The classic femme fatale 'never really is what she seems to be', an ambiguity that is also rendered through Amy's malleable 'girled' identity.[116] In dialogue with the classic femme fatale's propensity to reflect 'discourses around "woman"', Amy's choice of personality is invented around what is 'coveted' or 'au courant' (p. 222).[117] With 'au courant' defined as that which is 'aware of current developments', Amy's personas are therefore invested in contemporary, contextual shifts in cultural formations of femininity.[118] Whereas the classic and late-twentieth-century femme fatale is described as dialogic with 'contemporary cultural anxieties about women', Amy's mediation of 'au courant' personas works to highlight the performativity of femininity more broadly (p. 222).[119] 'The way some women change fashion regularly', Amy states, 'I change personalities', thus aligning her actions with, and yet distancing them from, the can-do girl's desire to 'have (or at least buy) it all' (p. 222).[120] For the can-do girl, Harris's statement

---

[111] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 16.
[112] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 16.
[113] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 16.
[114] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 16. Whilst 'girlpower' or '*grrrlpower*' began, Harris states, as a 'young radical feminist movement that advocated for the improvement of girls' lives', 'emerging in the early 1990s as a blend of punk and feminist politics', the 'DIY' philosophy of punk and 'individual responsibility for social change lent easily to its transformation into a discourse of choice and focus on the self' (p. 16).
[115] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 16.
[116] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[117] Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice', p. 165.
[118] Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'au courant'. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/12992?redirectedFrom=au+courant#eid [accessed 10th February 2019].
[119] Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice', p. 165.
[120] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 16.

suggests, self-invention is closely intertwined with consumption: having (or buying) it all equals 'success'.[121] In turn, Martin Roberts suggests that postfeminist modes of feminine identity and 'empowerment' are 'unthinkable outside [of] consumption', providing a stark contrast to feminism's historical alignment with the critique of 'the commodification of women' and 'models of femininity [as] inseparable from mass consumption'.[122] Amy's self-invention constructs femininity as shifting and malleable, comparable to the adaptable trends of fashion but with an entirely different purpose. Instead, femininity is constructed as a variety of roles to step into, to 'pull off' like 'a switch' when they become ineffective, or no longer 'au courant' (p. 222).

Whereas, as Roberts goes on to suggest, postfeminist ideology situates narrow definitions of 'sexual attractiveness' as a 'source of power over patriarchy rather than [a] subjection to it', Amy's inventive shifting of personas allow her to maintain ambiguity, whilst working to critique postfeminist modes of subjectivity.[123] One particular mode of femininity that Amy performs, described by David Haglund as 'almost indisputably, the cultural legacy of the book', is the 'Cool Girl'.[124] The 'Cool Girl', as defined by Amy, is:

> [a] hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. *Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl* (p. 222, emphasis in original).

---

[121] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 16.

[122] Martin Roberts, 'The Fashion Police: Governing the Self in *What Not to Wear*', in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular* Culture, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 227-248 (p. 229).

[123] Roberts, 'The Fashion Police', p. 233. Following her disappearance, Amy undergoes a physical transformation. She has 'gained twelve pounds in the months before [her] disappearance' and 'already another two pounds since' (p. 250). Her weight gain, as well as the addition of a 'mouse-coloured helmet cut' and 'smart-girl glasses', distance Amy from her description of her former body: a 'beautiful, perfect economy, every feature calibrated, everything in balance' (p. 250). Whilst her statements 'I don't miss it. I don't miss men looking at me' highlight and criticise masculine objectification, the use of the term 'economy' is revelatory in terms of postfeminism's commodification of the feminine body (p. 250). 'Economy' is defined in conventional terms as the 'management' of the 'material resources of a community, discipline, or other organised body' (See Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'economy'. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/59393 [accessed 10th February 2019]). When applied to the feminine body, however, the term takes on new significance in relation to the self as a 'collection of disparate body parts to be endlessly worked on or even replaced as part of the plenitude of consumer choice' (Estella Tincknell, 'Scourging the Abject Body: *Ten Years Younger* and Fragmented Femininity under Neoliberalism', in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, ed. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 83-95 (p. 86)). In rejecting the bodily discipline of the 'self-monitoring subject', Amy enacts a distinctly critical 'relation to dominant, commercially produced' modes of femininity (McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', pp. 34-5).

[124] David Haglund, 'The Strange Thing David Fincher Does With the "Cool Girl" Speech in Gone Girl' (2014). Available at https://slate.com/culture/2014/09/gone-girl-movie-cool-girl-speech-is-in-it-but-there-are-no-men-seen-during-the-voiceover.html [accessed 9th February 2019].

The importance of this particular passage as a means of critiquing postfeminism becomes apparent when read alongside McRobbie's critique of the 'phallic girl'.[125] The phallic girl, McRobbie writes, adopts 'habits of masculinity' including 'heavy drinking, swearing, smoking', and 'casual sex'.[126] Like the Cool Girl – who is 'basically the girl who likes every fucking thing he likes and doesn't ever complain' (p. 223) – the phallic girl 'gives the impression of having equality with men by becoming like her male counterparts', thus insinuating that feminism is no longer required.[127] Crucially, as with the Cool Girl who is 'above all hot', the phallic girl must 'perform masculinity, without relinquishing the femininity which makes them so desirable to men' (p. 222).[128] This 'postfeminist masquerade' is 'a thin tightrope to walk' or, as Amy suggests, 'unsustainable' (p. 224).[129] Whilst the phallic girl and Cool Girl do 'accommodate some prior feminist demands in relation to the right or entitlement to sexual pleasure', the figures do not enact a 'critique of masculine hegemony'.[130] Amy situates this lack of critique as women's collusion in their own 'degradation', illustrated in part through her recollection of going to a 'dumb movie', and not worrying about the 'offensive sexism or lack of minorities in meaningful roles' (p. 223). Tasker and Negra's critique of postfeminist texts identifies a lack of engagement with 'women's experiences and social health', as well as 'class, age, and racial' politics.[131] This absence of scrutiny, according to Tasker and Negra, imbues postfeminist media with a certain 'hollow quality'.[132] It is incredibly fitting, then, that during this period of selective complacency, Amy remembers feeling as if Nick had 'hollowed [her] out and filled [her] with feathers' (p. 223). Whereas, according to McRobbie, the 'new' postfeminist feminine subject is 'called upon to be silent, to withhold critique', complicit as she is with 'generationally specific notions of cool', Amy's Cool Girl recollections actively work to

[125] Haglund, 'The Strange Thing David Fincher Does With the "Cool Girl" Speech in Gone Girl' (2014). Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*: *Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009), p. 83. See also, Harris' description of the 'at-risk' girl in *Future Girl*. Harris' 'at-risk' girl relates to 'concerns that some young women are becoming more "laddish" in their behaviour', through their exhibition of 'more masculine qualities' such as smoking and drinking more, and taking sexual risks (p. 28). Whereas McRobbie's phallic girl gives the impression of gender equality without deconstructing masculine hegemony, the 'at-risk' girl is constructed as the antithesis of 'can-do' femininity, exhibiting 'poor consumption choices' and 'enacting the gains of feminism in problematic ways' (p. 29).
[126] McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 83.
[127] McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 83.
[128] McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, pp. 83-4.
[129] McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, pp. 83-4.
[130] McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 83-5.
[131] Tasker and Negra, 'Introduction', p. 2.
[132] Tasker and Negra, 'In Focus', p. 107.

critique postfeminist culture (p. 223).[133] Although Amy refers to the ambivalent pleasures of postfeminist rhetoric – remarking how 'tempting' it is to play the Cool Girl, and how 'happy' it made her on an 'unsustainable' basis – she rejects the hollow performance of Cool Girl femininity in favour of more 'interesting', 'complicated' and 'challenging' modes of identity (pp. 223-25). Amy's 'girled' identity positions her within a mode of becoming – a shifting play of identities – that enables her to remain one step ahead, just beyond comprehension. Amy's self-reinvention presents a challenge not only to the 'male order', but also to postfeminist rhetoric.[134]

With this challenge to postfeminist discourses in mind, it is important to consider Amy's alignment with, and deliberate utilisation of, what journalist Gwen Ifill termed as 'missing white woman syndrome'.[135] When we meet post-Diary Amy, she is 'missing', 'soon to be presumed dead' (p. 219). This performance of the 'missing woman', as Eva Burke suggests, relies upon 'certain gendered cultural signifiers' around female victimhood.[136] The term 'missing white woman syndrome' was revitalised in 2021 regarding the huge media coverage following the disappearance of twenty-two year old Gabby Petito. However, Ifill first used the descriptor as a means of critiquing the racial biases present in such coverage in 2004: 'I call it the 'missing white woman syndrome […] If there's a missing white woman, you're going to cover that, every day'.[137] Radheyan Simonpillai describes how Petito's disappearance and the 'national media' coverage that followed – a 'well-oiled and coordinated manhunt' with 'with tips pouring in through social media' – became a 'textbook example' of 'missing white woman syndrome'.[138] Simonpillai goes on to highlight how the 'compulsion among law enforcement, the media and the public' to drive rescue efforts marks a clear contrast to the way in which 'missing and murdered women and children who are Indigenous and Black are historically, continuously and systematically ignored by all of the above' groups.[139]

---

[133] McRobbie, Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 34.
[134] Kaplan, 'The Place of Women in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*', p. 81.
[135] Gwen Ifill, qtd. in Matt Pearce, 'Gabby Petito and one way to break media's 'missing white woman syndrome" (2021). Available at https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2021-10-04/gabby-petito-and-breaking-the-white-missing-women-syndrome [accessed 21st January 2022].
[136] Burke, 'From Cool Girl to Dead Girl', p. 73.
[137] Ifill, qtd. in Matt Pearce, 'Gabby Petito and one way to break media's "missing white woman syndrome"'.
[138] Radheyan Simonpillai, '"Long history of neglect": why are missing Black people still less likely to be found?' (2021). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/nov/20/black-and-missing-documentary-hbo [accessed 21st January 2022].
[139] Simonpillai, "Long history of neglect".

In *Gone Girl*, even as she does not refer to it by name, Amy's narrative clearly utilises 'missing white woman syndrome' to her own advantage. She anticipates how her disappearance will be covered by media outlets and the efforts that will follow. When she is in hiding, she sits 'quietly, watching all the levers and latches [she] put in place do their work', ruminating on the fact that she has 'already left enough for the police to make a case against Nick: the staged scene, the mopped-up blood, the credit-card bills' (p. 244). Central to her plan is the coverage of her disappearance on '*Ellen Abbott*', the 'biggest cable-crime news show in the country' (p. 245). Amy's adoration of Ellen Abbott stems from how 'protective and maternal she gets about all the missing women on her show, and how rabid-dog vicious she is once she seizes on a suspect, usually the husband' (p. 245). Amy lays out the tracks for the kind of 'well-oiled and coordinated manhunt' described by Simonpillai, and revels in what will follow: 'So many clues to unpack, so many surprises ahead!'.[140]

Despite this oblique awareness of 'missing white woman syndrome', Amy's narrative does not reflect on how her whiteness shapes and bolsters the media coverage surrounding her disappearance. Instead, she positions her fake pregnancy as the 'key to big-time coverage, round-the-clock, frantic, bloodlust never-ending *Ellen Abbott* coverage', because 'Amazing Amy is tempting', but 'Amazing Amy knocked up is irresistible' (p. 258). This emphasis on pregnancy aligns with Rose's positioning of contemporary Western culture as a site where 'mothers are almost invariably the object, either of too much attention or not enough'.[141] Amy envisions how her fabricated pregnancy will exaggerate the outrage, concern, and media attention surrounding her disappearance. However, the focus that her pregnancy inevitably draws –and the amount of attention that mothers receive more broadly, a discussion to which I return in Chapter Three – is also intricately intertwined with her race and class position.

In reference to femme fatale criticism, Amy's ability to harbour 'a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable' *after* her apparent 'death' is a productive departure from earlier incarnations of fatal femininity.[142] Whereas the classic femme fatale was typically killed or imprisoned by the close of the narrative, thus fixing her unmanageability, the threat that Amy poses to Nick thrives beyond her disappearance. Nick paradoxically states: 'Amy was blooming large in my mind. She was gone, and yet she was more present than anyone else' (p. 214). Given the increasing threat of incrimination that Amy poses for Nick, with 'mayhem dangled on a thin piano wire above his shitty, oblivious

[140] Simonpillai, "Long history of neglect".
[141] Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), p. 9.
[142] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.

head', the idiomatic phrase 'looming large' – to appear 'enlarged', often with menacing connotations – would be more fitting in this context (p. 219).[143] The use of 'blooming', then, with bloom defined as 'to come into flower', 'to blossom', 'to flourish', connotes an expansive, transitory state.[144] Meanwhile, Amy's description of her 'loose joints' and 'wavy muscles' following her disappearance connotes the new sense of flexibility and agency that is gained as she becomes the 'Dead Girl' (p. 219). While the classic femme fatale's death is a fixed point of narrative closure, Amy's constructed pregnancy and death signify multiplicity and increased unmanageability. Nonetheless, Amy's plan would not have the desired effect if it were not for the dynamics highlighted in contemporary commentaries about missing women. If, as Tasker and Negra suggest, postfeminist media texts are marked by a lack of engagement with 'class, age, and racial politics', Amy's knowing utilisation of 'missing white woman syndrome' jars with the narrative's previous untangling of postfeminist discourses.[145] She highlights how America treats a certain demographic of missing women – imagining herself described as 'the beautiful, kind, doomed, pregnant victim of a selfish, cheating bastard' (p. 284) – but the treatment itself, and its attendant systemic exclusory practices, are not subjected to any scrutiny. This lack of critique is all the more glaring when held up against Amy's sustained and scathing examination of the 'Cool Girl'. Therefore, while Amy's 'death' and 'pregnancy' subvert discourses regarding classic fatal femininity, her unexamined alignment with 'missing white woman syndrome' is an undeniable limitation to her feminist, analytical potentialities as a contemporary femme fatale.

While Amy fully, and at times problematically, embraces her array of 'girl' personas, in *The Girl on the Train*, Rachel's attitude towards her 'girled' identity is much more cynical. Profoundly 'isolated' from 'the world of happy couples' and its attendant heterosexist modes of 'acceptable' femininity, she defines herself as 'worthless' (p. 112).[146] Despite such an admission, Rachel's position as the liminal girl on the train works to problematise the postfeminist rhetoric informing such a valuation of femininity. A train journey is a transition: a movement from one place to the next. In a similar vein, girlhood is critically framed as a transitory process, 'encompassing no specific age group but rather an idea of mobility

---

[143] Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'loom'. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/110153 [accessed 8th February 2019]. This source also defines 'loom' as 'to appear indistinctly' – a definition which is intriguing given the femme fatale's propensity to confound the relationship between sight and knowledge.
[144] Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'bloom'. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/20457 [accessed 8th February 2019].
[145] Tasker and Negra, 'Introduction', p. 2.
[146] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 37.

preceding the fixity of womanhood'.[147] Initially, Rachel does not desire this ideological instability.[148] Taking Wasserman's critical framework into account, Rachel's 'reversion' from 'being someone's wife' to 'being someone' is, at first, framed as a depletion of her value.[149] It is from Rachel's liminal position as the mobile girl on the train that she is able to survey the houses at the side of the track, and to speculate on the 'world of happy couples' from which she has been excluded.[150] As she watches the 'houses roll past', Rachel sees them 'as others do not', commenting on how 'even their owners probably don't see them from this perspective' (p. 16). She is an outsider, a spectator, likening her gaze to 'a tracking shot in a film' (p. 16). This cinematic parallel provides a productive way to think about Rachel's position as a spectator, and how her characterisation presents a challenge to the binary oppositions associated with the act of looking and discourses around the femme fatale.

The cinematic gaze, as Doane suggests, depends on the 'axiom that the visible equals the knowable'.[151] The act of looking, then, is highly epistemological. It is due to her relationship with the 'epistemological drive of narrative' that the femme fatale figure has a 'special relevance in cinematic representation'.[152] She 'never really is what she seems to be', and thus indicates the fallibility of 'appeals to the visible' for the 'production of truth'.[153] It is at this moment – when 'the relation between vision and knowledge becomes unstable' – that the 'potential for a disruption of the sexual logic appears'.[154] The 'sexual logic' referred to by Doane relates to Laura Mulvey's theorisations regarding the 'male gaze'.[155] Mulvey suggests that 'in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female'.[156] For Doane, the femme fatale's ability to disrupt this binary association locates the figure's 'deadliness', or subversive potential, for feminist theory.[157] Unlike *Gone Girl*'s Amy, Rachel's characterisation does not lend itself quite so easily to descriptions of the femme fatale as an 'evil seductress' – a 'glamorous', 'sexualised' spectacle.[158] Indeed, she imagines herself as 'no longer desirable' and 'off-putting in some way', imagining that 'people can see the damage written all over' her (p. 27). However,

---

[147] Driscoll, *Girls*, p. 47.
[148] Driscoll, *Girls*, p. 47.
[149] Wasserman, 'What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?'.
[150] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 37.
[151] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 45.
[152] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[153] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[154] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 14.
[155] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 14.
[156] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 19.
[157] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 14.
[158] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47; Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 21.

Rachel's ability to stand 'outside the male order' lies in her 'girled' position, outside of the categorical fixity of 'woman'.[159]

Mulvey's later theorisation of an active, feminine, investigative gaze also provides different ways of thinking through Rachel's knowledge seeking gaze. With the Pandora myth as a model, Mulvey describes how 'Pandora's gesture of looking into the forbidden space, the literal figuration of curiosity as looking in, becomes a figure for the desire to know rather than the desire to see, an epistemophilia'.[160] Like Pandora, whose gaze is 'directed towards enclosed, secret and forbidden space', Rachel is an outsider to the houses that line the railway tracks.[161] She does not belong within these 'enclosed' spaces and is therefore able to take up the position of the curious voyeur.[162] As an 'outsider' to the 'world of happy couples' both literally and ideologically – as well conventionally attractive modes of femininity and archetypal models of fatal femininity – Rachel is able to take up the position of spectator, presenting 'a challenge' to the ideological binary of 'active/male and passive/female' associated with the act of looking (p. 94).[163] When Pandora's box 'represents the 'unspeakable' of femininity' – an idea which bolsters the figure's position as 'the prototype for the *femme fatale*', in her harbouring of a dangerous, illegible threat – her 'curiosity appears as a desire to uncover the secret of the very figuration she represents' (emphasis in original).[164] For Rachel, curiosity is thus positioned as a means of untangling her own history and deconstructing the binary opposition of 'active/male and passive/female'.[165]

Rachel's ability to see the houses 'as others do not' enables her to witness Megan kissing another man (p. 16). When Rachel learns of Megan's subsequent disappearance, the spectacle compels her to assume an investigative role, further highlighting the 'flexibility' and 'malleability' of her 'girled' identity.[166] Driven by the claim that she could be 'the only person who knows that the boyfriend exists', this new role further works to subvert the binary opposition between 'active/male and passive/female' and relates back to Rachel as a curious, knowledge seeking subject (p. 93).[167] In classic film noir, the transformation of 'woman' into a 'secret' that must be 'discovered' sits comfortably with the masculine investigatory figure's

---

[159] Kaplan, 'The Place of Women in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*', p. 81.
[160] Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (London: British Film Institute, 1996), p. 59.
[161] Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, p. 62.
[162] Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, p. 62.
[163] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 37; Kaplan, 'The Place of Women in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*', p. 81; Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 19.
[164] Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, p. 59
[165] Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 19.
[166] Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, p. 107.
[167] Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 19.

active pursuit of mastery.[168] However, Rachel critiques this narrative in reference to Megan's disappearance.[169] 'Megan', Rachel states, 'is not a mystery to be solved' (p. 146). While her investigation does provoke a somewhat prurient thrill – she is both 'excited' and 'afraid' to find out what might have happened to Megan – Rachel still rejects the ideological implications associated with masculine spectatorship (p. 93). Through the evocation of another cinematic image, Rachel maintains that Megan is 'not a figure who wanders into the tracking shot at the beginning of a film, beautiful, ethereal, insubstantial. She is not a cipher. She is real' (p. 146). This explicit rejection of Megan as a 'cipher' conjures and resists the Freudian positioning of femininity as a 'riddle', a 'problem', a cryptic code to be unravelled.[170] The malleable, changeable disposition of the 'girled' fatale, then, allows Rachel to take on conventionally masculine roles of voyeur and investigator. As an amalgamation of memory and invention – 'a hinge between old and new, present and future' – Rachel revises and critiques elements of the classic fatal woman, investigating not only Megan's disappearance but also the ideological implications which underpin ambiguous, mysterious femininity.[171]

Within her discussion of the homme fatal figure, Lindop describes how the neo-noir 'women's psychothriller' constructs feminine protagonists who 'assume an active investigatory role in the perusal of the deadly man'.[172] Lindop suggests, however, that the feminist potential of these figures is undermined through a 'focus on themes of retreatism'.[173] The films' situation of 'the workplace as a primary point of contact' with the fatal man, Lindop continues, operates as a cautionary tale for women 'whose core values do not lie in the prioritisation of family unity'.[174] In this context, female investigator films do not function as an 'expression of women's concerns' and instead construct the homme fatal as a 'device with which to employ postfeminist rhetoric'.[175] Whereas the films discussed by Lindop intimate that 'home is perhaps not such a bad place after all', Rachel's narrative offers a

---

[168] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[169] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[170] Freud, 'Femininity', p. 113.
[171] Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture,* p. 107.
[172] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, pp. 133-34. Lindop also discusses female investigator figures in 1940s 'female investigator *noirs*' – films which centre 'on active, assertive women who behave as detectives in order to hunt down and expose murderous men' (p. 125). Lindop goes on to suggest, however, that the behaviour of these female investigators is 'not problematised' because their 'sole motivation is to maintain patriarchal order, both through her desire to enforce the law and her wish to remain faithful to the man whose innocence she is trying to prove' (p. 131).
[173] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 135.
[174] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 135.
[175] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 135.

different 'perspective'(p. 16).[176] Despite the range of cinematic images throughout the text, *The Girl on the Train* sits primarily within the genre of domestic noir, and therefore seeks to interrogate and explore women's complex and often dangerous experiences of the home *and* workplace. Rachel's projected fantasy of idyllic domestic bliss is shattered by the spectacle of Megan's infidelity, a sight which indicates that the 'world of happy couples' may not be so 'golden' after all (p. 19).[177] As John Berger suggests, the gaze is always already influenced: 'the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe'.[178] In the same vein, our prior knowledge and beliefs can be called into question *through* what, and how, we see. The flicker of corruption exemplified through Megan's infidelity calls Rachel's own 'blissfully happy' memories into question (p. 22). Her subsequent investigation, whilst initially focused on Megan's disappearance and murder, also reveals how Rachel's 'history' has been highly obfuscated.[179]

As memories of the night of Megan's disappearance resurface – slowly, as Rachel was intoxicated on the night in question – it is revealed that Tom was having an affair with Megan, and is responsible for her murder. As 'one piece of memory [leads] to the next', Rachel's recollections construct 'a view of the past not as fixed and finished', but 'connected to the present' and dialogic with 'present questions and needs' (p. 346).[180] 'Everything is a lie', she states, 'I *do* remember' (p. 348, emphasis in original). The memories, 'shifting like shadows' finally begin to coalesce (p. 215). Tom has, Rachel discovers, quite literally 'invented' her 'history', obscuring the physically and emotionally abusive nature of their relationship.[181] Rachel's yearning to return to her previous life is thus illuminated to have been a product of amnesia, decidedly undermining the postfeminist claim that 'home is perhaps not such a bad place after all.[182] Instead, Rachel's narrative indicates how a return to the home can be not only limiting, but also highly dangerous.[183] Her focus on remembering her own 'history' – on challenging and problematising the 'countervailing work of both disremembering and forgetting' – is indicative of a further refusal to participate in the 'collective amnesia' perpetuated by postfeminist rhetoric.[184]

---

[176] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 135.
[177] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 37.
[178] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin, 1972), p. 8.
[179] Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, p. 111.
[180] Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 305.
[181] Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, p. 111.
[182], *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 135.
[183] Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, p. 10.
[184] Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, p. 111; Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, p. 29; Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 298.

The moment in which Rachel brings Tom 'to his destruction' is also highly significant to discussions of memory and contemporary fatal femininity.[185] When she confronts him in the house that they once shared, Tom merely 'shrugs' and responds:

> Do you have any idea how boring you became, Rachel? How ugly? Too sad to get out of bed in the morning, too tired to take a shower or wash your fucking hair? Jesus. It's no wonder I lost patience, is it? It's no wonder I had to look for ways to amuse myself. You've no one to blame but yourself (p. 380).

Here, Tom is located as a 'device with which to employ postfeminist rhetoric'.[186] By associating his actions with Rachel's lack of 'self-monitoring', Tom becomes a conduit through which the postfeminist claim that 'there is only the self to blame if the right partner is not found' is voiced.[187] Her conscious rejection of such rhetoric, calling on her memories to confirm that 'this is what he does – this is what he always does', continues her ongoing refusal of the 'collective amnesia' maintained by postfeminist discourses (p. 399).[188]
For Rachel, 'the act of looking back' to when she inhabited the domestic space is quite explicitly an 'act of survival'.[189] When Tom physically attacks her, Rachel's inner dialogue plots a pragmatic retaliation that relies on her memory of the domestic space, and the assumption that his new wife Anna has not made any changes. 'I don't know if everything's in the same place that it was', she states, 'I don't know whether Anna arranged the cupboards. […] I just hope, as I slip my hand into the drawer behind me, that she didn't' (pp. 400-1). As she jams 'the vicious twist' of a corkscrew 'into [Tom's] neck' and kills him, we are assured that Rachel found what she was looking for (p. 402). The inventive use of the corkscrew as a deadly tool is highly significant to Rachel's position as a contemporary 'girled' redeployment of the femme fatale. As a device which enables the opening and consumption of alcoholic beverages, the corkscrew is symbolic of Rachel's addiction and, by implication, Tom's emotionally abusive obfuscation of her memories.[190] In a similar vein, the

---

[185] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47.
[186] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 135.
[187] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 37
[188] Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, p. 111; Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, p. 29; Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 298.
[189] Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', p. 18.
[190] Whilst, as Marissa Korbel suggests, 'women are not unique in using alcohol to manage stress, pressure, or social expectations', patriarchy has a hand in both the motivation for, and consequences of, women's alcohol abuse (Marissa Korbel, '24-Hour Women: Drinking to Escape Patriarchy' (2018). Available at https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/the-real-reason-women-drink [accessed 23rd April 2019]). Commenting on the daily pressures of performing 'successful' femininity in the twenty-first century, Korbel states that 'domestic life is only part of "having it all"' (Korbel, '24-Hour Women'). 'The other parts of the "all" include professional success and maintaining appearance', often translating, Korbel continues, 'to looking youthful, thin, and blond' (Korbel, '24-Hour Women'). 'Women don't escape the patriarchy by drinking', Korbel concludes, 'but cultural pressures about being "24-hour women" surely encourages them to pick up a bottle' (Korbel, '24-Hour

classic femme fatale originated as a patriarchal tool, constructed to control and pin down transgressive, threatening modes of femininity. In using the corkscrew as a deadly tool, Rachel redeploys the weapon once exploited to confound her memory – to 'invent' her 'history'.[191] Whereas Rachel's dependence on alcohol was initially used to control her narrative – just as the femme fatale archetype was employed to define and destroy unruly femininity – Rachel uses Tom's tool of abuse as a means of bringing him to his destruction. This specific moment mirrors how, like *Gone Girl*, *The Girl on the Train* subverts the femme fatale's previous position as a patriarchal tool, and redeploys pragmatically bad 'girled' femininity as a feminist analytical weapon.

Fixed and Finished? Uneasy Adaptations

In their literary modes, *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* complicate the 'epistemological drive of narrative' through their construction of 'epistemological twists', multiple narrative perspectives, and temporal shifts.[192] Amy's pragmatic self-invention and metafictional diary entries render any sense of discursive 'truth' hard to grasp. In a similar vein, whilst *The Girl on the Train* is concerned with uncovering the mystery of Rachel's past, the ideological implications of the knowledge-seeking cinematic gaze are called into question. Given that this level of critique is existent at the level of the literary narratives, how do we read the feminist potential of their male-directed filmic adaptations? Adaptations are conventionally discussed, Stam notes, in terms of '*infidelity*, *betrayal*', and '*violation*' (emphasis in original).[193] These 'moralistic' terms refer on one level, Stam continues, to the 'disappointment we feel when a film adaptation fails to capture what we see as the fundamental narrative, thematic, and aesthetic features of its literary source'.[194] On another level, such judgements are profoundly 'essentialist' in their implication that the 'novel

---

Women'). When 'having it all' is defined in terms of youthfulness, domestic and professional success, and self-maintenance, the modes of femininity creeping into Korbel's comments here are highly inflected by postfeminist discourses. As such, Rachel's alcoholism – partly motivated by 'failures' in both her personal/domestic and professional life – also draws attention to how alcohol may be used to escape or dull the ideological pressures perpetuated by postfeminist culture. In a similar vein, her self-inflicted amnesia can initially be read in line with postfeminism's 'countervailing work of both disremembering and forgetting' (Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, p. 29). When, as Greene suggests, 'forgetting is a major obstacle to change', the recuperation of memory has a crucial role in feminist efforts towards social, political, and economic equality (Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 298). Rachel's subsequent rejection of alcoholism and the recuperation of her lost memories are also a rejection of passivity, complicity, and political amnesia.

[191] Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, p. 111.

[192] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.

[193] Stam, 'Beyond Fidelity', p. 54.

[194] Stam, 'Beyond Fidelity', p. 54.

"contains" an extractable "essence" […] an originary core'.[195] Such judgements, therefore, appear to necessitate an idea of 'truth' within a literary text which filmic adaptations, when executed poorly, do not encapsulate.

In contrast, the source texts of *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* are, on a narrative level, highly concerned with shifting, evasive notions of 'truth'. Additionally, with reference to their 'girled' characterisation, Amy and Rachel consistently question the essentialist fixity of 'woman' as a category. These structural and thematic elements – as well as the femme fatale's ability to complicate the pursuit of narrative 'truth' – juxtapose the somewhat 'panicked' tone of articles concerning the texts' filmic adaptations.[196] Prior to the release of *Gone Girl*'s adaptation, it was reported that the narrative's 'dramatic finale' had been 'completely rewritten'.[197] The front cover of the January 2014 edition of *Entertainment Weekly*, shot by director David Fincher, undoubtedly had a part to play in the circulation of such speculations. Depicting Amy (Rosamund Pike) lying on an autopsy table with Nick (Ben Affleck) curled around her lifeless body, this image, and the media attention that it generated, highlights the fallibility of the relationship between sight and knowledge, while also speaking to an enduring interest in adaptative fidelity.[198] While such claims about *Gone Girl* were evidently exaggerated – or, more speculatively, in the case of Fincher's *Entertainment Weekly* cover, constructed to generate intrigue – the change of setting in *The Girl on the Train* attracted similar attention. Whilst Hawkins' novel is set in London, the filmic adaptation is situated in upstate New York – a move described as an 'ill-advised American retread' that 'loses' a 'very British sense of grime and hobbled ambition'.[199] However, in a piece entitled 'A Perfect Adaptation', critic F.S. asserts that much of *Gone Girl*'s cinematic audience wanted 'not just to "see" the book but to re-experience the thrill of not knowing, that carefully balanced sense of unease'.[200] This focus on a 'carefully balanced

---

[195] Stam, 'Beyond Fidelity', p. 57.
[196] Stam, 'Beyond Fidelity', p. 75.
[197] Ben Child, 'Gone Girl's Ending Rewritten for Movie Adaptation' (2014). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/jan/10/gone-girl-ending-rewrite-david-fincher [accessed 24th March 2019].
[198] Stam, 'Beyond Fidelity', p. 54. See also, Catherine Shoard, 'Gone Girl's Ending: Discuss the Movie with Spoilers' (2014). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2014/oct/04/gone-girl-ending-movie-book-changes-spoilers [accessed 24th March 2019]. Mirroring interest in the adaptative process, articles such as Shoard's - tracking the filmic narrative's continuities and departures - followed *Gone Girl*'s release.
[199] Stuart Jeffries, 'What, No Whistlestop? Why The Girl on the Train Should Have Stayed in Bleak Backyard Britain' (2016). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/oct/10/the-girl-on-the-train-relocating-movies [accessed 24th March 2019].
[200] F. S., 'A Perfect Adaptation' (2014). Available at https://www.economist.com/prospero/2014/10/03/a-perfect-adaptation [accessed 24th March 2019].

sense of unease' is key to my reading of the filmic adaptations' feminist potential.[201] Despite few narrative departures from their literary texts, the filmic adaptations of *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* maintain the 'thrill of not knowing' – or, in the words of Doane, a 'certain discursive unease'.[202]

The novels complicate the epistemological drive of narrative, questioning the fixity of traditional modes of femininity in the process. However, Doane indicates that although the femme fatale's origins are 'literary and pictorial', she has a 'special relevance in cinematic representation'.[203] Whereas film 'appeals to the visible as the ground of its production of truth', the femme fatale complicates 'the relation between the visible and the knowable'.[204] If, as Doane continues, patriarchal 'sexual logic' is disrupted at the moment when this relation becomes 'unstable', the *visual* femme fatale has a 'special relevance' for feminist critique.[205] While the novels subvert and interrogate the ideological implications of the truth-seeking drive of narrative, the films enact such a critique on a visual level, problematising not only notions of narrative 'truth' but also the conception that the 'visible' guarantees 'epistemological certitude'.[206] So far, I have suggested that the characterisation of the 'girled' fatale locates her as both a site of 'discursive unease' and 'a hinge between old and new, present and future'.[207] The utilisation of memory and invention within my analysis of the literary texts illustrates how feminist 'past' is not 'fixed and finished', but emerges within and problematises the texts' postfeminist present.[208] Whereas I have discussed Amy and Rachel's literary characterisations through the framework of 'mobility', I suggest that their filmic adaptations effectively 'girl' linear narrative form.[209] Both films play on the 'norm of narrational transparency', while their narrative trajectories and chronological boundaries are characterised by the same 'flexibility, malleability and change' that is discussed in relation to contemporary girlhood.[210] Alongside the 'girled' fatale, filmic narrative form in *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* is 'resilient and flexible', utilising 'nonlinear trajectories' towards destructive, deconstructive means.[211]

---

[201] F. S., 'A Perfect Adaptation'.
[202] F. S., 'A Perfect Adaptation'; Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[203] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[204] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, pp. 1, 46.
[205] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, pp. 14, 1.
[206] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 45.
[207] Doane, *Femmes* Fatales, p. 1; Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture,* p. 107.
[208] Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 305.
[209] Driscoll, *Girls*, p. 47
[210] George Wilson, 'Transparency and Twist in Narrative Fiction Film', *The Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, 64.1 (2006), 81-95 (p. 81); Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*', p. 107.
[211] Harris, *Future Girl*, pp. 6, 16.

In a comment that is strikingly similar to Nick's desire to crack open Amy's 'lovely skull' before 'unspooling her brains', F.S. claims that as an audience, we 'want to see inside [Nick and Amy's] pretty heads, but we can't'.[212] The adaptation's sense of 'unease' is thus attributed to Pike and Affleck's 'remarkable central performances'.[213] Though the performances are indeed remarkable, I suggest that *Gone Girl* manages to maintain a 'certain discursive unease', alongside *The Girl on the Train*, through the use of filmic techniques to utilise and question the relationship between sight and knowledge.[214] The 'flashback' is one technique employed by both films as a means to render the relationship between sight and knowledge, and past and present, as highly unstable. As Maureen Turim suggests, 'flashbacks give us *images* of memory, the personal archives of the past' (emphasis added).[215] The filmic adaptation of *Gone Girl*, like the literary text, introduces Amy through her own 'personal archive' – her diary entries.[216] Diary Amy's 'personal' accounts of the 'past' operate like a flashback on the level of the filmic narrative, repeatedly taking the cinematic 'present' back to the 'images' of Amy's 'memory'.[217] Throughout the first half of the filmic narrative, these flashbacks are consistently constructed through a shot of Amy writing in the diary – a close-up image of pen on paper – before the mise-en-scène shifts, opening up to an enaction of the described events, accompanied by Diary Amy's voiceover narration. The shot depicting Amy writing in the diary changes each time, with the heading of each entry pinpointing the ascending dates of writing and atmospheric qualities – such as varying shades of light – denoting different times of day.[218] When it is revealed that Amy is alive, the camera shot

---

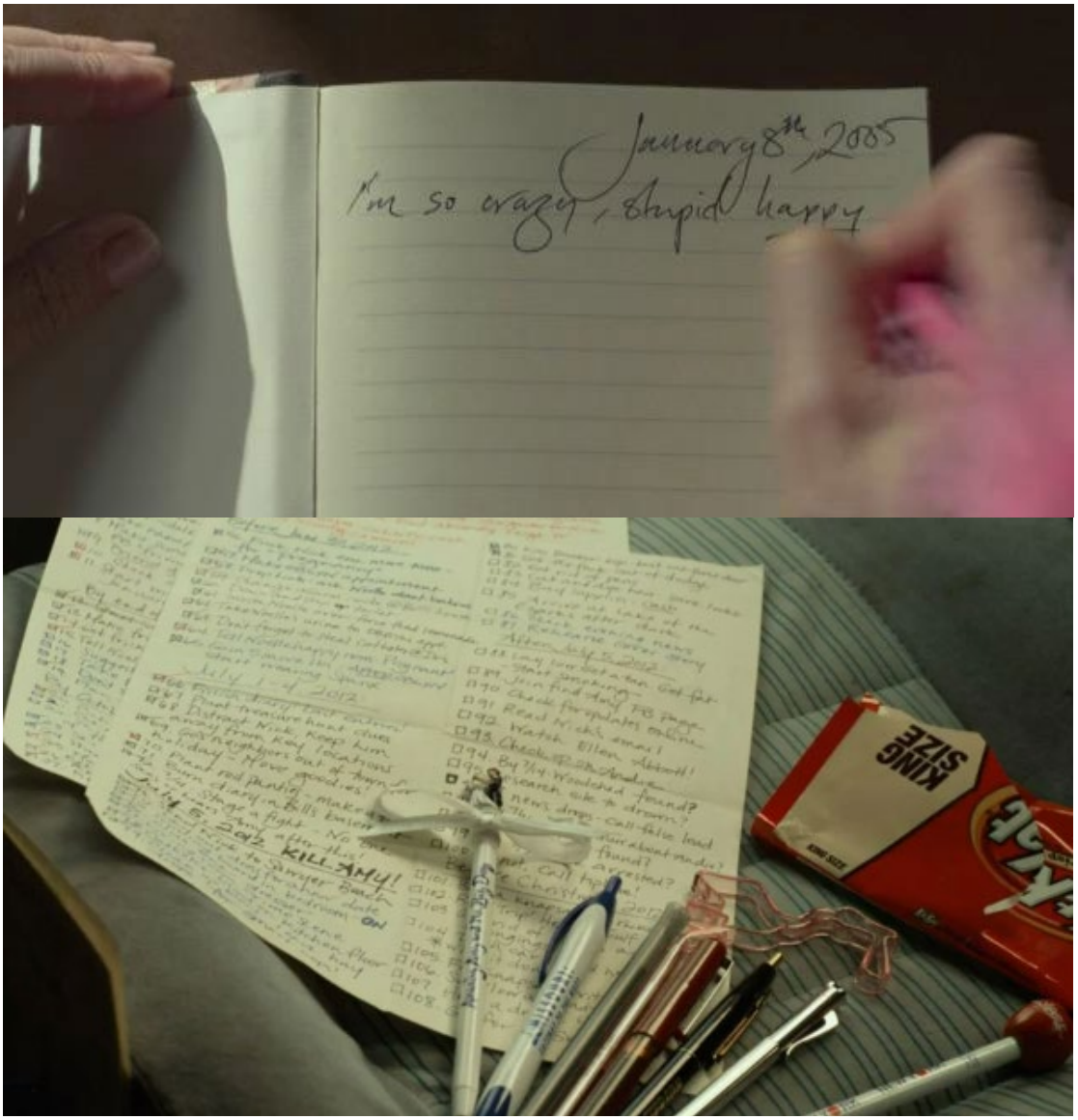
[212] F.S., 'A Perfect Adaptation'.
[213] F.S., 'A Perfect Adaptation'.
[214] *Gone Girl*, dir. David Fincher (Twentieth Century Fox, 2014); *The Girl on the Train*, dir. Tate Taylor (DreamWorks Pictures, 2016); Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[215] Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), p. 2.
[216] Turim, *Flashbacks in Film*, p. 2.
[217] Turim, *Flashbacks in Film,* p. 2.
[218] In each diary sequence, Amy's writing tools are aesthetically matched to the content of their respective diary entry, and, consequently, the thematic sway of the visually enacted events. From the fluffy pink pen used to record their romantic meet cute, to the red pen for valentine's day, the choice of pen draws on distinct cultural signifiers which implicitly work to reinforce the entries' illusion of 'truth', further destabilising the relationship between sight and knowledge. However, this particular attention to detail also enacts a dialogue with commentary around the literary genre of 'chick lit'. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young identify how 'those influenced by second-wave feminism, emphasizing contemporary women's fight for equality and access to professions, have disparaged chick lit as "unserious" and antifeminist' (Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, 'Introduction', in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1-13 (p. 11)). These criticisms, Ferriss and Young suggest, 'have become almost as common as the genre's ubiquitous pink, fashion-conscious covers' (p. 1). Recognising a connection between the feminine aesthetic of the novels and attitudes towards their content, Fiachra Gibbons suggests, the genre has been repeatedly disparaged by 'commentators who took one look at a "fluffy pink cover" and got out their knives' (Fiachra Gibbons, 'Stop Rubbishing Chick Lit, Demands Novelist' (2003). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/aug/21/books.booksnews [accessed 3rd May 2019]). 'Inside their dust jackets covered with shopping bags, martini glasses, shoes or purses', Anna Weinburg weighs in, 'many of these

pans down to a busy to-do list on the car seat beside her, detailing the sub-heading 'July 1-4 2012' and a marked entry: 'Finish Diary! Last Entries!'. Whilst the diary format in both the filmic and the literary text gives the illusion of seeing inside Amy's 'pretty head' – with specific dates emphasising the fixed temporal point of the entries – the shifting atmospheric and temporal details within the cinematic sequences strengthen, and then completely deny, any sense of 'epistemological certitude' from sight alone.[219] The revelation that the flashbacks – to the diary entries being written and their corresponding events playing out – are an elaborate deception disrupts 'appeals to the visible' as the 'production of truth'.[220]

titles really are trash' (Anna Weinburg, qtd. in Ferriss and Young, 'Introduction', p. 11). The suggestion in such comments is that the highly feminine aesthetic of the novels' covers betrays the unimportant 'froth' within (Beryl Bainbridge, qtd. in John Ezard, 'Bainbridge Tilts at 'Chick Lit' Cult' (2001). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/aug/24/books.generalfiction [accessed 3rd May 2019]). Given Amy's vindictive intent in writing her diary, the cinematic portrayal of the fluffy pink, bridal white, and red heart-shaped pens constructs another layer of deception. Through the invocation of highly feminine modes/tools of writing, the film constructs a visual dialogue with the aesthetic mode of chick lit. As I have previously argued, Amy constructs a postfeminist aesthetic within her diary entries in order to obfuscate narrative truth, deconstruct postfeminist modes of femininity, and regain narrative agency. Just as Amy's diary is initially presented as epistemological truth – not portrayed as a threat to narrative transparency – commentary surrounding chick lit suggests that the genre is not a 'threat' to the 'serious', academic canon of women's writing. However, like Amy's diary, chick lit is, as Ferriss and Young identify, 'rife with possibilities and potential' for 'another generation of women to ponder' (Ferriss and Young, 'Introduction', p. 12). Given that the variety of pens are an adaptative addition, this cinematic portrayal of Amy's writing is also a dialogue between filmic and literary discourses.

[219] F.S., 'A Perfect Adaptation'; Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 45.

[220] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1; As Seth Friedman identifies, 'misdirection films have been produced by Hollywood with greater frequency than ever before' since the late twentieth century (Seth Friedman, 'Misdirection in Fits and Starts: Alfred Hitchcock's Popular Reputation and the Reception of His Films', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 29.1 (2012), 76-94 (p. 79)). Friedman goes on to position Alfred Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* (1950) and *Psycho* (1960) as 'prime examples of Hollywood misdirection films that pre-date the existence of this contemporary upcropping of films' (p. 79). *Stage Fright* which, as Neil Badmington describes, 'opens with a long 'flashback' to a series of events that never actually took place', can be seen as an archetypal example of the false flashback as a narrative device (Neil Badmington, *Hitchcock's Magic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), p. 35). *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*'s visual representation of events – that, like those in Hitchcock's work, did not 'actually, phenomenologically' unfold (*Hitchcock's Magic*, p. 32) – thus engages with a longer, cinematic history beyond the publication of Flynn and Hawkins' novels.



Gone Girl, dir. David Fincher (Twentieth Century Fox, 2014)

The Girl on the Train also uses flashbacks to destabilise the relationship between sight and knowledge.[221] Whilst it is revealed at the climax of the filmic narrative that Tom has constructed Rachel's memories of their time together, the pursuit of this information is fraught with epistemological uncertainty. The majority *The Girl on the Train*'s flashbacks emerge from the night of Megan's disappearance. Whereas the literary text constructs

[221] See also, *The Girl on the Train*, dir. Ribhu Dasgupta (Reliance Entertainment, 2021). The plot of this more recent Hindi adaptation diverts quite dramatically from Hawkins's novel, introducing additional characters and rewriting the protagonist, a former lawyer but still an alcoholic, as suffering from amnesia following a car accident. In an additional turn, Nusrat (the character known as Megan in the American adaptation) is still alive after being left for dead in the woods. Instead of Mira's husband, Nusrat is attacked by a female police officer who is working on the case. She is attempting to frame Mira for the crime, following an incident years ago (where Mira sent the police officer's father, a crime boss, to jail). While certain themes – the loss of a child, amnesia and alcoholism – prevail, the ending of this adaptation sees a fight between Mira and the female police officer, rather than Mira and her ex-husband.

memories of the night through troubled declarative statements – ‘Something is wrong […] Something happened’ – the filmic adaptation presents such uncertainty through the jarring interpolation of blurred, shifting images that are representative of Rachel’s intoxicated state (p. 61). In the novel, Rachel ‘imagine[s]’ winding her ‘hand into [Anna’s] long blonde hair, violently smashing ‘her head against the cool blue tiles’ of the kitchen floor, while the adaptation explicitly shows this event taking place (p. 65). Whereas the ‘truth’ of this matter in the literary text is highly destabilised – we can only piece together the events of the night through Rachel’s confused ‘memories’ – the cinematic flashback obfuscates this epistemological drive even further. The camera angles of the flashbacks constantly interpolating Rachel’s narrative overwhelmingly view Megan/Anna from behind, viewing only the back of their ‘blonde’, ‘petite’, bodies (p. 117).

The Girl on the Train, dir. Tate Taylor (DreamWorks Pictures, 2016)

Both Megan and Anna fit this description, and Rachel has questionable motives for wanting to hurt both women. This depiction entails that, as viewers, we cannot determine the identity of the person Rachel 'attacked'. Furthermore, in several instances the mise-en-scène is constructed through the jolting perspective of the attacker. This use of 'perceptual alignment', with the conventional function of 'concealing the identity' of the perpetrator, works to further reinforce the suggestion that Rachel has harmed Megan/Anna.[222] Subsequent images of Rachel grabbing a handful of blonde hair, sitting by an inanimate body on the kitchen floor, and close-up shots of her sober, panicked eyes work indicate that we have been watching the events from her perspective. However, as the content of the many flashbacks begin to shift and change, the suggestion that Rachel hurt anybody at all is called into question. When it is later revealed that Tom is responsible for Megan's murder, the flashbacks are revealed to be completely false. As with Diary Amy's fabricated memories, then, Rachel's flashbacks problematise and obfuscate 'epistemological certitude'.[223] The use of the filmic flashback entails that, like the 'girled' fatale, narrative 'truth' becomes 'durable, malleable and resistant to definition'.[224]

[222] Murray Smith, 'Altered States: Character and Emotional Response in the Cinema', *Cinema Journal*, 33.4 (Summer, 1994), 34-56 (p. 41).
[223] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 45.
[224] Hanson and O'Rawe, 'Introduction', p. 3.

As Turim suggests, flashbacks also juxtapose 'different moments of temporal reference'.[225] With this in mind, the interplay of perspectives during the first half of *Gone Girl* is also an interaction between past and present. Just as memories of their 'perfect togetherness' in the literary text are deliberately rose-tinted, the mise-en-scène of Diary Amy's filmic recollections are cast in warm, sepia tones, eliciting a blunt contrast to the cold, stark quality of Nick's present day. Chronological boundaries, however, are not as rigid as the change in tone might suggest. There are key moments of verbal and thematic spillage across the interplay of Nick and Amy's separate portrayals. As Nick attempts to solve the 'riddle' of Amy's disappearance through the anniversary treasure hunt clues, her voice interrupts his section of the narrative. Clue one, for example, is relayed in Amy's voice as Nick is depicted entering his office: 'Although this spot couldn't be any tighter, it's a cosy room for my favourite writer. After school meeting? Don't mind if I do. Maybe I'll teach you a thing or two'. Whilst Amy's voice repeatedly stakes a claim in Nick's present, a distinct thematic blurring between their two disparate narratives further works to merge the past and present. On the first night of Amy's absence, Nick has sex with Andie – the young student with whom he is having an affair. As they are undressing each other, Nick turns down the lights. The scene then fades, before opening to Diary Amy's recollections as her voiceover states: 'my husband has come undone'. The diary entry is referring to Nick's emotional decline following the death of his mother. However, when juxtaposed against Nick's current actions – where his clothes are literally 'coming undone' – Diary Amy's voice complicates our knowledge not only of the present, but of the past as 'fixed and finished'.[226] This narrative interruption works to illustrate that the past is 'vitally connected to the present', 'responsive' and shifting in relation to 'present questions and needs'.[227] As a result, linear narrative form and chronological boundaries are rendered distinctly 'malleable' and 'flexible'.[228]

The juxtaposition of 'different modes of temporal reference' also allow the act of 're-vision'.[229] Turim suggests that 'memory surges forth, it strengthens or protects or repeats and haunts'.[230] Whilst the abundance of flashbacks in *The Girl on the Train* repeatedly haunt Rachel's present, they also enable 'the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes'.[231]

---

[225] Turim, *Flashbacks in Film*, p. 1.
[226] Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 305.
[227] Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 305.
[228] Hanson and O'Rawe, 'Introduction', p. 3; Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 6.
[229] Turim, *Flashbacks in Film*, p. 1; Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', p. 18.
[230] Turim, *Flashbacks in Film*, p. 2.
[231] Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', p. 18.

When Rachel sees Tom's ex-boss' wife, Martha, on the train, she shrinks into her seat to avoid being seen. Following a pre-lap of Rachel's slurred voice, a flashback 'surges forth'.[232] The memory depicts a barbeque at Martha's home. In contrast to the polite conversation surrounding her, Rachel becomes extremely drunk and increasingly aggressive. After she throws a plate at the wall in a fit of rage, Tom has no choice but to escort her away from the gathering. The mise-en-scène shifts to a dark street where Rachel slaps and pushes Tom, before shifting again to their home, depicting Rachel smashing a mirror with a golf club as Tom cowers on the stairs beneath. Later, Rachel is able to see the events of that afternoon with 'fresh eyes'.[233] When she sees Martha on the train, she apologises for her behaviour. However, it becomes apparent that Martha has no recollection of the events that she describes, instead recalling how Rachel 'felt sick' and 'had a lie down' in their guest bedroom. Once again, the narrative flashes back to the past where the mise-en-scène is both eerily similar and vitally different. In this instance, Rachel recalls the events as depicted through Martha's description. As Martha's blurred face disappears from her point of view, Tom appears in her place. She apologises, and Tom tells her to 'get up' with a distinctly hostile tone. The flashback recalls and revises the past, finding 'play rather than place' – malleability instead of fixity.[234] This juncture of past and present, with the past shifting in response to 'present questions and needs', works to deconstruct not only the relationship between sight and knowledge, but also temporal boundaries between past and present.[235]

As I have illustrated, the use of flashbacks in *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* effectively 'girls' linear narrative form. That is, the epistemological drive of narrative is obstructed by the flexibility, changeability, and malleability of the narrative trajectory. In the process, the relationship between sight and knowledge and chronological boundaries between past and present are shown to be highly fallible. A dialogue with previous incarnations of the femme fatale can also be traced through the films' pragmatic rejection of fixed narrative. Considering the 'textual eradication' of the classic femme fatale – where the enigmatic 'threat of woman' is transformed into a secret to be 'aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered' at the conclusion – the films' visual deployment of memory as an interruptive, destabilising return to the past denies such fixed notions of 'truth'[236]. The adaptations of *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* both engage with and exploit the femme fatale's

[232] Turim, *Flashbacks in Film*, p. 2.
[233] Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', p. 18.
[234] Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 305.
[235] Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 305.
[236] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, pp. 1-2.

compatibility with the 'epistemological drive of narrative', the linear, truth-seeking 'structuration of the classical text'.[237] The films' obfuscation of narrative truth indicates that feminist past is not 'fixed and finished', despite postfeminist claims to the contrary.[238] Instead, the act of looking back in order to revise the present, utilising existing feminist discourses regarding remembering, locates feminism as anything but a 'spent force'.[239] The filmic representation of the 'girled' fatale, denies 'epistemological certitude' and readdresses the 'assumptions in which we are [still] drenched', engaging with and redeploying feminist critiques of the classic femme fatale figure.[240]

Adaptative Nostalgia: Ice-Picks and Headless Brides

When discussing various adaptations of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Ridout suggests that such texts are 'inherently nostalgic' due to their choice to 'return to a previous text rather than start afresh'.[241] Given the context of Ridout's analysis, her suggestion is perhaps not, at first glance, particularly productive in the case of *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*. Whereas Ridout focuses on adaptations of a text published over two centuries ago, the filmic adaptations of *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* emerged within one to two years of each novel's publication. Although 'nostalgia', Greene suggests, is 'by no means gender specific', it does have 'different meanings for men and women'.[242] A return to the 'good old days' is also a return to the 'time when women knew their place' – a 'place' to which 'most women' do not 'want to return'.[243] With this in mind, I suggest that *The Girl on the Train* and *Gone Girl* rely upon a certain element of cultural nostalgia in their evocation of the films *Lady on a Train* (1945) and *Basic Instinct* (1992), respectively.[244] However, this act of 'looking back' is not executed through a rose-tinted lens of complacency.[245] Instead, the films evoke previous aesthetic and thematic constructions of femininity, mobilising them towards a feminist critique of our current cultural moment. Within this dialogic redeployment, the texts unsettle 'our relation to the past' and illustrate how previous incarnations of unruly femininity might be reworked to address 'present questions and

[237] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[238] Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 305.
[239] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 28.
[240] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 45; Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', p. 18.
[241] Ridout, *Contemporary Women Writers Look Back*, p. 135.
[242] Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', pp. 295-6.
[243] Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 296.
[244] *Lady on a Train*, dir. Charles David (Universal Pictures, 1945).
[245] Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', p. 18.

needs'.[246] In the moments where the adaptions depart from their literary and filmic sources, it is possible to trace a pragmatically bad 'betrayal' of existing narratives about femininity.[247]

The parallels present between the filmic adaptation of *The Girl on the Train* and the 1945 comedy-thriller *Lady on a Train* extend past their similar titles. In both films, the protagonist witnesses an event whilst looking out from the window of a train. Whilst in *Lady on a Train*, protagonist Nicki sees a man being murdered, Rachel witnesses an act an act of infidelity that kills her projected fantasy of domestic bliss. For both protagonists, an investigation ensues. However, the shift in register present between the two titles – from '*Lady*' on '*a*' train, to '*The Girl*' on '*the*' train – is indicative of a subsequent shift in the centrality of each protagonist's role in the investigative process and in the narrative more broadly. While in *Lady on a Train* Nicki seeks help from a man who writes mystery novels in order to solve the case, Rachel embarks upon her investigation alone, unravelling and reconstructing her own memories, before eventually bringing Tom to 'his destruction'.[248] *Lady on a Train* opens to a close-up shot of Nicki's face as she states 'I killed him. I had to kill him'. As she continues to speak, and the pronouns shift from first person to the third person, the camera angle zooms out. She brings a book closer to her face and it is revealed that she has been reading aloud from a book by aforementioned author Wayne Morgan, titled 'The Case of the Headless Bride'. As E. Ann Kaplan states, within the classic film noir narrative trajectory 'the world is presented from the point of view of the male investigator' who 'seeks to unravel a mystery with which he has been presented'.[249] Whereas the filmic scene opens with Nicki's voice, and what we believe to be a confession of her actions, the narrative trajectory is taken over by Morgan's perspective as the events within the literary text come to fruition within the filmic mise-en-scène. 'Somehow', Nicki reads, 'she forced her eyes to turn toward the window. What horror she expected to see'. It is at this point, as directed by the literary narrative, that Nicki looks out of the window and witnesses the murder take place. Therefore, whilst Nicki may be performing the traditionally masculine voyeuristic role within this scene, her actions and the narrative events are still intertextually directed by Morgan's 'point of view'.[250]

Like Nicki in *Lady on a Train*, the first scene of *The Girl on the Train* depicts Rachel sitting in a train carriage. However, the view of Rachel's face is initially obstructed by

---

[246] Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', pp. 305, 292.
[247] Stam, 'Beyond Fidelity', p. 54.
[248] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47.
[249] Kaplan, 'The Place of Women in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*', p. 81.
[250] Kaplan, 'The Place of Women in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*', p. 81.

condensation on the inside of the train window. We cannot see her, and she cannot see out. When she draws an 'X' onto the window, her eye becomes the focal point of the camera shot.

The Girl on the Train, dir. Tate Taylor (DreamWorks Pictures, 2016)

Unlike *Lady on a Train*, where the act of looking and subsequent narrative events are dictated by male authorship, Rachel actively draws space for her own gaze. This re-appropriation of a once obfuscated perspective foreshadows Rachel's actions throughout the filmic narrative as she interrogates her fabricated memories and, ultimately, 'draws her story into history'.[251] As the opening sequence unfolds, Rachel's voiceover recalls how her husband used to tell her that she has an 'overactive imagination'. The suggestion that she has an 'overactive imagination' is an example of the 'history' – or, rather, 'his-story' – that Tom constructed in order to abuse Rachel.[252] This particular parallel foreshadows Rachel's interrogation of such abuse and the reclamation of her-story. Later in the film, the lines read from 'The Case of the Headless Bride' in *Lady on a Train* become eerily dialogic with Rachel's narrative. At the very end of *The Girl on the Train*, when explaining Tom's murder to the police, Rachel claims 'I had no choice. He would have killed me'. The 'headless bride' explains her actions in a similar register: she 'killed him' – she 'had to kill him'. The idiomatic phrase, to 'lose one's head', means 'to lose one's presence of mind or self-control; to become irrational'.[253]

[251] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs*, 1.4 (Summer, 1976), 875-893 (p. 881).
[252] Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, p. 111.
[253] Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'head'. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/84896 [accessed 27th March 2019]. See also, Miller, '"How

This definition, alongside Rachel's loss of selfhood, supposed irrationality, and her reference to Tom within this sequence as her 'husband', highlights a parallel between Rachel and the 'headless bride' of Morgan's novel. Therefore, in both *The Lady on the Train* and *The Girl on the Train*, 'The Case of the Headless Bride' is constructed as a product of masculine authorship. For Nicki, whose investigative trajectory begins under Morgan's dictation and continues with his guidance, there is a loss of 'self-control' over her story, emphasised by her containment within 'normative romance' at the filmic culmination. In contrast, whereas the beginning of *The Girl on the Train* visually and thematically mirrors the opening of *Lady on a Train*, throughout the film Rachel actively interrogates and refuses her allotted position as the 'irrational' 'headless bride'. In 'looking back' towards *Lady on a Train*, *The Girl on the Train* mobilises nostalgia, redeploying cinematic modes of femininity in order to invoke and present a 'challenge' to the 'male order'.[254]

The key moment of nostalgic dialogue in *Gone Girl* takes place within the scene where Amy murders her ex-boyfriend Desi. After her money is stolen at a motel, Amy calls upon Desi for help. However, as the days pass, Desi's heroic rescue becomes more of an exercise in restriction. He controls Amy's finances as well as her appearance and, in trying to shape her back into 'Amy circa 1987', threatens her mobile, ambiguous identity (p. 361). Not one to be pinned down, Amy plots her escape. In the novel, Amy describes seducing Desi before crushing sleeping pills into his martini. Once he is asleep she stabs him, before carefully staging the scene to suggest that her violence was an act of self-defence rather than cold-blooded murder. In the novel, we are only given the details of Amy's plan and Desi's death before and after the event, creating a marked contrast to the violent depiction of his murder in the filmic adaptation. Samantha Highfield's suggestion that viewers 'can't forget seeing' this sequence speaks to its resonance and visual potency.[255] This particular moment that resonates is, in itself, a site of resonance. Evocative of *Basic Instinct*'s Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone), who most can picture 'wielding a K-mart ice-pick with wild abandon at the apex of sexual ecstasy', Amy's murder of Desi constructs a blood-soaked intersection of sex

---

Much Do You Want to Pay for This Beauty?"'. The idea of 'losing one's head' discussed in reference to *The Girl on the Train* also reiterates Miller's points regarding 'the head and the brain' as a 'new site of bodily concern in contemporary crime fiction' (p. 102). Just as, in *Gone Girl*, Nick's comments about Amy's skull render 'the cerebral physical', Tom's abusive contortion of reality works to reduce Rachel's 'intellect to something fragile and vulnerable to violence' (p. 102).

[254] Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', p. 18; Kaplan, 'The Place of Women in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*', p. 81.

[255] Samantha Highfill, 'Best of 2014: Cinematographer Talks Desi's Death Scene in 'Gone Girl'' (2014). Available at https://ew.com/article/2014/12/12/best-of-2014-gone-girl-desi-death/ [accessed 28th March 2019].

and death.[256] In Desi's bedroom, from his shirt to Amy's lingerie and the bedsheets beneath them, almost everything within the immediate mise-en-scène is white. Warm lighting bathes the rest of the room in soft focus, locating the bed as a stage, a blank canvas for the 'sheer volume of blood involved' within the scene.[257] Amy is underneath Desi as they are having sex and, as she casts her eyes upwards, the camera follows, showing a close-up shot of her hand slowly reaching underneath the pillow.

Gone Girl, dir. David Fincher (Twentieth Century Fox, 2014)

With the same steady movement, her hand slides back out, brandishing the box-cutter that she will use to kill Desi. In one fluid motion, she pulls the blade across his throat. This shot explicitly mirrors the opening scene of *Basic Instinct* where, as the man reaches climax, Tramell's hand moves underneath the bedcovers to grab an ice-pick, before repeatedly

[256] Julianne Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme: (Dis)Figuring Feminism, Family, Irony, Violence', *Cineaction*, 38 (1995), 64-72 (p. 65).
[257] Highfill, 'Best of 2014: Cinematographer Talks Desi's Death Scene in 'Gone Girl".

stabbing the physically restrained man in the neck and face. Whilst Amy's movements are a lot more controlled than this aforementioned 'frenzy', further parallels to *Basic* Instinct's 'no-holds-barred opening scene' are evident as she flips Desi over, pinning him down and assuming the same dominant position as Tramell.[258] Whereas Stone's character uses a white, silk scarf to restrain her sexual partners/victims, Amy utilises almost identical bonds in order to bolster the story that she will tell the police on her return to Nick. On the morning of the murder, Amy waits for Desi to leave the house. After he has left, she ties a white, silk ribbon around her ankle and stains her dress and thighs with red wine, before crawling over to a spot beneath one of Desi's many security cameras. Pawing at the floor to ceiling glass, crying and soundlessly screaming, Amy uses the white, silk restraints to further portray herself as a victim of kidnapping and sexual violence. This highly problematic performance works in Amy's favour when she returns to Nick and pleads with the police: 'there were cameras everywhere. […] please find the tapes'.

Gone Girl, dir. David Fincher (Twentieth Century Fox, 2014)

Highfill suggests that this scene illustrates a succinct message: 'Amy is a sociopath'.[259] However, as I have illustrated, Amy's shifting characterisation evades such categorical claims.[260] Instead, I suggest that the evocation and subversion of *Basic Instinct*'s

[258] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', p. 65.
[259] Highfill, 'Best of 2014: Cinematographer Talks Desi's Death Scene in 'Gone Girl''.
[260] See also, Genevieve Yue, *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021). Through the concept of 'escamontage' – a 'portmanteau that combines escamotage, French for concealment by trickery (as in magic), and montage, the compositional practice of assembling a film through discrete elements' – Yue positions Fincher's *Gone Girl* as a film where the 'vanishing woman's body is both thematized and integrated as part of the production process' (pp. 74, 79). Arguing that *Gone Girl*'s narrative 'game of misdirection' is also encapsulated at the level of filmmaking, Yue describes how Fincher's technique ('the workflow film') is 'less shot or recorded in the traditional cinematographic model than // it is digitally

murderous aesthetic within this particular scene has further ideological implications. Discussing the 'sheer proliferation of fatal femme figures' in 1990s popular culture, Pidduck suggests that films like *Basic Instinct* imply a 'widespread uneasiness which can never be entirely wished away'.[261] The twenty-first century proliferation of such figures, highlighted by *Gone Girl*'s specific homage to *Basic Instinct*, works to reinforce and build upon Pidduck's claim.[262] While Pidduck ascribes this 'uneasiness' to the femme fatale's 'subversive attack on the family unit', the particular evocations of previous cinematic modes of femininity in *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* indicate an additional dialogue.[263] That is, if the filmic adaptations work to destabilise the relationship between sight and knowledge, they also utilise the knowledge of previous visual modes in order to generate further critique. When 'forgetting is a major obstacle to change', such adaptative work enacts a further dialogue with feminist theorisations around memory and nostalgia.[264] In mining and redeploying past cinematic modes, the filmic adaptations of the 'girled' fatale look back with 'fresh eyes', illustrating how the past can take on 'new meaning in response to present questions and needs'.[265]

#MeToo and The Uses of Violence

We are, therefore, presented with a question: what can we read about 'present questions and needs' from these cinematic dialogues?[266] One of the most striking elements of the filmic adaptations of *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* are their portrayals of violent women.

---

constructed or animated, often frame-by-frame and even pixel-by-pixel', '[w]ithout any apparent disruption in viewer expectations' (pp. 91-2). Yue positions Amy's consequent unknowability in the film as a problematic side effect of such technical development. Whereas Amy's motivations, desires and anxieties are explored through Flynn's novel, Fincher succeeded in creating 'a new person, a woman made of disparate parts that only appear to fit together' (p. 96). For Yue, Amy is not 'especially mysterious' in Fincher's adaptation, 'she is only unknowable because he does not bother to know her' (p. 96). While I still maintain that Amy's unknowability is key to her efficacy as a contemporary femme fatale, we can trace through Yue's theorisations what might be lost through the process of adaptation, particularly when a text moves from being authored by a woman to being directed by a man. This 'now familiar treatment of a woman', Yue speculates, is 'potentially everywhere' in cinema (p. 96).

[261] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', p. 71.

[262] Positioning *Basic Instinct* as a work of postmodern cinema – a classification of work which 'pillages, adulterates and reconstitutes past cinemas', with an 'unslakeable appetite for film noir' – Stables describes how the femme fatale is 'subject to mutation, and even […] complete transformation by the new cinema's knowing and eclectic combinations of genres and codes' (Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice', p. 164, p. 168). If *Gone Girl* borrows and building upon motifs from *Basic Instinct* – a film that already stands as an accumulation of existing cinema – the dialogue between past, present, and future, as well as the femme fatale's ability to mediate 'present questions and needs' is emphasised even further (Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 305).

[263] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', pp. 71, 67.

[264] Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 298.

[265] Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', p. 18; Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 305.

[266] Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', p. 18; Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 305.

While *Gone Girl*'s depiction of murder enacts a brutal narrative departure from the literary text, Tom's demise in the filmic adaptation of *The Girl on the Train* is also highly suggestive. As Rachel jams the corkscrew into his neck, the pair are twisted into an oddly intimate embrace, interpolating not so much sex and death, but death and romantic love. In line with Pidduck's observation that there is something 'politically explosive' in the 'explicit making-violent of the sacrosanct' site of 'romance', Rachel's use of violence is indicative of a potential upheaval of gendered power structures.[267] However, in reference to the realities of gendered violence, Amy's falsified claims of rape and domestic abuse are highly problematic. In an article criticising Amy's portrayal, Joan Smith cites a study where the Crown Prosecution Service reported '5,651 rape prosecutions and a staggering 111,891 for domestic violence' during a seventeen month period.[268] 'In the same period', Smith states, 'only 35 women were prosecuted for making false allegations of rape and six for false claims of domestic violence'.[269] Despite such statistics there is, as recognised by Rose, an 'eagerness' apparent within 'large sections of the press and public to discredit women who have been subject to domestic abuse'.[270] Identifying a 'disturbing proximity' between such attitudes and Amy's actions, Rose argues that Flynn has 'tapped into the zeitgeist' and made the discreditation of violence against women the 'driving mechanism of her plot'.[271] For Smith, it is not possible to view Amy's characterisation separately from the 'grim reality of gender-based violence': '[c]ontext matters in the movie business', she concludes.[272] In light of Smith and Rose's observations, then, Amy's close relationship with the 'zeitgeist' of 'scepticism' towards women, particularly in reference to the reality of violence perpetrated against women, places the feminist potential of her characterisation under strain.[273]

Since the publication and adaptation of *Gone Girl*, as well as Rose and Smith's responses, the 'zeitgeist' has altered fairly dramatically, especially within the context of the film industry.[274] The emergence and proliferation of movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp indicated a huge shift in our cultural climate, with a renewed focus on challenging

---

[267] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', p. 67.
[268] See Joan Smith, 'Gone Girl's Recycling of Rape Myths is a Disgusting Distortion' (2014). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/06/gone-girl-rape-domestic-violence-ben-affleck [accessed 5th February 2019].
[269] Smith, 'Gone Girl's Recycling of Rape Myths is a Disgusting Distortion'.
[270] Jacqueline Rose, 'Corkscrew in the Neck', *London Review of Books*, 37.17 (Sept, 2015), 25-6. Available at https://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n17/jacqueline-rose/corkscrew-in-the-neck [accessed 28th March 2019].
[271] Rose, 'Corkscrew in the Neck'.
[272] Smith, 'Gone Girl's Recycling of Rape Myths is a Disgusting Distortion'.
[273] Rose, 'Corkscrew in the Neck'.
[274] Rose, 'Corkscrew in the Neck'.

the misogyny and violence that women have faced within and beyond this industry. Given this shift, one might speculate as to whether Flynn would have omitted Amy's fabrication of rape if *Gone Girl* was written following or during the emergence of #MeToo. However, it goes without saying that the violence that #MeToo seeks to combat is not limited to the last few years, decades, or even centuries. The 'grim reality of gender-based violence' and subjugation is also 'as old as Eve, and as current as today's movies'.[275] Describing a similarly vexed context, Pidduck recalls how the 1990s violent femme appeared to enact a 'bizarre reversal' of 'what [she] saw happening around [her] as a feminist'.[276] Whilst the feminist movement had been 'hard pressed' to 'put the issue of systemic violence against women into public discourse', the overtly aggressive femme fatale appeared to be a 'sinister reversal, a patriarchal sleight of hand'.[277] With the palpable presence of #MeToo within public discourses in mind, *Gone Girl* appears to enact a similar reversal of statistical knowledge around false rape allegations and the actuality of violence against women.

Whilst there is no way to 'unproblematically square' such a reversal, it does not have to be exclusively viewed as a 'patriarchal sleight of hand'.[278] For Pidduck, despite the fact that the 'fatal femme flies in the face of what we know as feminists about statistical gendered violence', the figure's intense ferocity is not only highly compelling, but ideologically potent.[279] Pidduck continues:

> Where in our everyday lives as women we are bombarded by the evidence of our increasing vulnerability, poverty, and limited social power, the fatal femme's embodied social, sexual, and physical powers offers an imagined point of contact, if not simply identification – an imagined momentum or venting of rage and revenge fantasies – the importance of which cannot be underestimated.[280]

In line with Pidduck's theorisations, Piotrowska offers a different perspective on *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*'s uses of violence, with specific reference to the filmic adaptations. Following a discussion of the #MeToo movement and the revelations regarding producer Harvey Weinstein, Piotrowska argues that *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* grasp hold of a collective feminine 'rage' and 'imagine it as an actual concrete violence – against men, against their violence and against the patriarchal way of thinking which still seeps through

---

[275] Smith, 'Gone Girl's Recycling of Rape Myths is a Disgusting Distortion'; Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47.
[276] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', p. 71.
[277] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', p. 71.
[278] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', pp. 71-2.
[279] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', pp. 71-2.
[280] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', pp. 71-2.

everything we do'.[281] Whilst movements like #MeToo enact something of a 'fighting back', they also draw attention to the sheer extent of such violence, acting as 'evidence' of women's 'vulnerability, poverty, and limited social power'.[282] If, as Pidduck claims, portrayals of feminine violence work to 'bolster' our feminist 'reserve', then *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* are highly responsive to 'present questions and needs'.[283]

Cyclical Returns

Piotrowska suggests that, while pleasurable for feminist spectators, the 'fantasy/metaphor of 'fighting back' offers no new ideas of how to re-negotiate the balance of power in the world'.[284] If *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* do not give succinct solutions to the renegotiation of gendered power imbalances, they do indicate where we might look for direction. *Gone Girl*'s filmic and literary modes both enact a cyclical return at the narrative denouement. In the novel, Amy returns to the domestic sphere to ensnare Nick, soon becoming pregnant and vowing to make him into the man that she wants him to be. Nick's framing of their relationship as 'one long frightening climax' – with Amy positioned as his 'forever antagonist' – indicates a lack of fixity, an uneasy refusal of narrative closure (p. 413). Mirroring the 'happy housewife' musings of Diary Amy's opening narrative, Amy declares that they are on the 'eve of becoming the world's best, brightest nuclear family' (p. 415). Imogen Sara Smith suggests that Amy's return to Nick betrays the couple's aspiration 'to the ultimate form of noir matrimony, the sick marriage, in which two people are bound together by a toxic bond of guilt, bitterness, and dependence'.[285] Given Amy's incessant shifting of personas, is it possible to make any definitive claims about her return? The phrase 'best, brightest nuclear family' is, in itself, suggestive of performativity – a construction, or façade, of idyllic domestic bliss (p. 415). By the conclusion of the literary narrative, then, the only certainty that Amy's characterisation allows is her enduring capacity to present a 'certain discursive unease'.[286] In terms of the filmic adaptation, the same image appears at the beginning and conclusion of the narrative: the back of Amy's head. During the film's opening scene, we hear Nick describing how he pictures 'cracking her lovely skull,

[281] Piotrowska, *The Nasty Woman and The Neo Femme Fatale in Contemporary Cinema*, p. 56.
[282] Piotrowska, *The Nasty Woman and The Neo Femme Fatale in Contemporary Cinema*, p. 56; Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', pp. 71-2.
[283] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', p. 72; Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 305.
[284] Piotrowska, *The Nasty Woman and The Neo Femme Fatale in Contemporary Cinema*, p. 56.
[285] Imogen Sara Smith, '*Gone Girl*: A Modern Noir Marriage?', *Noir City*, 9.3 (Winter, 2015), 57-61 (p. 61).
[286] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.

unspooling her brains, trying to get answers'. At the mention of 'answers', Amy's head suddenly turns, fixing Nick/the viewer with a defiant gaze.

Gone Girl, dir. David Fincher (Twentieth Century Fox, 2014)

At the filmic conclusion, the image of the back of Amy's head is identical to that at the beginning. In this scene, however, Nick's voiceover asks 'what are you thinking?' As Amy's

head snaps around again, her resistant gaze is coupled with the slightest suggestion of a sinister smile. In her illegibility, 'malleability', and unpredictability, Amy remains to be an 'epistemological trauma'.[287] Just as Amy was never truly 'gone', the threat that she represents never truly leaves.

The novel and the filmic adaptation of *The Girl on the Train* construct a similar cyclical return. Both narratives close with Rachel back on the train, evoking a renewed sense of momentum. The novel ends with the phrase 'I have to get up early tomorrow morning, to catch the train', and the filmic narrative concludes with Rachel catching the train (p. 409). She no longer frequents her usual carriage or stares out at the trackside houses. Instead, she looks ahead. The line 'I am not the girl I used to be' at the beginning of the film refers to the apparent depletion of Rachel's 'successful' femininity and her exclusion from the idyllic façade of marital bliss. At the end of the adaptation, however, the statement is mirrored and reframed. Now, Rachel states: 'anything is possible, because I am not the girl I used to be'. As Rachel's voiceover relays this statement, the train – previously depicted only horizontally, hammering past houses, or arriving into stations – snakes into the distance before disappearing from sight as the train tracks curve into the landscape. She is not the girl she used to be, but Rachel's characterisation remains to be mobile, and 'resilient', succeeding via 'non-linear trajectories'.[288]

The Girl on the Train, dir. Tate Taylor (DreamWorks Pictures, 2016)

[287] Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*', p. 107; Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[288] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 16.

Greene suggests that 'circular returns', where 'final scene returns to first scene', provide a 'measure of change, of a present transformed by remembering'.[289] The returns exhibited in *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* are in line with their incessant thematic and structural focus on the vital interaction of past and present. This narrative return, however, also imbues each 'girled' fatale with a potent sense of futurity, a refusal of textual and ideological closure. Whilst the 'fantasy/metaphor of 'fighting back" alone may not offer any 'new ideas of how to renegotiate' patriarchal power imbalance, their interpolation of feminist discourses offer a renavigation: 'a return that leads not back but forwards'.[290] Through their engagement with feminist discourses, *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* 'present a challenge' not only to the 'male order', but to postfeminist claims that feminism, like the past, is 'fixed and finished'.[291] Amy and Rachel, as 'girled' analytical redeployments of the fatale figure, indicate the enduring relevance of past, present, and future feminist enquiry.

[289] Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 307.
[290] Piotrowska, *The Nasty Woman and The Neo Femme Fatale in Contemporary Cinema*, p. 56.
[291] Kaplan, 'The Place of Women in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*', p. 81; Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', p. 305.

Chapter Two – 'We All Want to Be Seen': The Teenage Femme Fatale in *The Girls*, *Girls on Fire* and *Assassination Nation*

Taking its lead from the bad 'girled' women of chapter one, this chapter focuses on the 'pragmatically […] bad' possibilities of the teenage femme fatale figure.[1] The teenage femme fatale is a prominent feature of what Sarah Hughes calls the 'new breed of bad girl stories' that have emerged following *Gone Girl*, traversing – as Wasserman suggests of 'girl stories' more broadly – 'genre and medium'.[2] Despite this vast emergence of texts concerning unruly teenage girls, and critical discourses around girlhood in general, there has been little critical focus on the fatal girl. We can trace one justification for this negligence in Megan Abbott's claim that 'female aggression, desire and rage among young girls' remains, for many, an 'uncomfortable topic'.[3] Doane indicates that the femme fatale of classic noir has a 'special relevance in cinematic representation' due to her connection with psychoanalytic discourses around mysterious femininity and her destabilisation of the relationship between sight and knowledge.[4] As the enigmatic object of the 'epistemological drive of narrative', the classic femme is constructed in order to be solved, unmasked, scrutinised.[5] The girl figure, as the object of a 'particularly intense and sustained moment of cultural obsession' within our current epoch, also has a 'special relevance' within literary and visual texts concerned with the act of looking.[6] Through what Projansky describes as the 'intense publicness of contemporary girlhood', girls are rendered as 'spectacular', 'readily available to us', and 'fair game for discussion, evaluation, and consumption'.[7] This availability or, as Harris suggests,

---

[1] Gillian Flynn, qtd. in Oliver Burkeman, 'Gillian Flynn on her Bestseller Gone Girl and Accusations of Misogyny'. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/01/gillian-flynn-bestseller-gone-girl-misogyny [accessed 10th June 2017].

[2] Sarah Hughes, 'The Gone Girl Effect Sparks Year of Flawed Women Behaving Badly' (2015). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/03/gone-girl-effect [accessed 28th October 2018]; Robin Wasserman, 'What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?' (2016). Available at https://lithub.com/what-does-it-mean-when-we-call-women-girls/ [accessed 5th January 2019].

[3] Megan Abbott, qtd. in Jessa Crispin, 'Mean Girls: Megan Abbott's *Dare Me*' (2012). Available at https://www.kirkusreviews.com/features/mean-girls-megan-abbotts-dare-me/ [accessed 12th May 2019].

[4] Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 1.

[5] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.

[6] Sarah Projansky, 'Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections on Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminism's Daughters', in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular* Culture, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 40-72 (p. 41); Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.

[7] Sarah Projansky, *Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), p. 7. In her discussion of the 'spectacularization[sic] of girls in turn-of-the-twenty-first-century media culture', Projansky refers to how various 'media incessantly look at and invite us to look at girls', how 'some mediated girls are also spectacular as in *fabulous*', and how others are 'spectacles or *scandals*' (p. 5, emphasis in original). Whilst these theorisations draw upon Harris' categorisation of at-risk and can-do

'proliferation of sites to see and hear' from girls within late modernity, renders 'young womanhood' as a 'site of either new possibilities of problems'.[8] Girls are a site of 'intense interest', with 'actual young women and the symbolic value of girlhood' standing for 'a number of hopes and concerns about late modernity' and 'what it means to prevail or lose out'.[9] Harris' comments work to suggest that the centrality of girlhood within popular culture is not just about monitoring the wellbeing or celebrating the successes of young women as subjects. Rather, the intense focus on girls represents broader sociocultural anxieties.[10] In turn, Farrimond identifies how teenage girls 'frequently stand in for bigger things than themselves', existing in 'popular culture as symbols more often than as subjects with lived lives'.[11] Textual figurations of teenage girlhood are, therefore, intrinsically linked with the sociocultural positioning of girlhood within the twenty-first century. Given that the femme fatale figure also 'represents and uniquely reflects' discourses around feminism and femininity, how might we read the teenage girl fatale?[12]

There is an overlapping set of discourses to consider when assessing such constructions. Both contemporary figurations of girlhood and fatal femininity carry their own set of associations, questions, and implications. However, aligning both the girl and the femme fatale figure is their positioning as sites/sights of anxiety, subjected to sociocultural scrutiny. If the fatal woman and spectacular girl are constructed as figures to be looked at and

---

girlhood, Projansky's text insists 'that not all girls are spectacularized[sic] in the same way' (p. 7). Rather, Projansky emphasises how race, sexuality, and class intersects with the spectacularisation of girlhood identifying, for example, how 'the can-do girl is usually white, while the African American or Latina girl is usually at-risk' (p. 7).

[8] Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 1, 14.

[9] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 14.

[10] Over the course of the last few years, girls have also repeatedly emerged as figureheads of contemporary activism. However, unlike the individualistic sway of the 'future girl', these girls are campaigning for social, political, and economic change on a broader scale. See Courtney Connley, '7 Female Activists Under 23 Who Are Changing the World' (2018). Available at https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/08/these-7-young-female-leaders-are-changing-the-world.html [accessed 9th June 2019]. Connley cites several examples including Emma Gonzalez who has 'used her voice to call national attention to gun law reform' following the murder of 17 peers at her school in Florida, as well as Amariyanna 'Mari' Copeny who wrote to President Barack Obama in 2006, requesting a meeting with him to discuss the 'water crisis in her hometown of Flint, Michigan' and has since 'become a youth ambassador for the Women's March'. Connley's article also refers to Malala Yousafzai who, since being 'shot by the Taliban after publicly speaking out about her fight to protect girls' education', has shared her story and 'launched the Malala Fund in 2013' to raise awareness before becoming the youngest Nobel Laureate after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014. For more recent examples, see also Greta Thunberg, *No One is Too Small to Make a Difference* (London: Penguin, 2019) and Gina Martin, *Be The Change: A Toolkit for the Activist in You* (London: Little Brown, 2019). Whilst Martin has changed the law – making 'upskirting' a legal offence in 2019 – Thunberg has become a prominent voice in activism regarding the need for immediate action against climate change.

[11] Katherine Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and American Cinema* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 91.

[12] Kate Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing the *Femme Fatale* in 90s Cinema', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 164-82 (p. 165).

worried over, what happens when the figurations meet and the fatal girl is formulated? How might the teenage fatale interact with, or challenge, the controlling, epistemological gaze? In this chapter, I focus on how the girl, as a figure of becoming-woman, and the femme fatale as a site of ambiguity, have the potential to destabilise fixed, patriarchal perceptions of femininity. It is due to the femme fatale's 'intimate entanglement with patriarchal narrative', Frida Beckman suggests, that locating 'inconsistencies and gaps in film noir narrative' would also indicate a more 'progressive potential' for the femme fatale.[13] As I argue here, it is through illuminating the 'inconsistencies and gaps' between dominant narratives and lived experience that the self-narrating teenage fatale wrenches 'the "look" (and the "voice")' with pragmatically bad, feminist intent.[14]

The Teenage Femme Fatale

In their assessment of the teen fatales in films such as *Knock Knock* (2015), *Spring Breakers* (2012), *Hard Candy* (2005), and *Stoker* (2013), Farrimond and Lindop focus on how the teen fatale, armed with the 'traditional arsenal of an evil scheming mind, cruel single-mindedness of purpose and sexual allure', often escapes punishment for her 'transgressions'.[15] In reference to the filles fatales of *Hard Candy* and *Stoker*, Lindop suggests that this 'newly found agency' is an articulation of the 'masochistic male paranoia that the power afforded to young women is too great' following the gains of second wave feminism.[16] Lindop's reading emphasises how the fatal girls are 'the focus of the narrative', with the audience afforded access to their 'subjectivity via voice-over narration, flash-forward and flash-back', constructing an 'important break from cinematic convention' for the fatale figure.[17] This tearing away from a masculine perspective betrays, Lindop suggests, a masculine

---

[13] Frida Beckman, 'From Irony to Narrative Crisis: Reconsidering the Femme Fatale in the Films of David Lynch', *Cinema Journal*, 52.1 (2012), 25-44 (pp. 25-6).
[14] Beckman, 'From Irony to Narrative Crisis', p. 25; Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism: An Introduction', in *Re-vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles, CA: The American Film Institute, 1984), pp. 1-17 (p. 14).
[15] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 59; Samantha Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 99. Farrimond also explores representations of the teen fatale where the figure does not go unpunished, tracing a movement between the 'grasping 'Lolita femme fatale" of the early 1990s, and more recent 'sympathetic' accounts of the teenage girls' 'manipulative sexuality'(Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 60). The latter, Farrimond asserts, have taken 'the wealth of discourses' around girlhood and 'girls at risk into account' (Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 60). Whilst such representations move 'beyond impersonal hand-wringing, and into a more considered approach' of 'the effects of teenage femininity's cultural positioning', 'the new teen femme fatale film', Farrimond suggests, 'stop[s] at these limits' (Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 74).
[16] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, pp. 124, 112.
[17] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 124.

'intensification of fears about the potential of adolescent girls' in our contemporary moment.[18] The fatal girl also aligns with discourses around 'can-do' femininity and individualistic, postfeminist narratives of 'success'.[19]

In the introduction and chapter one of this thesis, I described Lindop and Farrimond's framing of the teenage fatale figure as individualistic and inscrutable, in line with postfeminism's opposing stance to feminist collectivity. In her discussion of *Knock Knock* and *Spring Breakers*, Farrimond frames friendship as 'a form of power in itself' indicative of 'a shift towards the femme fatale as a less isolated figure'.[20] This movement towards collective action is, therefore, a movement away from postfeminist narratives of individual success. However, Farrimond does continue to identify how the girls in *Knock Knock* and *Spring Breakers* are 'almost entirely lacking in context'.[21] Despite the opacity of the girls' intimacy, 'signified by arms draped around one another and unspoken accord', the 'intensity' of their friendship is 'unavailable for the audience's dissection'.[22] According to Farrimond, whilst this inscrutability does provide a framework for feminist subversions of the epistemological, controlling gaze – so that the teen fatale cannot be 'solved' or 'explained' – the constructions run the risk of replicating the 'hollowness' identified across various other postfeminist media texts.[23] Therefore, in highlighting the ineffectuality of a mere rejection of masculine hegemony, Farrimond also emphasises the importance of a 'clear sense of political awareness and engagement' with 'women's experiences and social health' for feminist critical readings of the teen fatale.[24]

Therefore, through Farrimond and Lindop's accounts, we find the teenage fatale in a critical predicament. A clear rejection of the scrutinising, epistemological gaze runs the risk of constructing a certain 'hollow quality'.[25] Simultaneously, when the teen fatale is given the space to narrate her own story, this window to the girl's subjectivity is read through the lens of masculine anxieties relating to transgressive femininity. My discussion of the teenage

---

[18] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 124.
[19] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 16.
[20] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, pp. 90-1.
[21] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 89.
[22] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 89.
[23] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 90. See Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 'In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Studies', *Cinema Journal*, 44.2 (Winter, 2005), 107-110 (p. 107). Tasker and Negra identify how 'a variety of films and genres of the late 1990s and early 2000s' do not 'sustain any easy or straightforward relationship to women's experiences and social health'. Whilst these texts may 'hype empowerment', therefore, 'scholars, popular critics, and mass audiences often report a "hollow quality" at the heart of many postfeminist media texts'.
[24] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 8; Tasker and Negra, 'In Focus', p. 107.
[25] Tasker and Negra, 'In Focus', p. 107.

fatale is grounded in both the girl and fatal figure's subjection to intense scrutiny. With the teenage fatale operating as an amalgamation of contemporary discourses around girlhood, and critical, cultural perspectives regarding fatal femininity, masculine ways of looking seek to subjugate the figure from every angle. The girl is the future. The girl is at risk. The fatal woman is deadly. The fatal woman is dangerous. Both must be fixed, with that masculine, immutable gaze, before they get away and cause havoc. Crucially, however, both the femme fatale and the girl are heavily discursively informed by instability. The femme fatale 'never really is what she seems to be'.[26] She 'makes trouble' within the supposedly fixed relationship between sight and knowledge.[27] In her contemporary incarnations, she 'resists death' – slipping away at the last moment, refusing textual closure on a narrative and ideological level.[28] The teenage girl, as a figure of 'becoming-woman', is a site of fluidity and transition.[29] She is 'an idea of mobility preceding the fixity of womanhood'.[30] Characterised by this flexibility and ambiguity, then, the teen fatale holds the potential to question and evade the ideological rigidity of masculine narratives regarding 'woman' as a category. The teen fatale, as a doubly gazed and yet doubly slippery figure, stands outside of the 'male order' of the male gaze, and presents 'a challenge to it'.[31]

The 'Gazed Gaze'

This exposure of the 'male order', this refusal of silent objectification, is all the more timely given the contemporary cultural milieu of movements such as #MeToo.[32] In our current cultural moment, women are refusing to accept and dismiss acts of patriarchal violence as typical, part of navigating life as a feminine subject, 'what men [have] always done'. Given that the fatale figure consistently 'represents and uniquely reflects current discourses around 'woman'', I suggest that the teenage fatales' problematisation of masculine ways of looking emerges in dialogue with contemporary interrogations of structural violence and oppression.[33] Within constructions of the teenage fatale and contemporary feminist movements alike, self-narration (or testimony) is central. Through self-narration – of

---

[26] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[27] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs*, 1.4 (Summer, 1976), 875-893 (p. 876).
[28] Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 876.
[29] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans, and ed. H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, [1949] 1997), p. 66.
[30] Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 47.
[31] E. Ann Kaplan, 'The Place of Women in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 81-88 (p. 81).
[32] Kaplan, 'The Place of Women in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*', p. 81.
[33] Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice', p. 165.

becoming, of moving through the world as a feminine subject – ideological, patriarchal abuse is exposed. Joey Soloway's talk on the female gaze at the 2016 Toronto International Film Festival provides a framework for how this exposure of the 'male order' might operate on a textual level.[34] Citing examples such as the film *Magic Mike* (2012) and the publication *Playgirl* (1973-2008) Soloway identifies a mode of the 'female gaze' that women have been offered: 'the opposite of the male gaze […] visual arts and literature depicting the world and men from a feminine point of view, presenting men as objects of female pleasure'.[35] Rejecting this mode of the gaze – held as it is within a heteronormative, hollow, and ineffectual reversal of long-established dichotomies – Soloway proposes three key ways in which feminine ways of looking might be constructed. Firstly, they posit the female gaze as a 'way of feeling seeing' – a 'reclamation of the body' which 'uses the frame to share and evoke a feeling of being in feeling' where 'emotions' are prioritised over 'action'. The second avenue, the 'gazed gaze', shows us 'how it feels to be the object of the [male] gaze'.[36] '[C]ome feel with me', the gazed gaze says, experience 'how I become as I become what men see'.[37] Finally, the female gaze might also involve a return of the gaze. This return is not a straightforward reversal of the male gaze, with its associated dynamics of passivity/activity left intact. Instead, Soloway proposes, this return of the gaze says 'we see you seeing us […] I don't want to be the object any longer', followed by a repositioning of the feminine as subject of the narrative. It is a 'wresting away, perhaps a wrestling away' of the 'point of view' and claiming woman's space as the subject of the narrative.

While Soloway's discussion focuses on visual texts specifically, the first section of this chapter utilises their formulation of the 'gazed gaze' across visual and literary modes. Gazing back is enacted in two different ways by the pragmatically bad girls of *The Girls*, *Girls on Fire*, and *Assassination Nation*. Constructions of the teenage fatale perform a literal looking back – both to archetypal narratives of fatal femininity and to the 'transition from

---

[34] Kaplan, 'The Place of Women in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*', p. 81.
[35] Joey Soloway, 'Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze' (TIFF Talks, 2016). Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnBvppooD9I&t=2895s [accessed 14th May 2019]. See also, Cara Buckley, 'They Couldn't Get Past the 'Mimbos" (2008). Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/16/fashion/16playgirl.html [accessed 27th June 2019]. In her exploration of the demise of *Playgirl* magazine, Buckley describes how '[n]ot long after Nicole Caldwell became editor in chief', she discovered that 'looking at photos of naked men all day was not everything she has imagined it would be'. Caldwell apparently detected a 'curious vapidity to the men' and 'took to describing them as "mimbos"'. The term 'mimbos' – an amalgamation of 'male' and 'bimbos' – alongside the suggestion of 'vapidity', imbues the male models with a certain emptiness, lack, and passivity. This description, therefore, works to reinforce how a reversal of masculine and feminine subject positions, locked within the same dynamic, constructs the same uninspiring and persistent ideological narratives.
[36] Soloway, 'Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze'.
[37] Soloway, 'Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze'.

girlhood to womanhood'.[38] Reinforced by each text's chronological traversals between past and present, the gazed gaze enacts a critical re-examination of the process of becoming-woman as defined by patriarchal narratives. Therefore, constructions of the gazed gaze revisit, revise, and deconstruct the formation of feminine subjectivity as defined by masculine perspectives. The final section of this chapter, focusing primarily on *The Girls* and *Girls on Fire*, discusses how feminine ways of looking might reach beyond formulations of the 'gazed gaze'. Utilising Colman's work on the 'transversality of becoming-adolescent', this discussion considers the provocative role of friendship within the process of becoming-woman.[39] Through this framework, friendship is positioned as a catalyst through which the teen fatales become aware of their capacity for 'aggression, desire and rage', aligning with Farrimond's positioning of friendship as a 'form of power in itself', intimating 'a shift towards the femme fatale as a less isolated figure'.[40] If the gazed gaze *gazes back*, confronting and interrogating patriarchal narratives with feminist, analytical intent, the transversal gaze imagines 'new patterns of definition' for constructions of teenage subjectivity and feminine ways of looking more broadly.[41]

The Girls

When asked about what influenced her to write *The Girls*, Cline explains that while '[g]rowing up in Northern California, [she] heard so many stories about Charles Manson'.[42] Like Cline, most people will have heard of Manson, the man who 'established his own cult and, eventually, manipulated his 'Family' members' into killing five people, including the famous actress Sharon Tate.[43] *The Girls* is loosely based around this infamous cult and the

---

[38] Wasserman, 'What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?'.
[39] Felicity Colman, 'Hit Me Harder: The Transversality of Becoming-Adolescent', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 16.3 (2005), 356-371 (p. 357).
[40] Abbott, 'Mean Girls'; Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, pp. 90-1.
[41] Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, 'Introduction', in *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture* (London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1988), pp. 1-7 (p. 6).
[42] Emma Cline, qtd. in Jane Mulkerrins, 'How Emma Cline's family inspired her cult novel on the Manson murders' (2017). Available at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/emma-clines-family-inspired-cult-novel-manson-murders/ [accessed 19th June 2019].
[43] Mulkerrins, 'How Emma Cline's family inspired her cult novel on the Manson murders'. See also Sarah Ditum, 'The Girls by Emma Cline review – the Charles Manson 'family' reimagined' (2016). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jun/08/the-girls-by-emma-cline-review-charles-manson [accessed 19th June 2019]. It is important to note that, as Sarah Ditum identifies, Cline's reimagining of the Manson murders 'excludes some of the most troubling social history around Manson'. 'In the real-life Manson murders', Ditum continues, 'his followers daubed "PIG" and "HEALTER SKELTER" at the crime scenes – references to Manson's apocalyptic theology' which dictated that a 'race war' was imminent, in which 'the blacks would overpower the whites (the "pigs"). Ditum suggests that the 'murders were intended to frame the Black Panthers and kick off a cycle of race violence'. Describing Cline's omission of these contextual factors, Ditum states that including such racist motivations 'would presumably have made it harder to sympathise with the girls'.

murders that took place on the 9th August 1969. However, while Manson's name usually takes centrality within existing narratives – among many documentaries and fictionalised accounts about the cult, the first and most recent are titled *Manson* (1973) and *Charlie Says* (2019) – Cline's text seeks to place men 'on the periphery'.[44] Instead, *The Girls* uses the events to explore how it feels to be a girl 'who ha[s] grown up so steeped in the male gaze, with all these heterosexual mythologies about love and romance'.[45] Paraphrasing Phyllis Chesler, bell hooks recalls an interview with one cult member where the dynamic outlined by Cline is rendered explicit in relation to sexual activity with Manson himself:

> The story is that one of the women was interviewed and asked to share what it was like to fuck him. She replied: "He said, 'Imagine I'm your father.' I did. I did. And it was very good." This is a story I have told many times since first reading it. I have never returned to the book to find out if my memory is accurate. This story delighted me because it reveals quite innocently the extent to which patriarchy invites us all to learn how to "do it for daddy," and to find ultimate pleasure, satisfaction, and fulfillment[sic] in that act of performance and submission.[46]

As Charlotte Higgins identifies, the literal meaning of the term patriarchy is 'rule of the father'.[47] Therefore, as hooks suggests, whether the statements above are accurate or not, the recollection encapsulates how women are encouraged to perform their desire 'for daddy', to envision their own desire and selfhood through a patriarchal gaze.[48] Cline's decision to shift the perspective away from Manson – refigured as cult leader 'Russell' in the novel – and onto the ambivalent 'aggression, desire and rage' of the girls involved within the reimagined events, exhibits a 'wrenching of the "look" (and the "voice")' from patriarchal formations of femininity and desire.[49]

The Girls unfolds from protagonist Evie's perspective, switching between the 'endless, formless summer' of 1969 and the present day (p. 25). From the outset of the novel,

---

[44] *Manson*, dir. Robert Hendrickson and Laurence Merrick (Merrick International, 1973); *Charlie Says*, dir. Mary Harron (Epic Level Entertainment, 2019). While *Charlie Says* also focuses on the girls' experiences of becoming indoctrinated into the cult, the use of 'Charlie' in the title indicates the persistent draw of Manson's name. An additional recent example of the fictionalisation of the Manson Family can be seen in the 2019 film *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, dir. Quentin Tarantino (Columbia Pictures, 2019), where three cult members attend the wrong house in August 1969 and are murdered by leading men Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt); Cline, 'How Emma Cline's family inspired her cult novel on the Manson murders'.

[45] Cline, 'How Emma Cline's family inspired her cult novel on the Manson murders'.

[46] bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Class and Sex at the Movies* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), p. 104.

[47] Charlotte Higgins, 'The Age of Patriarchy: How an Unfashionable Idea Became a Rallying Cry for Feminism Today' (2018). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jun/22/the-age-of-patriarchy-how-an-unfashionable-idea-became-a-rallying-cry-for-feminism-today [accessed 10th July 2019].

[48] hooks, *Reel to Real,* p. 104.

[49] Abbott, 'Mean Girls'; Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism', p. 14.

we can trace Cline's construction of how the gaze affects the formation of subjectivity. As an adult, Evie's existence is liminal; she stays 'in a borrowed house' tending to 'the in-between spaces of other people's existences'.[50] Evie's stay in such a house is interrupted by the arrival of her friend's son Julian, and his teenage girlfriend Sasha. Sasha's presence prompts Evie to reflect on her own girlhood. Describing how she 'had forgotten that dopey part of teenage girls: the desire for love flashing in [Sasha's] face so directly', Evie realises that her gaze is making Sasha 'nervous' (pp. 13-4). Though 'embarrassed' by Sasha's 'desire for love', Evie understands the 'worry' (pp. 13-4). She recalls how when she was 'that age', she was 'uncertain of how to move […] as if everyone were constantly gauging [her] performance and finding it lacking' (p. 14). This 'performance' of selfhood, later referred to as the 'industrious' and 'constant project of our girl selves', is therefore situated within the realm of adolescence (pp. 14, 27). However, Evie's subsequent shift into Julian's perspective highlights how she continues to visualise herself through somebody else's gaze. Imagining herself as 'unkempt', and therefore 'lacking' a certain sense of order or containment, Evie persistently recognises her own 'performance' as somewhat unsatisfactory through a masculine gaze (pp. 19, 14). This beginning thus highlights the cruciality of the gaze in the formation of subjectivity, as well as how the 'constant project' of girlhood, as a process of becoming-woman, is not necessarily contained within adolescence (p. 27).

In further recollections of her own girlhood, Evie's awareness of the role of the male gaze in the process of becoming-woman is marked by a certain ambivalence. She recalls:

> I waited to be told what was good about me. I wondered later if this was why there were so many more women than men at the ranch. All that time I had spent readying myself, the articles that taught me life was really just a waiting room until someone noticed you – the boys had spent that time becoming themselves (p. 28).

In this passage, Evie highlights how being 'noticed' or seen works to define feminine identity (p. 28). Becoming-woman concerns Evie 'readying' herself, with blank stretches of waiting to be told what is valuable about her (p. 28). To not be seen is to be rendered formless, to spend, in Evie's words, 'a whole life skittering across the surface' (p. 18). Whilst such a formation of identity aligns with the flexibility, ambiguity, and 'mobility' outlined in discourses around girlhood and fatal femininity, here such descriptors work to illuminate an undeniable desire *for* the male gaze.[51] As a teenage girl, Evie is 'excited' by her discovery of what she describes as an 'equation': 'You could be pretty, you could be wanted, and that

[50] Emma Cline, *The Girls* (London: Penguin, 2016), pp. 9-10. All further references to Cline's text are to this edition and will be given parenthetically within the body of the thesis.
[51] Driscoll, *Girls*, p. 47.

could make you valuable' (p. 171). The concrete requirements of this 'equation', 'the tidy commerce' of becoming valuable, sits in stark contrast to her subsequent life of invisibility and unfixed subjectivity (p. 171). During her first experience at the ranch, Evie compares Russell's eyes to 'hot oil' and lets herself become 'the kind of girl a man would startle at, would want to touch' under his gaze (p. 118). Though the comparison to 'hot oil' highlights the danger of Russell's gaze – indicated further through Evie's ambivalent traversal between 'fear and interest' – she also feels an 'unfamiliar' and 'new feeling of power' flexing and 'tightening' (pp. 118-19). Through becoming-visible, then, Evie is also awakened to a new feeling of desire, a 'pleasurable', 'flattered sickness', prompting her to want and envisage 'this world without end' (pp. 122, 119).

This section illustrates, to quote hooks, 'the extent to which patriarchy invites us all to learn […] to find ultimate pleasure' in acts of 'performance and submission'.[52] Evie does not desire Russell, and yet she is highly aware of the pleasures, possibilities and powers that might accompany being an object of his desire. In imagining 'this world without end', Evie's potential pleasures are juxtaposed by her recognition of her performance in the 'equation' of being wanted (pp. 119, 171). The fixed stages of becoming valuable through a male gaze are, she states, 'part of being a girl' (p. 55). If Evie felt 'as if everyone were constantly gauging [her] performance and finding it lacking' (p. 14), she was also aware of how, as a girl, 'you [are] resigned to whatever feedback you'd get. […] The only thing you could do was smile from the corner they'd backed you into' (pp. 55-6). Instead of an endless world of possibility and desire, there are rules that you must follow and enclosures that you must bear, smiling all the while. It is no big leap to connect Evie's recollection of the 'constant project' of constructing her girl self with Sasha's 'campaign for her own existence' later in the novel (pp. 27, 343). 'We all want to be seen', for to not be visible through the male gaze in a culture 'ordered by sexual imbalance' is, according to Evie's commentary, to assume a certain non-existence (p. 352).[53] Therefore, through the incorporation of the 'gazed gaze' – the construction of how Evie becomes as she 'become[s] what men see' – *The Girls* simultaneously illustrates the ambivalent pleasures and limitations associated with being seen and desired by men, or 'do[ing] it for daddy'.[54]

[52] hooks, *Reel to Real,* p. 104.
[53] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 19.
[54] Soloway, 'Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze'; hooks, *Reel to Real,* p. 104.

Girls on Fire

Evie's 'skittering' liminal existence as an adult woman provides narrative lens through which to reassess girlhood (p. 18). In Wasserman's *Girls on Fire*, sections from the perspective of protagonist Dex's mother intersperse the text, allowing a similar commentary to unfold. Julia Dexter describes the 'tragedy of birthing a girl'; the 'special provenance of a mother to a daughter, one woman raising another, knowing too well what could happen' (p. 75).[55] Whilst, initially, this idea of fearing for daughters seems to refer to dominant narratives of 'at-risk' girlhood, with girls positioned as 'passive victim[s] of circumstances beyond their control', Julia's fear for her daughter is positioned in relation to a potential loss of selfhood.[56] Reflecting on her own 'transition from girlhood to womanhood', she describes feeling that 'everything she had been and wanted had been whittled away, her edges smoothed into a featureless surface without a name of its own. Hannah Dexter's mother. Jimmy Dexter's wife' (p. 77). Here, similarities are apparent between Dex's mother's 'smoothed', 'featureless surface' and adult Evie's 'blurred' and 'ambiguous expression' in *The Girls* (*Girls on Fire*, p. 77; *The Girls*, p. 10). Their faces have been 'smoothed' and 'blurred', suggesting that what was once vivid has been obscured. This lack of facial definition translates to a loss of distinct identity. While Evie states that she has never quite met her 'inevitable self', Dex's mother describes her trajectory as an apparent 'infinity of choice' that had turned out to be more like a 'funnel, life narrowing itself one bad decision at a time' (*The Girls*, p. 18; *Girls on Fire*, p. 77). As with Evie's commentary regarding being desired by Russell, Dex's mother positions girlhood as a time of endless possibility, aligning with the discursive frameworks of flexibility and malleability associated with girlhood. Here, we can trace Harris' theorisation of the spectacular 'can-do' girl, who has benefited from the gains of second wave feminism and therefore has 'choice, freedom and real autonomy'.[57] In Evie's commentary, possibility and choice are both associated with and problematised through the ambivalent pleasures that accompany being an object of the gazed gaze. In placing men 'on the periphery' of the narrative, Cline makes space for this critical examination to unfold from the perspective of the feminine protagonist. In turn, Wasserman's aim in writing *Girls on Fire* was to 'talk about the power that young women have, and allow them to be at the center[sic] of their own

[55] Robin Wasserman, *Girls on Fire* (London: Little Brown, 2016), p. 75. All further references to Wasserman's text are to this edition and will be given parenthetically within the body of the thesis.
[56] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 26.
[57] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 5.

stories, making their own choices'.[58] When discussing the temporal grounding of her novel, Wasserman states that she initially 'wanted to write something that was shaped by the Satanic panic' of the 1980s, and how this particular epoch was 'fixed' on the 'idea that women were going back to work and children were being left to the forces of evil'.[59] 'At the end of the '80s and the beginning of the '90s', Wasserman continues, 'those concerns shifted toward discussion of what was happening to the teenagers'.[60] This shift aligns with a critical intensification on the teenage girl. With reference to Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, Wasserman states that she has 'a lot of problems with' the framing of young women as 'vulnerable' 'victims' who are ultimately just 'a problem to be solved'.[61] Positioning the late-twentieth-century setting of the novel as 'a moment where society was really consumed with this question of what to do about the teenage girl', Wasserman's project aligns with Cline in her objective of 'wrenching [of] the "look" (and the "voice")' away from such discursive structures, instead allowing analytical commentary from the perspective of the teenage girl.[62]

Though Dex's characterisation does align with the 'white heteronormativity that undergirds the can do/at risk dichotomy', her narrative highlights the finite nature of 'choice' under a masculine sociocultural gaze.[63] When visiting a nightclub with her friend Lacey, Dex navigates the ambivalent power associated with being seen. Though both characters are obviously underage, the bouncer, 'more interested in [Dex's] cleavage than [her] birthdate',

---

[58] Robin Wasserman, qtd. in Michael Schaub, "Girls on Fire' Author Robin Wasserman Sees Parallels Between '90s and Today in Politics and Women's Empowerment' (2017). Available at https://www.latimes.com/books/la-ca-jc-robin-wasserman-20170415-story.html [accessed 17th July 2019].
[59] Wasserman, "Girls on Fire' Author Robin Wasserman Sees Parallels Between '90s and Today'. For more discussion on the connection between children, day care centres, and the moral panic of the 1980s, see Mary deYoung, 'Another Look at Moral Panics: The Case of Satanic Day Care Centers', *Deviant Behavior*, 19.3 (1998), 257-278. deYoung's article discusses the 'Satanic Panic' in the US during the 1980s, focusing specifically on 'day care providers who, it was claimed, were abusing their very young charges in satanic rituals' including 'blood-drinking, cannibalism, and human sacrifices' (p. 258). deYoung also highlights how moral panics serve a sociocultural purpose. 'Through the use of highly emotive claims and fear-based appeals', deYoung suggests, 'a moral panic tends to orchestrate cultural consent that something must be done, and quickly, to deal with this alleged threat' (p. 257). The resultant 'increased social control' works to preserve and reassert the 'hegemonic values and interests' that the threat seeks to undermine (p. 257). Moral panics, therefore, actually serve a 'distinct stabilizing function' on a sociocultural level (p. 258). See also, Aja Romano, 'The History of Satanic Panic in the US – And Why It's Not Over Yet' (2016). Available at https://www.vox.com/2016/10/30/13413864/satanic-panic-ritual-abuse-history-explained [accessed 17th July 2019]. When discussing the rise of occultism and satanic fear, Romano links 'the increased interest in, and fear of, the occult during the late 1960s and 1970s' to the 'Manson cult's operation in the late '60s' which 'culminated in a string of mass murders in the summer of 1969 that shocked the nation and put organized ritualistic killing on the brain'. Both Wasserman and Cline's texts, therefore, speak to a similar sociocultural framework of moral panic.
[60] Wasserman, "Girls on Fire' Author Robin Wasserman Sees Parallels Between '90s and Today'.
[61] Wasserman, "Girls on Fire' Author Robin Wasserman Sees Parallels Between '90s and Today'.
[62] Wasserman, "Girls on Fire' Author Robin Wasserman Sees Parallels Between '90s and Today'.
[63] Projansky, *Spectacular Girls*, p. 10.

waves them both in (p. 99). Dex comments on how she was 'used to people looking at Lacey', but that night 'they looked at [her]' (p. 99). In the nightclub, Lacey suggests that Dex is 'going mad with power' and, Dex affirms, 'she was right' (p. 99). She 'did love the power of it', her chest 'squeezed sausage tight, suddenly capable of miracles' (p. 99). Using girls' activity on social media as an example, Soraya Chemaly identifies how what is 'pleasing' and instils 'a sense of control in girls *and* women' isn't sexualisation itself, 'but the *power* it brings' (emphasis in original).[64] However, Chemaly continues, 'power and empowerment' and 'sexual objectification and sexuality' are not the same.[65] Women do not 'own the media and marketing companies that profit from their images' or 'lead the religious and educational institutions that dictate what constitutes obscenity' entailing that, ultimately, they are not in control of *how* they are seen.[66] Due to such constraints, self-sexualisation remains to be a 'very narrow […] path to power' for girls, albeit the 'most available'.[67] When Dex is admitted into the aptly named nightclub 'Beast', her bodily display constructed for and consumed by the bouncer, she is also treading the 'narrow' path into the belly of the patriarchal beast – becoming subjected to the structural and ideological constraints of the male gaze.[68] Similarly, Evie appreciates the 'tidy commerce' of being seen through a masculine gaze in *The Girls*: 'You could be pretty, you could be wanted, and that could make you valuable' (*The Girls*, p. 171). Although Dex gains 'status' through her admittance to the nightclub, before delighting in the 'influence' that being seen conveys, she is also being introduced to a limited (and limiting) promise of power.[69]

Though Dex does not report the same 'creep of discomfort, of being tricked' that Evie remembers having 'already perceived in relationships with men', similar limitations are indicated in the stark contrast between her interactions with men, and her experience as part of a larger crowd (*The Girls*, p. 171). After a somewhat lacklustre encounter in a 'single-stall bathroom with some guy', Dex moves back into the expanse of the club and finds Lacey (p. 99). It is within this space that she understands 'what it was to feel a need and seize it. [She] needed to move. [She] needed to fly' (p. 101). Dex becomes part of the crowd, which is itself described as a 'single organism' with 'a hundred legs and arms and heads' (p. 102). Despite the 'power' Dex originally felt when subjected to the bouncer's gaze, it is when she is no

[64] Soraya Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2018), p. 44.
[65] Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her*, p. 44.
[66] Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her*, p. 45.
[67] Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her*, p. 44.
[68] Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her*, p. 44.
[69] Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her*, p. 44.

longer situated within her own body that 'anything, everything' becomes 'possible' (pp. 99, 102). The fact that 'no one [is] watching' connects this feeling of possibility to an absence of scrutiny (p. 102). Whilst the bouncer's gaze illustrates that there is an ambivalent power to be found in being seen – or, as Evie surmises in *The Girls*, that the 'arrangement' of objectification can be 'put toward some use'– as Dex's narrative develops, mobility and possibility are conceived through an absence of the gaze (*The Girls*, p. 171). Here, the construction of the gazed gaze works to show us how Dex becomes as she becomes 'what men see', whilst indicating the limitations of the ambivalent powers that such a look might promise to impart.[70]

Further events work to highlight the gap between Dex's narrated 'aggression, desire and rage' and the limitations of the powers proffered by the male gaze.[71] Later into the narrative, Dex and Lacey plan to attend a party together. When Lacey does not arrive to meet Dex at the arranged time, she decides to go to the party alone, because she is 'angry' and had 'seen enough movies where the mousy girl goes to a party and changes her life' (p. 130). Here, Dex is explicitly referring to the plethora of images in popular culture which position self-reinvention – represented through the accrual of fashionable clothing and performance of conventional beauty practices – as a means of obtaining popularity, status, and agency. In *The Makeover in Movies: Before and After in Hollywood Films, 1941-2002*, Elizabeth A. Ford and Deborah C. Mitchell describe how cinematic productions of the late twentieth/early twenty-first century 'tapped into the old Cinderella story': the 'transformation of ugly duckling to beautiful swan'.[72] The 'new generation' of consumers at which films such as *Clueless* (1995) and *Legally Blonde* (2001) were aimed, 'already mass consumers of beauty products and trendy fashions', are framed as a 'lucrative' market for such narratives.[73] Dex's desire to attend the party due to the belief that it might change her life reveals the symbiotic relationship between the popular modes of femininity outlined by Ford and Mitchell and the lived experience of teenage subjectivity. This desire for self-reinvention is, ultimately, highly concerned with visibility.

---

[70] Soloway, 'Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze'.
[71] Abbott, 'Mean Girls'.
[72] Elizabeth A. Ford and Deborah C. Mitchell, *The Makeover in Movies: Before and After in Hollywood Films, 1941-2002* (Jefferson: McFarland and Co, 2004), p. 67.
[73] Ford and Mitchell, *The Makeover in Movies,* p. 67.

Clueless, dir. Amy Heckerling (Paramount Pictures, 1995)

For Dex, staying at home and choosing ‘rules over rebellion’, invisibility over possibility, is not an attractive option (p. 130). Recreating ‘that magic moment’ of makeover montages with ‘a few brush strokes and some sexy, stylish clothes’, Dex dons vampish accoutrements of femininity, applying lipstick and lacing herself ‘into the black corset’ that she ‘hadn’t worn

since the night of the Beast' (p. 129).[74] Through this makeover process, Dex's narrative establishes a parallel between her appearance at the nightclub, and her aspirations for the night ahead. While at Beast, her bodily display resulted in heightened visibility and (limited) notions of 'status', 'power', and 'influence', Dex's night at the party, however, works to illustrate Chemaly's points in a harrowing fashion.[75] Despite the 'aggression, desire and rage' that propels Dex's actions, her experience at the party illustrates the limitations of power, the gap between projected narratives around femininity and feminine lived experience, under a patriarchal sociocultural gaze.[76]

After a night of drinking and dancing 'like everyone is watching', Dex wakes up in an 'alien landscape' – on a stretch of lawn outside of the long-finished house party (p. 137). As she takes in her surroundings, she realises that she 'couldn't remember the night' or, rather, that she 'couldn't remember enough of the night' besides 'strange hands doing strange things' (pp. 138, 141). The security guard who wakes Dex, despite also knowing nothing of the night's events, regards her with highly misogynistic contempt, suggesting that she should 'learn to have a little more pride' in herself (p. 139). If she keeps 'behaving like a whore', he continues, 'people will keep treating [her] like one' (p. 139). In her preparations for the party, Dex *has* taken pride such in herself, painting and lacing her body into the performance of sexualised femininity that popular, cultural narratives promise will bestow visibility, power, and 'transformation'.[77] When self-sexualisation is the 'most available' path to 'status' and 'influence' for feminine subjects, to take pride in one's self, or to achieve and maintain certain standards of successful femininity, more often than not translates to taking pride in one's own appearance.[78] As Dex undresses to shower, she finds words written all over her body. The words – '*slut* and *whore* and *skank*' – are framed as 'labels' that won't 'come off' (p. 141, emphasis in original). As Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury identify, 'there is a tension between women's lived bodily experiences and the cultural meanings inscribed on the female body that always mediate those experiences'.[79] Conboy, Medina, and Stanbury's identification is rendered explicitly at the level of Dex's narrative. Through this representation of Dex's body, *Girls on Fire* further constructs the gazed gaze, showing us

[74] Ford and Mitchell, *The Makeover in Movies,* p. 67.
[75] Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her*, p. 44.
[76] Abbott, 'Mean Girls'.
[77] Ford and Mitchell, *The Makeover in Movies,* p. 67.
[78] Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her*, p. 44.
[79] Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury, 'Introduction', in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 1-12 (p. 1).

how Dex becomes 'what men see'.[80] Even when void of the self-sexualising, cosmetic accoutrements of femininity, however, Dex's body is quite literally inscribed with ideologically loaded terms, indicating how feminine subjectivity is always already inscribed within a patriarchal sociocultural system.

By indicating these limitations, *Girls on Fire* works to illuminate the gap between successful teenage femininity in dominant cultural narratives, and the 'desire, aggression and rage' which propel the subject's lived experience.[81] Whilst, as Chemaly indicates, self-sexualisation instils a 'a sense of control' for feminine subjects, Dex frames the events of the night before in terms of an individual loss of agency, ruminating on the fact that she would have to attend school and 'face all those faces who'd seen [her] lose control, who knew what she did, whatever it was' (p. 140).[82] Despite playing the role of the 'mousy girl' who 'goes to a party and changes her life', enacting the 'transformation of ugly duckling to beautiful swan', she 'would be the story. [She] would be the joke' (pp. 130, 140). Here, Dex's recognition aligns with Evie's voice in *The Girls*, as she states '[t]hat was part of being a girl – you were resigned to whatever feedback you'd get. […] The only thing you could do was smile from the corner they'd backed you into. Implicate yourself in the joke even if the joke was always on you' (*The Girls*, p. 56). The 'creep of discomfort, of being tricked' that Evie perceives in 'relationships with men' is also brought to the fore as, despite Dex's performance of femininity, she is backed into a corner, turned into a joke (*The Girls*, p. 171). If performing for the male gaze is a 'narrow' path towards 'power', it is also, clearly, a 'thin tightrope to walk'.[83] As Dex discovers, the reality of performing for the male gaze deviates from dominant discourses. The party 'changes her life', but the upheaval that the event creates is not in line with the promise of 'influence', 'status', and positive social visibility propagated within and beyond popular culture's representations (p. 130).[84] In highlighting the 'tension between women's lived bodily experiences' and dominant cultural codes, or the 'gaps and inconsistencies' between feminine subjectivity and patriarchal projections of femininity, this construction of the gazed gaze works to illuminate how the 'male order' infiltrates experiences of becoming-woman.[85] In 'wrenching the "look"' from the grasp of

[80] Soloway, 'Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze'.
[81] Abbott, 'Mean Girls'.
[82] Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her*, p. 44.
[83] Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her*, p. 44; Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*: *Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009), pp. 83-4.
[84] Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her*, p. 44.
[85] Conboy, Medina, and Stanbury, 'Introduction', p. 1; Beckman, 'From Irony to Narrative Crisis', p. 25; Kaplan, 'The Place of Women in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*', p. 81.

patriarchy, the narrative shifts the *focus* of the look. Through the construction of the gazed gaze, *Girls on Fire* highlights the intense social and ideological scrutiny to which girls are subjected. As such, the gazed gaze *gazes back* – redirecting the look and placing patriarchal sociocultural structures under a scrutinising lens.

Assassination Nation

Assassination Nation begins with a caution from teenage protagonist Lily. This film is the 'story of how [her] town, Salem, lost its motherfucking mind' after individuals' internet histories, camera rolls, and text conversations are leaked by an anonymous hacker. The ensuing narrative, she warns us, 'gets pretty graphic'.[86] Following this admission, the screen goes blank, before the phrase '*A Few Trigger Warnings' appears onscreen, accompanied by the familiar 'ding' of the default iMessage ringtone. Subsequently, each trigger warning flashes up, appearing alongside a snapshot of the content to which it refers. Through this montage, we are warned of content such as 'bullying', 'classism', 'drug-use', 'sexual content', 'toxic masculinity' and 'transphobia'.

Assassination Nation, dir. Sam Levinson (BRON Studios, 2018)

Cinematic modality aside, it is clear from the film's opening sequence that *Assassination Nation* is a strikingly different text to *The Girls* and *Girls on Fire*. Whereas in the novels we unwittingly follow the narrative, becoming immersed in its accompanying violence,

[86] *Assassination Nation*, dir. Sam Levinson (BRON Studios, 2018).

Assassination Nation's use of 'trigger warnings' constructs an 'ironic distance' from its own content, whilst speaking directly to the specific concerns of the cultural milieu in which it is disseminated.[87] Whereas in *Girls on Fire* and *The Girls*, the male gaze is constructed as a somewhat implicit and yet highly corrosive force – something we discover, alongside the girls, as we follow them becoming 'what men see' – *Assassination Nation* places 'the male gaze' as one of the many 'trigger warnings' within its opening sequence.[88] Given that *Assassination Nation* is written and directed by a man – in contrast to *The Girls* and *Girls on Fire* – and is, therefore, possibly more likely to construct and perpetuate masculine ways of looking, what do we make of the fact that 'the male gaze' is explicitly mentioned (and promised) within the first two minutes of the filmic sequence?

In an article addressing the cultural responses to content warnings, Kate Manne describes how 'trigger warnings have been getting a lot of pushback', with those adopting the 'practice of alerting' people to 'potentially disturbing content in a text or class […] accused of coddling millennials'.[89] As Manne identifies, the concept of content warnings are 'nothing new', having originated in 'Internet communities, primarily for the benefit of people with post-traumatic stress disorder' in order to 'flag content that depicted or discussed common causes of trauma'.[90] One the one hand, for *Assassination Nation* to warn of 'the male gaze' as a potential 'trigger' is to position its presence as a source of harm and potential cause of trauma. Though the violence of the male gaze is obviously different to depictions of 'torture', for example, to alert the audience of its presence alongside other such content warnings is to recognise the ideological impact of the male gaze on lived experience. On the other hand, given that the opening sequence constructs such warnings against actual depictions of the filmic content that they are warning about, how seriously can we take the warnings themselves? Is *Assassination Nation* merely critiquing 'snowflake' culture from its cultivated 'ironic distance'?[91]

---

[87] Wendy Ide, 'Assassination Nation Review – Revenge Horror Packed with Insight' (2018). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/nov/25/assassination-nation-review-revenge-horror [accessed 9th April 2019].
[88] Soloway, 'Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze'.
[89] Kate Manne, 'Why I Use Trigger Warnings' (2015). Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/opinion/sunday/why-i-use-trigger-warnings.html [accessed 30th July 2019].
[90] Manne, 'Why I Use Trigger Warnings'.
[91] Steven Poole, 'Trigger warning: how did 'triggered' come to mean 'upset'?' (2019). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/25/trigger-warning-triggered-emotionally-upset-word-of-week [accessed 29th July 2019]; Ide, 'Assassination Nation Review'.

In my discussion of *Assassination Nation*, I am less interested in Levinson's authorial and directorial intentions, and more concerned with how the film's positioning of the male gaze as a 'trigger', alongside its actual depiction of masculine ways of looking, might be utilised towards feminist ends. In positioning masculine ways of looking as a 'trigger', *Assassination Nation* assumes a certain filmic dialectical knowledge, establishing a dialogue between the text and a broader, and notably feminist, cultural milieu where 'the male gaze' has become more of a part of common parlance. In highlighting the presence of 'the male gaze' within its filmic sequence, *Assassination Nation* separates itself from, and highlights the gaze itself, as a consciously (and culturally) constructed mode of looking. Why is such an identification useful for feminist critical analysis? As Steven Poole suggests, in psychological discourses, 'a "trauma trigger" means a stimulus that triggers recall of a traumatic event'.[92] When the male gaze is situated as a 'trigger', therefore, it is also located as something which, when experienced, might prompt the recollection of previous events. This act of recollection, of bringing past into present, subverts linear narrative trajectories. The temporal subversion inherent within a 'trigger' is, therefore, also in line with Lily's narration throughout the filmic sequence, as the story of how 'an entire suburb could freak the fuck out to the degree [that] they'd wanna kill four teenage girls' unfolds after the fact.

To situate the male gaze as a 'trigger', something that exists in the present but can also be recalled from the past, is to position masculine ways of looking as something that can be revised, readdressed, re-examined. As Rich suggests, the act of 're-vision', of 'looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes' is 'an act of survival' for feminine subjects.[93] Such a 'radical critique' of existing narratives, Rich continues, will illuminate 'how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves'.[94] If *Assassination Nation* differs in tone to Cline and Wasserman's novels, the contrasting cultural contexts of the filmic text and Rich's essay are even more distinct. Therefore, a side-by-side discussion of Rich's work and *Assassination Nation* enacts an anachronistic dialogue. Munford and Waters describe anachronism as an instance where 'the past is revisited upon us: what we thought to be gone returns, confirming its ability to influence the present'.[95] Though the specifics of Rich's cultural milieu and that of our current twenty-first-century moment have clearly altered – a

[92] Poole, 'Trigger warning'.
[93] Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *College English*, 34.1 (Oct, 1972), 18-30 (p. 18).
[94] Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', p. 18.
[95] Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 11.

point made evident by the data leak at the core of *Assassination Nation*'s narrative, alongside the constant influx of emojis and iMessages overlaying the filmic mise-en-scène – the pervasiveness of the male gaze remains frustratingly consistent. The enduring relevance of Rich's essay to a text like *Assassination Nation* also works to indicate the persistent relevance of, and requirement for, previous feminist discourses. The positioning of the male gaze as a 'trigger' works to both emphasise its constructed presence and posit the opportunity for a re-vision of 'the assumptions in which we are [still] drenched'.[96]

However, as Lily's narration commands, 'let's start at the beginning'. Lily's voiceover, and the way that it controls how we perceive the events within the cinematic narrative, promises a wrenching of 'the "look" (and the "voice")' from masculine ways of looking, showing us 'how it feels to be the object of the [male] gaze'.[97] It is worth bearing in mind that the feminist potential of Lily's command of the narrative does sit in tension with the fact that the film is written and directed by Levinson – a man whose representation of teenage girls in the series *Euphoria* (2019-) is currently the subject of media discourses about superfluous nudity and the male gaze.[98] Lily's 'beginning' shows her lying on a bed, whilst her boyfriend Mark records her with his iPhone. Filming her face as he inserts his fingers into her mouth, Mark says: 'you could be a fucking porn star, you know that?'. At this specific

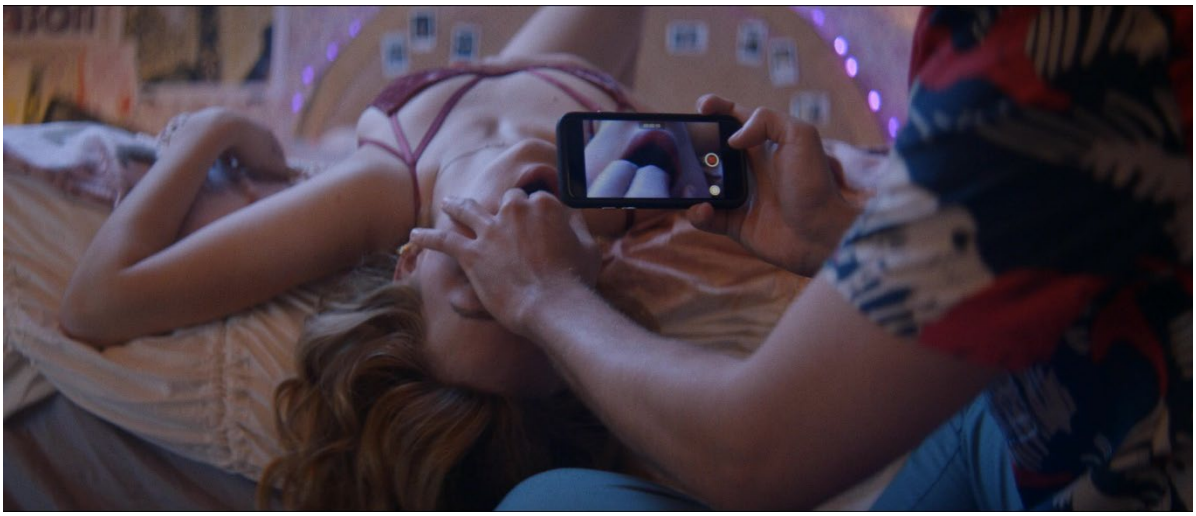
---

[96] Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', p. 18.

[97] Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism', p. 14; Soloway, 'Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze'.

[98] See Melissa Mason, 'Why is "Euphoria" Hypersexualising Cassie?' (2022). Available at https://graziamagazine.com/articles/euphoria-male-gaze-cassie/ [accessed 14th February 2022]. Mason highlights how, while '*Euphoria* has always been controversial' and never 'about people-pleasing or avoiding controversy', character Cassie's (Sydney Sweeney) nude scenes seem to portray something more insidious. 'Sometimes', Mason continues, the nude scenes 'make sense', ranging from 'raw, intimate portrayal[s] of teenage insecurity' to the representation of feeling 'overwhelmed by the changes your body goes through, interested in sex but also often doing it with bravado'. Mason's issue lies less with nudity or the exploration of teenage girls' sexuality, and more with how such themes are explored through Levinson's lens. When Cassie is vying for Nate's (Jacob Elordi) affection, with her hair getting 'bigger, her makeup stronger and her outfits more risqué' each day, Mason outlines how Levinson's direction 'goes beyond simply acknowledging that she's a woman desperate for attention'. Whereas in this sequence the camera hones in on Cassie's cleavage, an earlier plot point focuses on her nude photos being leaked. The audience 'saw all of them, but did we need to?', Mason asks. Sweeney has commented on Levinson's openness to altering scenes where 'Cassie was supposed to be shirtless', stating that she has never felt that he 'pushed it on [her] or was trying to get a nude scene into an HBO show. When [she] didn't want to do it, he didn't make [her]' (Sydney Sweeney, qtd. in Zack Sharf, 'Sydney Sweeney Says 'Euphoria' Creator Allowed Her to Cut 'Unnecessary' Season 2 Nudity' (2022). Available at https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/sydney-sweeney-euphoria-nude-scenes-1235163094/ [accessed 14th October 2022]. Sweeney goes on to situate the discourses around her nudity as a double standard, indicating how when 'a guy has a sex scene or shows his body, he still wins awards and gets praise. But the moment a girl does it, it's completely different' and subjected to different scrutiny (Sweeney, 'Sydney Sweeney Says 'Euphoria' Creator Allowed Her to Cut 'Unnecessary' Season 2 Nudity'). Mason acknowledges the fact that *Euphoria* 'has no problem with full-frontal male nudity', but argues that this comparison 'can't be the benchmark' – the impact of 'male and female on-screen nudity […] is not the same' (Mason, 'Why is "Euphoria" Hypersexualising Cassie?'). The way that the camera 'lingers on Cassie's body', Mason maintains, is not about characterisation or 'nudity for realism's sake, it's gratuitous'.

moment, Lily is the recipient of multiple different gazes. While the depiction of this scene in its entirety entails that she is subjected to the cinematic look, this look is also directed through the camera of Mark's iPhone, where only her mouth is depicted.



Assassination Nation, dir. Sam Levinson (BRON Studios, 2018)

Accompanying these two looks, Mark's commentary works to project a further gaze onto Lily, likening her image on-screen to that which is constructed within pornography. On the one hand, Lily's 'act of performance and submission' under Mark's gaze(s) links back to hooks' illustration of how 'patriarchy invites us all to learn how to "do it for daddy," and to find pleasure [and] satisfaction' in such displays.[99] Lily's apparent complicity with patriarchal ways of looking could threaten to construct a certain 'hollow quality' on the level of the filmic narrative.[100] Rather than destabilising the 'active/male' and 'passive/female' binaries which construct the cinematic look, Lily is submissive under Mark's gaze.[101] However, there is an interesting oxymoron at play in the idea of performing submission – a kind of active passivity that complicates the binaric structuration of the male gaze. When Lily abruptly shifts the mise-en-scène, her voiceover stating 'actually, not here, because what I did that afternoon was really gross', there is a similar juxtaposition between her command of the narrative trajectory and her previous position under an influx of different gazes. It is at this particular moment that 'male discourse loses control', disrupted by Lily's voice and her

[99] hooks, *Reel to Real*, p. 104. Lily's relationship to the term 'daddy' is rendered explicitly elsewhere in the film. Her affair with Nick, a married neighbour for whom she babysits, is a source of tension when the data leak occurs. When both of their files are hacked, it is revealed that Lily has been sending Nick – saved in her phone as 'daddy' – nude pictures. While Nick, an adult man, has been consistently asking for these images of Lily, a teenage girl, it is Lily who is persecuted. After 'do[ing] it for daddy', Lily is thrown out of her home and framed as a 'whore' and a 'homewrecker', indicating the limitations of the powers and pleasures promised by patriarchy (hooks, *Reel to Real*, p. 104).
[100] Tasker and Negra, 'In Focus', p. 107.
[101] Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 19.

commentary on the scene itself.[102] Lily's description of the afternoon as 'gross' and 'not as sexy as it sounds' undercuts any identification with Mark as an omnipotent male character who drives the story forward. As Mark's gaze is destabilised, we are able to identify one of the 'inconsistencies and gaps' identified by Beckman as crucial for instances of possible feminist subversion.[103] In 'wrenching the "look" (and the "voice")' away from Mark's perspective, Lily's narrative shows us 'how it feels to be the object of the [male] gaze'.[104]

As indicated within this scene, and the data leak itself, a central theme within *Assassination Nation* is the struggle over who controls the gaze and, therefore, the image. We recall Chemaly's assertion that, because women do not 'own the media and marketing companies that profit from their images' or 'lead the religious and educational institutions that dictate what constitutes obscenity', they cannot truly reap the limited 'power' that their self-sexualisation promises to bestow.[105] Drawing a distinction between 'sexual objectification' and 'sexuality', Chemaly continues to suggest that feminine subjects who self-sexualise on a public platform do so for 'the likes and followers of social media', which translate to 'symbols of influence and status' and, therefore, 'positive emotions'.[106] The difference between 'sexual objectification' and 'sexuality' is also explored within *Assassination Nation*. Following her submission of an art assignment in which she was instructed to 'draw from life', Lily is called to see the school principal. Inside his office, the mise-en-scène opens to a close-up shot of Lily's sketchbook, depicting a drawing of a woman masturbating. Whilst this image is on-screen, Lily's conversation with the principal continues, as she asserts that she still doesn't 'see how the drawings are explicit'. The principal's response – that the drawings are 'not just explicit' but 'extreme' in their depiction of 'naked women in pornographic poses' – is met with Lily's disdain: 'you're a man. I don't expect you to understand'. She continues to explain:

> All you're looking at is the nudity. But this isn't about that. This isn't about the sex or the porn or even being naked. This is about everything that goes into it. The pressure, the endless mindfuck, the ten thousand naked selfies you took before this one, trying to get it just right. Trying to make sure the light hides your left nipple because it's slightly inverted or it's smaller. Or maybe your labia's too big. But if you pull your pelvic bone up and bend to the left slightly in a low-light setting, then you'll be beautiful. '#flawless', 'body confident'. But it's all one big lie. You can never be,

---

[102] Christine Gledhill, '*Klute* 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 20-34 (p. 27).
[103] Beckman, 'From Irony to Narrative Crisis', p. 25.
[104] Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism', p. 14; Soloway, 'Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze'.
[105] Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her*, p. 45.
[106] Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her*, p. 44.

> because nobody's flawless and all it takes is one fucking asshole to remind you of that. One guy to say 'LOL' or 'she's nasty', and you're right back at square one. So, okay, maybe it is explicit or extreme, but it sure as hell looks like life to me.

Initially, Lily foregrounds her awareness of the principal's masculine perspective, identifying how he sees female nudity and immediately construes the image into sex or pornography. Through her deconstruction of the work, Lily explains that the drawing is not about the image itself but the process of *conforming to* an image, while also evoking the public consumption of such media as discussed by Chemaly through the ironic use of hashtags. This explanation further serves to highlight the intense pressure, anxiety, and self-observation that goes into becoming 'what men see'.[107] Linking back to Evie's observation in *The Girls* – 'the only thing you could do was smile from the corner they'd backed you into. Implicate yourself in the joke even if the joke was always on you' (*The Girls*, p. 56) – Lily's monologue outlines how it can only take 'one fucking asshole' to put you 'right back at square one'. Despite the principal's accusations of obscenity, it is this image of femininity that 'sure as hell looks like life' to Lily. In showing 'how it feels to be the object of the [male] gaze', Lily's narrative interjection constructs a feminine perspective, 'wrenching the "look" (and the "voice")' to interrupt the 'male order' of masculine spectatorship.[108]

---

[107] Soloway, 'Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze'.

[108] Soloway, 'Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze'; Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism', p. 14; Kaplan, 'The Place of Women in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*', p. 81; It is important to note that Lily's drawing is about the construction of a 'selfie': an image of the self captured on camera. See Mary McGill, 'How the Light Gets In: Notes on the Female Gaze and Selfie Culture' (2018). Available at https://maifeminism.com/how-the-light-gets-in-notes-on-the-female-gaze-and-selfie-culture/ [accessed 25th June 2019]. According to McGill, women's selfies have the potential to provide 'a chink in the armour of male gaze dominance, a crack where the light of the female gaze seeps through'. Given that Lily focuses on how the selfie is a performance for the male gaze, there is a notable ambivalence between her drawing and McGill's comments. However, as McGill goes on to suggest, to be 'culturally intelligible as 'female' requires interpreting and embodying' specific 'visual signs'. It is, therefore, 'not surprising' that many selfies conform to 'norms of femininity'. These instances of conformity should be viewed less as a 'missed opportunity' and more in terms of the 'complicated pleasures' inherent in 'women's relationship to images of the feminine, including images of themselves'. What Lily's artistic adaptation of a selfie might reveal, then, is the way in which 'to be a woman in culture', as McGill continues, 'is to be erased before your own eyes, represented as a sign for another, rarely, if ever, for yourself'. See also, Emma Maguire, *Girls, Autobiography, Media: Gender and Self-Mediation in Digital Economies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). Maguire's text positions the 'digital landscape' as a 'site of promise and possibility for identity experimentation and empowerment for girls' that is 'also potentially hostile and exploitative' (p. 19). Exploring 'the strategies that [girls] are using to navigate the various pressures, discourses and media literacies' of this space 'in order to represent themselves to others', Maguire's text is an 'enquiry into how girlhood is more broadly understood and constructed as a *subject position*, and specifically as a young, self-narrating feminine subject position' (p. 19). In her chapter 'Camgirls: Surveillance and Feminine Embodiment in Lifecasting Practice', Maguire's analysis of camgirling parallels Lily's struggle between objectification and self-representation. Though, as Maguire identifies, lifecasters like Ana Voog and Jennifer Ringley were 'experimenting with self-presentation and surveillance technology because ideas around self-image, self-branding, and surveillance were pressing issues for them and for others as the time they were lifecasting (and remain factors in today's media landscape', such digital practices have been 'sexualised and objectified' within critical discourses (p. 44). Through such commentary, the 'radical aspects' of their work is 'displaced by discussion of the more sensational aspect of giving strangers access to images of their naked

Therefore, despite the inclusion of 'the male gaze' within the film's opening sequence of 'trigger warnings', *Assassination Nation* maintains an ambivalent relationship with the essential performance and 'complicated pleasures' involved in becoming-woman amidst masculine ways of looking.[109] By the film's culmination, however, Lily's final monologue firmly relocates this ambivalence into a powerful call to arms. Speaking over scenes of the violent mobs who are out to get her, before directly confronting the cinematic look, she states:

> My name is Lily Colson. I'm 18 years old. And I don't know if me and my friends are gonna live through the night. This entire fucking town wants to kill us. And they may say that it's because they thought I was behind it or that I'm a whore, I'm immoral, I'm a homewrecker, I deserve it, I have it coming. Well, guess what? […] This is your world. You built this. If it's too strict, tear it the fuck down. But don't look at me. Don't take your hate out on me. I just got here. And I have no clue where to go, because from the moment I arrived, all I was ever given were orders. Smile. Open up. Cross your legs. Spread your pussy. Speak softer. Scream louder. Be quiet. Be confident. Be interesting. Don't be so difficult. Be strong. Be an angel. Be a whore. Be a princess. Be anything you want to be. Even the President of the United States of America. Just kidding.

In this monologue, Lily's critique encapsulates the 'strict' structures of the sociocultural into which she has been born, and the contradictions to which she has been subjected in the process of becoming-woman.

Assassination Nation, dir. Sam Levinson (BRON Studios, 2018)

The evocation and dismissal of the claim that girls can be 'anything [they] want to be' can be read as a direct attack on the postfeminist formulation of the 'can-do' girl, a figure with

bodies' (p. 44). Underlying this focus, like Lily's conversation with the Principal, is the assumption that their work is less of a critical enquiry into performativity itself, and more a performance that presumes a male voyeur.

[109] McGill, 'How the Light Gets In'.

'choice, freedom and real autonomy'.[110] Through emphasising the contradictory commands geared towards teenage girls, Lily problematises their 'strange social currency' amidst competing discourses of postfeminist 'sexual empowerment' and the 'sexual double standards that continue to prevail'.[111] Directly addressing the cinematic look, and the sociocultural narratives which construct femininity through a male gaze, Lily draws further attention to 'how we live, how we have been living, [and] how we have been led to imagine ourselves' as feminine subjects.[112] Interspersing this sequence are shots of girls looking at laptop and phone screens, watching Lily's monologue unfold. As she walks towards the crowd of Salemites seeking to destroy her, she is accompanied by a crowd comprising largely of teenage girls. 'You still want to kill me?', her speech continues, 'You want to do this in real life now? Give it your best shot. 'Cause you've prepared me my whole life for this. You may kill me. But you can't kill us all'.

Assassination Nation, dir. Sam Levinson (BRON Studios, 2018)

While Salem's witch hunt has been directed towards Lily – who is accused of causing the data leak, despite being a victim herself – her response exhibits a movement away from the 'self-affirming', 'individualistic' responses to violence and oppression exhibited by existing forms of teenage fatal femininity.[113] Instead, this scene can be read as an explicit reference to feminist 'collectivist action', with the forming crowd both mimicking *and* expressing a

[110] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 5.
[111] Katherine Farrimond, 'Bad Girls in Crisis: The New Teenage Femme Fatale', in *Women on Screen: Feminism and Femininity in Visual Culture*, ed. Melanie Waters (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 77-89 (p. 87).
[112] Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', p. 18.
[113] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 123.

protest against the suggestion that 'girls have achieved all the power they need and more'.[114] Lily's articulation of 'aggression, desire and rage' thus posits collective action over individual resistance, a theme that will continue to run through my theorisation of the transversal gaze in *The Girls* and *Girls on Fire*.[115]

The Transversal Gaze

So far, I have suggested that *Girls on Fire*, *The Girls*, and *Assassination Nation* draw attention to how the male gaze impacts sociocultural narratives of becoming-woman. In each text, the gazed gaze works to wrench 'the "look" (and the "voice")' away from masculine perspectives.[116] Consequently, when constructions of the gazed gaze work to illuminate 'how it feels to be the object of the [male] gaze', they are also beginning to work *against* such objectification – gazing back and scrutinising the patriarchal ideology that is upheld within, and perpetuated by, masculine ways of looking.[117] In this section of the chapter, I will discuss how *The Girls*, *Girls on Fire*, and *Assassination Nation* indicate further subversive potential in their construction of a feminine gaze. This potential lies in 'wrenching' the critical look away from interactions between men and women – or, rather, men and girls – and instead focuses on what happens when teenage girls look at each other.[118] In their critique of psychoanalytic discourses regarding the gaze, Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment identify how a movement beyond the heteronormative structures of sexual difference would be politically productive for formulations of the feminine gaze.[119] Considering other modes of looking or of being seen, Gamman and Marshment suggest, could illuminate 'new patterns of definition with real effects on how we can visualise ourselves'.[120] It is with this suggestion in mind that I continue my discussion of *The Girls*, *Girls on Fire*, and *Assassination Nation,* focusing on how constructions of looking between women could offer 'new patterns' and modes of becoming-woman.[121] One strand of critical thought which proffers a new mode of self-definition is Colman's work on the 'transversality of becoming-adolescent'.[122] Colman

---

[114] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 123.
[115] Abbott, 'Mean Girls'.
[116] Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism', p. 14.
[117] Soloway, 'Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze'.
[118] Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism', p. 14.
[119] Gamman and Marshment, 'Introduction', p. 6.
[120] Gamman and Marshment, 'Introduction', p. 6.
[121] Gamman and Marshment, 'Introduction', p. 6.
[122] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357; Farrimond also notes that Colman's formulation of 'vampiric identity formation' could also be utilised to describe the 'friendships' in Cline and Wasserman's novels (Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme* Fatale, p. 91).

draws on Félix Guattari's formulations of adolescence, and his 'insistence on the recognition of the 'multivalent logic' of identity', in her discussions of 'teen-girl cinema'.[123] Multivalence, defined as the state of having, or being open to, 'many different applications, interpretations, meanings, or values' is particularly fitting for formulations of adolescence.[124] For Colman, it is politically productive to think of 'teen' as multivalent; as that which holds a multitude of 'potential mentalities'.[125] Teen subjectivity rejects 'routine performances of pre-codes', instead holding 'movement' 'in surprise, in possibility, in anger, in awe'.[126] This particular understanding of 'becoming-adolescent' is 'intended to challenge' homogeneous, linear perceptions of adolescence and subjectivity.[127] Colman's decision to theorise modes of becoming-adolescent through teenage girlhood, despite the concept's adaptability to a variance of genders and age groups, aligns with critical perceptions of girlhood as a process characterised by flexibility and change. A clear parallel exists, for example, between Colman's description of teen subjectivity as 'movement' held in 'possibility' and Driscoll's positioning of girlhood as an 'idea of mobility before the fixity of womanhood'.[128] For this section of the chapter, I am interested in *where* and *how* Colman locates the opportunity for multivalent 'potential mentalities'.[129] Focusing on Catherine Hardwicke's *Thirteen* (2003), a number of short films by Sadie Benning from the early 1990s, and Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), Colman suggests that whilst friendship might initially occur through a 'circumstantial configuration', it 'often becomes a transformative passage' throughout which 'the participants alter'.[130] Through this process of change, the friends retain a certain self-sentience - they 'become aware of [their] own desires, of what [they] *do not* desire' through interactions with each other (emphasis in original).[131]

---

[123] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357.
[124] Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'multivalent'. Available at https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/123646?redirectedFrom=multivalent#eid [accessed 24th October 2019].
[125] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357. Alongside critics such as Driscoll, Colman sees adolescence as more a mode of being than a period of development designated to a specific age group. Adolescence is a 'a becoming subjectivity that affords many possibilities to be commenced at any position in chronological life' (Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 368). Whilst Colman concludes claiming that 'both men and women can become adolescent, and engage in existential crossings of their socially demarcated realms', her analysis questions which 'modalities of *woman*' have been 'enabled' by cinematic constructions of friendship between teenage girls (Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 369).
[126] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357.
[127] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357.
[128] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357; Driscoll, *Girls*, p. 47.
[129] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357.
[130] *Thirteen*, dir. Catherine Hardwicke (Searchlight Pictures, 2003); *Girl Power*, dir. Sadie Benning (1992), *A Place Called Lovely*, dir. Sadie Benning (1991), *If Every Girl Had a Diary*, dir. Sadie Benning (1990), *It Wasn't Love*, dir. Sadie Benning (1992), *Flat is Beautiful*, dir. Sadie Benning (1995); *The Virgin Suicides*, dir. Sofia Coppola (American Zoetrope, 1999); Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357.
[131] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357.

The Virgin Suicides, dir. Sofia Coppola (American Zoetrope, 1999)

The ability to imagine 'new patterns of definition' – separate to, or beyond, the ideological violence of the male gaze – is crucial to formulations of a feminine gaze.[132] This section discusses the constructions of friendship in *The Girls* and *Girls on Fire* in reference to Colman's positioning of 'becoming-friend' as an alternative and overwhelmingly 'transformative' mode of flexible subjectivity.[133] While Colman's focus moves between dark, feature-length teen dramas and short experimental film, I posit that the transversal gaze promises a productive avenue for visualising 'new patterns of definition' in Cline and Wasserman's texts.[134]

Colman's theorisations regarding teen subjectivity are also intriguing for formulations of fatal femininity. The 'point' of 'teen', Colman continues, is not the 'routine' performance of 'pre-codes' related through culturally scripted behaviours of 'happiness, misery, subversion, aggression, [and] subjugation'.[135] As a figuration of a highly culturally scripted mode of femininity, the femme fatale is also highly pre-coded; she is 'as old as Eve, and as current as today's movies'.[136] This resonance entails that the figure is always already loaded with meanings, images, and connotations. To go beyond 'routine' performances of 'pre-

[132] Gamman and Marshment, 'Introduction', p. 6.
[133] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357.
[134] Gamman and Marshment, 'Introduction', p. 6.
[135] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357.
[136] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.

codes' works to indicate a subversion of what is culturally and critically understood about the narrative limitations of fatal femininity.[137] In her discussion of the teenage fatale, Farrimond highlights how friendship becomes 'a form of power in itself' indicating 'a shift towards the femme fatale as a less isolated figure'.[138] The fact that the 'teen femme fatale might enjoy a victorious ending arm in arm with another girl', Farrimond continues, implies a subversion of the postfeminist rhetoric that suggests that 'individual success' must be achieved 'at the expense of other girls'.[139] If the triumph over narrative closure achieved 'arm in arm with another girl' indicates a different way of looking at 'successful' femininity, then the 'intimate moments of frenzied togetherness' identified by Colman also hold the potential to be highly productive for feminist formulations of a feminine gaze.[140] Ideas of 'success' are also called into question through this proposed line of enquiry.[141] Within transversal modes of becoming, success does not occur 'at the expense of other girls'.[142] On the contrary, it is due to the centrality of other girls within narratives of becoming-seen that feminine subjects might successfully 'become aware of' their own capacity for 'aggression, desire and rage'.[143] As a result 'success', or successfully overcoming masculine hegemony, also allows a multitude of 'potential mentalities' and femininities.[144] This potentiality indicates a movement towards a multivalent girled fatale who is 'open to many different applications, interpretations, meanings, or values'.[145]

As I have discussed previously, the femme fatale disrupts the supposedly straightforward relationship between sight and knowledge. She is slippery; she refuses to be pinned down to a single definition. It is her ability to make trouble for epistemological certitude that necessitates her violent closure within the narrative space of classic film noir. A key focus of my study of contemporary fatal femininity thus far is the femme fatale who 'gets away with' her subversive actions and behaviours. With *Gone Girl*'s Amy Dunne, for example, the threat that she represents to epistemological certitude and masculine hegemony continues throughout and beyond the narrative culmination of both the literary text and its filmic adaptation. Constructions of the transversal gaze, I suggest, also present a threat to the ideologically loaded relationship between sight and knowledge. However, rather than looking

[137] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357.
[138] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, pp. 90-1.
[139] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 91.
[140] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 91; Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 356.
[141] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 91.
[142] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 91.
[143] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357; Abbott, 'Mean Girls'.
[144] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357.
[145] Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'multivalent'.

at how formulations of fatal femininity withhold or obstruct knowledge from masculine subjects, the transversal gaze offers an example of how *different* knowledge might be divulged for *feminine subjects* through looking at, and being seen by, another girl. Within this framework, masculine narratives regarding transgressive femininity and, furthermore, essentially heterosexual structures of sexual difference supposedly inherent within the gaze are still disrupted. The transversal gaze is thus revealed to be all the more productive for formulations of a feminine gaze in its capacity to move beyond a sole focus on how transgressive women might threaten masculine omnipotence, opening up the possibility for multivalent 'patterns of definition'.[146]

Whilst *The Girls* works to construct the gazed gaze, highlighting the formative effect of the male gaze on young femininity, protagonist Evie's retrospection also focuses on another member of the group named Suzanne.[147] When asked by Sasha why she stayed with Russell's group, Evie hesitantly admits that '[t]here was a girl. It was more her than Russell' (p. 143). In Evie's comment, there is a certain ambiguity as to *what* exactly Suzanne represents, or represented, to her. *What* was more Suzanne than Russell? Does Evie's statement occur in response to Sasha's previous probing regarding Evie's feelings of love for Russell? Or is she referring to Sasha's most immediate question, regarding the pull she felt towards the group as a whole? In asking these questions, I am not seeking a definitive answer. Rather, I am highlighting how, even within discursive framing, Evie and Suzanne's relationship is characterised by liminality. This condition of being between states, of resisting straightforward definition, is also depicted in constructions of girls looking at girls within the novel. Whilst all the girls are described to be 'messing with an uneasy threshold, prettiness and ugliness at the same time', Suzanne is marked with a certain 'otherworldliness' (p. 4).[148]

---

[146] Gamman and Marshment, 'Introduction', p. 6.

[147] Within my discussion of Evie and Suzanne, I do not wish to diminish or categorise their interactions solely within the bounds of friendship, particularly given the sexual aspect of their relationship. I am using the term 'friend' in the context of Colman's work on 'becoming-friend' as a process within which individuals 'become aware of [their] own desires, of what [they] *do not* desire' through interactions with each other (Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357, emphasis in original). Colman, too, is careful to emphasise that the kind of 'gothic friendship-love' involved within this mode of becoming-friend is 'not at all univocal' (Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 358). That is, the relationships between girls cannot be reduced to having one 'proper meaning or signification' that is 'unmistakeable' and 'unambiguous' (Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'univocal'. Available at https://www-oed-com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/214806 [accessed 10th November 2019]).

[148] 'Otherworldliness' is also defined as '[c]oncentration upon or devotion to spiritual matters or life, esp. accompanied by a disdain for, neglect of, or lack of interest in the temporal world' (Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'otherworldliness'. Available at https://www-oed-com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/133249 [accessed 10th November 2019]). This alternative definition also relates to the group at the ranch's spiritual focus, as well as their rejection of conventional time. As Evie recalls, '[t]ime was confusing on the ranch: there were no clocks, no watches, and hours and minutes seemed arbitrary, whole days pouring into nothing' (*The Girls*, p. 120). If it is this sense of 'otherworldliness' that surrounds Suzanne, her rejection of the temporal world can also be read in her return within Evie's life as she reports being 'stopped by hundreds of ghosted Suzannes

She 'cut[s] across the regular world' with the other girls, with the 'suggestion' of otherness 'hovering' around her (p. 4). When Evie first encounters the girls, she studies them 'with a shameless, blatant gape', remarking on how it 'didn't seem possible that they might look over and notice [her]' (pp. 3-4). Whereas the straightforward 'equation' of the male gaze is culturally coded and highly visible, this particular line highlights how looking between feminine subjects is nowhere near as culturally embedded or rigidly scripted (p. 171). Evie cannot imagine the possibility of a symbiotic feminine gaze, because such modes of looking evade straightforward categorisation.

Suzanne, however, is a girl who gazes back. As Suzanne turns, Evie's 'glance' is 'caught', and her gaze is reciprocated (p. 40). As their eyes meet, an intangible 'something' passes between them, further described as a 'subtle rearranging of air' (p. 40). Drawing on Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, Colman theorises the process of becoming as an 'existential reality' full of 'vibratory possibility', with the transversal gaze between friends providing the 'point' of contact which 'ruptures subjectivity'.[149] The moment when Suzanne gazes back is an example of such a 'rupture'. This destabilisation of subjectivity emerges in two distinct yet interrelating ways. On one level, Evie cannot explain the 'wrench' she feels from Suzanne's look, indicating how the reciprocated gaze causes an ambiguous, bodily disruption, an unknown rupture in Evie's experience of feminine subjectivity up until this point (p. 41). On another level, as Robyn Seglem suggests, Suzanne 'disrupts what it means to be a girl' on a broader level – she is defined by darkness rather than 'light', she is 'dirty' when others are 'clean' – destabilising the 'equation' of being 'pretty', 'wanted', and therefore 'valuable' (p. 171).[150] When Suzanne returns Evie's gaze, Evie compares Suzanne's appearance to the 'gaudy prickling tease' of 'strange and raw flowers', suggesting that she is 'blooming' with 'almost the same thing as beauty'(p. 41). This 'lurid' intensity, later referred to as her 'sneaky' mode of beauty, holds uneasy propositions in tension, resisting prettiness or ugliness as fixed modes (pp. 41, 145). As a result, Suzanne's return of the gaze also ruptures *known*

---

on the streets or in the background of movies' as the past refuses to be a 'box you could close a lid on' (p. 145). Therefore, Suzanne's otherworldliness marks her as a figure that ruptures and destabilises boundaries between past and present, as well as states of absence and presence.

[149] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 358. With the term 'vibratory possibility', Colman is implicitly referring to Deleuze and Guattari's position of 'all becomings' – which, in turn, all 'begin with and pass through becoming-woman' – as 'molecular' (*A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 306). As with molecular construction, the girl is 'defined by a relation of movement and rest, speed and slowness' (p. 305). She is constantly in the process of possibility and becoming, a 'combination of atoms, an emission of particles' (p. 305).

[150] Robyn Seglem, 'The Girls. Emma Cline. 2016', *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 60. 4 (January/February, 2017), 482-483 (p. 483).

modes of feminine subjectivity, marking the possibility for multivalent modes of femininity and 'new patterns of definition'.[151]

Suzanne's gaze is also constructed as highly ambivalent. When they break into the Dutton's house, Evie describes feeling a bodily 'lurch' when Suzanne returns her look (p. 246). This 'lurch' reminds her of 'an afternoon when [she] was younger', where her father 'pointed out a leech in the water, quivering and tight with blood' (p. 246). The 'inky leech', Evie continues, prompted the same 'drag on [her] insides' that she feels with 'Suzanne's eyes meeting [hers] across the living room' (p. 246). At first glance, this moment appears to be drawing a less than favourable comparison between Suzanne and a leech. A leech is, after all, a parasitic creature often found 'clinging to the host while sucking blood'.[152] Such a comparison positions Suzanne as a draining, life-sapping force, with even her gaze causing a 'drag on [Evie's] insides' (p. 246). However, the description of the leech as that which clings to its 'host while sucking blood' also heavily evokes vampiric imagery.[153] Significantly, Colman highlights 'vampiric identity formation' as a common feature of teen cinema in which transversal moments of rupture occur.[154] This mode of becoming-friend, Colman continues, involves 'desiring to possess the other person, desiring to be, and to become, the other person'.[155] Such desire consequently involves a 'betrayal of prior chronicled identity' and a destabilisation of the boundary between self and other.[156] In light of Colman's description of the vampiric intensity of becoming-friend, the parallel between Suzanne and the leech is imbued with further significance. Rather than focusing on the leech as a draining parasite, it would be more productive to think about the creature, and therefore Suzanne, as that which undermines the boundary between self and other. Evie also frames this destabilisation in reference to the pair's easy intimacy, recalling Suzanne reaching out to 'play with a part of [her] hair', or 'wedging a fingernail between [her] front teeth to dislodge a bit of food' (p. 203). In performing such gestures, Evie explains, Suzanne was '[b]reaching the boundaries to let [her] know that they didn't exist' (p. 203).[157] If the male gaze relies on

---

[151] Gamman and Marshment, 'Introduction', p. 6.
[152] K. H. Mann, *Leeches (Hirudinea): Their Structure, Physiology, Ecology and Embryology* (Oxford, London, New York, Paris: Pergamon Press, 1962), p. 2.
[153] Mann, *Leeches (Hirudinea),* p. 2.
[154] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 358.
[155] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 358.
[156] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 358.
[157] Suzanne's breaching of the boundary between self and other can also be understood through Julia Kristeva's theorisation of the abject as that which 'disturbs identity, system, order [and] does not respect borders, positions, rules' (Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4). For more reading on the connection between femininity and abjection, see

(sexual) difference – simultaneously upholding binary categorisations of self and other, subject and object, active and passive – the construction of looking between Evie and Suzanne works to destabilise the boundaries inherent within such ways of looking, and formulate a consuming and destabilising feminine gaze.

If Suzanne's gaze is described in vampiric terms, Evie's desire for Suzanne – with her 'wide eyes, greedy for the details of her' (p. 111) – also brings to mind themes of consumption and formation. This point is further reinforced by the 'startling vision' Evie experiences of a 'dark space yawning' inside Suzanne (p. 249). Instead of considering what this space might make Suzanne capable of, Evie experiences 'only a doubling of her desire to be near it' (p. 249). Here, we begin to see how Evie might be becoming 'self-sentient', or 'aware of [her] own desires' through interactions with, and looking at, Suzanne.[158] Despite this blurring of boundaries, emphasised further within Evie's recollection of how Suzanne's mouth had 'smiled into' hers, memories of the murderous events call the merging of the two girls' identities into question (p. 348). Evie wants to believe that Suzanne 'kicked [her] out of the car because she'd seen a difference between' them (p. 349). 'That', she continues, 'was the easy explanation': Suzanne had excluded Evie because it was 'obvious to her that [she] could not kill anyone' (p. 349). However, Evie confesses to a 'complicating fact' that rejects such an 'easy' and 'univocal' justification based on difference, and instead involves a highly ambivalent recognition of the 'aggression, desire and rage' coursing through both girls (p. 349).[159] The 'hatred' that she imagines Suzanne 'must have felt to do what she'd done' – to slam the knife over and over again like she was trying to rid herself of a frenzied sickness' – is 'not unfamiliar' to Evie (p. 349). She ascribes the 'easy' accumulation of such 'hatred' to the ongoing 'permutations' of harassment that she has experienced 'over the years', including 'a stranger at a fair who palmed [her] crotch through [her] shorts' and 'man on the sidewalk who lunged at [her] then laughed when [she] flinched' (pp. 349-50). Feminine violence, then, is constructed as an embodied reaction to patriarchal domination, objectification, and aggression. Whilst such a response engages with experiences of masculine hegemony and violence explored through my discussion of the gazed gaze, this particular section crucially highlights the role of Suzanne's insight in Evie's recognition of her own capacity for 'aggression, desire and rage'.[160]

Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 8-15.

[158] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357.

[159] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 358; Abbott, 'Mean Girls'.

[160] Abbott, 'Mean Girls'.

Years later, Evie admits to Sasha that there 'wasn't that much difference' between her and 'the other girls' (p. 146). It 'seems like an accident' that she wasn't more involved in the crime (p. 146). This recognition of the slippage between 'good' and 'bad' femininity – the ease with which one can slide from one to another – works to further undermine the categories themselves, as well as any sense of a clear, defined difference between Evie, Suzanne, and the other girls. In the place of difference, we can trace likeness in Evie's suggestion that Suzanne recognised the 'hatred that vibrated beneath the surface of [her] girl's face' (p. 350). More speculatively, I suggest that Suzanne recognised such hatred – noting the similarity between Evie's shuddering rage and Colman's identification of becoming as a 'vibratory possibility' – because it reflected her own capacity for 'aggression, desire and rage' (p. 350).[161] In this context, becoming-friend and becoming-seen through a transversal point of rupture – a symbiotic feminine gaze – also entails a process of becoming-bad, violent, and transgressive. This particular moment also works to highlight how feminine ways of looking might, with reference to Doane and Soloway, demand 'a becoming' *beyond* drawing attention to 'how I become as a I become what men see'.[162]

Unlike Suzanne, Evie was 'set loose into the world like an avatar for the girl' that Suzanne would not become (p. 350). Whilst Suzanne is imprisoned for the murders, her influence endures. Evie states that 'no one had ever looked at her before Suzanne, not really', thus marking the feminine, transversal gaze as highly distinctive (p. 348). Highlighting the formative influence of this gaze, Evie describes how Suzanne had 'become [her] definition', explicitly inviting readings of the transversal look as one of the 'new patterns of definition' that gazing outside of masculine, patriarchally encoded structures might allow (p. 348).[163] Furthermore, Evie marks Suzanne's gaze as distinct from Russell's 'because it contained him, too' making 'him and everyone else smaller' (p. 348).[164] With reference to his sexually coercive and abusive actions throughout the text, Russell can be read as an embodiment of

---

[161] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 358; Abbott, 'Mean Girls'.
[162] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 22; Soloway, 'Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze'.
[163] Gamman and Marshment, 'Introduction', p. 6.
[164] It is also significant that *The Girls*, *Girls on Fire*, and *Assassination Nation* all construct problematic relationships between teenage girls and older men. In *The Girls* and *Girls on Fire*, however, these relationships are purely a means of being close to other girls. For example, in *The Girls*, a sex act involving Evie, Suzanne, and Mitch is framed as a 'way [for Suzanne and Evie] to be together' (*The Girls,* pp. 222-3). In turn, when Dex and Lacey undergo a prolonged period of no contact in *Girls on Fire*, a relationship begins between Lacey and Dex's father. Once they have kissed, however, Lacey realises that she 'didn't want it anymore', 'wanted [Dex]' and 'took what [she] could get' (*Girls on Fire*, pp. 248-9). These textual examples illustrate further how a feminine gaze might focus on desire between women, without excluding men from the equation entirely. This lack of exclusion, however, with men still involved as 'background noise' or a 'necessary excuse', could also be viewed as symptomatic of a culture still intertwined with notions of compulsory heterosexuality (*The Girls*, p. 223).

the male gaze, with its accompanying patriarchal subjugation, violence, and objectification. The suggestion that Suzanne's gaze 'contained' Russell, and therefore the male gaze, works to highlight how a feminine gaze both gazes *back* at masculine hegemony, and goes beyond masculine constructions of femininity (p. 348). If Suzanne becomes Evie's 'definition' for being seen, known, and understood, *The Girls* provides 'new patterns of definition' for the role of looking within identity formation, beyond the bounds of the male gaze (p. 348).[165] It is, therefore, appropriate that Evie's process of becoming 'aware of [her] own desires' and capaciousness for 'aggression, desire and rage' also operates as a critique of patriarchal ideology.[166] There is, after all, 'so much to destroy' (p. 350).

Wasserman's *Girls on Fire* also works to construct feminine ways of looking through transversal points of rupture. As with *The Girls*, *Girls on Fire* frames Dex and Lacey's first interactions through a focus on the jarring, subjectivity-shifting capacity of the returned look. Dex recalls feeling her eyes 'pulled' away from Craig's desk and towards Lacey, whose eyes were 'wide and open' and looking in the same direction (pp. 9-10). Lacey's watchful gaze is also associated with the ongoing performativity of subjectivity when, suddenly, Lacey's eyes shift and are 'on' Dex instead, watching 'like she was waiting for a performance to begin' (p. 10). According to Colman, 'teen' and the process of 'becoming-adolescent' have the 'capacity' to 'challenge' the 'routine performances of pre-codes'.[167] When Dex elicits no reaction or 'challenge' to Lacey's watchful, anticipatory gaze, she recalls how Lacey 'rolled her eyes skyward' and 'opportunity slipped away' (p. 10).[168] It is only when Lacey no longer looks at her that Dex realises that her gaze somehow contained the 'opportunity that [she'd] been waiting for' (p. 10). In this interaction, the symbiotic gaze provides a transversal 'point' of contact which 'ruptures subjectivity', making Dex aware of her own desire *for* such an 'opportunity' (p. 10).[169] Held within Lacey's look is the opportunity of 'becoming-friend', the opportunity to 'challenge' the 'routine performance of pre-codes', and the 'possibility' of multivalent femininities.[170]

For their first outing together, Dex and Lacey go to the lake. Lacey questions Dex's apparent inability or unwillingness to show her anger following an incident with another girl Nikki, before revealing that she has brought Dex to the lake because it is a place where 'no

---

[165] Gamman and Marshment, 'Introduction', p. 6.
[166] Abbott, 'Mean Girls'; Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357.
[167] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357.
[168] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357.
[169] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', pp. 357-8.
[170] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', pp. 357-8.

one can hear you scream' (p. 22). This playful threat, whilst operating on one level as the literal reason that Lacey brought Dex to the lake, draws upon a broader cultural and specifically cinematic vocabulary. While the idea of a place where 'no one can hear you scream' does speak to a somewhat clichéd horror trope – emphasised by Lacey's 'serial killer pitch' – her statement also echoes the tagline of Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979): 'In space no one can hear you scream' (p. 22).[171] In reference to pragmatically bad girlhood, what might be the significance of *Girls on Fire*'s textual redeployment of this line? Barbara Creed asserts that one of the major concerns of sci-fi horror films such as *Alien* is the 'reworking of the primal scene, the scene of birth'.[172] At the lake, we witness a similar 'birth'; a rupture which propels Dex and Lacey's movement into 'becoming-friend' as a new mode of definition.[173] Dex describes how Lacey 'stepped to the edge of the water, threw her head back, and screamed' (p. 22-3). 'It was a beautiful thing', she continued, 'a tide of righteous fury' (p. 23). Crucially, '[she] wanted it for [her] own' (p. 23). Here, the sight of Lacey's vivid expression of 'aggression, desire and rage' prompts Dex's awareness of her own desire for the same.[174] Colman describes how, 'in becoming-adolescent film texts', we can ascertain 'bursts of subjectivity' which serve to undermine 'the firm kneading of social roles'.[175] Lacey's scream – and the way in which it subverts culturally coded and acceptable feminine behaviours – acts as such a 'burst' of subjectivity. Dex attempts to mirror Lacey's actions – wanting to 'prove' their similarity, that 'what she felt, [Dex] felt', but 'nothing came out' (p. 23). '"We'll work on it"', Lacey responds, thus highlighting the *process* of becoming-woman and further indicating how Dex is made aware of, and practices, alternative 'patterns of definition' through interactions with Lacey.[176]

Dex draws a distinction between her birth name, Hannah, and her new persona: Dex. Whereas 'Hannah wanted to be invisible', Dex states, 'Dex wanted to be seen' (p. 31). Hannah Dexter 'believed in right and wrong, an ordered world of justice', and Dex 'was a rule breaker' (p. 31). In these comparative phrases, 'the ordered world of justice' is a world where girls are rendered invisible, and being seen is aligned with breaking rules and undermining social codes (p. 31). This shift from Hannah to Dex is not a 'transformation', Lacey tells Dex, but a 'revelation' (p. 31). The intimation is that Dex has always been present

---

[171] Daniel Bristow, *2001: A Space Odyssey and Lacanian Psychoanalytic Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 75.
[172] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, p. 17.
[173] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, p. 17.
[174] Abbott, 'Mean Girls'.
[175] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 358.
[176] Gamman and Marshment, 'Introduction', p. 6.

in Hannah Dexter, both lexically and symbolically. Defined as 'the perception of something not previously seen or understood', the term revelation is also highly linked to both acquiring knowledge and becoming visible.[177] Dex's knowledge of her own capacity for 'aggression, desire and rage' – of alternative modes of becoming-seen – is intrinsically tied to instances of looking between herself and Lacey.[178] If, previously, the notion that 'no one can hear you scream' is formulated as a threat *to* the subject, the private practice of screaming – with overt, unexpected displays of rage situated as a transversal burst of subjectivity – is reframed as a threat that the subject might *present* to prescribed and gendered 'social roles'.[179] Therefore, as multivalent modes of femininity become visible and possible, different knowledge about the self is made available.

Dex's realisation of her capacity for violence is framed in a similar way to that of Evie in *The Girls*. Suggesting that there 'wasn't that much difference' between her and 'the other girls', that 'maybe' her involvement 'would have been easy', Evie's narration illustrates a slippage between 'good' and 'bad' modes of girlhood (*The Girls*, pp. 146, 321). In turn, Dex's awareness of her own murderous potential is also realised with a distinct sense of ease. After it transpires that Nikki filmed Dex on the night that she could not remember – and that the 'strange hands doing strange things' did so under Nikki's direction – Dex and Lacey lure her into the forest in order to take revenge (p. 141).[180] Once Nikki is restrained, Dex is instructed by Lacey to 'prove' her 'love' by picking up a knife and doing 'whatever [she] want[s] with it' (p. 337-8). This prospect is not daunting for Dex, who realises that she 'could, that was the thing of it. [She] could do anything' (p. 338). The process is reduced to a series of 'steps' that her body could 'perform' in tandem with 'inanimate objects – floor, knife, skin' that would 'give way to [her] will' (p. 338). There is a contrast between the practical, near-effortless sequence of Dex's actions – 'it would be simple, and then it would be done', she comments – and her repeated use of the phrase 'that was the thing of it' (p. 338). The somewhat clumsy syntax of Dex's statement parallels Evie's admittance in *The*

---

[177] Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'revelation'. Available at https://www-oed-com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/164694?redirectedFrom=revelation#eid [accessed 20th November 2019].
[178] Abbott, 'Mean Girls'.
[179] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 358.
[180] It is at this point in the novel that Dex becomes aware of the other incidents that have taken place in the forest, including Lacey, Nikki, and Craig's secret meetings, and Lacey and Nikki's part in Craig's death. The forest as a setting is significant to this narrative shift. Colman highlights 'forests' as an example of a 'heterotopic site' that 'collects subjectivities or accumulates layers of time' (Colman, 'Hit Me Harder, pp. 358-9). Such sites, Colman continues, are the scene of a 'vampiric-becoming affect'; a 'rupture' that is 'transgressive of what is considered to be normative behaviour' (Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', pp. 358-9). As this knowledge is revealed to Dex, she is required to 'prove' her 'love' for Lacey by killing Nikki, thus subverting acceptable, 'normative' modes of subjectivity (*Girls on* Fire, pp. 337-8; Colman, 'Hit Me Harder, p. 359).

Girls that 'it was more' Suzanne than Russell (*The Girls*, p. 143). Just as we asked *what* was more Suzanne than Russell, now we are prompted to ask *what* is 'the thing of it'? (*Girls on Fire*, p. 338). Given the fact that Dex being 'the one to do it' was 'the thing of it, too', we are able to draw a connection between this unnameable, indescribable point of revelation and Dex's potential for violence (p. 338). As I have argued that Evie and Suzanne's relationship is characterised by liminality, *Girls on Fire* illustrates the inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to fully define and encode Dex's 'aggression, desire and rage' within conventional frames of reference.[181] As Colman suggests, the 'point of teen' is to challenge 'routine performances of pre-codes', illustrating becoming as a 'vibratory possibility'.[182] Whilst Dex's description of her potential to commit murder allows multiple interpretations – also, therefore, indicating a kind of linguistic 'vibratory possibility' – the revelation also illustrates a transversal 'rupture' in her own subjectivity; a 'becoming-bad' which undermines the 'firm kneading of social roles' and, crucially, occurs through interactions with other girls.[183]

As Dex becomes 'aware of [her] own desires' through interactions with Lacey and Nikki, their interactions range from being somewhat ambivalent to highly problematic.[184] However, for my line of enquiry, the most striking element of these interactions is the way in which they utilise a cinematic gaze. When Dex visits Nikki's house, she finds the rest of Nikki's clique also present, 'all smiles and claws' (p. 273). Hearing girls' 'laughter on the TV' mirrored by 'girls' laughter in the basement', Dex sees herself on the television screen: a 'Dex doll' doing 'whatever they made it do' (p. 274). The 'hands', 'fingers', and 'tongues' of the people on screen differ, but one instructive voice endures throughout the footage; 'Nikki loved to direct' (p. 274). As the girls anticipate what happens next to the 'girl-on-screen', it becomes apparent that they had 'watched [the footage] before, knew it by heart' (p. 274). Whereas Nikki controls the cinematic look for the entirety of the footage, the interjection of the line 'freeze-frame, rewind, fast-forward, play' draws attention to the girls' ability to manipulate the footage and control and consume Dex's image when she is not present (p. 274). This violation is all the more abhorrent given Dex's lack of consent to any of the acts that are pictured on-screen. In turn, when taking her revenge on Nikki, Dex imagines the scene in cinematic terms. She pictures:

> A helpless girl, naked, tied to a chair in a dirty train car with satanic scribbles on the wall. Two wild-eyed girls looming over her, one of them holding a butcher knife. I

[181] Abbott, 'Mean Girls'.
[182] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357.
[183] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 358.
[184] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357.

> saw it like I was seeing it on-screen, prom queen brought low, soon to have her throat slashed by monsters of her creation, audience rooting neither for hero nor villain but only for gore (p. 299).

Despite this 'Hollywood vision', Dex simultaneously sees Nicki as 'any girl, sorry and afraid', admitting that if she were a part of the audience she would have 'wanted her saved' (p. 299). In this empathetic response, Dex aligns the violent degradation of the situation with the gaze of the imagined, 'gore'-seeking cinematic spectators (p. 299). Through this gaze, Nikki is not a girl, 'any girl'; she is depersonalised (p. 299). A parallel can therefore be drawn between Nikki and Dex's cinematic image. They are a 'doll', a 'girl-on-screen', subjected to violent actions and violent spectatorship (p. 274). However, Dex's imagined, empathy-driven alignment with Nikki is short-lived. Whilst she initially focuses on 'forcing Nikki to admit what she'd done', Dex also enjoys knowing that she has 'the power' to make Nikki 'suffer' (p. 303). Dex's fantasy places Nikki in the same passive position of her on-screen counterpart: the 'Dex doll' doing 'whatever they made it do' (p. 274). She muses on the 'prospect of forcing her to do what [she] wanted', with 'Nikki stripped bare, limp and helpless, a marionette' under their 'control' (p. 304).

Given the oppressive, cruel degradation of both Nikki and Dex's gazes, how far can they be read as an act of feminist subversion or, even, as an example of a feminine gaze? Referring back to Mulvey, Gamman, and Marshment's comments on the male gaze, the cinematic look reflects the 'sexual imbalance' of a patriarchal sociocultural system in which 'men act' and 'women are acted upon'.[185] Given that, in *Girls on Fire*, girls are behind the camera directing the cinematic gaze *and* taking up the position of spectator, how relevant is the binary distinction of 'active/male' and 'passive/female' in this discussion?[186] Does the girls' degrading, violent treatment of each other mean that they are taking up an inherently masculine position? Or is there room to consider their behaviour as something entirely different, occurring beyond binary patterns of definition? Despite the intensely ambivalent acts of violence that the girls commit towards each other – which, arguably, are further problematised by what Rebecca Stringer describes as the 'critical ethics of collective non-violent action' characterising feminist activism – these instances of looking at other girls still work towards the constitution of a feminine, transversal gaze.[187] In looking at the footage

---

[185] Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 19; Gamman and Marshment, 'Introduction', p. 1.
[186] Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 19.
[187] Rebecca Stringer, 'From Victim to Vigilante: Gender, Violence, and Revenge in *The Brave One* (2007) and *Hard Candy* (2005), in *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, ed. Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 268-82 (p. 269).

Nikki has taken, at the girls watching the footage, and at Nikki 'limp and helpless', Dex is awakened to her own potential for 'aggression, desire and rage' more forcefully than ever (p. 304).[188] Whereas the sight of her own body on-screen causes a rapid shift in subjectivity – illustrated within the comparative framing of 'Hannah the victim, Hannah the fool, Hannah the body. Hannah, stupid' and 'Dex, awake' – the sight of Nikki's subjugation indicates the possibility of different modes of femininity and feminine spectatorship (p. 275). Reflecting on her new position of power, Dex states that she 'wasn't supposed to be that kind of person' (p. 303). She 'was a good girl, and good girls weren't supposed to take pleasure in pain' (p. 303). Despite what girls are 'supposed' to do, Dex *does* find pleasure in Nikki's pain and finds that there is 'no shame in it' (pp. 163, 303). Here, the idea of what constitutes acceptable 'good' girlhood are destabilised by (highly visual) interactions with another girl, marking the opportunity for imagining multivalent modes of femininity.

Whereas Farrimond suggests that texts in which a 'teen femme fatale' enjoying a 'victorious ending arm in arm with another girl' denote a 'shift' in individualistic, postfeminist narratives of 'success', Wasserman's text illustrates how narratives might culminate both 'at the expense of' *and* 'arm in arm' with other girls.[189] Nikki's murder at the end of the text works to strengthen and intensify the connection between Dex and Lacey, simultaneously provoking their eventual escape from Battle Creek and a life of prescribed mediocrity. On the night of Nikki's murder, Dex compares the 'glorious' sight of Lacey – a 'wild thing' with 'so much rage compressed into a tiny black-eyed body' – to 'a sunrise […] birthing a new world, meant only for' her (p. 303). Addressing Dex directly, Lacey states 'you were afraid to let yourself feel it, but I could feel it for you, simmering' (p. 120) – a 'vibratory possibility' lurking beneath the surface.[190] Therefore, we can further trace Colman's outline of friendship as a 'transformative passage' containing 'the possibility of becoming not the other, but becoming self-sentient', in *Girls on Fire*'s construction of pragmatically bad girlhood.[191] Colman continues to position the transversal as a 'spatial concept'; a mode of 'praxis' which signals the opening of a realm which is 'not restricted to chronological biological progression'.[192] This formulation of the transversal is particularly productive for discussions of the 'new world' that Dex and Lacey's friendship might form (p.

[188] Abbott, 'Mean Girls'.
[189] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 91.
[190] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 358.
[191] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357.
[192] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 361.

303).[193] If we consider how alternative modes of becoming involve a revision of the 'transition from girlhood to womanhood', the transversal's rejection of linear, 'chronological biological progression' is performing similar analytical work.[194] Envisioning the transversal line as that which crosses and interrupts existing linear patterns, we can also see how points of rupture allow the possibility for departure and movement in multiple directions. When Lacey calls upon Dex to imagine her life as a march 'through high school and college and a lifetime of diaper changes and mind-numbing jobs and garden clubs and PTA bake sales', never discovering how 'tough' and 'angry' she had the potential to become, she is outlining a fixed, linear 'transition from girlhood to womanhood' (pp. 119-20).[195] Nikki's murder is a transversal point of rupture – where new 'existential' realities becomes possible and 'aggression, desire and rage' become visible – provoking literal and ideological departure for Dex and Lacey.[196] Exactly 'as planned, in the dark of night, bags piled into the trunk', Dex and Lacey escape Battle Creek to 'pretend away the days to come' (pp. 352-3). They 'have only each other', co-existing as 'two parts of a whole'; it is 'everything [they] wanted' (p. 354). As this sense of 'vampiric identity formation' intensifies, Dex and Lacey 'refuse the future', freezing themselves within a perpetual girlhood and refusing fixed narratives of becoming-woman (p. 354).[197]

Overall, both Wasserman and Cline's texts construct and dramatize the ambivalent, complex, problematic power plays between girls, thus illustrating girls' position as 'keen wielders of power: social, erotic, emotional, physical'.[198] Confronting the cultural discomfort around 'aggression, desire and rage among young girls' identified by Abbott, *The Girls* and *Girls on Fire* construct the 'rich terrain' of 'complicated emotions and drives' which go towards forming experiences of adolescent girlhood.[199] In allowing a textual reassessment of feminine ways of looking, transversal modes of becoming-friend provide an alternative mode of becoming which rejects and destabilises hegemonic, masculine ways of looking. The absence of *Assassination Nation* in my discussions of the transversal gaze is due to the film's own omittance of such modes of looking. While the text effectively identifies the male gaze and constructs how such ways of looking affect modes of becoming-woman, the film does not offer alternative ways of imagining this process on a prolonged basis. There is, however,

[193] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 361.
[194] Wasserman, 'What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?'; Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 361.
[195] Wasserman, 'What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?'.
[196] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 358; Abbott, 'Mean Girls'.
[197] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 358.
[198] Abbott, 'Mean Girls'.
[199] Abbott, 'Mean Girls'.

one instance of feminine looking which outlines an interesting tension in terms of gendered spectatorship. One week after Nick's files are leaked, placing Lily under the scrutiny of the entire town, the mise-en-scène opens to Lily and friends lying in bed, in a row, looking towards the direction of the camera. As the scene shifts, it becomes apparent that they are watching a film projected onto the ceiling above them: *Stray Cat Rock: Delinquent Girl Boss* (1970), a Japanese Exploitation film about 'delinquent teenagers' who fight rival girl-gangs and nationalist 'fascist' groups within their community.[200] As the camera moves between the images projected on the ceiling and the girls watching, they have a conversation about the kinds of films that they would like to make.

Assassination Nation, dir. Sam Levinson (BRON Studios, 2018)

'When I grow up', Em states, 'I wanna be a director and only make male rape-revenge films […] Like if someone remade *Straw Dogs* but instead of Susan George getting raped it's Dustin Hoffman gets raped'.[201] While a full discussion of the problems and possibilities of this statement reaches beyond the focus of this chapter, I do want to comment on how this scene constructs girls looking at girls and, as a result, becoming 'aware of [their] own desires' as cinematic spectators.[202] The advocacy of any kind of sexual violence is, clearly, abhorrent. However, Em's statement does draw attention to the plethora of rape-revenge

[200] Chris D., *Outlaw Masters of Japanese Film* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), p. 60.
[201] *Straw Dogs*, dir. Sam Peckinpah (ABC Pictures, 1971).
[202] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357; See also, Anne Billson, 'How the 'rape-revenge movie' became a feminist weapon for the #MeToo generation'. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/may/11/how-the-rape-revenge-movie-became-a-feminist-weapon-for-the-metoo-generation [accessed 20th November 2019]. As Billson identifies, rape-revenge films are highly ambivalent. Whilst on the one hand, 'it's a format that by its very nature hinges on sexual violence', there is, Billson suggests, a sense of 'fantasy wish fulfilment' in 'watching a woman wreaking violent vengeance on her abusers'.

films made about women. As Anne Billson identifies, one problem with such films is that the 'thrill of vicarious empowerment' from the revenge itself is 'backloaded into the latter part of the movie', whilst the instances of sexual violence are 'often teased out in harrowing detail, unbearably gruelling to watch or, worse, filmed salaciously'.[203] After repeating hooks' desire to go for her entire life 'without ever having to see another rape scene in a movie', Soloway asks: 'what if only women were allowed to craft storylines about [their] bodies, about rape or consent for the next 100 years?[204] Given this critical commentary, Em's desire as a spectator and filmmaker can be seen as a response to Soloway's question. That is, a feminine gaze would look to destabilise ideologically entrenched 'patterns of definition' involving violence against women, 'wrenching the "look" (and the "voice") from their previous structures'.[205]

Despite the subversive potential of Em's assertion, *Assassination Nation* does not steer away from portraying violence, including attempted rape, throughout the rest of the filmic sequence. If anything, the violence against the girls intensifies. How surprising is this intensification, coupled with the film's lack of engagement with a transversal gaze? It is provocative for feminist readings of the texts discussed in this chapter that transversal modes of becoming take place within *The Girls* and *Girls on Fire* – texts which are themselves written by women. *Assassination Nation*, whilst establishing the teenage girl as a looking, desiring subject, does not construct the transversal gaze. This comparison between the literary and filmic texts draws attention to the overt and parallel *presence* of the transversal gaze in *The Girls* and *Girls on Fire* – despite the fact that a film might be the easiest mode in which to construct such ways of looking – thus further highlighting an intriguing modal difference for discussions of gender and authorship. Contemporary women's writing consistently formulates the transversal gaze, situating the genre and mode as a promising site for future constructions of the pragmatically bad femme fatale.

---

[203] Billson, 'How the 'rape-revenge movie' became a feminist weapon for the #MeToo generation'.
[204] bell hooks, qtd. in TIFF Talks, 'Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze' (2016). Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnBvppooD9I&t=2895s [accessed 14th May 2019].
[205] Gamman and Marshment, 'Introduction', p. 6; Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism', p. 14.

Chapter Three - Mums on-the-run and 'Plot Killers': Fatal Motherhood in *Sunburn*, *A Simple Favour* and *Good Girls*

In an article on the 'Top 10 Runaway Mothers in Fiction', author Lippman muses: 'Gone Girl? Sure. Gone Mommy? Not so much'.[1] While Lippman's *Sunburn* engages with and subverts this statement, the claim that she is making highlights the ongoing critical division between fixed, maternal modes of femininity, and the pragmatically bad girls that I have discussed up until this chapter. This chapter will explore how contemporary incarnations of fatal femininity question the femme fatale's critical location as the 'antithesis' of the maternal.[2] Place notes how, in mid-twentieth-century film noir, 'exciting' and 'sexy' fatal women are constructed as a contrast to the 'dull and constricting' realm of 'families, children, homes and domesticity'.[3] In turn, Harvey questions the 'strange and compelling absence of 'normal' family relations' in classic noir.[4] Harvey positions noir's opposition to the family, and its attendant production of 'ideological entities' in a 'capitalist economy' – such as 'daughters, wives, and mothers' – as a site for the 'production of the *seeds* of counter-ideologies' (emphasis in original).[5] This 'absence or disfigurement' of the family, calling 'attention to its own lack', can therefore be read as an encouragement of 'the consideration of alternative institutions for the reproduction of social life'.[6] Pidduck identifies the recurrence of this 'attack on the family unit' in the next 'cycle' of femme fatale films, late-twentieth-century noir.[7] In their 'explicit making-violent of the sacrosanct sites of romance and family', Pidduck continues, such media carried 'politically explosive' implications for perspectives on femininity and domestic entrapment.[8] The subversive possibilities of the films discussed by Pidduck – including but not limited to *Basic Instinct* and *Fatal Attraction* – are also related to the particular cultural moment from which they were created, and through which they were disseminated. Faludi positions *Fatal Attraction* as an exemplar of Hollywood's reinstation

---

[1] Laura Lippman, 'Top 10 runaway mothers in fiction' (2018). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/21/top-10-runaway-mothers-in-fiction [accessed 27th April 2020].
[2] Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 2.
[3] Janey Place, 'Women in Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 47-68, (p. 60).
[4] Sylvia Harvey, 'Woman's Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 35-46 (p. 38).
[5] Harvey, 'Woman's Place', p. 45.
[6] Harvey, 'Woman's Place', p. 45.
[7] Julianne Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme: (Dis)Figuring Feminism, Family, Irony, Violence', *Cineaction*, 38 (1995), 64-72 (p. 67).
[8] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', p. 67.

and reinforcement of the postfeminist 'backlash thesis: women were unhappy because they were too free; their liberation had denied them marriage and motherhood'.[9] Faludi goes on to emphasise cinema's role in forcefully driving these 'lessons', where the '"good mother" wins and the independent woman gets punished'.[10] Here, we can trace McRobbie's description of postfeminism's revalorisation of the 'conventional desires' for marriage, children, and domesticity that feminism has previously 'intervened to constrain'.[11] The femme fatale thus inhabits a vexed relationship with family and motherhood. Across Place, Harvey and Faludi's accounts the fatal woman is separated from these ideological realms, either aligning with feminist discourses, or fuelling the postfeminist backlash. Positioned outside of the family unit, the figure provokes a challenge to traditional, domestic modes of femininity. Though the model of 'happy families' is, as Pidduck notes, 'strikingly resilient', it is clear that the femme fatale's 'subversive attack' on such ideology – consistent across both cycles of fatal femininity in the twentieth century – is similarly tenacious.[12]

While in previous chapters of this thesis, motherhood is on the margins – evoked in order to define lack, permanence or, in the case of *Girls on Fire*, to flesh out representations of girlhood – Bell's *A Simple Favor* (2017), Lippman's *Sunburn* (2018), and the Netflix series *Good Girls* (2018-21) explore the possibilities and limitations of fatal motherhood in greater detail. In this chapter, I argue that the overt mobility and visibility of fatal femininity, when merged with constructions of motherhood in texts authored by women, works to destabilise and subvert this thematic erasure. 'Mothers', Rose speculates, might be 'the original subversives' due to the fact that they are 'never – as feminism has long insisted – what they seem, or are meant to be'.[13] That is, the complex and multiple lived realities of mothering exceed and deny dominant images of feminine maternity. A key strand of my argument throughout this thesis has been based on Doane's assertion that the femme fatale 'never really is what she seems to be'.[14] Destabilising the relationship between sight and knowledge, the fatal woman possesses an unmanageable, unpredictable threat to masculine omnipotence. When given the voice and mobility allotted to contemporary femmes fatales, feminine narratives of motherhood have the same propensity to evade fixed categorisation.

---

[9] Susan Faludi, *Backlash: America's Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Vintage, [1992] 1993), p. 141.
[10] Faludi, *Backlash*, p. 141.
[11] Angela McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime', in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 27-39 (p. 37).
[12] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', p. 67.
[13] Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), p. 18.
[14] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.

'Plot Killers' and Mums on-the-run

In each text explored within this chapter, mothers are 'on the run' from either the law, dangerous men, or their own past. In running *away* from what does not serve them, these women are also running *towards* what they desire. Whether they are chasing power, agency, or revenge, the maternal modes explored in this chapter construct a slippery web of motherhood, desire, and criminality. In *Sunburn, A Simple Favor* and *Good Girls*, being 'on the run' in a physical sense also entails renewed ideological movement: the evasion of patriarchal narratives that situate motherhood as a stable state. As these literary and televisual mothers chase what they desire and flee from what they do not, they 'slip in and out […] of focus' in an ongoing, mobile process.[15] This movement, I argue, works to give voice and visibility to maternal desire, whilst rejecting fixity and closure. It is with 'mums-on-the-run' in mind that I move onto the second conceptual thread that runs throughout this chapter: fatal mothers as 'plot killers'. This idea refers to both the characterisation of the mothers themselves, and also the subversive narrative structuring of women writing against said conventions. Narratives which represent motherhood as a complex, mobile mode of femininity respond to recent critiques of popular culture's maternal offerings in the twenty-first century. In an episode of the podcast *The Guilty Feminist*, Frances-White suggests that wives and mothers in contemporary film and television are overwhelmingly constructed as 'plot killers': characters whose role is to create conflict.[16] While, in some cases, the generation of conflict can be read as a mobilising force, the characters outlined by Frances-white are simultaneously coded as the nagging wife or worrying mother, slowing the story down, obstructing the narrative trajectory of the masculine protagonist.[17] In her 'own version of the Bechdel test', Frances-White proposes two criteria to be used in identifying such narratives.[18] Firstly, 'does the woman try to kill the plot?' and secondly, 'if you listened to

---

[15] Rose, *Mothers*, p. 9.

[16] Deborah Frances-White, 'Dangerous Women on Film with Nat Luurtsema and Guest Yasmine Akram' (2018), The Guilty Feminist [Podcast]. Available at http://guiltyfeminist.com/episodes/ [accessed 10th November 2018].

[17] For another contemporary example of a subversion of this format, see *Kevin Can Go F*** Himself* (AMC, 2021-).

[18] See Alison Bechdel, *Dykes to Watch Out For* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1986). In this comic strip, Bechdel sets out a criteria, now widely known as the Bechdel test, for assessing the representation of women in film. The assessment for a given film is as follows: '*One*, it has to have at least two women in it who, two, *talk* to each other about, three, something besides a *man*' (emphasis in original, p. 22). Bechdel's test has since been adapted in order to assess cinematic diversity in representations of gender, race, and sexuality. See Terri Waters, '7 Tests (That Aren't The Bechdel Test) That Measure Movies For Gender Equality And Representation' (2018). Available at https://www.the-unedit.com/posts/2018/8/20/7-tests-that-arent-the-bechdel-test-that-measure-movies-for-gender-equality-and-representation [accessed 7th April 2020]. For example, Waters cites the

the woman would there be no story?'.[19] Representing narrative closure, restriction, and constraint, the plot killer must be ignored and marginalised if the male-driven plot is to successfully unfold. To pick up on a term used by Rose, the task of the plot killer is, therefore, 'unrealisable'.[20] Plot-killing wives and mothers are constructed in order to fail, in order to be ignored – 'entertainment happens despite [their] best efforts'.[21]

It is important to note that Frances-White's test is not a steadfast rule; feminist criticism of the femme fatale in the 1970s and beyond has focused on reading the figure against the grain, and considering the feminist implications of her characterisation beyond her textual containment. In a sense, Frances-White's test tells us something that we already know: masculine experience and desire are privileged and central in conventional narrative cinema. What makes Frances-White's test useful for my discussion is its recognition of how a masculine cinematic gaze has misappropriated the image of motherhood and how such stories are told at the expense of *maternal* visibility, desire, and voice. In this chapter, instead of reading the potentiality of plot killers against such terms, I will be considering how women writers are reworking the narrative conventions that construct the mother as a killer of plots. Moving beyond Frances-White's observations, this chapter will ask: what happens when

---

'Villalobos' test, founded by writer and producer Ligiah Villalobos, which focuses on films having a 'Latina lead' who must 'be shown as professional or college educated', and 'not be sexualised (as a key character trait)'. Another example, founded by film critic Manohla Dargis is the 'DuVernay test'. In order to pass this test, named after the award-winning filmmaker Ava DuVernay, films must have 'an African American character […] or a character of another minority' constructed with their own lives and desires, rather than 'serving as background characters (see: the black friend) for white plotlines'.

[19] Frances-White, 'Dangerous Women on Film'. The character's plot-killing attempts are 'why women are hated in long-running television shows', Frances-White suggests, and this 'hate for the character is expressed by letters threatening violence to the actress who plays the character' (Frances-White, 'Dangerous Women on Film'). Skyler White – wife of protagonist Walter White in the television series *Breaking Bad* (2008-13) – is proffered as an example. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Frances-White is not the first to pick up on the sheer extent of the vitriol directed at Skyler, played by actress Anna Gunn. See also, Joke Hermes and Leonie Stoete, 'Hating Skyler White: audience engagement, gender politics and celebrity culture', *Celebrity Studies*, 10. 3 (2019), 411-426. In this article, Hermes and Stoete focus on how 'in online discussions', some featuring on groups solely dedicated to the hatred of Skyler White, 'the fictional character Skyler is merged with Anna Gunn, the actor playing her' (p. 411). Rather, the character and the actress 'become a single entity' towards which 'viewers address their deep dislike and even hatred' (pp. 411-2). See also, Anna Gunn, 'I Have a Character Issue' (2013). Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/24/opinion/i-have-a-character-issue.html [accessed 7th April 2020]. In an open letter for the New York Times, Gunn has also contributed to the discussion around the hatred of Skyler, and herself by extension. Though she was, at first, 'bewildered' at the anger directed towards her, Gunn states that the anger towards Skyler 'has become a flash point for many people's feelings about strong, nonsubmissive, ill-treated women'. The 'consensus among the haters', Gunn continues, 'was clear: Skyler was a ball-and-chain, a drag, a shrew, an "annoying bitch wife"'. Though Gunn has not 'enjoyed being at the center[sic] of the storm of Skyler hate', she describes coming to realise that people's hatred had little to do with her, 'and a lot to do with their own perception of women and wives'. Skyler does not 'conform to a comfortable ideal of the archetypical female', and has thus 'illuminated' some of the 'dark and murky corners' of existing sociocultural attitudes towards women.

[20] Rose, *Mothers*, p. 1.

[21] Frances-White, 'Dangerous Women on Film'.

mothers become 'story initiators'? Wrenching the 'the "look" (and the "voice")' from existing structures – a thread running throughout my previous chapters – will be central to my discussion of how fatal motherhood resists and subverts patriarchal perspectives on maternity.[22] In this chapter, I redeploy the term 'plot killer' as a means of identifying the women-authored narratives' intentional refusal of fixed, existing perspectives on motherhood. This utilisation of the term 'plot killer' will take advantage of the slippery signification of each component, understanding 'plot' in terms of conventional narrative trajectory, but also in terms of a plan, scheme, or operation. In turn, 'killer' will refer metaphorically to how, in each text, patriarchal 'plots' are subverted and obstructed, but also literally in terms of the fatal mother's murderous actions. *Sunburn*, *A Simple Favor* and *Good Girls* offer different ways of telling motherhood. Through these new maternal potentialities, they subvert, destabilise and 'kill' patriarchal plots about mothers, and against mothers. Always on the run, towards desire and away from subjugation, fatal mothers do not only initiate the story – they drive the narrative forward.

Sunburn

Insurance fraud, private investigators and a beautiful woman with a murky past. It makes perfect sense that, alongside such trappings of classic noir, *Sunburn*'s Polly (or Pauline) Costello is described by those around her with traditional signifiers of fatal femininity. Aligning with another key feature of noir fictions, *Sunburn*'s chapters alternate between different voices, entailing that the narrative trajectory unfolds through a constant switching of perspectives. Like *Gone Girl*, *Sunburn* offers a masculine perspective, including chapters from Polly's husband Gregg, a nemesis from her past named Irving Lowenstein, and Adam Bosk – the private investigator that Irving has hired to track Polly down. It is through said masculine perspectives that Polly is framed with references to classic fatal femininity. Through Gregg's recollections in particular, Polly is 'defined by her sexuality', thus echoing the narrative positioning of the femme fatale in the 'male fantasy' of classic film noir.[23] Just as the 'sexy, exciting' femmes fatales of classic noir are framed as the antithesis of 'good' domestic women, Gregg's framing of Polly's sexuality initially places her in opposition with

[22] Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism: An Introduction', in *Re-vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles, CA: The American Film Institute, 1984), pp. 1-17 (p. 14); Frida Beckman, 'From Irony to Narrative Crisis: Reconsidering the Femme Fatale in the Films of David Lynch', *Cinema Journal*, 52.1 (2012), 25-44 (p. 25).
[23] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47.

maternal and familial modes of femininity.[24] Reflecting on when he first met Polly (or Pauline), Gregg states that she had a 'kind of wildcat energy, indicating that she was suitable for 'a good time' and 'nothing more' (pp. 15-16).[25] While the 'wildcat energy' Gregg ascribes to Polly holds connotations of unpredictable, undomesticated, animalistic behaviour, it also apparently marks her as inappropriate for any commitment beyond casual sex (p. 15). Though Gregg had deemed Polly unsuitable for marriage, stability, or long-term commitment, she became pregnant and their daughter Jani was born. Her refusal to have an abortion – 'she wouldn't even think of it' – serves as proof, to Gregg, that Polly must have been a 'good girl' masquerading as a bad girl all along (p. 16). Polly's choice to carry her pregnancy to term situates her within a traditionally more stable and acceptable mode of femininity: motherhood.[26] Once Jani was born, Gregg recalls, Polly was 'calm' (p. 16). He, on the other hand, was a 'mess' (p. 16). At this point in the text, Gregg is unaware that Polly already has a daughter from a previous marriage – a fact that would, presumably, have made her more prepared for the birth of Jani. Though her ease is likely the result of having already experienced taking care of a new-born baby, Gregg views Polly's relaxed attitude as further evidence of an inherent deviance. 'Should any woman be that calm, taking care of her first baby?', he asks, neatly sidestepping his own ineptitude (p. 16). While he remembers speculating as to whether such behaviour meant that Polly was a 'natural mother', Gregg now positions her proficiency as further 'proof' that Polly is the polar 'opposite' of maternal – 'detached' and 'removed' (p. 16). Polly is, once again, located as the antithesis of maternal femininity, even after having given birth to a child, and taken to looking after her with no sign of duress. It is only when Polly literally detaches herself from the family unit – leaving

[24] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 63.
[25] Laura Lippman, *Sunburn* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), pp. 15-16. All further references to Lippman's text are to this edition and will be given parenthetically within the body of the thesis.
[26] It is important to note that reproductive choice is still a highly contentious issue within and beyond Western contexts. This matter has become all the more pressing since the overturning of Roe vs Wade in 2022. In *Bitch Doctrine: Essays for Dissenting Adults* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), Laurie Penny highlights how the 'idea that abortion might be a positive choice is still taboo', often needing justification such as the pregnancy being an immediate threat to life or the result of rape' (p. 269). 'In Britain', she continues, 'the Abortion Act 1967' asks those wishing to terminate why continuing a pregnancy 'poses a threat to her health and well-being or that of her existing offspring' (p. 269). However, the United Kingdom's laws appear progressive when, in 2020, there are twenty six countries in the world that do not allow abortion under any circumstances, with a further thirty nine countries only allowing termination when a woman's life is at risk (see 'The World's Abortion Laws' on the Center for Reproductive Rights website. Available at https://reproductiverights.org/worldabortionlaws?category[294]=294 [accessed 24th April 2020]). Underlying all restrictions on female-bodied people's reproductive autonomy, however, as Penny indicates, is 'structural and economic inequality' (pp. 270-1). Reproductive inequality is, she continues, fundamental when considering the 'material basis' of 'women's second-class status in society' (p. 271).

Gregg to care for Jani on his own – that he is able to halt speculation, and confirm Polly as an aberration of acceptable modes of femininity.

In *Sunburn*, the apparent conceptual stability of 'natural' motherhood translates to a literal stasis. A 'natural' mother does not run away; she is predictable, stable, dependable. In *Mythologies* (1957), Roland Barthes describes the "naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality' that is 'undoubtedly determined by history'.[27] His aim throughout *Mythologies* is to 'track down' and unveil the 'ideological abuse' lurking within '*what-goes-without-saying*', to query what we unquestioningly accept as natural, or true (emphasis in original).[28] The term 'natural mother' can, and should, receive the same interrogation. As Ellen Ross highlights, as 'an institution so embedded in social and cultural practices', there is little that can be situated as natural about motherhood.[29] Regardless, phrases like 'natural mother' present an illusive permanence, positing motherhood as a fixed, immutable mode of femininity that some women can access. The term 'natural father' – with reference to fathering as a series of acts or caring capabilities, beyond biological parenthood – does not have the same well-worn ring to it, does not roll off the tongue quite as easily as its feminine counterpart. Furthermore, as Polly indicates, the dynamic outlined in which the man departs from the familial sphere is highly normalised: 'men leave their kids all the time' (p. 51). Even within her outline of this recurring narrative – where the man leaves to pursue his own desires, and the woman is left to care for their children – the presence of maternal femininity is left outside of the picture entirely, taken for granted. The wife, the mother, simultaneously holds the family together and provides the background of malaise from which the man must escape.

Parallels can be read, here, both with the 'plot killer' as set out by Frances-White, and with the "good' but boring' women of classic film noir.[30] Present within these comparisons is

---

[27] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage [1957] 1993], p. 11.
[28] Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 11.
[29] Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London 1870-1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 4. See also, Virginia Held, 'Birth and Death', *Ethics*, 99.2 (Jan, 1989), 362-388. Though giving birth and dying are both biological processes, Held argues that the former is positioned as 'natural', while the latter is ascribed as a 'human' experience (p. 363). In this context, a 'human' experience refers to its associations with the 'capacity for choice, for conscious awareness, and for imaginative representation' (p. 363). That which is positioned as 'natural', it follows, does not benefit from such treatment. Indeed, the cultural shaping of birth as a concept – that which would make it 'human' in this context – is left unexamined. Such a positioning serves to disguise the 'traditional ways of thinking as well as traditional ways of acting', created and reinforced by a 'long history of patriarchy', existent within the 'natural' conceptions of birth outlined by Held (p. 387). The view that childbirth is 'primarily natural or biological', Held concludes, needs to be 'turned around', alongside the view that women are 'inevitably vulnerable to domination, and views that political life must always be organized around male conceptions of power' (p. 387).
[30] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 60.

a larger point about the dominance, and predominance, of masculine trajectories within classic film noir, but also conventional cinematic narratives more broadly. If the man is known to leave, while the woman is known to stay, this knowledge can be mapped onto respective concepts of mobility and stasis which, in turn, resemble the binary oppositions of 'active/male and passive/female' in 'a world ordered by sexual imbalance'.[31] In leaving her life with Gregg and Jani, Polly is refusing broader narratives about the division of parental labour, and the self-effacement of feminine desires for the sake of the predominance of masculine trajectories.

So far, through Gregg's misogynistic musings, Polly's character has slipped 'in and out' of 'focus'.[32] When the prose is not written from Polly's point of view, the insights that the multiple perspectives of the novel delivers are focused on either tracking her down or working her out. Polly's narrative works to question the stasis of 'natural' motherhood, while also wrenching 'the "look" (and the "voice")' from existing ways of telling motherhood.[33] Her desire to leave Gregg and Jani is initially set out as follows:

> [Gregg] didn't love her and she didn't love him. He had one foot out the door. He'd leave her, get an apartment. He'd never pay child support, not without endless nagging. She might even have to get a job. So why not go ahead and get a job, but let him have Jani, see what it's like to be a full-time parent? He wasn't going to trap her (p. 11).[34]

Though Gregg is described as having 'one foot out the door', threatening to 'trap' Polly in an undesirable situation, the spatial elements of this passage are less about physical domestic sites, and more about ideological narratives (p. 11). Gregg's perspective describes the modes of femininity that he deems to be acceptable: wife or 'wildcat', mother or 'dirty, dirty girl'

---

[31] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 19.
[32] Rose, *Mothers*, p. 9.
[33] Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism', p. 14; Beckman, 'From Irony to Narrative Crisis', p. 25.
[34] See also, Heather Dillaway and Elizabeth Paré, 'Locating Mothers: How Cultural Debates About Stay-at-Home Versus Working Mothers Define Women and Home', *Journal of Family Issues*, 29. 4 (April, 2008), 437-464 (p. 459). Though, as Polly notes, women 'seldom have [the] option' of leaving their families at will, she does not linger on her privileged position with reference to the socioeconomic differences underpinning such a recognition (p. 51). She leaves, finds a job in Belleville, Illinois, and lets Gregg 'see what it's like to be a full-time parent' (p. 11). Here, Polly's framing of work and parenting falls into what Dillaway and Paré describe as the 'dichotomized' positioning of women's decisions 'about paid work and mothering' (Dillaway and Paré, 'Locating Mothers', p. 437). We 'often portray individual women', Dillaway and Paré continue, 'as making choices between whether they will be "stay-at-home" and presumably "full-time" mothers, or "working mothers" and therefore ones who prioritize paid work over caregiving' (p. 437). As Paré and Dillaway go on to suggest, however, such a dichotomy does not allow for the 'complexities of parenting and paid work' (p. 459). For the mothers who are 'not solidly middle- or upper-class' – often constructed as 'Black or Latina in our cultural imaginations' – work is not a choice, but an essential component in maintaining a 'basic standard of care' including food, shelter, clothing, etc. (p. 453). Therefore, the 'choice' to work or to mother is a 'luxury' rather than a reality (p. 453).

(pp. 15-7). By leaving first, Polly explicitly subverts the narrative in which 'men leave their kids all the time' (p. 51). However, she is also fleeing the 'trap' posed by Gregg's binary definitions of femininity (p. 51). Here, there are clear parallels between Polly's reflections on leaving Gregg, and Amy's rejection of her 'new persona' of 'Average Dumb Woman Married to Average Shitty Man' in the latter half of *Gone Girl* (*Gone Girl*, p. 234). Like Amy, to paraphrase Rich's summation, Polly rejects Gregg's position as the 'maker' and 'sayer' of her identity as a woman and as a mother.[35] If, as Gregg suggests, Polly is not 'cut out' to be a wife or mother, it is because she is overflowing the story that he has shaped about her, and consequently killing the plot that he has written for her (p. 17).

Throughout its multiple perspectives, narrative threads, and recollections of past slicing into the present, *Sunburn* troubles over one central question: what kind of woman walks out on her family? This question first explicitly occurs within the novel when Gregg discovers that Polly has left and he has to care for their child on his own. For Gregg, the answer to this question lies within Pauline's 'wildcat energy' – an unpredictability that was never quite stilled (p. 15). When, more generally, we puzzle over the 'kind' of woman that might leave her family, this is less of an acceptance that 'woman' might take and exceed multiple forms, and more of a focus on how women might deviate from acceptable modes of femininity. As I have outlined, and as Lippman herself identifies in an article about 'runaway mothers', a woman who leaves her family is positioned as 'starkly unnatural'.[36] 'Starkness' is a quality frequently employed to illustrate contrasts and sharp differentiations, though it can also describe the inflexibility or rigidity of a method or approach.[37] Both interpretations work to recognise how existing definitions of 'good' and 'bad' – or 'natural' and 'unnatural' – mothering are placed within stable and opposing binaries. The woman who leaves is an anomaly, a distinct aberration. Her desire to leave must come from an inner motive, a wickedness. In contrast to these fixed assertions, Lippman suggests that the 'what kind of woman' question 'animates' her novel.[38] The term 'animate' – to 'move', 'incite', or 'stir up' – is particularly useful in terms of *Sunburn*, where Polly complicates, or stirs up, concrete definitions of femininity and motherhood.[39] In line with Lippman's description, it is this complication or animation of conventional maternity that drives the narrative forward. When

---

[35] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1977), p. 11.
[36] Lippman, 'Top 10 runaway mothers in fiction'.
[37] Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'stark'. Available at https://www-oed-com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/189130 [accessed 29th May 2020].
[38] Lippman, 'Top 10 runaway mothers in fiction'.
[39] Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'animate'. Available at https://www-oed-com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/7778 [accessed 29th May 2020].

we ask what kind of a woman walks out on her family, we are focusing on what she is leaving behind. More intriguing tensions come to light when we consider what she might be moving towards, or what 'moves' her to act. When thinking over what kind of woman Polly is, we are also trying to work out what she wants.

In Lippman's article and, perhaps consequently, Polly's narrative in *Sunburn,* maternal departures are positioned as a subject of fantasy.[40] 'Do all mothers fantasise about fleeing their families, if only for a weekend?', Lippman asks, '[or] do we simply crave the vicarious thrill of reading about something we know we'll never do?'.[41] In turn, Polly is 'surprised more women don't [leave]', having gotten the idea from a book she 'didn't actually read' but that everyone was talking about 'like it was a fantasy' (p. 12).[42] How might we understand the role of fantasy in this context? Fatal femininity is intricately intertwined with notions of fantasy. As Place suggests, the femme fatale is a 'timeless fantasy' and 'cross-cultural myth'.[43] Timeless as she might be, she can be found within the confines of the 'male fantasy' of classic noir.[44] In this context, fatal femininity is one component in an exercise of masculine wish fulfilment, ultimately contained by the strictures of conventional filmic narrative. To imagine her otherwise, as contemporary texts do, is to wrench 'the "look" (and the "voice")' from existing fantasies, to imagine a world where she is not killed, punished, or otherwise contained.[45]

In *Sunburn*, the 'empowering fantasy' that prompts Polly to leave is provoked by a work of fiction that enables her to subvert the 'story' set out for her by conventional patterns

---

[40] Lippman, 'Top 10 runaway mothers in fiction'.
[41] Lippman, 'Top 10 runaway mothers in fiction'.
[42] Reading Lippman's article further, it is possible to identify the intertextual link being made, here. Anne Tyler's *Ladder of Years* (New York: Penguin Random House, 1995) is described by Lippman as a 'big-hearted novel' about a 'still somewhat unformed' woman who 'bolts from her family on a beach vacation' (Lippman, 'Top ten runaway mothers in fiction'). While this description illustrates clear comparisons between *Sunburn* (set in 1995) and *Ladder of Years* in terms of plot and the pliability of their protagonists, it is possible to speculate further, and suggest that the book Polly is referring to in this section of the narrative *is* Tyler's *Ladder of Years*. Polly's comment that she 'didn't actually read' the book that prompted such widespread fantasy reinforces this identification further (p. 12). Lippman suggests that *Ladder of Years* is meant to be 'dissected with other women' (Lippman, 'Top ten runaway mothers in fiction'). In contrast to moments of feminine bonding, Polly's characterisation is shot through with problematic moments of internalised misogyny. '[G]irlish chitchat' is part of the reason that Polly 'doesn't like women' – she finds them 'exhausting' (p. 114). It therefore makes sense that Polly would not have actually read the 'quintessential book club fodder', and had instead ran with the fantasy created and perpetuated by the text's cultural reach (Lippman, 'Top ten runaway mothers in fiction'). Nonetheless, *Sunburn*'s intertextual dialogue, interspersing a book from 1995 into a text published in 2018, is also an intergenerational dialogue, prompting further critical possibilities around how existing texts might 'mother' new literature.
[43] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47.
[44] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47.
[45] Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism', p. 14; Beckman, 'From Irony to Narrative Crisis', p. 25.

of maternal and paternal roles.[46] The novel that Polly describes in *Sunburn* inspires her to act; it provides a framework, a narrative, enabling her to imagine an alternative reality based on what she does, or does not, desire. Helen Thornham and Elke Weissmann's claim that 'the act of narration is always already a fantasy of agency' is particularly pertinent in relation to *Sunburn*.[47] As a work of woman-authored noir fiction, Lippmann's novel works to wrench 'the "look" (and the "voice")' from what is traditionally known as a genre which privileges masculine perspectives and desires.[48] Redeploying fatal femininity as a means of exploring women's fantasies, *Sunburn* kills the conventional plot regarding whose fantasy takes precedence. 'Gone mommy' – and the agency associated with leaving established narratives regarding maternity – becomes a reality.[49] The shift from Gone Girl to Gone Mommy reflects how fantasies around fatal femininity bend and refract contemporary discourses and tensions around 'woman', as Place suggests.[50] Though *Sunburn* was published in 2018, the mid-90s setting relates to Thornham and Weissmann's further suggestion that narration is a means of disrupting, or taking ownership over, a past that 'continues to resonate in particularly problematic ways'.[51] That is, the fantasies and concerns relating to motherhood illustrated by *Sunburn* are still relevant to twenty-first-century audiences. The Gone Mommy fantasy is still enough to shock, and to drive the narrative forward. If these fantasies persist, it is reasonable to assume that patriarchal 'realities' regarding maternity – with motherhood as a stable, fixed state – also continue to exist within our contemporary moment. Their 'business', the work that these fantasies seek to perform, like that of feminism, 'remains unfinished'.[52]

For Polly, the Gone Mommy fantasy becomes reality. Perhaps, to imagine a way of living that is fundamentally different, the presence of fantasy is key. While fictional fantasies may be 'empowering' on paper (or screen), it is important to think about the limits of their influence on, or application to, lived experiences.[53] Referring to the fantasy of the 1990s fatal femme, Pidduck notes how the on-screen display of powerful, agentic femininity works to

---

[46] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', p. 72.
[47] Helen Thornham and Elke Weissmann, 'Introduction: Renewing-Retooling Feminisms', in *Renewing Feminisms: Radical Narratives, Fantasies and Futures in Media Studies*, ed. Helen Thornham and Elke Weissmann (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), pp. 1-10 (p. 7).
[48] Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism', p. 14; Beckman, 'From Irony to Narrative Crisis', p. 25.
[49] Lippman, 'Top 10 runaway mothers in fiction'.
[50] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47.
[51] Thornham and Weissmann, 'Introduction', p. 7.
[52] Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 171.
[53] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', p. 72.

'bolster' an 'imaginary reserve' – to support a retained pool of psychical feminist strength.[54] However, as cultural fantasies regarding maternal femininity slip into focus, they distort the realities of contemporary mothering, as well as how these realities are inflected and directed by intersections of race and class. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed describes Friedan's image of the 'happy housewife; as a 'public fantasy of happiness'.[55] 'The happy housewife', Ahmed continues, 'is a fantasy figure that erases the signs of labor under the sign of happiness'.[56] Ahmed's critique continues to recognise how, though Friedan positioned this imagined figure as a fantasy, she did not recognise how the happy housewife evoked 'the embodied situation of some women more than others'.[57] Ahmed goes on to quote bell hooks' *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (2000), where hooks states that 'many women longed to be housewives', but only those 'with leisure time and money could actually shape their identities on the model of the feminine mystique'.[58] Therefore, for the majority of women – i.e. those who did not fit into Friedan's white, middle class demographic – working outside of the home was essential. To work at home was an 'aspiration' rather than an oppressive 'situation'.[59] Ahmed and hooks's interlocking critique of one of the most resonant cultural fantasies of domestic and maternal femininity thus emphasises the importance of interrogating the dominance of such modes, and questioning the intersecting, systemic realities that they obscure.

So where does this leave Polly and her Gone Mommy Fantasy? While *Sunburn* does not focus on Polly's whiteness and its associated privileges, her narrative does touch upon socioeconomic difficulties associated with maternal agency. Though Polly's aforementioned comments on the topic of Gregg leaving her – 'she might even have to get a job' (p. 11) – indicate that she was living within comfortable means throughout their marriage, her decision to leave does factor in the preparation and forward thinking required to pursue the image of family that she desires. When discussing the 'fantasy' of 'leaving your family at the beach' presented by the book 'everybody was talking about', Polly recalls wanting to tell her neighbours: '*If only you knew what it means to walk away from something, what it takes*. Money. She has some. She needs more' (p. 12, emphasis in original). Here, Polly's imagined dialogue focuses on the limitations of the kind of agency involved in the act of walking away,

[54] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', p. 72.
[55] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 50.
[56] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 50.
[57] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 50.
[58] bell hooks, qtd. in Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 51.
[59] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 50.

of being on-the-run. These limitations are picked up again in reference to Polly's previous marriage:

> Early in her first marriage – the less said about that, the better – Polly would get so upset at her husband that she would throw herself out of the car. At first, only at stop signs or traffic lights. Eventually she started jumping out during a slow roll. Never more than 5 or 10 mph, usually in a parking lot, but there was a heady danger to it […] Why couldn't she leave that marriage as easily as she jumped from his car? Part of it was money, of course. Walking home cost her nothing, except a beating. To leave, she would have needed money (p. 21).

Jumping from the moving car presents a 'moment of possibility' (p. 21). This physical act, this impulsive movement, is 'the opposite of a plan' (p. 21). 'Leaving required planning', Polly continues, as well as, like 'everything worth having', 'time and money' (p. 21-2). Thus, Polly's perspective works to illuminate how the capacity to act – to walk away from Gregg, or to jump from the car and her abusive ex-husband (Burton) Ditmars – is not enough to elude or subvert male-driven narratives in any practical or long-term sense. If the femme fatale is able to succeed on a narrative level through the ability to act alone, Polly as a fatal mother highlights the gap between such fantasy and reality, drawing attention to socioeconomic restraints on maternal agency.[60] Mere 'moment[s] of possibility', drawn from fantasy, do not sufficiently take into account other factors beyond basic definitions of agency that are required to sustain long-lasting change (p. 21).[61]

Fortunately, Polly has money. Or, at least, she will – if Irving does not get to her first. Though Polly tries to avoid the memories of her first marriage – 'the less said about that, the better', she states (p. 21) – the future that she has meticulously planned depends on revisiting

---

[60] See also Shelley M. Park, *Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood: Resisting Monomaternalism in Adoptive, Lesbian, Blended, and Polygamous Families* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013). When referring to 'reality', I am mindful of what Park describes as the 'the complex webs of epistemological, ethical, and political norms embedded in metaphysical claims about reality' (p. 3). In this context, Park continues, discussions around reality 'frequently serve to render certain phenomena central to our field of vision while relegating other phenomena to the background, to uphold certain values to the exclusion of others, to illuminate or obscure certain relations of power'(p. 3). My usage of the term 'reality' does not relate to one fixed reality – but rather draws attention to the gap between fantasy and lived realities (or lived experience).

[61] See also Kate Demolder, 'The Ultimate Feminist Issue: How to Save for a Runaway Fund' (2020). Available at https://irishtatler.com/lifestyle/runaway-fund [accessed 14th August 2022]. Demolder explores the idea of a 'runaway fund': private savings to be accessed in the case of an emergency. The types of emergencies mentioned by Demolder include 'an unfulfilling job, an abusive relationship or a scary landlord'. The creation and maintenance of such a fund is situated within the title of the piece as a defining feminist concern. However, as Demolder indicates, this impetus to save for emergencies 'presumes you're gainfully employed, making enough to cover expenses, with even a slim margin left over'. Despite this recognition, their advice – to 'start small', with '[p]acked lunches. Office coffees. Budget calculators. Financial spreadsheets' – still presumes a particular lifestyle and socioeconomic situation. Demolder imagines a woman in an office job, with consistent access to computers and time to calculate a budget. Budgeting in itself depends on a steady stream of income. For women living below the poverty line, women who do not work or who are underpaid, their paycheques squeezed to the limit by the increasing cost of living, the idea of a 'runaway fund' is less the 'ultimate feminist issue' and more of an impossible reality.

the past and securing a large amount of money. As *Sunburn* unfolds, we learn more about how this money has been gained, as well as its connection to the abusive nature of Polly and Ditmars' marriage. Within this correlation, we also discover why Irving is so invested in tracking Polly down, ten years later. Irving – who hired Adam to 'insinuate himself' initially into the family routine, but now into Polly's life away from Gregg and Jani (p. 90) – describes how Polly resurfaced the year before: a 'witch' 'hiding inside a suburban mom' (p. 92). This description, though drawing attention to suburban motherhood as a performative mode, more prominently works to emphasise the aforementioned associations between an inner deviance, or 'wildcat energy', and Polly's characterisation (p. 15). The reasoning behind such a position is found within events of the past. A decade earlier, Polly had implicated Irving when taking out a dubious life insurance policy for Ditmars without his knowledge. Buoyed after sex with Polly, and reassured by her guarantee that Ditmars was as 'healthy as an ox', Irving found somebody to write said policy (p. 94). As Irving states, however, 'even an ox can't survive a knife through his heart' (p. 94). Later, when Adam discovers that she went to prison for killing her ex-husband, Polly partly appeals to maternal care as justification for the murder. 'I had one chance', she states, '[o]ne chance to save myself and my kid. He was going to kill me. When he did, I knew there was no one who would care for Joy' (p. 211).[62] Reinforcing Polly's earlier appeal to maternity, at this earlier point in the narrative her daughter is again framed as the motivation for finding a way out of Ditmars' tyranny. 'But – Joy', Polly continues, '[h]e said he would kill Joy, too. And she believed him' (p. 100). During the trial following Ditmars' death, Polly's lawyer asks the jury

[62] Polly's narration states that she 'had lost whatever family she had when she was convicted' for Ditmars murder, meaning that 'the state, at her behest, took custody of Joy' (p. 234). Joy, who we find out has 'severe […] cerebral palsy', needs additional care (p. 234). Having 'outsmarted' Irving by making Joy the beneficiary of the claim, Polly has also ensured that there are sufficient funds to pay for her daughter's care (p. 94). While it could be argued that Polly's actions were pragmatic to the last, the language used to discuss her daughter's condition is, at times, troublingly ableist. She describes how, on the day her and Ditmars learnt of the severity of Joy's condition, she wept and said 'good-bye to every small dream that she had held for her child', commenting that Joy's body 'would look the way [she] felt – twisted, stunted, useless' (pp. 234-5). The description of Joy's body as 'twisted, stunted, [and] useless' aligns with the way in which, as Dan Goodley describes, ableism 'encourages an institutional bias towards autonomous, independent bodies' (See Dan Goodley, *Dis/ability Studies: Theorising Disablism and Ableism* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 21). This alignment is most apparent in the inclusions of the terms 'stunted' and 'useless' (p. 235). To be stunted is to be impeded, restricted, or slowed. While the term is often employed in relation to physical growth, it can also be understood in relation to the 'destiny' that we have in mind when thinking about ability (Goodley, *Dis/Ability Studies*, p. xii). As Goodley continues, this 'destiny is associated with success', creating 'linear, certain and expectant notions of ability' which 'undergird many societies" ideas regarding 'what it means to be a valued human being' (Goodley, *Dis/Ability Studies*, p. xii). In this context, ability also equates to usefulness, and 'lends support to economic and material dependence on neoliberal and hyper-capitalist forms of production' (Goodley, *Dis/Ability Studies*, p. 21). Therefore, while Polly's story might kill certain plots around maternal femininity, the language used to describe Joy upholds ableist narratives and neoliberal notions of usefulness.

to contemplate whether Polly could have 'mustered the force' to stab her husband so deeply, and so precisely as not to 'hit a bone on the way in' (p. 101). 'He knew', Polly admits, 'and she knew that she was more than capable' (pp. 101-2). Polly continues to locate Ditmars' murder as 'another of those superhuman feats of strength that a mother can summon, like lifting a car or leaping from a burning building' (p. 102). Therefore, here, her violence is attributed *to* her maternal love and care. Once again Polly's characterisation sends us pinging across different modes of femininity – from vicious maternal protector to victim, avenging spider woman to pragmatic mother. It is, perhaps, futile to ask 'what kind of woman walks out on her family' given that Polly does not smoothly slot into, or stay fixed within, any of these categorisations (p. 15). Instead, she kills such conventional plots, or destabilises categorical claims regarding both maternal criminality and fatal femininity.

So, Polly is not only a woman who has left her family, she is a woman, a mother, who has killed. Deborah Walker suggests that the 'ruthlessness and violent criminality' of the femme fatale stands 'in stark contrast to social reality and point to her construction as patriarchal myth'.[63] While, as I have argued previously, the violence exhibited by the femme fatale does not necessarily place her exclusively within the bounds of patriarchal fantasy, Walker goes on to draw an interesting distinction between the criminality of cultural constructions of fatal femininity and the lived experience of female offenders. Whereas filmic depictions of the femme fatale focus on the 'psychopathic grandeur of the murderess adulteress or spider woman', 'real-life' female criminality is often 'small scale', mostly consisting of 'low risk, low gain property crimes'.[64] Women 'most often offend to survive, to feed themselves and their families'.[65] Polly's actions echo that of a renowned example of fatal femininity: Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) of *Double Indemnity* (1944).[66] Like Polly, Dietrichson takes out a life insurance policy on her husband without his knowledge, implicating another man in the process. Unlike Polly, Dietrichson does not have an apparent maternal motive for the murder. Indeed, her reasoning for taking out another policy partly hinges on the fact that her stepdaughter is the sole beneficiary of the former policy. Additionally, unlike Polly, Dietrichson does not physically kill her husband, instead persuading insurance salesman Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) to do the dirty work for her. Therefore, Polly's criminality is subversive on two levels. While murdering her husband is

[63] Deborah Walker, 'Re-reading the femme fatale in film noir: an evolutionary perspective', *Journal of Moving Image Studies*, 5 (2006), 1-25 (p. 21).
[64] Walker, 'Re-reading the femme fatale in film noir', p. 21.
[65] Walker, 'Re-reading the femme fatale in film noir', p. 21.
[66] *Double Indemnity*, dir. Billy Wilder (Paramount Pictures, 1944).

more in line with the 'spider woman' set out within Walker's claims, her reasoning for the act is in line with women's 'real-life' crimes: the survival of her and her children.[67] While she exceeds the 'violent criminality' exhibited by Stanwyck's character – plunging 'a kitchen knife into [Ditmars'] heart with all the force she could muster' (p. 101) – she is not explicitly motivated by personal gain. The insurance pay out will benefit Polly financially, but the money is to be utilised in starting a new life for herself and Joy – a name that in itself exemplifies the positioning of Polly's children within her pursuit of happiness.

Samira Kawash claims that 'attention to mothers seemed increasingly suspect' in feminist contexts of the late twentieth century, due to the simultaneous milieu of postfeminist discourses around family and tradition.[68] In the Neoliberal context outlined by Catherine Rottenberg, the 'heteronormative ideal' of the happy, nuclear family 'has become […] more prominent' as a visible cultural formation, 'even as families have become more diverse'.[69] Though Polly leaves one outwardly projected 'heteronormative ideal' as a mum-on-the-run, fleeing from Gregg and Jani, she enters into another heterosexual relationship in the process.[70] The object of Polly's desire is Adam, the private investigator hired to track her down. The expression of this attraction is, however, imbued with both narratives around the independent, self-serving, 'progressive womanhood' highlighted by Rottenberg, and an interrelated lack of 'female solidarity'.[71] When discussing the possibility of a future with Adam, Polly 'hates herself' for sounding 'petulant' – an attitude apparently reserved for 'weak women, dependent women' (p. 224). Polly, in contrast, 'doesn't need [Adam]', she 'wants him' (p. 224). He is 'the first man' in a biblical sense, but also 'the first thing she has ever chosen for her own pleasure and delight' (p. 224). As the valorisation of independent, 'strong' femininity slips into focus, so does an emphasis on chosen, desired heterosexuality. Implicit in Polly's description of her desire for Adam is the suggestion that she usually chooses romantic partners for more pragmatic reasons. This dynamic is inflected throughout the novel, from Irving's warning to Adam that '*she'll have sex with you if you get close to her. It's what she does*' (p. 26, emphasis in original) to Polly's own admission that 'the goal is never a man', but what he can do for her (p. 78). The sexualised pragmatism outlined here

---

[67] Walker, 'Re-reading the femme fatale in film noir', p. 21.
[68] Samira Kawash, 'New Directions in Motherhood Studies', *Signs*, 36.4 (Summer 2011), pp. 969-1003 (p. 971).
[69] Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill, Catherine Rottenberg, 'Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in conversation', *Feminist Theory*, 21. 1 (2020), 3-24 (p. 15).
[70] Banet-Weiser, Gill, Rottenberg, 'Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism?', p. 15.
[71] Banet-Weiser, Gill, Rottenberg, 'Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism?', p. 14; Katherine Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and American Cinema* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 80.

sits in alignment with Bronfen's suggestion that the femme fatale, as 'more than simply a symptom of the hero's erotic ambivalence', constructs and 'gives voice to a feminine desire that may include him in order to attain its aim, but also exceeds his fantasy realm'.[72] There is space for heterosexual desire, but it is not the main objective. Therefore, Polly's desire for Adam, but also his inevitable disposability, undermines the renewed prominence of a 'heterosexual ideal' within a neoliberal context.[73] However, this decentralisation of heterosexuality is somewhat undermined through Polly's disdain for other women. Though 'men always like her, when she can be bothered to try', Polly has 'no use' for women (p. 25). With such a statement in mind, we find ourselves back at criticisms of the fatal girl who acts 'at the expense of other female characters and female solidarity'.[74]

Given the positioning of men as disposable and other women as useless, it perhaps comes as no surprise that *Sunburn* culminates at a point where '[e]veryone is dead. Except Polly' and her children (p. 287). Set in 2017, the very last section of the narrative finds Polly reunited with Jani and Joy, with Jani recently graduating from law school and a 'family life' that centres 'on Joy's needs' (p. 284). Back in 1995, we learn, Adam was killed while protecting Polly during a tussle with Gregg. Gregg was then found guilty for his murder and executed, while Irving suffered 'a fatal heart attack a few weeks before his much-delayed trial' for crimes committed many years before (p. 287). Within this complicated tying up of loose ends, two important subversions of existing constructions of fatal femininity come to the fore. Firstly, whereas in classic film noir the femme fatale is killed, punished, or encapsulated within ideas of 'normative romance' at narrative culmination, all of the men with which Polly has been intertwined are dead by *Sunburn*'s conclusion.[75] Whereas this could easily allow Polly to fall into aforementioned discussions of 'self-affirming, individualistic' fatal femininity, the second subversion complicates such swift categorisation.[76] While Farrimond identified 'normative romance' as another mode of narrative closure – an ending that I have previously associated with heteronormativity and family – Polly is both inside and outside of such a fantasy.[77] At *Sunburn*'s close, Polly is situated back within the realm of family. The family that she has built, however, differs

[72] Elisabeth Bronfen, 'Femme Fatale: Negotiations of Tragic Desire'*, New Literary History*, 35. 1 (2004), 103-116 (pp. 106-7).
[73] Banet-Weiser, Gill, Rottenberg, 'Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism?', p. 15.
[74] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 80.
[75] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme* Fatale, p. 14.
[76] Samantha Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 123.
[77] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme* Fatale, p. 14.

drastically from that at the beginning of the novel: just Polly and her daughters 'who will never know, must never know, what their mother did to provide them with their happy lives' (p. 290). As with the ending of *Gone Girl*, where Amy is planning to become part of the 'best, brightest nuclear family' while still giving the suggestion of an ongoing threat (*Gone Girl*, p. 415), 'Polly can't imagine being gone […] she's indestructible' (*Sunburn*, p. 286). Like Amy, Polly 'never really is what she seems to be'.[78]

This ongoing threat aligns with Rose's speculation that mothers might be 'the original subversives'.[79] Whereas Rose is drawing attention to the gap between lived experiences of, and overarching sociocultural narratives regarding motherhood, the same can be said in terms of Polly's characterisation. She might seem like a tangible 'kind of woman' in one moment, but she is always ready to turn around and leap from your grasp in the next (p. 15). Describing how she talks about her past with her daughters, Polly states that stories are 'like dough' (p. 285). You can put 'your hand in your stories, work them' (p. 285). This analogy, imbued with domesticity, presents a productive way of thinking about what *Sunburn* does with ideas around fatal femininity. Dough can be stretched, re-formed, worked into different shapes. Similarly, *Sunburn* stretches both fatal femininity and constructions of motherhood, questioning the shape of existing modes. Like dough, however, Polly's characterisation is imbued with elasticity, snapping and bouncing back to both existing modes of fatal femininity and postfeminist figurations of white, middle-class modes of motherhood.

A Simple Favor

Two mothers – Stephanie and Emily – are the focal point of Bell's text. Due to its focus on the construction of 'female antiheroines', Lexy Perez positions *A Simple Favor* as part of a broader literary moment following the publication and success of Flynn's *Gone Girl*.[80] Further foregrounding parallels between *A Simple Favor* and the domestic noir texts explored in chapter one, Jay Strafford describes *A Simple Favor* as *Gone Girl* 'gone nuclear', *Gone Girl* 'on steroids, amphetamines and cocaine', with Paul Feig's filmic adaptation of *A Simple Favor* (2018) also described as a 'parody' or 'updated version' of Flynn's novel.[81] From the

[78] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[79] Rose, *Mothers*, p. 18.
[80] Lexy Perez, 'Gillian Flynn Reflects on 'Gone Girl' Legacy and the Growing Appetite for Anti-Heroines in Books' (2019). Available at https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/gillian-flynn-reflects-gone-girl-legacy-rise-anti-heroines-1260003 [accessed 11th November 2020].
[81] Jay Strafford, 'Mysteries: 'Devil's Breath.' 'Almost Missed You,' 'A Simple Favor,' and 'All By Myself, Alone'' (2017). Available at https://richmond.com/entertainment/books/mysteries-devil-s-breath-almost-missed-you-a-simple-favor/article_6464ed4e-6aef-5576-8f70-8611cc9bbd61.html [accessed 11th November 2020]; Neal

outset of the text, we are made aware that Stephanie is a stay-at-home single mother and 'mommy blogger', while the glamorous Emily has a high-powered Public Relations role at a successful city-based fashion company.[82] Already, Stephanie and Emily's characterisation forms two popular and distinct modes of contemporary motherhood that are, according to Lori Kido Lopez, portrayed by media outlets as 'mutually exclusive and always at odds with one another': 'stay-at-home moms and working mothers'.[83] Whereas from the outset of *Sunburn*, the narrative asks what kind of woman protagonist Polly truly is, *A Simple Favor* offers two answers upfront, even if the distinction between the modes of maternal femininity proffered becomes more fallible as the novel proceeds.

Like *Sunburn*, *A Simple Favor* begins with a case of 'Gone Mommy'.[84] The first section of the novel is relayed from Stephanie's perspective, with some chapters consisting of posts from her blog, and some told through first person narration. The first chapter, a blog post titled 'Urgent', is written shortly after Emily's disappearance (p. 3). 'Hi, moms!', the post begins, before establishing that this entry 'is going to be different from any post so far', but not 'more important since all the things that happen with our kids, their frowns and smiles, their first steps and first words, are the most important things in the world' (p. 3). Already, Stephanie's post has established a struggle between the concerns of the online space to which she contributes and the urgency of Emily's disappearance. This blurring of known contexts echoes *A Simple Favor*'s position as a work of domestic noir – where motherhood and domesticity meet danger and criminality – while also drawing attention to the distinct modes of maternal femininity represented through Stephanie and Emily's characterisations. The two worlds are at odds with one and other, but crossing over nonetheless. As the first chapter of *A Simple Favor* draws to a close, Stephanie's concern over her missing friend is overshadowed by a much more immediate, menial task, her narrative re-enclosed within the

---

Pollack, "A Simple Favor' Is A 'Gone Girl' Parody That's Also Not A Parody, Or Is It?' (2018). Available at https://bookandfilmglobe.com/film/movie-review-blake-lively-anna-kendrick-paul-feig-henry-golding-simple-favor/ [accessed 11th November 2020]; Geoffrey Macnab, 'A Simple Favour review: An updated version of Gone Girl with extra comic elements thrown in' (2018). Available at https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/simple-favour-review-cast-blake-lively-anna-kendrick-henry-golding-a8545256.html [accessed 11th November 2020].

[82] Darcey Bell, *A Simple Favor* (2017) (New York: Harper, 2018), p. 280. All further references to Bell's text are to this edition and will be given parenthetically within the body of the thesis.

[83] Lori Kido Lopez, 'The Radical Act of 'Mommy Blogging': Redefining Motherhood Through the Blogosphere', *New Media & Society*, 11.5 (2009), 729-747 (p. 731). Lopez also indicates how 'while it is debatable as to whether or not there is actually animosity between the two sets of mothers, and unfortunate that only white middle- or upper-class mothers are invoked in such debates', such arguments suggest that *all* women 'fall into either one camp or the other – the workers or the homebodies – and that all women want children' (p. 731).

[84] Lippman, 'Top 10 runaway mothers in fiction'.

bounds and concerns of domesticity: 'Okay, got to run now', she concludes, 'I smell chocolate-chip cookies burning in the oven' (p. 6). Meanwhile Emily, who is already situated outside of the domestic realm as a working mother, is further removed in her position as a missing woman, and a mum-on-the-run.

Emily's characterisation is also heavily invested in tropes from film noir. Her double removal from the home echoes the contrast between the 'exciting' and 'sexy' fatal women of mid-twentieth-century film noir and the 'dull and constricting' realm of 'families, children, homes and domesticity'.[85] Echoing Amy's fatal plot in *Gone Girl*, Emily's disappearance, and fictitious death, have been planned. 'For six months', Emily explains, 'I would be dead. A suicide, some people would think. A drunken, pill-addled accident, Sean's lawyers would insist. And they would prevail' (p. 168). Though, unlike *Gone Girl*'s Nick, Sean participates in Emily's scheme, she is still very much the driving force behind the idea and its execution. Emily recalls how she 'made Sean watch the films [she] liked, black-and-white thrillers from the thirties and forties' (p. 152). Taking inspiration from these films, Emily began to build a plan to defraud the insurance carrier at Sean's firm of a '(relatively) small fortune', explaining 'the logical steps [while] Sean went along, like all those scammed, bewitched men in the movies' (pp. 151-2). While I have identified parallels between the plot of *Sunburn* and that of *Double Indemnity*, the comparison between *A Simple Favor* and the 1944 film is explicitly mapped onto Sean and Emily's plan: 'He was the Fred McMurray, I was the Barbara Stanwyck', Emily states (p. 152). While this comparison to the characters of *Double Indemnity* works for some elements of Emily and Sean's characterisation – she is tempting him to plot and plan with her, mirroring the dynamic between Walter Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson – in other places it is somewhat questionable. Emily and Sean are married, for example, while Phyllis and Walter are planning to kill Phyllis' husband. In addition, Walter kills femme fatale Phyllis at the close of *Double Indemnity*, in classic mid-twentieth-century noir style. With these inconsistencies in mind, I suggest that the intertextual dialogue taking place within Emily's sections are indicative of her position as a redeployment of fatal femininity. Like Phyllis, she is driving the narrative forwards with her fatal plot. Unlike Phyllis, she is not killed at the end of the narrative and, actually, is the only character who remains unscathed at the novel's close – an important narrative departure to which I will return later in this section.

[85] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 60.

Like *Sunburn*'s Polly, Emily's desires to go on-the-run are somewhat vexed, but still located within the realms of maternal desire. 'All I wanted – or *thought* I wanted', Emily muses in retrospect, 'was to stay home with Nicky. With lots of money in some gorgeous place. And without having to work' (p. 161, emphasis in original). However, lodged within Emily's desires to run is a deep-seated malaise. While I have previously located such feelings of dissatisfaction in relation to Friedan's theorisation of 'the problem that has no name', Emily's discontent is not contained within the bounds of housewifery.[86] In fact, she'd 'suffered from a sort of suffocating boredom, on and off, all [her] life', and liked that her plan 'was a long shot. The opposite of tedious and safe' (pp. 146, 156). She 'wanted to risk getting caught – and not get caught' (p. 161). Regardless of these individual motivations, she insists that she 'always wanted Nicky' to be a part of her plans (p. 152). Like Polly, who 'enjoys the silence, the novelty of no one needing her, no voices calling, nothing to be cleaned or cooked or washed' while on-the-run (*Sunburn,* p. 14), Emily recalls how 'it was great to go off the grid' (p. 170). Unlike Polly's narrative however, Emily's longing to see her child is made prominent. While on-the-run, she 'couldn't stay away' from Nicky, 'thought about him all the time', 'wondered what he was doing', and 'reached the point at which [she] felt that [she] couldn't live another day without seeing [her] son' (p. 170). Merging narratives of fatal and maternal femininity further, Emily describes seeking out Stephanie, mindful that she could fulfil a crucial role in her and Sean's plan. Emily 'became a friendship predator, on the prowl for a new best friend' (p. 157). Unlike depictions of the femme fatale in classic noir, in which an 'evil seductress […] tempts man and brings about his destruction', Emily's manipulation is not about 'sex or power but about closeness and trust. About raising [their] kids. About motherhood' (p. 157).[87] As a result, like Lippman's novel, Emily's narrative works to wrench 'the "look" (and the "voice")' from the masculine fantasies of film noir, delving into and redeploying narratives of fatal femininity.[88]

Masculine fantasies, desires, and anxieties are also given voice within *A Simple Favor*. With Bell's novel, two short sections feature from the perspective of Emily's husband Sean. Parallels can be read between these sections and those from the perspective of Gregg in *Sunburn*. While Gregg is mostly full of scorn for Polly's 'wildcat energy', Sean is scared of Emily, who he nonetheless finds irresistible (*Sunburn*, p. 15). For Sean, the fact that Emily is

[86] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, [1963] 2001), p. 47.
[87] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47.
[88] Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism', p. 14; Beckman, 'From Irony to Narrative Crisis', p. 25.

'trouble' is 'part of her appeal' (p. 229). Emphasising Emily's unknowability, Sean asks: 'What are you to think when after five years of marriage she has never once let you meet her mother? When you've never seen one picture of her when she was little, when she refuses to tell you one thing about her childhood […]?' before answering his own rhetorical questions: 'you give in; you give up […] you lose your power and you don't get it back' (p. 229). Whereas Gregg strives to regain power over Polly, Sean succumbs to Emily's magnetism like 'all those scammed, bewitched men in the movies' (p. 152). Additionally, Sean describes how his desire for Emily shaped his own identity. '[B]eing with Emily proved that I still had something cool about me. I was married to the prettiest, coolest girl', he states (p. 231). In *A Simple Favor*, Emily's narrative works to subvert Sean's positioning of her as the 'coolest girl' (p. 231), mirroring Amy's rejection of Cool Girl femininity in *Gone Girl*. While Sean describes how Emily was always 'daring' him and inviting him 'to be her partner in crime', her portrayal of events is much more pragmatic (p. 231). For Emily, Sean was 'so easy to reprogram, to convince that *he* was in control' (p. 144, emphasis in original). She could 'make Sean into whatever [she] wanted him to be. All [she] had to do was figure out what [she] wanted him to be' (p. 144). Not only does Emily fool Sean into perceiving her as the 'coolest girl', she also shapes Sean into the version of himself that *she* needs *him* to be, subverting the gendered dynamic associated with Cool Girl femininity (p. 231). While in film noir, the femme fatale has been framed as an exercise in masculine wish fulfilment, *A Simple Favor* (alongside *Sunburn*) includes a masculine narrative voice in order to foreground said perspective, before undermining its assumptions. Such a formal reversal might be seen as an act of feminine wish fulfilment, a point given further weight when considering how Emily moulds Sean into the kind of man that she wants him to be, the object of her own fantasy.

While Emily's aforementioned subversion destabilises ideas of feminine obedience and masculine omnipotence, her actions still hold an uneasy relationship with postfeminist and neoliberal values. In *Gone Girl,* Amy reflects on her embodied 'hollow quality' when playing the Cool Girl, the unsustainability of playing such a role, and the sociocultural effects such a mode of femininity has on gendered power structures, whereas on the other hand Emily's narrative delivers no sustained critique.[89] Like the phallic girl and the Cool Girl, Emily's ability to manipulate Sean is reliant upon her desirability, and her reversal of the

[89] Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 'In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Studies', *Cinema Journal*, 44.2 (Winter, 2005), 107-110 (p. 107); Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 'Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture', in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 1-25 (p. 2).

Cool Girl dynamic could, in itself, be said to give 'the impression of having equality with men'.[90] On a narrative level, however, feminist notions of collectivity are far from Emily's concerns. Stephanie is a stepping stone for Emily, someone who will step in to care for her son during her short absence. Even before Emily is aware that Stephanie and Sean have started a relationship, her descriptions of Stephanie are strewn with internalised misogyny, specifically directed at her mode of mothering. Specifically, the 'banality' of Stephanie's blog 'clinched' her role within Emily's plans (p. 161). According to Emily, the blog is full of 'nerdy posts about being the perfect mom and reaching out to other moms, helping other moms, and maybe once in a while stepping back so you can reflect on the culture's efforts to turn you and the other moms into baby-making childcare machines with no life or identity of your own' (p. 161). 'Surprise, *moms*!', she concludes, 'It's already happened!' (p. 161, emphasis in original). While her description does contain some legitimate critique – echoing Friedan's analysis of the culturally constructed mode of the housewife who exists 'only for and through her husband and children' with no separate identity of her own – Emily's tone is incredibly ambivalent.[91] Taken alongside her disparaging nickname for Stephanie, 'Captain Mom', Emily's critique also mocks Stephanie's attempts to connect with other women, and their discussions of sociocultural issues regarding motherhood (p. 158). As a result, Emily is positioned in opposition to 'feminist ideas of collectivist action', instead maintaining a 'self-affirming' and 'individualistic stance'.[92] Though, as a redeployment of fatal femininity, Emily's characterisation provides an 'imagined momentum', with motherhood included within her motivations, her actions diminish broader sociocultural tensions regarding motherhood, thus limiting her feminist potential as a fatal mum on-the-run.[93]

As I have suggested, Emily and Stephanie occupy two distinct modes of motherhood from the outset of the novel which, in turn, mirror the 'mutually exclusive' types of mothering made visible through contemporary popular culture: 'stay-at-home moms and working mothers'.[94] Stephanie's relationship to contemporary feminisms can be read through her blog. Though she insists that the woman she once was – the young woman in the city reading Virginia Woolf and working at a magazine – is buried underneath 'playdates and school lunches and early bedtimes' (p. 5), Stephanie's blog also acts as a space where

---

[90] Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*: *Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009), p. 83.
[91] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique,* p. 47.
[92] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 123.
[93] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', pp. 71-2.
[94] Lopez, 'The radical act of 'mommy blogging'', p. 731.

feminist concerns regarding motherhood and writing emerge. On her blog, Stephanie refers back to a previous post, stating that she's 'blogged about the silly, hurtful divisions that often come between working moms and stay-at-home moms', identifying the 'mutually exclusive' categories outlined by Lopez earlier in this chapter (p. 19). Therefore, though we are not privy to Stephanie's discourses around said categorisation, she is positioned as critical of the divisive positioning of these modes of motherhood.[95] Echoes of Woolf are also critically present within contemporary examinations of gender and online space. Tegan Zimmerman, in her study of *A Room of One's Own* and, in particular, the possibility of a *virtual* room of one's own, argues that 'rethinking [twenty-first century] women's writing in relation to Woolf's essay must now also take technology into account'.[96] While Zimmerman identifies the material limitations in terms of 'physical and practical access to the internet' for women in developing nations, she states that '[w]riting online can be a catalyst or way for women to write their lived experiences and gain an identity and visibility outside of their everyday lives'.[97] Given the criticism around motherhood and visibility – and how certain modes of motherhood 'slip in and out – mostly out – of focus' – Stephanie's blog presents itself as a potential avenue through which the pressures and divisions of mothering might be seen.[98]

Indeed, paralleling Zimmerman's proposed *virtual* room of one's own, criticism regarding 'mom blogs' positions these websites as spaces with radical potentiality.[99] 'Mommy bloggers', Lopez outlines, 'have officially invaded the blogosphere, luring thousands of readers daily to websites that document countless tales of parenting joys and woes'.[100] The title of 'mommy blogger', however, is a point of contention.[101] While Lopez suggests that the title 'can be both a source of pride and a source of embarrassment', used to both 'compliment and demean', Emily January Petersen links the term to women's 'lack of legitimacy as professionals' within the blogosphere, and the minimisation of the impact that such women and their blogs 'have on peers and society at large'.[102] On her blog, Stephanie indicates that, though she's 'kept it secret', she's 'always been a teensy bit jealous of Emily's career', longing for the 'glamour, the excitement, [and] the practically free clothes' that

---

[95] Lopez, 'The radical act of 'mommy blogging', (p. 731).
[96] Tegan Zimmerman, 'The Politics of Writing, Writing Politics: Virginia Woolf's A [Virtual] Room of One's Own', *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, 3.3 (Fall, 2012), 35-55 (p. 40).
[97] Zimmerman, 'The Politics of Writing, Writing Politics', pp. 49-50.
[98] Rose, *Mothers*, p. 9.
[99] Emily January Petersen, 'Redefining the Workplace: The Professionalization of Motherhood Through Blogging', *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 44.3 (2014), 277-296 (p. 278).
[100] Lopez, 'The radical act of 'mommy blogging", p. 729.
[101] Lopez, 'The radical act of 'mommy blogging", p. 730.
[102] Lopez, 'The radical act of 'mommy blogging", p. 730; Petersen, 'Redefining the Workplace', p. 278.

Emily's vocation entails, while she is at home 'making peanut butter sandwiches and wiping up spilled apple juice and blogging' (p. 19). She is, however, adamant not to 'underestimate how happy and grateful [she is] to be able to reach out to (by now) thousands of moms worldwide', thus highlighting the global and personal effects of these online communities (p. 19). While postfeminism proposes 'a movement beyond feminism to a more comfortable zone where women are now free to choose for themselves', Stephanie's voiced ambivalence positions her virtual room of one's own as a site to question such assumptions in dialogue with a broader collective of women.[103]

While, as is the case with *A Simple Favor* as a whole, Lopez highlights that 'white, married, heterosexual' women dominate the 'conversation' happening on 'mom blogs' – a fact that heavily undermines the radical potential of such spaces – she also theorises the criticism received by the writers of these blogs through the highly gendered 'concept of the public/private dichotomy'.[104] 'Motherhood', Lopez suggests, 'is seen as part of the private or domestic sphere that women are supposed to occupy and not challenge' – in opposition to the public sphere of work, 'politics', 'economics', and 'law': the domain of men.[105] This positioning of motherhood within the private sphere is transgressed within the public act of blogging about domesticity, mothering, and their ambivalences because, as Lopez reminds us, 'successful, strong men do not air their laundry in public, so to speak'.[106] In *A Simple Favor*, Stephanie's blog traverses the public and private realms.[107] While mom blogs are critically situated as sites where maternal subjectivities might 'slip' into 'focus', the chapter sections surrounding Stephanie's blog posts reveal her entries to be something of a façade.[108] If she told the truth, she suggests, the 'moms would never forgive [her]' (p. 67). Though some omittances are directly linked to the expectations of the mom blogging community – her choice not to blog about feeding Emily's son red meat, for example – there is still 'a lot [she] can't blog about' (p. 126). The information that is relayed in Stephanie's first person chapters relates to her personal, often sexual, desires and transgressions. Through these hidden admittances, we learn that Stephanie's son is fathered by her half brother and how, following Emily's disappearance, Stephanie and Sean begin a relationship. While mom blogs are critically situated as sites for the sharing, making-public, and legitimising of the so-called

[103] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 33.
[104] Lopez, 'The radical act of 'mommy blogging'', p. 731-33.
[105] Lopez, 'The radical act of 'mommy blogging'', p. 731.
[106] Lopez, 'The radical act of 'mommy blogging'', p. 731.
[107] Petersen, 'Redefining the Workplace', p. 278.
[108] Petersen, 'Redefining the Workplace', p. 278.

'private' concerns of mothering and domesticity, Stephanie uses her blog as a façade, a space for a performance of 'good' motherhood that also attends to the ambivalences of such a role.

Later in the novel, Stephanie begins to use her blog as a means of communicating with Emily, who she suspects is still alive. Framing the post in an exercise in managing grief, Stephanie writes to Emily: 'All I can do is love the people you used to love and try to make their lives better. Which is what I know you would want, if you loved them' (p. 177). Emily, irritated by this post, admits that 'Stephanie was right about how you can never really know anyone' (p. 179). While Emily is the mum-on-the-run from the outset of the novel this statement, alongside Stephanie's antagonistic behaviour, positions Stephanie within the realm of epistemological incertitude. 'If Stephanie wants to play cat and mouse', Emily continues, 'she can be the mouse. I'll be the cat […] The mouse has a reason to be afraid. Because the cat always wins. The cat is the one who enjoys it' (p. 179). The distinct playfulness of this interaction draws parallels back to evidence left behind by *Gone Girl*'s Amy: the anniversary treasure hunt. Like her diary, the treasure hunt is a tool of covert communication, this time with her husband Nick. Disguised as riddles referring to shared memories, Amy alludes to tensions within their relationship such as Nick's infidelities. As I have argued in Chapter One, through this riddle-filled treasure hunt, Amy actively constructs *herself* as an enigma, destabilising the 'masculine discourse[s]' which seek to position her as an '*object*' of epistemological enquiry (emphasis in original).[109] Amy's playful movement between modes of femininity is echoed in the 'cat and mouse' game of *A Simple Favor* (p. 179). Though Emily is initially portrayed as more of a classic femme fatale – due to her unknowability, the power that she holds over men, and her noir-inspired fatal plot – Stephanie, too, proves difficult to pin down, secretive, pragmatic, and transgressive. The initially disparate modes of femininity that Stephanie and Emily construct – 'stay-at-home moms and working mothers' – are no longer positioned as 'mutually exclusive', as boundaries between public and private are repeatedly blurred, alongside those of 'good' and 'bad' motherhood.[110]

This obfuscation of 'good' and 'bad' motherhood reaches an apex when Emily returns, drawing Stephanie into her renewed plan. After learning that Stephanie and Sean have been sleeping together, Emily contacts Stephanie and tells her – again echoing Amy's narrative about Desi on her return to Nick – that Sean had started to abuse her shortly after they were married. As with Amy's return, Emily's story of domestic abuse is fictional, but it

[109] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 13.
[110] Lopez, 'The radical act of 'mommy blogging'', (p. 731).

is enough to get Stephanie – who 'trusted' her and 'believed her' and 'was so sorry for what she had been through' – back on her side (p. 258). Stephanie imagines how their lives will continue: they will 'survive' together with their 'beautiful sons', 'like two powerful cartoon characters – superheroines, superfriends – on [their] way to get justice' (pp. 258-59). Stephanie's cloying language, evocative of Emily's disdainful nickname 'Captain Mom', sits in contrast with the acts that Emily is asking her to perform (p. 158). Bringing Sean to 'justice' is the least of Emily's problems – she needs help disposing of the insurance investigator who threatened her fatal plot (p. 259). As a result, Stephanie becomes 'a mom and a blogger and an accessory to murder' (p. 272). While these categories of identification juxtapose in Stephanie's narration, the physical strength employed to help Emily commit her crime is positioned in relation to motherhood. Recalling pushing the insurance investigator's car over a cliff, '[g]runting and swearing', Stephanie states that she 'tried not to think about how much it felt like giving birth' (p. 263). Just as Polly locates Ditmars' murder as 'another of those superhuman feats of strength that a mother can summon, like lifting a car or leaping from a burning building' (*Sunburn,* p. 102), Stephanie connects the feeling of 'lightness' and 'a familiar rush of pure joy when [they] finally succeeded' to the experience of labour (p. 263). Whereas previously Stephanie has linked investigative skills to motherhood – asking the 'moms community to keep its naturally extra-sharp mom eyes open', and suggesting that mothers develop 'an instinct for the truth that can help' in their 'non-mom lives' (p. 26, p. 245) – disposing of a dead body with Emily is also framed as 'mom power in action', confounding previous critical distinctions between fatal women and the 'dull and constricting' realm of 'families, children, homes and domesticity' (p. 263).[111]

In order to discuss the conclusion of *A Simple Favor*, it is worth looking ahead to Paul Feig's 2018 filmic adaptation of the novel.[112] In the film, the conclusion jumps ahead to six

[111] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 60.

[112] *A Simple Favor*, dir. Paul Feig (Lionsgate, 2018). In this adaption, Emily is openly bisexual. Farrimond indicates that, 'the figure of the femme fatale who behaves bisexually is arguably the most pervasive', appearing in 'Neo-Noir, erotic thrillers, teen drama, science fiction and retro noir' (Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 96). The femme fatale's bisexuality might be read, Farrimond continues, 'as an effort to amplify' her 'sexiness' in 'a culture where the conventionally attractive woman who behaves bisexually but is still predominantly more attracted to men has a great deal of currency', while also implying 'duplicity' (Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 96). While ideas about duplicity can veer dangerously close to a 'popular' and derogatory 'understanding of bisexuality as flighty and untrustworthy', Farrimond also identifies how bisexuality might be a productive avenue for disrupting the 'patriarchal gaze' (Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 96, p. 111). The 'patriarchal gaze' cannot sufficiently 'objectify' the 'bisexually active' femme fatale 'without a sense of anxiety', Farrimond suggests, as her desires are 'confusing, opaque and potentially deadly' – 'she refuses to stay still and allow us to see clearly what she is' (Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 111). There is one moment in the film and another in the book where bisexuality, or desire between the two women, comes to the fore. In Bell's novel, Stephanie tries on Emily's clothes in her absence. She lies down on the bed with her 'legs draped over the end so [she] could watch

months later, with the closing scenes depicting vlogger Stephanie with one million subscribers, announcing that she is now inviting 'unsolved mysteries' following her success in taking down Emily. Emily, duped by Sean and Stephanie, is now incarcerated, with expository text advising the viewer that 'she has adjusted to prison life quite nicely'. Here, Emily's imprisonment harks back to the narrative closure allotted to femmes fatales in classic film noir, a parallel aesthetically heightened by her out-of-character 1940s style dress at the point of her arrest. With this ending, Emily is declawed, her threat diminished, along with any attempt at re-examining or redeploying the contemporary femme fatale for dynamic, feminist ends. In the novel, though Stephanie concludes the events on her blog with the line '[a]ll's well that ends well', Emily has other ideas (p. 292). When visited by the police in relation to the discovery of the car belonging to the insurance investigator, as well as some of his remains and Emily's wedding ring, she advises the police that in her absence, Stephanie and Sean began a relationship and were planning to get married. If they need more information, she says, she can give them a 'link to her blog' (p. 297). Stephanie's blog, with its multiple uses throughout the novel, is now redeployed by Emily in order to evade punishment – the 'cat and mouse' game continues (p. 179). As soon as the police leave, echoing both the ongoing threat indicated at the close of *Gone Girl* and the maternal conclusion of *Sunburn*, Emily decides that it is 'time for Nicky and [her] to head into the sunset, or sunrise, whichever. To go off the grid for a while' (p. 298). She considers visiting Sean, becoming 'the cat again – with yet another mouse' (p. 298). Crucially, the novel ends on an optimistic note for Emily, who feels 'young and excited and brave […] happy to be alive' (p. 298). The novel's conclusion rejects fixity as, once again, both mothers and their futures 'slip in and out […] of focus'.[113] As with *Sunburn*, Emily exists both inside and outside of the 'normative romance' of heterosexuality and family at the end of the novel.[114] However, by directly incriminating Stephanie in order to get ahead, Emily's characterisation does fall more into the 'self-affirming, individualistic' mode of fatal femininity associated

---

[herself] in the mirror', reaching 'up under the filmy pale blue dress' and masturbates, imagining that she is Emily, and that Sean is watching her (p. 129). 'I didn't want to have sex with Emily', Stephanie affirms, 'I just liked pretending to be her' (p. 129). While Feig's adaptation does not remove eroticism from Stephanie and Emily's relationship entirely, the scene including Stephanie masturbating is not featured. Instead, over an after school martini, Stephanie (Anna Kendrick) and Emily (Blake Lively) kiss, a scene that is contextualised by the film's inclusion of Emily's bisexuality – a detail that does not feature in Bell's text. While Bell's text constructs a complex, ambivalent connection between the two women – rooted in restrictive cultural ideas about motherhood, boredom, and fantasies of escape – Feig sidesteps nuanced constructions of desire between women, and fatal femininity.

[113] Rose, *Mothers*, p. 9.

[114] Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme* Fatale, p. 14.

with both postfeminism and neoliberalism.[115] Ending on the same ambivalence that characterises the constructions of fatal motherhood in *A Simple Favor*, it is nonetheless still the case that the novel lends further credence to Rose's suggestion that mothers are 'never – as feminism has long insisted – what they seem, or are meant to be'.[116]

Good Girls

While *Sunburn* and *A Simple Favor* culminate with their fatal mothers as lone victors, the protagonists of the television series *Good Girls* (2018-) are consistently constructed as a collective group. The series, created by Jenna Bans, follows three mothers – Beth (Christina Hendricks), her sister Annie (Mae Whitman), and their friend Ruby (Retta) – who, due to their differing financial difficulties, plan to hold up a local supermarket. Though the supermarket heist is intended to be a one-off event, the trio become further embroiled within the world of criminality as the series unfolds. This basic narrative premise has caused critics to draw comparisons between *Good Girls* and Vince Gilligan's 2008-13 series *Breaking Bad*, a series utilised as a key example in Frances-White's discussion of the wife and mother as a 'plot killer'.[117] In *Good Girls*, it is women's perspectives, actions, feelings and voices that drive the story forwards. The plot killer is reshaped and re-imagined to kill plots about women, wives, and mothers. Despite this difference in focus, reviews of *Good Girls* establish a parallel between Ruby, Beth, and Annie's motivations and those of Gilligan's protagonist Walter White. In *Breaking Bad*, Walter, a high school chemistry teacher diagnosed with untreatable lung cancer, starts to produce methamphetamine as a means of providing for his family after his death. Despite recognising that the 'surface parallels' between this premise and that of *Good Girls* are 'tough to miss', James Poniewozik identifies a difference between the two series.[118] Whereas for 'Walter White and his many TV cousins, crime has often been about self-worth, even virility', Poniewozik continues, for Ruby, Annie, and Beth 'the money is more about self-determination: freedom from reliance on lousy men or the whims of the economy'.[119] While such an assessment of *Good Girls* is somewhat valid, Poniewozick's distinction between men and women's motivations in these series is predicated on a false binary. It is hard to imagine the likes of Walter or, to use another example proffered by

[115] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 123.
[116] Rose, *Mothers*, p. 18.
[117] Frances-White, 'Dangerous Women on Film'.
[118] James Poniewozik, 'Review: 'Good Girls' Offers Equal Time for Antiheroines' (2018). Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/25/arts/television/good-girls-review-nbc-christina-hendricks.html [accessed 12th January 2021].
[119] Poniewozick, 'Review: 'Good Girls' Offers Equal Time for Antiheroines'.

Poniewozick, Tony Soprano of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) operating without any concern for self-determination *and* self-worth. Furthermore, Poniewozick questions the strength of the 'ironies' encapsulated within *Good Girls*' title, suggesting that there needs to be 'moral conflict' and 'the possibility that these protagonists, however much we like them, might make a wrong choice that will get somebody hurt.'.[120] This reductive account of the series' so-called 'surburbanites-gone-wild conceit' does not take into account the potential consequences associated with the protagonists actions and how said risks intersect with gender.[121] As Eliana Dockterman points out, while comparisons to the likes of *Breaking Bad* are 'inevitable', 'Walter White never had to worry that if a woman found out his secret identity she would try to blackmail him for sex or, failing that, rape him' – a comment which touches upon a storyline featuring Annie and her boss, Boomer (David Hornsby), in Season One of *Good Girls*.[122] In this critical conflict, *Good Girls* is positioned as a space where feminine sociocultural concerns 'slip' into 'focus'.[123]

This opportunity for the representation and discussion of feminine-focused issues may also be intertwined with the series' generic position. As with domestic noir – a genre concerned with the danger and disillusionment of noir but, unlike classic noir, concerned largely with women's experiences – *Good Girls*' position between crime drama and comedy provides a site for tracing 'broadly feminist' discourses and concerns.[124] For Poniewozick, the series' generic liminality provides another point of contention. 'The problem', he states, 'as enjoyable as "Good Girls" often is, is that it seems unsure how serious it is about being a crime story', citing a lack of 'ethical angst' as one reason that the series is not as 'heavy' as its 'cable kin'.[125] While this focus on being 'serious' calls to mind the broader exclusion of women's work from canonical (men's) writing, I want to focus here on the feminist possibilities provided by this generic slipperiness and the incorporation of humour. Dusty Lavoie's partly anecdotal discussion of the potentiality of humour when grappling with issues of class, race, gender, and sexuality provides one point of insight. 'By disrupting, discoursing, critiquing, performing, and, yes, even laughing about/through/with identity politics', Lavoie writes, 'we collectively become more sensitive to the nature of others' lived

---

[120] Poniewozick, 'Review: 'Good Girls' Offers Equal Time for Antiheroines'.
[121] Poniewozik, 'Review: 'Good Girls' Offers Equal Time for Antiheroines'.
[122] Eliana Dockterman, 'Good Girls Is the Perfect Show for This Moment' (2018). Available at https://time.com/5163688/good-girls-nbc-review/ [accessed 12th January 2021].
[123] Rose, *Mothers*, p. 9.
[124] Julia Crouch, 'Genre Bender' (2013). Available at http://juliacrouch.co.uk/blog/genre-bender [accessed 7th April 2019].
[125] Poniewozick, 'Review: 'Good Girls' Offers Equal Time for Antiheroines'.

experiences and to instances of difference that enrich our daily lives'.[126] It is through the use of 'strategic, respectful, sometimes transgressive humour', Lavoie continues, that 'outdated notions and norms become loosened'.[127] This strategic undoing of sociocultural values also relates to *Good Girls'* propensity for 'plot killing'. While Poniewozick's focus on a lack of 'ethical angst' is positioned in relation to the series' (predominantly male-focused) 'cable kin', questions of 'good' and 'bad' characterisation are prominent within *Good Girls*.[128] Indeed, perhaps there is even more at stake for Annie, Beth, and Ruby. They run the risk of being branded not only as 'bad' women, but also as 'bad' mothers – an observation all the more pressing when read against the sociocultural contexts highlighted by Rose and McRobbie regarding the binaric systems of 'aspirational' and 'underclass' motherhood.[129] Rebecca Feasey's comments on representations of motherhood in contemporary popular television provide another context within which this tension is particularly pertinent. Though the 'impossible, implausible and unattainable image' of 'good' motherhood is 'far removed from the lived experience of many women in society', Feasey states, this ideal is still positioned as the image of mothering that 'we should all aspire to and strive for'.[130] Rather than aligning with the masculine-focused crime framework (with its associated broad moral judgements) provided within Poniewozick's assessment, and marking a departure from the modes of televisual motherhood outlined by Feasey, *Good Girls*' focus lies within the complex, conflicting, and angst-ridden space between 'good' and 'bad' motherhood.

Rose's, McRobbie's, and Feasey's sentiments on the unrealisability of being a 'good' woman and/or mother in a patriarchal context marks a parallel to the feelings that motivated Bans' creation of *Good Girls*. In the midst of the climate of sexism associated with Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign – a time when, Bans states, the 'collective view of women was just in the ether' – Bans recalls considering the 'idea that you spend your entire life following the rules and doing everything right and being a good person', with the hope that this behaviour will, someday and in some way, pay off.[131] '[Y]ou have this expectation

---

[126] Dusty Lavoie, '"No, Not That Twilight": The comic critique of gendered/raced identity, politics, pedagogy, and performance', *Feminist Media Studies*, 10. 3 (2010), 364-367 (p. 366).
[127] Lavoie, '"No, Not That Twilight"', p. 366.
[128] Poniewozick, 'Review: 'Good Girls' Offers Equal Time for Antiheroines'.
[129] Angela McRobbie, 'Feminism, the Family and the new 'Mediated' Maternalism', *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/*Politics, 80-81 (2013), 119-137 (p. 120); Rose, *Mothers*, p. 18.
[130] Rebecca Feasey, *From Happy Homemakers to Desperate Housewives: Motherhood and Popular Television* (Anthem Press: London and New York, 2012), p. 5.
[131] Debra Birnhaum, 'Good Girls' Creator Jenna Bans on How Donald Trump's Election Fueled Her' (2018). Available at https://variety.com/2018/tv/news/good-girls-jenna-bans-donald-trump-1202674831/ [accessed 3rd March 2021]; See Jill Filipovic, 'Our President Has Always Degraded Women – And We've Always Let Him' (2017). Available at https://time.com/5047771/donald-trump-comments-billy-bush/ [accessed 12th January

that life should work out for you and if it doesn't', Bans posits, 'what do you do then?'.[132] While *Good Girls* is intended to be an 'escapist and fun' answer to this question, it is also 'a love letter to [Bans'] mother, who was really depressed and down about the way the election was going', and its concurrent amplification of patriarchal values.[133] Therefore, as 'escapist' as elements of the series might be, *Good Girls* holds experiences of motherhood at its core, whilst maintaining an alignment with real world sociocultural contexts.[134] The dialogue between the series and contemporaneous narratives about womanhood also mirrors discourses regarding fatal femininity. We recall, for instance, how Stables describes the femme fatale figure as an 'anxiety pointer': a signifier of social unrest and unease around issues of gender and power.[135] With this in mind, the fatal mothers of *Good Girls* can be positioned as a reaction, or pointer, to the flourishing sexism of the sociocultural milieu in which the series was born. Bans's further suggestion that the series is 'chockfull of wish fulfillment' [sic] also works to solidify this relationship, particularly with reference to Pidduck's emphasis on the ideological vitality of 'rage and revenge fantasies'.[136] During a time when women are 'bombarded by the evidence of our increasing vulnerability, poverty, and limited social power' on an 'everyday' basis, Pidduck writes, the power associated with representations of fatal femininity provide 'an imagined momentum' which 'cannot be underestimated'.[137] When we read *Good Girls* in alignment with Stables and Pidduck's assertions, with Bans's motivations also in mind, we can see how the series seeks to identify and challenge contemporaneous dialogues about femininity and power, while keeping the narrative itself firmly rooted within the context of motherhood.

Though motherhood is a clear focal point within the series – with each protagonist projected into the world of crime with the interests of their family in mind – *Good Girls*' title, with its explicit invocation of girlhood, also invites interrogation. In her review of series one,

---

2021]. Writing in 2017, Filipovic comments on the *Washington Post*'s publication of the tape in which Trump infamously states: 'I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it, you can do anything… grab them by the pussy', describing how it was a 'national scandal, but apparently not scandalous enough'. That Trump used a naughty word 17 years ago isn't headline news', Filipovic continues, '[b]ut his history and the way he has talked about and treated women offer important context for our current political universe'. This misogyny has been 'encouraged, enabled and even glorified by his business associates, the entertainment media and the press more generally', leading to a situation where 'a crass misogynist' is able to 'ascend to the highest position in the country'. It is 'women who have long paid the price for Trump's bad behavior', Filipovic continues, 'and women across the country and around the world who are paying now'.

[132] Birnhaum, ''Good Girls' Creator Jenna Bans on How Donald Trump's Election Fueled Her'

[133] Birnhaum, ''Good Girls' Creator Jenna Bans on How Donald Trump's Election Fueled Her'.

[134] Birnhaum, ''Good Girls' Creator Jenna Bans on How Donald Trump's Election Fueled Her'.

[135] Kate Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing the *Femme Fatale* in 90s Cinema', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 164-82 (p. 171).

[136] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', pp. 71-2.

[137] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', pp. 71-2.

Kristen Baldwin asks: 'Is the show's title intentionally demeaning or just cutesy?'.[138] The title of Baldwin's review – '*Good Girls* is a gentler, girlier *Breaking Bad*' – arguably leans towards the former, echoing Miller's suggestion that '*girl*', when used to refer to women, is 'patronising and infantilising' (emphasis in original).[139] However, as Lindop indicates, the cultural focus on girlhood, or 'girling' of femininity more generally, can be seen as 'indicative of postfeminist popular culture' and the centrality of 'girls' to the 'notion of female empowerment'.[140] Providing another perspective to the vexed critical position of girlhood, Munford and Waters suggest, that 'girl culture' is also a feature of third wave feminism, indicative within this context of 'a break from an earlier feminist generation'.[141] Accompanying this break is, Munford and Waters continue, 'an understanding of feminist history framed by the mother-daughter metaphor'.[142] Bans's utilisation of 'girl' may signify this division, but it is not necessarily a complete break away from previous waves of feminist thought. Instead, through Bans's indication that the series is, in part, a 'love letter' to her mother, an intergenerational dialogue and identification of like concerns emerges.[143] Subverting what Tasker and Negra describe as the 'generational construction of girls and young women […] enjoying the freedoms secured by the activism of their mothers and grandmothers', *Good Girls* works to illuminate what happens when the 'expectation that life should work out for you' – the postfeminist suggestion that daughters will enjoy gender equality thanks to their feminist foremothers – does not come to fruition.[144] In this context, 'girl' is not figured as 'demeaning' or 'cutesy', nor 'patronising and infantilising'.[145] Instead, *Good Girls* acts as 'a hinge between old and new, present and future', indicative of the enduring requirement for feminist discourse and activism.[146] While marriage and motherhood may be traditionally situated as signifiers of adult womanhood, Annie, Beth, and Ruby's narratives illustrate the instability of such modes of femininity, a precarity that can also be

---

[138] Kristen Baldwin, 'Good Girls is a gentler, girlier Breaking Bad: EW review' (2018). Available at https://ew.com/tv/2018/02/09/good-girls-nbc-review/ [accessed 12th January 2021].
[139] Miller, '"How Much Do You Want to Pay for This Beauty?", p. 97.
[140] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 99.
[141] Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, p. 23.
[142] Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, p. 23.
[143] Birnhaum, ''Good Girls' Creator Jenna Bans on How Donald Trump's Election Fueled Her'
[144] Tasker and Negra, 'Introduction', p. 18; Birnhaum, ''Good Girls' Creator Jenna Bans on How Donald Trump's Election Fueled Her'.
[145] Baldwin, 'Good Girls is a gentler, girlier Breaking Bad: EW review'; Emma V. Miller, '"How Much Do You Want to Pay for This Beauty?": Domestic Noir and the Active Turn in Feminist Crime Fiction', in *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, ed. Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 89-113 (p. 97).
[146] Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, p. 107.

thought of in terms of 'mobility' and flexibility.[147] This particular 'girling' of motherhood seeks to engage with the promises and disappointments of postfeminist discourses, while allowing contemporary sociocultural experiences of motherhood to 'slip' into 'focus'.[148]

The opening scenes of series one episode one ('Pilot') exemplifies the gap between the postfeminist utilisation of girlhood and the lived experiences of women and girls.[149] As the camera pans down to the shot of a large suburban house, we hear a girl, later revealed to be Ruby's daughter, speaking. 'Girls today can be anything', the voiceover states, 'CEO, Olympic gold medallist, even a Supreme Court justice'. Such discourse calls to mind Harris's work on the 'future girl': 'a kind of young woman' on whom ideas of '[p]ower, opportunities, and success' are modelled in the twenty-first century.[150] The 'future girl' is celebrated, Harris continues, for her ability to 'take charge of her life, seize chances, and achieve her goals'.[151] While Harris suggests that the proliferation of this particular mode of girlhood exemplifies how 'young women are made visible in more and more places to exemplify this new way of being', the opening scenes of the Pilot episode construct the realities of Beth, Annie, and Ruby's lives as mothers.[152] 'We've finally broken that glass ceiling and wow, it sure looks good from the top' the voiceover ends, explicitly evoking a term which has become, according to Theresa Vargas, a 'universally recognized shorthand for a complex problem'.[153]

---

[147] Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 47.
[148] Rose, *Mothers*, p. 9.
[149] 'Pilot', *Good Girls*, NBC, 26th February 2018.
[150] Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.
[151] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 1.
[152] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 1.
[153] Theresa Vargas, 'She coined the term 'glass ceiling.' She fears it will outlive her' (2018). Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/03/01/she-coined-the-phrase-glass-ceiling-she-didnt-expect-it-to-outlive-her/ [accessed 7th April 2021]. Coined by Marilyn Loden during a panel entitled 'Mirror, Mirror on the Wall' at the 1978 Women's Exposition, the 'glass ceiling' describes an 'invisible barrier to [women's] advancement' in a professional context. Rather than focusing on 'what her colleagues were wearing or saying', Loden indicated that the lack of women 'entering management positions' was structural, not individual. Critics have also built upon Loden's critique with reference to twenty-first century contexts. As Amanda Mull indicates in her exploration of Girlboss Media, the issues associated with limiting equality to a professional context has been heightened by the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing awareness of broader inequalities. 'When a country is grappling with mass death, racist state violence, and the unemployment and potential homelessness of millions of people', Hull suggests, 'it becomes inescapably clear that when women center[sic] their worldview around their own office hustle, it just re-creates the power structures built by men, but with women conveniently on top' (Amanda Mull, 'The Girlboss Has Left the Building' (2020). Available at https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/06/girlbosses-what-comes-next/613519/ [accessed 7th April 2021]). Mull describes how the 'confident, hardworking, camera-ready' girlboss has an 'evil twin: a woman, pedigreed and usually white, who was not only as accomplished as her male counterparts, but just as cruel and demanding too'(Mull, 'The Girlboss Has Left the Building'). Evidently, while the mode of femininity offered through corporate empowerment promises, like the 'can-do' or 'future girl', 'choice, freedom, and real autonomy' (Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 5), the possibility of becoming a glass-ceiling-smashing girlboss is not only unattainable for many, it also fails, like McRobbie's 'phallic girl', to enact a 'critique of masculine hegemony' (McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, pp. 83-5).

While *Good Girls*' voiceover states that the glass ceiling has now been 'smashed', and that women's sociocultural and economic situation 'sure looks good from the top', the movement of the camera draws our gaze *down* towards the house. This physical movement, from the sky to Beth's home, stands in for a movement from this proposed 'top' to one reality of domestic labour and mothering – a space where corporate notions of women's empowerment have little to no concrete relevance. Replacing the voiceover, the lyrics of Selena Gomez's 2017 song 'Bad Liar' – 'Oh I'm tryin', I'm tryin', I'm tryin" – overlays the mise-en-scène as we see Beth's children running between rooms or drawing on each other's faces as she is 'trying' to get them ready for school. As Beth seeks to coordinate her children – asking them to brush their teeth and wash their face, lining up their lunch in brown paper bags – they are distracted by their father's presence on the television in an advert for his co-owned car dealership. Notably, he appears with his younger secretary, Amber, with whom he is later revealed to be having an affair. Dean's pig costume – contextualised by the advertisement's clumsy slogan 'what are you waiting for? A pig to fly?' – arguably foreshadows this revelation, while the notion of impossibility inferred within the figure of speech 'pigs might fly' aligns with the hopelessness of Beth's economic situation. Far from the realm of 'choice, freedom, and real autonomy', Beth is 'highly constrained' by the instability caused by Dean's behaviour.[154] If she does not find a large sum of money, they will lose their home. Therefore, both Dean's affair and his bankruptcy are key motivations for Beth's entry into fatal motherhood.

Though Beth's situation is clearly unsatisfactory, we can ascertain that prior to Dean's infidelity and bankruptcy her position was, on the contrary, highly aspirational. Beth is a white woman, living in a large house in the suburbs, who did not have to seek any means of income prior to the revelation of Dean's transgressions. In contrast, the issues propelling Annie's and Ruby's turns towards fatal motherhood are much more complex. Beth's younger sister, Annie, had her child with her ex-partner Gregg while they were teenagers. Now separated, Gregg (Zach Gilford) is trying to sue Annie for full custody of their child Sadie (Isaiah Stannard).[155] Annie works at 'Fine and Frugal' – the supermarket that the trio will

---

[154] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 5.

[155] Throughout the first season, their child is referred to with she/her pronouns and the name Sadie. Though an exploration of subsequent series of *Good Girls* is beyond the remit of this chapter, it is important to note that in season two, Annie's child comes out as transgender and is from there referred to as Ben, with he/him pronouns. Nick Duffy describes how the 'story arc is very close to home for 14-year-old actor Isaiah Stannard—who was originally cast while presenting as female, but came out as trans as he joined the show in 2018' (Nick Duffy, '11-year-old Good Girls character comes out as trans in beautiful scene' (2019). Available at https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2019/04/23/11-year-old-good-girls-character-comes-out-as-trans-in-beautiful-

later hold up. Indeed, it is Annie's knowledge of the behind-the-scenes workings of the supermarket that make the heist possible. When Annie, Ruby, and Beth hold up the supermarket, they find a much larger sum of money within the safe than expected. They keep and spend the money regardless, before discovering that the money belongs to a gang of criminals who are using 'Fine and Frugal' as a site for money laundering. As a result, the trio's entrance into criminality lands them in debt with the gang's leader Rio (Manny Montana). As part of repaying their debt to Rio, Beth is called upon to house one of Rio's associates as he recovers from several injuries – the causes of which remain mysterious. The associate escapes, and between this point and his return, Annie and Sadie share a moment which reveals the extent of the abuse that Sadie is receiving while in school. This moment also propels Annie towards utilising criminality as a means of addressing Sadie's bullies. Annie questions Sadie's frustration at being unable to find a belt, and Sadie reveals that other children at school keep trying to pull her trousers down because, she tells Annie, 'they want to know what I am'. The invasive actions of the bullies reflects, to utilise Lola Olufemi's discussion of intersex infants, the social and cultural 'power of sex as a classification system that makes us intelligible'.[156] In alignment with Olufemi's point, and remaining mindful that the 'fight for intersex people's rights to bodily autonomy and recognition is not the same fight as transgender people's', I suggest that in her experiences with the bullies at her school, Sadie is coming up against 'a rigid and violent system of sexual essentialism that renders many bodies and lives incomprehensible, forcing conformity and/or expulsion of those deemed unruly'.[157] Annie and Gregg's approaches to dealing with the situation differ drastically. While Gregg suggests that Sadie should move schools – stating that at St. Anne's, students who pulled other students' trousers down would simply be expelled – Annie indicates that the other alternative also 'uses the bible as a science textbook'. The lack of progressivism associated with the denial of evolutionary biology implies a concurrent traditional perspective on gender and sexuality which would, speculatively, also position Sadie's body as 'unruly'.[158] Gregg's suggestion is rendered obsolete as Annie has already utilised her criminal connections (in this case, Rio's aforementioned associate) in order to help Sadie. While the practical and ethical questions of a stranger entering a school in order to intimidate and injure a group of children are very much left up in the air, this is a moment

scene/ [accessed 14th December 2021]). Due to the context of my exploration of *Good Girls,* I refer to Stannard's character as Sadie as this is how the character is referred to in season one.

[156] Lola Olufemi, *Feminism Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), p. 52.

[157] Olufemi, *Feminism Interrupted*, p. 52.

[158] Olufemi, *Feminism Interrupted*, p. 52.

where associations with criminality are utilised to resolve issues affecting a fatal mother's family.

The key issue that propels Annie's entrance into criminality, however, is the battle for custody of Sadie. When Annie approaches Gregg to ask for sixty thousand dollars, the amount initially needed to pay back Rio, Gregg responds by telling Annie that she is 'not stable' and that situations like this are 'exactly why Nancy and [Gregg] should have full custody'. While we watch as Annie makes some chaotic financial decisions throughout season one – immediately going on a shopping spree and buying a new car after the supermarket holdup, for example – here Gregg's judgement also aligns with McRobbie's identification of the 'aspirational' and 'underclass' binary that underpins contemporary constructions of motherhood.[159] From the outset, Annie does not have the same financial stability and class privilege as Gregg and his new wife Nancy (Sally Pressman). Therefore, she is positioned as a 'bad', or at least not quite as 'good', mother. On the day of the custody evaluation, the group have to collect a package from Canada for Rio, before disposing of their borrowed vehicle. Annie loses track of time, and Sadie is forced to prepare alone for the home visit. Nancy, on the other hand, has been 'planning a menu' for their visit, Sadie informs Annie. Here, we can trace once again the binary notions of 'aspirational' and 'underclass' motherhood identified by McRobbie.[160] While Annie lives in a small apartment, Gregg and Nancy live on a winding suburban street populated by large detached houses. Continuing from Nancy and Annie's contrasting approaches to the custody evaluation, their differences are constructed on several occasions through food and domesticity. While Annie is often seen surrounded by fast food containers, Nancy welcomes Sadie to the house with the promise of fresh 'Pico de gallo' for dinner. In episode two 'Mo Money Mo Problems', when Annie asks Gregg 'who cares about real love and connection when you can make a child fresh Pico de gallo?', she is initiating more than just a humorous jab at Nancy.[161] Notably, Nancy is an aesthetician – she works with people in order to improve their appearance. With this in mind, Annie's question works as a critique of the focus on appearance that is associated with 'aspirational' modes of motherhood, whether this is concerned with giving children the 'right' food, keeping an immaculate home, or maintaining ideals of feminine beauty.[162] This critique also extends to later in the series in episode eight, 'Shutdown', when

[159] McRobbie, 'Feminism, the Family and the new 'Mediated' Maternalism', p. 120.
[160] McRobbie, 'Feminism, the Family and the new 'Mediated' Maternalism', p. 120.
[161] 'Mo Money Mo Problems', *Good Girls*, NBC, 5th March 2018.
[162] McRobbie, 'Feminism, the Family and the new 'Mediated' Maternalism', p. 120.

the trio choose to target and steal from Nancy's spas.[163] Annie's apparent instability, therefore, can also be thought of as her refusal to conform to, and her critique of, the 'aspirational' mode of motherhood or parenthood that Nancy and Gregg represent.[164] Annie's characterisation works to construct the realities of so-called 'underclass' motherhood, allowing a 'controversial, albeit current' mode of contemporary mothering to 'slip' into 'focus'.[165]

While it is Ruby's daughter that delivers the postfeminist voiceover in episode one, the possibilities for 'choice, freedom, and real autonomy' in both Sara (Lidya Jewett) and Ruby's lives are 'highly constrained' from the outset of the series.[166] Ruby and her husband Stanley (Reno Wilson) are suffering from financial difficulties. He is a police officer and she works as a waitress, but their combined salaries are not enough to pay for the treatment that Sara, who has been diagnosed with kidney disease, requires. While Beth and Annie's trajectories construct and interrogate tensions associated with class and 'aspirational' modes of motherhood, Ruby's narrative illustrates the realities of mothering on intersecting axes of race, class, and gender .[167] This approach thus aligns with Crenshaw's development of a 'Black feminist criticism' that reflects the 'interaction of race and gender'.[168] While Rose identifies how race maps on to the contemporary mediated binary of 'good' and 'bad' motherhood – with the most overtly visible or 'good' modes of mothering inextricably linked to 'middle-class' white motherhood, while 'poorer' and/or black women are situated as 'failures' – Danielle Fuentes Morgan explores the specificities of black motherhood in greater depth.[169] In her article, titled 'Visible Black Motherhood is a Revolution', Morgan suggests that the 'Black mother-child relationship is marked by the historicity of fear and precarity'.[170] Morgan continues to argue that this frame is not one 'in which the white mother and white child traditionally exist', rather this precarity is part of a legacy of 'ancestral trauma [that] is passed down generationally and reinforced culturally'.[171] Regardless of the lack of 'literal

---

[163] 'Shutdown', *Good Girls*, NBC, 16th April 2018.
[164] McRobbie, 'Feminism, the Family and the new 'Mediated' Maternalism', p. 120.
[165] McRobbie, 'Feminism, the Family and the new 'Mediated' Maternalism', p. 120; Feasey, *From Happy Homemakers to Desperate Housewives*, p. 73; Rose, *Mothers*, p. 9.
[166] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 5.
[167] McRobbie, 'Feminism, the Family and the new 'Mediated' Maternalism', p. 120.
[168] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1.8 (1989), 139-167 (pp. 139-40).
[169] Rose, *Mothers*, pp. 17-8.
[170] Danielle Fuentes Morgan, 'Visible Black Motherhood is a Revolution', *Biography*, 41.4 (Fall, 2018), 856-875 (p. 860).
[171] Morgan, 'Visible Black Motherhood is a Revolution', p. 860.

slave masters to serve as violent executors', the 'threat of separation by "death and distance" remains' in the twenty-first century.[172]

With reference to Sara's declining health, Ruby's narrative constructs the threat of 'death and distance' within the mother-child relationship.[173] In *Good Girls*, one key way in which this dynamic is refracted is through Ruby's experiences within a medical context. The way that Ruby and, by extension, Sara are treated, allows an intersectional perspective on the experience of being a black, working class mother to 'slip' into 'focus'.[174] In episode one, we see Ruby and Sara in a noisy, crowded room waiting to see a doctor. Ruby addresses a member of staff walking past, politely enquiring 'excuse me, how much longer is the wait? Because we've been…', before being abruptly cut off mid-sentence by the woman slamming down the files that she was carrying. The woman then leaves the room without acknowledging Ruby. The next scenes detail Ruby's interaction with the doctor, who tells her that he is 'most concerned' about 'Stella's kidney function'. When Ruby informs him that her daughter's name is Sara, not Stella, he replies 'what?' and looks quizzically at the documents in his hand. In an article concerning the 'Angry Black Woman trope', Trina Jones and Kimberley Jade Norwood discuss 'the invisibility and dehumanization that Black women experience on a daily basis'.[175] Already, as we watch Ruby being ignored and Sara being addressed by the wrong name, we have witnessed two moments where the modes of oppression outlined by Jones and Norwood are constructed.

The doctor continues to tell Ruby that one of Sara's kidneys is failing, and that the other is close behind, meaning that she needs to be put on the transplant list. Ruby explains that she has been doing her own research as, currently, Sara can barely make it through the

---

[172] Morgan, 'Visible Black Motherhood is a Revolution', p. 860. One way in which this threat can be observed, Morgan argues, is through 'the staggering incarceration rates for Black bodies in the prison system' (p. 860); There is a tension present between Morgan's commentary, and the vocation of Ruby's husband, Stan. Indeed, this particular tension taps into a recent popularisation of Black actors playing police officers in contemporary film and television. See Seve Chambers, 'The Rise of Black Cops and Policing Films' (2019). Available at https://www.blackartinamerica.com/index.php/2019/11/23/the-rise-of-black-cops-and-policing-films/ [accessed 14th December 2021]. Chambers questions why 'Black cops are at the forefront' of many contemporary films, especially when it is largely white officers that are 'at the center[sic] of controversy' in sociocultural contexts. The fact that Hollywood chooses to write characters who are Black police officers, or cast Black actors as police officers, is, therefore, 'something of a head scratcher'. 'Perhaps', Chambers suggests, 'it's easier to depict the different worlds of police forces and Black neighborhoods[sic] with someone that can walk between them'. Chambers is careful not to suggest that 'the conversation should be flattened to Black or white, us vs them', or that 'fictional depictions' should always be 'bound to reality'. Rather, Chambers asks, 'if Black cops aren't really the problem, is Hollywood saying they are the solution?', and 'what does [this choice] add to the conversation?'.

[173] Morgan, 'Visible Black Motherhood is a Revolution', p. 860.

[174] Rose, *Mothers*, p. 9.

[175] Trina Jones and Kimberley Jade Norwood, 'Aggressive Encounters & White Fragility: Deconstructing the Trope of the Angry Black Woman', *Iowa Law Review*, 102.5 (Jul 2017), 2017-2069 (p. 2021).

school day. Meanwhile, the doctor is communicating with a colleague about the other folders currently on his desk. With this interaction ongoing, he tells Ruby that she might want to keep Sara home and 'get a tutor'. As Ruby indicates, she and her husband 'work all the time' and are still struggling to stay financially afloat. They cannot simply 'get a tutor'. As the doctor continues to move between conversations with Ruby and his colleague, thus perpetuating the experience of 'invisibility and dehumanization' outlined by Jones and Norwood, Ruby explains that 'the transplant list can take months' and that she is aware of a new drug that has recently been approved.[176] She looks between the doctor and his colleague before eventually shouting 'oh my god, can you please just listen to me for one damn minute?'. The doctor and his colleague fall silent, looking at Ruby with shocked, incredulous expressions. Here, we can trace Jones and Norwood's explanation of how, when Black women seek to speak out against injustice, or simply just exist, the 'raced and gendered voices of Black women become the problem, rather than the underlying issue to which they seek to bring attention'.[177] The doctor, now giving Ruby his full attention, explains that while the drug that she is talking about does improve renal function, it costs ten thousand dollars a month 'out of pocket' which he is 'guessing […] may not be an option'. Ruby's options, therefore, are looking very slim, hence her turn towards criminality alongside Beth and Annie.

While this sequence exemplifies the lack of visibility that Black women experience across sociocultural spheres, the medicalised context in which these micro-aggressions play out is also highly relevant to contemporary antiracist critique. Findings from a 2020 study concerning the healthcare experiences of low-income African-American women indicate that women from this community 'continue to experience perceived discriminatory treatment' informed by 'implicit bias and pervasive stereotypes'.[178] Marking a striking parallel with Ruby's constructed experience in *Good Girls*, a 'common message' emerging from the findings was that the women involved in the study 'wanted to pass across to healthcare personnel and providers' that 'everyone [is] deserving of respect regardless of one's racial/ethnic background'.[179] This emphasis on respect – listening to patients, empathising, and 'relationship-building' – is a key part of the study's recommendations for improving

[176] Jones and Norwood, 'Aggressive Encounters & White Fragility', p. 2021.
[177] Jones and Norwood, 'Aggressive Encounters & White Fragility', p. 2037.
[178] Olihe N Okoro, Lisa A Hillman, and Alina Cernasev,'"*We get double slammed*!": Healthcare experiences of perceived discrimination among low-income African-American women', *Women's Health*, 16 (2020), pp. 1-12 (p. 10).
[179] Okoro, Hillman, and Cernasev, '"*We get double slammed*"', p. 6.

'quality of care' and helping to 'eliminate the health disparities that adversely affect' low-income African American women.[180] Following the hold-up at the supermarket, Ruby has the money to seek help from a different doctor who delivers the kind of care outlined in the aforementioned study. From the outset of the appointment, Ruby is given the doctor's undivided attention. The doctor affirms her choices as 'great', immediately confirming that they can have samples of the medication that day, and organising several scans and procedures for Sara in the meantime. The level of care provided, and its contrast to the impersonal treatment that her and Sara have received previously, brings Ruby to tears. Through these scenes, Ruby's narrative portrays various instances of interlinking class, race, and gender-based oppression, allowing the representation of the realities of Black, working class motherhood to 'slip' into 'focus'.[181] This construction of intersecting modes of subjugation is particularly striking when read against the pervasive whiteness of the femmes fatales discussed within this thesis so far.

Good Girls' focus on class, race and gender is accompanied by a movement away from the tendency towards individualism exhibited through the novels explored within this chapter. Ruby, Beth, and Annie all offend with their children in mind. Across all three narratives, economic instability drives the women to become fatal mothers. In this regard *Sunburn* and *A Simple Favor*, Polly and Emily are also driven by the desire for better lives for their children, and need money to make this happen. However, while both Polly, Emily, and sometimes Stephanie's characterisations teeter on the edge of becoming invested in individualistic postfeminist and/or neoliberal modes of femininity, the fatal mothers of *Good Girls* do not appear to operate in the same way. While this may be partly due to Annie and Ruby's engagements with contemporary intersectional feminist discourses, the series' sense of collectivity is also inextricably linked to form. With *Sunburn* and *A Simple Favor*, narrative trajectories are presented through a first person perspective. It is through these perspectives that a sense of individualism, and an often antagonistic relationship with other feminine characters, appears to emerge. Kyra Hunting's work on dialogue and 'Chick Lit TV' pushes this argument further. Focusing on television programmes such as *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), *Lipstick Jungle* (2008-2009), and *Cashmere Mafia* (2008), Hunting seeks to revise the series' critical positioning as postfeminist, due to their centrality of dialogue as a

[180] Okoro, Hillman, and Cernasev, '"*We get double slammed*"', p. 10.
[181] Rose, *Mothers*, p. 9.

means of actively negotiating and debating 'life options and gender norms'.[182] While, in *Good Girls*, there are several moments in each episode where we watch the characters operating along their individual trajectories, the three women consistently come back together to debrief, emotionally support one and other, solve problems, and plan their next moves. Like the programmes discussed by Hunting, *Good Girls* positions the women and their relationship to each other as central to the show, therefore relying 'heavily on conversation and dialogue for narrative development'.[183] As a result, a movement away from the 'self-affirming individualistic stance' associated with postfeminism and neoliberalism and towards 'feminist ideas of collectivist action' is made possible by the very form of the individual episodes that make up *Good Girls* as a television series.[184]

The fatal mothers have 'close relationships and interrelated lives', and it is here, in this notion of overlapping trajectories and embedded connections, that another argument regarding the group's propensity for crime is emergent.[185] Unlike *Sunburn*'s Polly and *A Simple Favor*'s Emily, the fatal mothers in *Good Girls* are not, in a literal sense, on the run. They do not physically leave their children, or the domestic sphere, for any prolonged period of time. In episode two, as they are trying to get money together to pay Rio back, Annie suggests multiple places to which they might travel, to which Beth firmly responds 'we cannot run, we have families'.[186] Shortly after, Rio and his associates visit Beth's home in order to collect the money that they are owed, and find out that the amount is several thousand dollars short. Rio's associates begin to trash Beth's home, as one holds a gun to her head.

Beth tells Rio that he is 'an idiot', before delivering the following lines:

> What, are you going to blow our brains out all over the room? Cause' that's how it works, right? Someone shorts you and then they get tossed out like trash? And no one cares and no one even notices? Your problem this time is that's not us. We're normal people. We pay our taxes and we take our kids to P.F. Changs, and we take orange slices to soccer games. And when bad things happen to good people everyone else goes crazy. It's all over the news and there are all these hashtags and movements, because if it could happen to us it could happen to anyone. So if you want to invite all that attention over a few grand, then you're not the smart businessman you think you are.

---

[182] Kyra Hunting, 'Women Talk: Chick Lit TV and the Dialogues of Feminism', *The Communication Review*, 15.3 (2012), 187-203 (p. 194).
[183] Hunting, 'Women Talk', p. 189.
[184] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 123.
[185] Hunting, 'Women Talk', p. 189.
[186] 'Mo Money Mo Problems', *Good Girls*, NBC, 5th March 2018.

In this monologue, Beth points to several key issues surrounding motherhood and visibility. On the one hand, Beth identifies that they are 'normal people', in contrast to those who are consistently aligned with criminality, and are therefore 'bad'. If people are deemed by society as 'bad', their deaths go unnoticed. While such a recognition holds a number of questions and problematic implications – for example, what drives people towards criminality? And why does society deem these people as disposable? – the associations that Beth attaches to herself, Ruby and Annie as 'normal people' exposes certain sociocultural tensions regarding motherhood. Their position as 'normal' and 'good' people is exemplified through the fact that they pay their taxes, take their children out to restaurants, and 'take orange slices to soccer games'. The latter two actions are explicitly related to motherhood, and perhaps particular modes of motherhood (the 'soccer mom', for example). The idea of normality upheld through this description also translates to a sense of invisibility – they are not spectacular or distinctive. However, as Beth indicates, if something was to happen to 'normal' people like themselves, it would have a broad, sociocultural impact. This dynamic draws a parallel with Rose's argument that 'mothers are almost invariably the object, either of too much attention or not enough'.[187] They are simultaneously upheld and invisible.

It is notable that Beth delivers this monologue, particularly in reference to how the notion of 'good' or 'normal' people is inextricably linked to race and class. Discussing the positioning of motherhood, and the mother as 'Madonna', Morgan comments on the 'ideation of parenthood' in American society – with parent and child positioned as 'sacred', 'innocent' and 'worth protecting'.[188] That is, Morgan continues, 'until it considers parents and children of color, whose bodies are already criminalized' by the state.[189] In this context, whiteness aligns with notions of idealised parenthood. Beth's positioning of the three mothers as 'normal' and 'good' people thus glosses over how each woman might be perceived differently due to her race and class position. Nevertheless, it is due to the fact that mothers 'slip in and out – mostly out – of focus', that Rio revisits Beth later with a proposition for future work.[190] When Beth tells him that they will get him the money, he responds 'nah let's forget all that', and instead tells her that he keeps 'thinking about what [she] said, about being a basic bitch and whatnot'. Daisy Buchanan explains the use of the popular term 'basic bitch' in her 2014 article for *The Guardian*, suggesting that '[i]f you don't share the same interests

[187] Rose, *Mothers*, p. 9.
[188] Morgan, 'Visible Black Motherhood is a Revolution', p. 860.
[189] Morgan, 'Visible Black Motherhood is a Revolution', p. 860.
[190] Rose, *Mothers*, p. 9.

as basic bitches you are not like all the other girls'.[191] What is most relevant for this discussion, however, is the way that the term again engages with notions of normality: the 'basic bitch' is 'normal', and those who do not align themselves with the same 'cultural feminine signifiers' are 'special'.[192] Due to the fact that, in Rio's words, Beth, Annie, and Ruby are 'basic bitches' – they are 'normal', they are everywhere – and 'slip in and out […] of focus', they can also operate undetected and unsuspected, making them ideal figures for criminality.[193]

In this chapter, I have illustrated how *Sunburn*, *A Simple Favor* and *Good Girls* collapse any straightforward distinction between fatal and domestic/maternal femininity. Place notes how film noir's 'exciting' and 'sexy' fatal women are constructed in contrast to the 'dull and constricting' realm of 'families, children, homes and domesticity'.[194] In the texts explored in this chapter, fatal femininity and maternity are no longer positioned as antithetical. On the contrary, the so-called 'dull and constricting' elements of the characters' lives are what allow them to transgress unnoticed, aligning with the femme fatale's propensity in destabilising the relationship between sight and knowledge.[195] Therefore, in these texts, fatal femininity and motherhood are positioned as not only compatible, but analytically effective. The fatal mothers of each text draw attention to patriarchal narratives around motherhood, utilising and subverting them with their family in mind.

Exciting, dangerous and pragmatic, the fatal mothers explored within this chapter both update and reinforce the notion that the femme fatale 'never really is what she seems to be', while aligning with Rose's assertion that mothers, too, are never 'what they seem, or are meant to be'.[196] Fatal mothers who act with their children in mind – and conclude their narratives with their children in their arms – represent a huge shift from the binary oppositions read within film noir *and* the violent individualism exhibited by the femmes fatales of neo-noir. While *Sunburn* and *A Simple Favor* are also inflected by the 'self-affirming, individualistic' politics associated with both postfeminism and neoliberalism, *Good Girls*' engagement with intersecting axes of oppression brings the contemporary femme fatale into new territory.[197]

---

[191] Daisy Buchanan, 'Why I'm proud to be a 'basic bitch'' (2014). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/14/proud-to-be-basic-bitch [accessed 16th April 2021].
[192] Buchanan, 'Why I'm proud to be a 'basic bitch''.
[193] Rose, *Mothers*, p. 9.
[194] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 60.
[195] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 60.
[196] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1; Rose, *Mothers*, p. 18.
[197] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 123.

Chapter Four – 'She Doesn't Have a Signature But She Certainly Has Style': Putting Clothing to Work in *Killing Eve*, *Boy Parts*, and *Promising Young Woman*[1]

Focusing on series one of the television programme *Killing Eve* (2018-22), Eliza Clark's novel *Boy Parts* (2020), and Emerald Fennell's film *Promising Young Woman* (2021), this chapter explores the relationship between work, clothing/costuming, and the contemporary femme fatale. The anxieties and promises of the femme fatale have, in part, been critically located in dialogue with women's changing social roles and employment opportunities. In the context of her discussion of film noir, Place situates this dialogue as part of popular culture's production of the 'ideologies necessary to the existence of the social structure'.[2] For example, the imperative to make women work in factories in the Second World War and then 'channel them back into the home' once the war had ended.[3] Place traces the existence of these social and economic requirements alongside the shift in feminine archetypes on screen, from the 'strong women of 40s film such as Katherine Hepburn and Rosalind Russell' to their replacement with 'sex goddesses […] virtuous wife types […] and professional virgins'.[4] When there is an 'unacceptable' mode of femininity present in film noir – the 'myth of the sexually aggressive woman', for example – cinema 'allows sensuous expression of that idea and then destroys it'.[5] In reference to women in 1940s America, Grossman also outlines how the extension of women's 'spheres […] beyond the household during the war' lead to 'social anxieties about their work ambition and potential promiscuity'.[6] The femmes fatales of mid-twentieth century film noir, whose threat to 'cultural norms' is posed, as Stables suggests, by their existence 'outside of the conventional social structures', thus signify said anxieties and operate as a cultural means of re-establishing traditional gender roles.[7] While, as Place notes, this use of the cinematic femme fatale does not limit the legacy of the figure and the readings that might be gleaned from her 'sexy, exciting and strong' visual presence, it attempts to perform a specific and highly conservative function, covertly directing women towards certain social positions and thus maintaining the patriarchal status quo.[8]

---

[1] 'I'll Deal With Him Later', *Killing Eve*, BBC One, 15 April 2018.
[2] Janey Place, 'Women in Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 47-68 (p. 47).
[3] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47.
[4] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47.
[5] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 48.
[6] Julie Grossman, *The Femme Fatale* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), p. 45.
[7] Kate Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing the *Femme Fatale* in 90s Cinema', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 164-82 (p. 170).
[8] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 63.

Moving forward to the late twentieth century, the relationship between women and work remains intricately intertwined with media representations. Stables suggests that the femmes fatales of 1990s neo-noir cinema are motivated by their 'enormous appetite for power, money and sex', desires which are, perhaps unsurprisingly, refracted within the workplace itself in films like *The Last Seduction.*[9] In Stables's reading of the 'postmodern' femme fatale, the figure endures as an 'anxiety pointer' who 'processes and displays cultural concerns' through the filmic narrative.[10] Focusing on Hollywood cinema since the 1970s, 'loosely termed 'New Hollywood", Tasker asks where we might locate the '*historical specificity*' of this femme fatale? (emphasis in original).[11] That is, what do the femmes fatales of the late twentieth century tell us about the cultural concerns of that particular cinematic period? Or, as Stables asks, 'what are we to make of *fatales* who triumph?'.[12] Focusing on *The Last Seduction*, Stella Bruzzi argues that protagonist Bridget is a 'quintessential contemporary *femme fatale* who, in addition to being more intelligent, scheming and alluring than any of the men in the film, is also professionally successful'.[13] Crucially, it is the 'final attribute' that 'differentiates most modern *femmes fatales* from their 1940s predecessors'.[14] Their 'entry into the job market', Bruzzi continues, signals the femme fatale's 'ability and intention to usurp the traditional male social role'.[15] Tasker also identifies a conflation of the independent working women and the femmes fatales of the late twentieth century. With the 'sexually aggressive' and 'independent' femme fatale 'now often cast as career woman' set against the 'vulnerable, persecuted hero', new film noir reinvigorates previous anxieties while engaging with contemporary sociocultural shifts in terms of gender and work.[16] The result entails, Tasker concludes, that these representations of the femme fatale are 'both ahistorical and precisely of [their] time'.[17] Farrimond builds upon this position, situating the 'hard professionalism' of the neo-noir femme fatale as a 'cultural backlash to the gains achieved by second wave feminism'.[18] In line with Farrimond, Lindop connects this backlash to the 'emergence of postfeminism', stating that whilst the 'deadly woman (and girl)' within

---

[9] Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice', p. 170.
[10] Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice', p. 171.
[11] Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 122.
[12] Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice', p. 171.
[13] Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 127.
[14] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127.
[15] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127.
[16] Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 135.
[17] Tasker, *Working Girls*, p. 135.
[18] Katherine Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and American Cinema* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 8.

neo-noir has consistently operated as an 'active, calculating character', in the 1990s she becomes 'overwhelmingly powerful, autonomous and self-determining'.[19] While these elements link back to Stables's suggestion that the femme fatale operates as an 'anxiety pointer', illustrating concerns that feminism has pushed women's position past the point of equality and has perhaps 'gone too far', Lindop's discussion also highlights postfeminist texts' emphasis on individual choice and agency.[20] As Lindop identifies, such 'self-affirming' and 'individualistic' narratives jar with broadly feminist notions of 'collectivist action'.[21] Therefore, as with the femme fatale of the mid-twentieth century, the neo-noir femme fatale's relationship with work occupies a curious territory. She is not entirely a 'symptom of male fears about feminism', nor necessarily a 'subject of feminism'.[22] As I argue in this chapter, the femme fatale's ambiguity, and her potentiality for feminist enquiry, endures.

Styling the Femme Fatale

Clothing and costuming are approached in this chapter as distinct but interrelated spheres, concerning a character's clothing choices on the one hand, and costume design choices made by media creators on the other. Whether agency is read as belonging to the character or the creator, clothing and/or costuming perform key analytical work in these texts. This additional sartorial focus acknowledges the texts' consistent utilisation of costume and clothing in the 'work' of the contemporary femme fatale, in terms of both more formal notions of employment *and* analytical work. That is, the vocations fictionalised within the texts – assassins, photographers, baristas and vigilantes – and also the work of, or working *through* of, contemporary feminist concerns. One key area in which clothing and work critically and culturally intersect is the concept of 'power dressing'. Focusing on the late 1970s and early 1980s, Joanne Entwistle indicates how the 'discourse of 'power dressing'' enabled the 'career woman' to '*fashion* herself' as such, thus making her 'visible within the male public arena' (emphasis in original).[23] Offering women 'a conception of power located at the level of the body and rooted in individualism', 'power dressing' is thus 'underpinned by an enterprising

[19] Samantha Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 14.
[20] Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice', p. 171.
[21] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*, p. 123.
[22] Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 2-3.
[23] Joanne Entwistle, "Power Dressing' and the Construction of the Career Woman', in *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, ed. Malcolm Barnard (Routledge: Oxon and New York, 2007), pp. 208-219 (p. 212).

philosophy which fits with the individualism of neo-liberalism', which is not to say that it was concerned with 'expressing individuality in dress'.[24] Rather, Entwistle continues, 'power dressing' was 'inherently conservative', enabling women 'to steer a steady course through male-dominated professions', therefore seeking to 'work with existing codes of dress'.[25] To dress in alignment with such codes is to dress for a masculine environment, within codes of professionalism that women did not create, that were not created *for* women.

A similar point of contention arises when thinking about the visual coding of the femme fatale, and of the relationship between women and clothing more broadly. In *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies*, Bruzzi acknowledges and challenges knowing performances of 'stereotyped femininity', that is, dressing in a way that feminist commentators such as Susan Brownmiller and Rosalind Coward would label as "oppressed", or pandering to a male gaze.[26] In her discussion of *The Last Seduction*, Bruzzi suggests that Bridget is 'the embodiment of the self-conscious *femme fatale* who successfully uses a conventionalised, overtly sexual image of femininity which acknowledges its cinematic antecedents and suggests a full awareness of how that image affects men'.[27] Bruzzi continues to indicate that the 'strange sublimation process' between 'body, mind and clothes' that occurs within 'the traditional interpretations of both feminine fashions and the visual representation of the *femme fatale*' can be used to women's advantage.[28] Therefore, clothing 'is not inevitably', or solely, 'produced to render the wearer attractive to the opposite sex'.[29] 'The ambiguity', Bruzzi continues, 'no longer rests with the image […] but with the possession of the image', and it is Bridget who, in *The Last Seduction*, 'controls the effect of' the image that she represents.[30] Whereas 'the feminine image' has been theorised as 'passive in relation to an active male gaze', clothing is an avenue through which this image can be both actively managed and covertly mobilised by a feminine subject.[31] In short, clothing is a site where the femme fatale can perform important analytical work, rethinking the idea of 'power dressing' and aligning 'with existing codes of dress'.[32] What Bruzzi terms as the

---

[24] Entwistle, "Power Dressing' and the Construction of the Career Woman', pp. 215-16.
[25] Entwistle, "Power Dressing' and the Construction of the Career Woman', p. 216.
[26] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127. Though Bruzzi does not cite Brownmiller and Coward directly here, elsewhere she refers to Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity* (London: Paladin, 1984) and Rosalind Coward, *Our Treacherous Hearts: Why Women Let Men Get Their Way* (London: Faber, 1993).
[27] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127.
[28] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 126.
[29] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema,* p. xvii.
[30] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127.
[31] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. xvii.
[32] Entwistle, "Power Dressing' and the Construction of the Career Woman', p. 216.

'symbolic iconography' of the femme fatale in film noir features a 'clearly demarcated register of clothes, based on the contrast between light and dark'.[33] Other items that we might conventionally associate with fatal femininity include high heels, red lipstick, and form fitting garments such as pencil skirts. This code is culturally entrenched, remaining within a visual vocabulary beyond the bounds of film noir scholarship – a quick internet search will bring up multiple 'femme fatale costumes' featuring long gloves and cigarette holders – even as the 'look' of the femme fatale has been reworked in more contemporary visual modes, such as the neutral, flowing garments of *Basic Instinct*. Clothing is therefore a key point of enquiry when looking at the contemporary femme fatale's critical dialogue with contemporary modes of feminism and femininity.

Beginning with *Killing Eve*, this chapter positions Villanelle as a character whose style moves beyond the bounds of traditional fatal femininity, arguing that such sartorial choices nonetheless render her all the more unknowable. Focusing on the swapping of clothing in reference to Bruzzi's argument that clothing can and does exist as a discourse between women, I also argue for a reading of the text's exploration of desire through a revisitation of Colman's concept of the transversal. Moving on to *Boy Parts*, I continue to consider the pleasures of looking and being seen, utilising Bruzzi's assertion that the feminine image can be redeployed for fatal means, when she is 'dressed to kill', and the limitations of the power that accompanies such a performance. The discussion of sexual violence, and the perpetration of violence by the protagonist engages with both scholarship on rape revenge cinema and contemporary feminist discourses around #MeToo, gender and justice, foregrounding the final text discussed in this chapter: *Promising Young Woman*. This final section positions different modes of employment as sites of failure and means of revenge, a function signified and bolstered by clothing throughout the filmic narrative. Cassie's 'promise' as a contemporary femme fatale, I conclude, is complicated by the film's conclusion, both in terms of the narrative's use of violence and its reliance on carceral forms of justice.

Killing Eve

Killing Eve follows MI5/6 agent Eve Polastri (Sandra Oh) and trained assassin Oksana Astankova/Villanelle (Jodie Comer) as the two engage in a 'cat-and-mouse' game of chase,

[33] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 126.

deception, and desire.[34] I am choosing to focus on the first series of *Killing Eve*, released during the 'Year of the Woman', because it is here that the themes that I seek to explore appear most prominently. Critics have identified how texts concerned with criminality and detection are typically and historically masculine, and how *Killing Eve* successfully takes 'a genre usually steeped in the masculine' and 'feminize[s] it'.[35] We can immediately trace this movement away from the masculine in the adaptative process from literary text to television series: the books from which the BBC America series is adapted, *Codename Villanelle* (2014-16), were written by male author Luke Jennings, while series one of *Killing Eve*, the focus of this section, was created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge. This shift is importantly accompanied by changes to the tone and content of Jennings' novellas. As Stephanie Pomfrett indicates in her study of the adaptative changes between the literary and televisual texts, Jennings's writing situates Eve and Villanelle within 'the realm of old boys' networks', frequently 'subjected to the male gaze', and working in 'environments dominated by men'.[36] For Pomfrett, it is therefore 'fascinating' that a book so 'wedded to genre conventions', so deeply entrenched within masculine ways of seeing and a 'masculine, violent world', has been 'transformed into a quirky, funny love letter to female obsession that feels authentic to female viewers'.[37] Tone aside, comparisons can be made between *Killing Eve*'s intergeneric shift and that of domestic noir. Whereas domestic noir seeks to indicate how the home and work might be dangerous spaces for women, thus moving away from male-centric noir narratives, *Killing Eve* focuses less on women's experiences in a masculine world (while still deftly commenting *on* the misogyny that accompanies navigating patriarchal systems) and more on the dynamics between two complex female characters. This key adaptative departure, or narrative '*betrayal*', position the series as another text that seeks to wrench 'the "look" (and the "voice") from their previous structures' (emphasis in original).[38] Men exist on the outskirts of Eve and Villanelle's trajectories and, as E. Deidre Pribram suggests of the 'two principal male figures – Eve's spouse, Niko, and Villanelle's handler, Konstantin', ultimately seek to

[34] Jen Chaney, 'BBC America's *Killing Eve* Is Instantly Addictive Television' 2018. Available at https://www.vulture.com/2018/04/killing-eve-review.html [accessed 17th September 2021].
[35] Chaney, 'BBC America's *Killing Eve* Is Instantly Addictive Television'.
[36] Stephanie Pomfrett, '"Killing Eve" strayed from the book. That was a smart move' (2019). Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/killing-eve-strayed-from-the-book-its-based-on-it-was-a-smart-move/2019/03/04/e2abad82-3eae-11e9-9361-301ffb5bd5e6_story.html [accessed 17th September 2021].
[37] Pomfrett, ''Killing Eve' strayed from the book. That was a smart move'.
[38] Stam, 'Beyond Fidelity', p. 54; Doane, Mellencamp, Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism', p. 14.

'constrain or tame the two female leads, as much as they sustain the women's endeavours'.[39] This 'notable opposition' does, however, exist as background noise to the obsessive interplay of Eve and Villanelle's plots.[40] This shift in focus is further emphasised through the interpolation of the character Carolyn Martens (Fiona Shaw), the head of MI6's Russian desk, who does not exist in Jennings' texts. With the above in mind, it is easy to position characters such as Niko and Konstantin as 'plot killers' – characters which are conventionally, as I discussed in chapter three, women who exist on a narrative level to slow down the action of the male protagonist.[41] The typical plot killer creates conflict, thus spurring the narrative along, while being coded in misogynistic fashion as the 'nagging wife', attempting to hold the hero back from the exciting, dangerous storylines that lie ahead. As Jen Chaney indicates, *Killing Eve* constructs Eve's husband as the one who 'frets' about *her* safety, 'while leaving leftover shepherds pie in the fridge'.[42] In this example, we can already see how the series 'subvert[s] familiar tropes' about heterosexual married couples and, more importantly, traditional gender roles, contributing to its broader aim of 'seeing difference differently'.[43]

That being said, as Pribram indicates in her discussion of female detectives, the 'removing' or 'at least the reframing' of a 'masculine-feminine binary based in gendered comparisons' is one effect of 'featuring both a female detective hero and a female criminal villain'.[44] If the femme fatale traditionally operates in opposition to the male protagonist, the inclusion of two female protagonists opens up new possibilities for reading the feminist potentialities of the figure, and the analytical work that she might perform. We can also see this potentiality in Hanson's discussion of the contemporary femme fatale and the female investigative figure. When tracing the relationship between the neo-femme fatale and female investigator of 1980s to early twenty-first-century cinema, Hanson identifies how both 'modifications' of noir tropes 'advance key questions about female liberation and identity in

---

[39] E. Deidre Pribram, 'Consorting with Criminality: The Female Detective in Killing Eve', *MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture*, 7 (2021). Available at https://maifeminism.com/consorting-with-criminality-the-female-detective-in-killing-eve/ [accessed 22nd September 2021].
[40] Pribram, 'Consorting with Criminality'.
[41] Deborah Frances-White, 'Dangerous Women on Film with Nat Luurtsema and Guest Yasmine Akram' (2018), The Guilty Feminist [Podcast]. Available at http://guiltyfeminist.com/episodes/ [accessed 10th November 2018].
[42] Chaney, 'BBC America's *Killing Eve* Is Instantly Addictive Television'.
[43] Chaney, 'BBC America's *Killing Eve* Is Instantly Addictive Television; Doane, Mellencamp, Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism', p. 14.
[44] Pribram, 'Consorting with Criminality'.

relation to sexuality' in neo-noir crime thriller narratives.[45] For the female investigator, Hanson posits, tensions regarding the 'sexuality and sexual conduct of the investigative woman arise within the sphere of work and career'. In the case of the femme fatale, or 'criminal enigma', 'sex and crime fuse onto the figure of the feminine'.[46] Here, the link between femininity, agency, and sexuality threatens to take us back to the realm of sexual difference; however, Hanson identifies areas within both characterisations that hold potential for feminist critique, specifically in terms of *Killing Eve*. Hanson highlights how the female detective figures are 'exceptional', both in their '(still) unusual' presence in 'a male world and male space', as well as in the 'qualities, attributes and skills that permit them to be there'.[47] It is in this exceptionalism, and the very 'terms of being an exceptional heroine', that these films and their characters remain 'resonant for a feminist critique'.[48]

In response to such modes of investigative femininity, *Killing Eve* reworks the relationship between the exceptional working woman and excessive sexuality. Whereas in *Fatal Attraction* the working woman operates as a threat to the family, and in *The Last Seduction*, protagonist Bridget's 'success' in the workplace is interlinked with her overt 'sexual talent', Eve's characterisation breaks away from such conventions.[49] While she is clearly highly observant, analytical, clever and determined, Eve is not positioned as 'exceptional' in the same way as her cinematic and televisual predecessors.[50] From the first episode, 'Nice Face', when we see Eve arriving to a meeting at MI5 late, hungover, and attempting to covertly eat a croissant from a rustling paper bag, the moment is imbued with a humour that lends Eve's character a broad sense of accessibility, aligning with her character's shift from notions of exceptionalism.[51] In a similar vein, in episode five, 'I Have a Thing about Bathrooms', Villanelle forces Eve to hand over her phone and asks for the passcode

---

[45] Helen Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), pp. 141-42. Hanson's text also revisits the female investigative figure in mid-twentieth century noir, focusing on *Stranger on the Third Floor*, dir. Boris Ingster (RKO Pictures, 1940), *I Wake Up Screaming*, dir. H. Bruce Humberstone (20th Century Fox, 1941), *Phantom Lady*, dir. Robert Siodmak (Universal Pictures, 1944) and *The Dark Corner*, dir. Henry Hathaway (20th Century Fox, 1946). Hanson argues that, in these films, the 'working-girl investigator figure and her narrative agency evidence a range of female roles in the *noir* crime thriller that extends beyond the ruthless *femme fatale* and the passive, domestic redeemer figure' (p. 32). Hanson indicates how the working-girl investigators are 'characterised by their physical activity in the films' urban spaces', directing an 'active investigative gaze' which ultimately endorses the 'female optical point-of-view', offering a 'suspension of Hollywood's politics of looking' and undermining the positioning of noir as an 'exclusively 'male' mode' (p. 25).
[46] Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, pp. 142-43.
[47] Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, p. 165.
[48] Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, p. 165.
[49] Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, p. 168.
[50] Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, p. 165.
[51] 'Nice Face', *Killing Eve*, BBC One, 8th April 2018.

which turns out to be '1234' – a predictable sequence for anyone who is conscious of their personal security, but particularly funny here given that Eve works in support of *national* security.[52] Within the same episode, we see Eve in bed asking her husband Niko if he wants to have sex. The two begin to kiss, before Eve pulls away to begin talking about the case discussed earlier that day. Niko tells her that she should have been a spy, and Eve thanks him before kissing him again and turning out the light. When she remembers that they were going to have sex, she apologises before Niko tells her that he is actually too tired, to which Eve replies 'oh good'. From these examples, we can see how themes of sexuality and professional exceptionalism are both evoked and reworked through Eve's characterisation. Miles away from the overt eroticism and hyper-competency of characters like Bridget in *The Last Seduction*, Eve subverts ideas and expectations about female investigators. Eve's characterisation is therefore highly unstable, rejecting fixed ideas about investigative femininity that is indicative of the series' shift away from male-centric crime narratives.

With this subversion in mind, Hanson's commentary on the femme fatale of neo-noir indicates that the figure's 'currency for feminism' lies in 'her resistance to stable meanings of femininity'.[53] The femme fatale 'upsets patriarchal mastery' and 'reworks understandings of character stability'.[54] Villanelle, who violently rejects any male restrictions on her agency and constantly switches her persona to suit a given situation, is immediately recognisable as a femme fatale under these terms. Interestingly, however, the hyper-competency usually ascribed to investigative women is more applicable to Villanelle's character than it is to Eve's. Both women are intelligent, watchful and active, but it is Villanelle who plots her hits with flair, striking when we least expect it, and smoothly flees the scene. There is, therefore, a distinct crossover in terms of Eve and Villanelle's characterisation. Their respective positions of investigator and villain becomes unstable as they investigate each other and seek each other out. With the shifting, complex nature of Eve and Villanelle's characterisations and their desire for one and other in mind, I suggest that the appeal of *Killing Eve* for feminist spectators lies within, as Hanson suggests of the neo-noir femme fatale, the characters' 'productively troubling' refusal of 'containment'.[55] When both the femme fatale and the investigative woman of neo-noir 'advance key questions about female liberation and identity in relation to sexuality', the slipperiness of Eve and Villanelle's characterisation contributes

[52] 'I Have a Thing about Bathrooms', *Killing Eve*, BBC One, 6th May 2018.
[53] Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, p. 166.
[54] Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, p. 166.
[55] Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, p. 167.

to *Killing Eve*'s efforts in 'redesigning the architecture of the woman's Panopticon', that is, how women might look and be seen, and the pleasures and dangers that accompany such acts, away from the 'apprehension of sexual difference'.[56] In 'multiplying differences', and moving away from the 'homogeneity' of sexual opposition, *Killing Eve* allows the exploration of the complexities of feminine identity and desire.

Dressed to Kill: Villanelle

Clothing is key to the objective of 'seeing difference differently'.[57] This theoretical utilisation can be read in terms of costuming, where garments are put towards certain means in the construction of characterisation. We can also consider how a character uses clothing, and the work this performs at the level of the narrative. From the beginning of the series, clothing is a means through which the differences between Villanelle and Eve's lifestyles are foregrounded. Changes in dress also illustrate the pair's movement towards, and desire for, one another. Media coverage of the clothing used in the series has focused primarily on Villanelle, with a plethora of editorials covering topics such as 'Every Single Outfit Worn by Villanelle on 'Killing Eve,' Ranked' and 'How To Shop Villanelle's Wardrobe On The High Street Ahead Of Season Four'.[58] Given that out of the two characters, Villanelle's outfits are more engaged with contemporary style, both outlandish and bold in their effect, the fact that her clothes are receiving the most attention is unsurprising. This spectacular positioning of Villanelle's outfits is thus posed as aspirational, reaching beyond the series itself and onto the (virtual) pages of major fashion publications such as *Grazia, Elle* and *Vogue* – the latter of which bestowed on *Killing Eve* the title of the 'most fashionable show on TV' in 2018.[59]

---

[56] Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, p. 142; Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism: An Introduction', in *Re-vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles, CA: The American Film Institute, 1984), pp. 1-17 (p. 15).

[57] Chaney, 'BBC America's *Killing Eve* Is Instantly Addictive Television; Doane, Mellencamp, Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism', p. 14.

[58] Kate Halliwell, 'Every Single Outfit Worn by Villanelle on 'Killing Eve,' Ranked' (2020). Available at https://www.theringer.com/tv/2020/4/8/21212957/killing-eve-villanelle-outfits-ranked-ranking [accessed 28th October 2021]; Hannah Banks-Walker, 'Killing Eve: How To Shop Villanelle's Wardrobe On The High Street Ahead Of Season Four' (2021). Available at https://graziadaily.co.uk/fashion/shopping/shop-killing-eve-fashion-look-for-less-as-jodie-comer-reaches-style-icon-status/ [accessed 28th October 2021]. See also, Olivia Blair, 'Killing Eve: Villanelle's Best Ever Fashion Moments' (2020). Available at https://www.elle.com/uk/fashion/celebrity-style/g32156498/villanelle-best-outfits-killing-eve/ [accessed 28th October 2021]; Rebecca Patton, 'Villanelle's 21 Best Outfits From 'Killing Eve,' Because Her Style Is Just As Dramatic & Beautiful As She Is' (2019). Available at https://www.bustle.com/p/villanelles-21-best-outfits-from-killing-eve-because-her-style-is-just-as-dramatic-beautiful-as-she-is-17865977 [accessed 28th October 2021].

[59] Steff Yotka, '*Killing Eve* Is the Most Fashionable Show on TV' (2018). Available at https://www.vogue.com/article/killing-eve-is-the-most-fashionable-show-on-tv [accessed 28th October 2021].

Moving away from this aspirational focus somewhat, I want to focus on the analytical work that Villanelle and Eve's clothing might be *doing* and how both are complicating and reformulating fixed ideas about femininity through dress.

The femme fatale's 'symbolic iconography', Bruzzi suggests, 'is a limited, clearly demarcated register of clothes, based on the contrast between light and dark […], frequent wardrobe changes […] and the insertion of distinctive, often anachronistic garments of accessories'.[60]

Double Indemnity, dir. Billy Wilder (Paramount Pictures, 1944)

This visual code is often subverted in order to underscore the '*femme fatale*'s duplicity'.[61] Bruzzi situates the use of 'pale clothes', for instance, as a 'clear example of reverse symbolism'.[62] Villanelle's outfits both engage with and expand upon Bruzzi's discussion. While her often colourful clothing departs from Bruzzi's theorisations about light and dark – the use of which would have been more important in black and white films such as, to use Bruzzi's example, Jacques Tourneur's 1947 film *Out of the Past* – 'frequent wardrobe changes' are central to Villanelle's visual repertoire.[63] Costume designer Phoebe de Gaye describes Villanelle as a 'good chameleon', stating that a key idea underlying her clothing was the fact that 'you could never really pin her down', a summation that positions

[60] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 126.
[61] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127.
[62] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 126.
[63] *Out of the Past*, dir. Jacques Tourneur (RKO Radio Pictures, 1947); Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 126.

Villanelle, like the classic femme fatale, as a 'figure of a certain discursive unease'.[64] The now iconic pink Molly Goddard dress worn by Villanelle in episode two, 'I'll Deal With Him Later', while miles away from the structured, dark garments that we might typically associate with the femme fatale, is one example of how Villanelle's clothing aligns with the ideas of duplicity and illegibility outlined by both Bruzzi and Doane.[65] Villanelle wears the tulle smock dress to an appointment with a psychiatrist who is going to assess whether she is well enough to continue in her role as an assassin. Before the visit, she asks Konstantin whether they are seeing 'Jerome' and, when his presence is confirmed, replies 'I'll wear my chicken fillets then'. Here, Villanelle's supposed plans parallel Bruzzi's description of Bridget in *The Last Seduction* (1994): a 'self-conscious *femme fatale* who successfully uses a conventionalised, overtly sexual image of femininity', showing 'a full awareness of how that image affects men'.[66] While Villanelle acknowledges this ability to play on cultural scripts, her dress – described by de Gaye as 'extremely feminine, almost to the slightly perverse point' – does not conform to these ideas in nearly the same way.[67] In this scene, Villanelle's clothing reflects her feelings towards the assessment – at which Konstantin is also watchfully present – and the control that both her handler and the psychiatrist have over her freedom to work and travel. It is as if Villanelle is saying, as de Gaye suggests, if you're going to treat me like a child, "I'm going to dress like a little girl and act like a mad little girl".[68] While the

---

[64] Phoebe de Gaye, qtd. in '*Killing Eve* Is the Most Fashionable Show on TV'; Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[65] 'I'll Deal With Him Later', *Killing Eve*, BBC One, 15 April 2018; Looking to critical appraisals of Goddard's designs more broadly sheds more light on Villanelle's particular brand of duplicity. Lynn Yaeger writes that Goddard's dresses, while seeming to be the 'embodiment of girlish charm', have a 'transgressive current rumbling underneath all the frothy folderol' (Lynn Yaeger, 'Molly Goddard on Her Distinct Vision and Dedicated Following (2018). Available at https://www.vogue.com/article/molly-goddard-interview-vogue-march-2018-issue [accessed 2nd November 2021]). Situating Goddard's aesthetic 'firmly in the tradition of vixen-in-an-innocent-frock', Yaeger states that 'the Goddard girl […] is likely to run riot in her pretty pastels' (Yaeger, 'Molly Goddard on Her Distinct Vision and Dedicated Following'). The 'Goddard girl' is also aesthetically linked to punk which, according to Yaeger, 'took the conventions of proto-feminine fashions – the slinky fifties sheath, the prom dress – and exploded them' (Yaeger, 'Molly Goddard on Her Distinct Vision and Dedicated Following'). It is worth noting here that this dialogue with punk aesthetics is heightened by the designer's choice to pair the dress with black, chunky Balenciaga boots, rather than the ballet shoes initially proposed by producers (Phoebe de Gaye, in 'Killing Eve Costume Designer Phoebe de Gaye on Dressing Villanelle and Eve | Talking TV' (2019). Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqOegZj2ltQ [accessed 2nd November 2021]).
[66] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127.
[67] de Gaye, qtd. in '*Killing Eve* Is the Most Fashionable Show on TV'.
[68] de Gaye, qtd. in '*Killing Eve* Is the Most Fashionable Show on TV';]). We can read the same thematics of girlishness tainted with subtle subversion in Villanelle's actions when wearing the dress. In this sequence, Villanelle evokes particular modes of femininity and their associated conventions, and 'explodes' them along with the expectations of the characters around her. From Villanelle's promise of sexualised femininity to her false show of vulnerability with Konstantin, the viewer is also duped by their own expectations of how the sequence will unfold. These expectations are constructed through a specific vocabulary of femininity and clothing, evidenced by filmic antecedents like Bridget in *The Last Seduction*, which tell us how women might glean power in situations with men. The sheer dress both reveals and conceals, showing Villanelle's black bra beneath and yet obscuring the shape of her body with layer upon layer of tulle in overtly girlish 'pretty pastels'

Goddard dress sets Villanelle apart from the more traditional visual vocabulary of both femmes fatales and female assassins, the overall effect of this particular look is still in line with criticism regarding the femme fatale. The layers – both literal and epistemological – of the dress ensure that Villanelle cannot be easily read, situating her as a 'figure of a certain discursive unease'.[69] She is unavoidable, spectacular, and yet cannot be pinned down to a distinct, fixed meaning.

'I'll Deal With Him Later', *Killing Eve*, BBC One, 15 April 2018

The mention of 'chicken fillets' both demystifies the appearance of sexualised femininity and leads the audience to believe that Villanelle will be dressed in a particularly provocative manner. At the beginning of the appointment, close-up shots rest on Villanelle's face, with her outfit hidden from view. It is only when Jerome thanks her for 'making such an effort' that the camera angle changes, allowing the viewer to take in Villanelle's dress in all its glory. The shift to a medium wide shot frames Villanelle sitting in the middle of the sofa, with the dress splayed all around her. The draping of the dress across the sofa emphasises the

(Yaeger, 'Molly Goddard on Her Distinct Vision and Dedicated Following'). Linking to this idea of both concealing and revealing – and with reference to their departure from the 'blunt bobs and leather dusters' of international assassins in films like *Atomic Blonde* (2017) – Steff Yotka highlights how Villanelle's outfits make her stand out in order 'to blend right in' (Yotka, '*Killing Eve* Is the Most Fashionable Show on TV'; *Atomic Blonde*, dir. David Leitch (Focus Features, 2017).

[69] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.

amount of material that the dress utilises. Dressed entirely against the social codes of the meeting, she is highly conspicuous. She takes up space in a situation that threatens to make her feel small and powerless, without utilising overtly sexual visual codes relating to femininity and power. Bruzzi highlights how in classic noir, the 'gaze of the hapless men' who are duped by the femme fatale is 'at least in part mocked because they never understand the complexity of what they are looking at'.[70] They do not understand that the fatal woman is performing a particular sexualised mode of femininity in order to get her own way. She has anticipated their response to her, and acted accordingly. While Villanelle does not manage to trick the psychiatrist in this sequence, she does manage to obtain the details of her next assignment after the appointment. When Konstantin tells Villanelle that 'it is good to have someone worried about [her]', referring to himself, she tells him that she cares for him too, and pulls him into a tight hug. This display of emotion prompts Konstantin to lean further into his paternal sentiments, telling Villanelle to 'go home and do something normal', none the wiser that Villanelle has taken the postcard with the details from his pocket mid-embrace. While Konstantin may have thought that her performance of femininity was unsuccessful, his failure to 'understand the complexity' of Villanelle's dress positions him as a 'hapless' duped man.[71] She has "dress[ed] like a little girl and act[ed] like a mad little girl", invoking and anticipating his concern, in order to secure her future assignment.[72]

De Gaye describes the Goddard dress as highly feminine, 'almost to the slightly perverse point'.[73] The term perverse can be used to describe that which is 'wicked, evil, [and] debased', but also a person that is 'disposed to go against what is reasonable, logical, expected or required'.[74] Both definitions are applicable to Villanelle's actions while wearing the dress. Not only does she lie and steal in order to get her way, she also evades the expectations of the characters around her and the audience alike. Another moment in which Villanelle anticipates and upends expectations is in episode three, 'Don't I Know You?'.[75] Eve and Bill go to Berlin, where Villanelle has just killed a Chinese colonel by impersonating a sex worker during his visit to a 'kink clinic'. In the sequence on which I will focus, Villanelle is styled in a patterned Dries Van Noten brocade suit.[76] Eve's scarf, selected from

[70] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127.
[71] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127.
[72] de Gaye, qtd. in '*Killing Eve* Is the Most Fashionable Show on TV'.
[73] de Gaye, qtd. in '*Killing Eve* Is the Most Fashionable Show on TV'.
[74] Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'perverse'. Available at https://www-oed-com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/141672 [accessed 7th November 2021].
[75] 'Don't I Know You?', *Killing Eve*, BBC One, 22 April 2018.
[76] The style of the Van Noten blazer relates to *Killing Eve*'s broader project of 'feminising' 'a genre usually steeped in the masculine' (Chaney, 'BBC America's *Killing Eve* Is Instantly Addictive Television').

her stolen suitcase (more on that later), is around Villanelle's neck. In her commentary regarding her costume design choice in this sequence, de Gaye highlights how, at this point in the series, we had not seen Villanelle 'looking totally masculine'.[77] While the notion of 'looking masculine' does not necessarily align with considering masculine styling and what it might suggest, we can trace how a movement away from hyper-femininity might interact with Villanelle's characterisation. Gesturing to the movements that Villanelle makes within this sequence, and the severity of the shots that detail Bill's murder, de Gaye surmises that the choice of a suit seemed to really 'fit' Villanelle's actions and characterisation.[78] The appropriateness of the suit is therefore linked to both mobility and danger. More broadly, women in suits have been associated with the concept of 'power dressing'. In her study of 'power dressing' in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Entwistle indicates how the 'discourse of 'power dressing" enabled the 'career woman' to '*fashion* herself' as such, thus making her 'visible within the male public arena'.[79] Within this specific code of dress, women are to 'avoid trousers in the boardroom at all costs since these are supposedly threatening to male power'.[80] While such values might feel archaic in the twenty-first century, there are many historical narratives and studies connecting trousers, femininity, and power. Gayle V. Fischer identifies how even if trousers did not become a widespread fashion for women until after the second world war, the relationship between women and rational dress positions trousers as both 'an expression of male rationality and intellectual fortitude' *and* a signification of 'the power – and infectious potential – of dangerous ideas about women's social and professional mobility'.[81] Writing in the late twentieth century, Fischer points out that the phrase '"who

---

Anachronistic in style, with a cinched in waist, three buttons and, when compared to women's 'fashion' blazers in the twenty-first century, a relatively high neckline, the blazer marks a striking parallel to the jacket of Christian Dior's 1947 'Bar Suit'. Still available to purchase under the name '30 Montaigne Bar Jacket', this style of blazer is historically rooted in the post-war era and, in its original format, the 'bar jacket' sought to provide women with 'the ammunition to assert their powers of seduction', while concurrently imbuing the 'gloomy' epoch with 'a new joie de vivre' (Tiziana Cardini, 'Dior's Bar Jacket: A Brief History' (2020). Available at https://www.vogue.com/article/christian-dior-bar-jacket-a-brief-history [accessed 8th November 2021]). As Bruzzi indicates, 'anachronistic garments or accessories' are key sartorial hallmarks of the classic femme fatale (Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 126). The particular anachronism of Villanelle's jacket thus points to a visual history that, if not explicitly aligned with what a classic femme fatale might wear, alludes to an era in which she was particularly visible, and a device through which her 'duplicity' was underscored in such films (Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127).

[77] de Gaye, in 'Killing Eve Costume Designer Phoebe de Gaye on Dressing Villanelle and Eve | Talking TV'.

[78] de Gaye, in 'Killing Eve Costume Designer Phoebe de Gaye on Dressing Villanelle and Eve | Talking TV'.

[79] Entwistle, "Power Dressing' and the Construction of the Career Woman', p. 212.

[80] Entwistle, "Power Dressing' and the Construction of the Career Woman', p. 216.

[81] Gayle V. Fischer, *Pantaloons and Power: A Nineteenth-Century Dress Reform in the United States* (Kent, Ohio and London: The Kent State University Press, 2001), p. 176. See also, Becky Munford, 'Medical Bloomers and Irrational Rationalists: Pathologising the Woman in Trousers', *Women's History Review*, 28.6 (2019), 988-1008 (p. 990). In the nineteenth century, women's 'rational dress' posed the threat of both increased mobility and consequent social change. Munford articulates how, by the mid-nineteenth century, concern

wears the pants"' – meaning 'the one who wears the pants has the power and is in control' – is still resonant in popular culture.[82] Today, just over thirty years later, this phrase has not disappeared from popular parlance, indicating an enduring semiotic relationship between trousers and power.

The choice to place Villanelle in trousers has links to this history, and to her characterisation more broadly. Villanelle wears the suit in Berlin when she sets out to pursue Eve. Initially, this pursuit begins at a U-Bahn station. When Bill sees Villanelle watching Eve before attempting to follow her onto the train, he approaches and distracts her, ensuring that Eve is not followed or harmed. In order to distract Villanelle, he draws her into a conversation about the scarf that she is wearing, a scarf that she has taken from Eve's stolen suitcase. Villanelle leaves the station and the power dynamic switches: Bill is now pursuing Villanelle, or so he thinks. The first shot in this sequence shows Bill's perspective of Villanelle, followed by a shot of Bill walking closely behind. When discussing urban streetwalking, discourses regarding the figure of the *flâneur* and the (im)possibility of the *flâneuse* come to the fore. In 1863, Charles Baudelaire identified the figure of the *flâneur* as a 'passionate spectator' whose 'passion and profession are to become one flesh with the crowd': 'to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world'.[83] As Leslie Kern notes, it is unsurprising given these conditions that the *flâneur* was 'always imagined as a man, not to mention one who is white and able-bodied'.[84] We can trace elements of *flânerie* in both Bill and Villanelle's navigation of the city streets. The famous image of the *flâneur*, Paul Gavarni's *Le Flâneur* (1842), illustrates a man, with his hands in his pockets observing the scenery above him. In the sequence where Bill begins to follow Villanelle, both characters walk with their hands in their trouser pockets, mimicking the leisurely stance of Gavarni's subject. While Villanelle appears to be walking with ease, unaware that she is being watched as she becomes 'one flesh with the crowd', Bill, following

---

regarding the 'deleterious effects of long, full skirts, heavy petticoats, heels and corsets on women's bodies and minds' emerged from multiple discursive fields including 'medicine, health reform, women's rights activism, religious teaching and education'. The styles outlined here, creating an 'hourglass shape' by '[p]ulling in the waist, and pushing excess flesh up into the bosom and downwards into the lower abdomen', served to accentuate the 'distinction between male and female anatomy'. 'Anti-fashion discourses' of the time, Munford continues, thus 'highlighted the 'irrationality' of fashionable dress', deeming it 'frivolous, inconstant and immoral, but also detrimental to women's health'. If such fashion is associated with 'ornamentation', and men's dress with 'utility', the binary between 'irrational' women and 'rational' men is further naturalised through clothing.

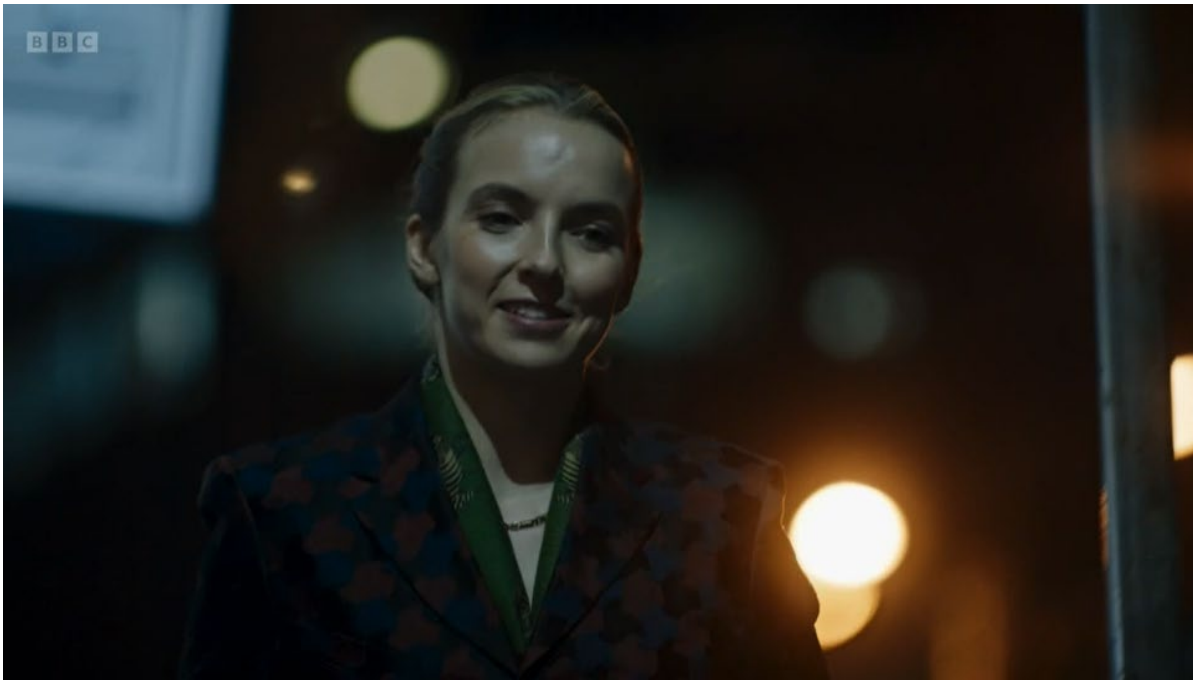
[82] Fischer, *Pantaloons and Power,* pp. 176-7.

[83] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (London and New York: Phaidon, 2008), p. 9.

[84] Leslie Kern, *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-made World* (London and New York: Verso, 2020), p. 24.

closely behind, is an active, passionate 'spectator', not necessarily of the crowd around him, but certainly of Villanelle.[85]

In the context of modernity, Janet Wolff states that the women observed by writers such as Baudelaire do not 'meet the poet as his equal' because they are the 'subjects of his gaze'.[86] The impossibility of the *flâneuse* is largely predicated on her position as *part of* what the *flâneur* observes, as part of the landscape of modernity. However, when Villanelle looks before crossing the road, Bill attempts to merge with a group of strangers, bashing into them in the process, in order to remain unseen. A tram passes between Bill and Villanelle, obstructing his view. After it has passed, it is subtly apparent that Villanelle has paused, without looking back, to allow him to catch up. While Bill is now visibly flustered, his movements more chaotic, Villanelle continues to stroll with her hands in her pockets. The camera angle changes, allowing us to see Villanelle's face as she smiles, letting us know that *she* knows, has always known, that Bill is following her.



'Don't I Know You?', *Killing Eve*, BBC One, 22 April 2018.

Glancing back to the discourses around trouser-wearing women, we can see in this sequence how Villanelle undermines 'male rationality' while exercising her threatening mobility around the urban environment.[87] In *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City*, Lauren Elkin proposes that if 'we tunnel back, we find there always was a *flâneuse* passing Baudelaire in the

[85] Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, p. 9.
[86] Janet Wolff, 'The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity', *Theory, Culture & Society* 2.3 (1985), 37-46 (p. 42).
[87] Munford, 'Medical Bloomers and Irrational Rationalists', p. 1001.

street'.[88] The issue is, as Kern notes, these women were situated by writers like Baudelaire within their own 'preconceived notions', or masculine patterns of definition.[89] 'Women walking in public', Kern continues, 'were more likely to be read as street walkers (sex workers) than as women out for another purpose'.[90] This emphasis on masculine perspectives is also what ultimately causes Bill's downfall. As he follows Villanelle, thinking that he is the spectator, the active knowledge seeker, it is Villanelle who 'wears the trousers', and holds the power. Villanelle's knowledge of her environment as she glides around the city, her ability to 'be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home', allows her to lead Bill to a busy nightclub.[91] He does not imagine for a moment that this woman – a known assassin – could be actively leading him here for another purpose, spectating as she is spectated, linking back to the apparent impossibility and invisibility of the *flâneuse*, due to masculine frames of reference.

'Don't I Know You?', *Killing Eve*, BBC One, 22 April 2018.

[88] Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City* (London: Vintage, 2016), p. 11.
[89] Kern, *Feminist City*, p. 25.
[90] Kern, *Feminist City*, p. 25.
[91] Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, p. 9.

Once she leads him into the nightclub – she notably is able to walk straight in, whereas Bill must queue – the pair truly 'become one flesh with the crowd'.[92] Villanelle utilises the writhing mass of people as a means of covertly killing Bill, but not before turning to give him an eerily angelic smile. In this sequence, Villanelle's 'hiding-in-plain-sight proposition' performs the same function as her manipulation of Konstantin.[93] Just as she fools Konstantin by acting the role of the "mad little girl", she leads Bill to his death by letting him believe that he is the spectator.[94] Aligning with Bruzzi's descriptions of the femmes fatales of neo-noir, Villanelle manipulates the 'stereotypes on offer' and ultimately renders 'supposedly transparent signs unreadable' through her sartorial choices.[95] As dangerous in a brocade suit as she is in pink tulle, Villanelle's clothing continues to take us beyond the classic visual codes of fatal femininity.[96]

Transversal Desire: Eve

While Villanelle's outfits have been the focus of fashion editorials about *Killing Eve*, with Eve's clothing described as *un*fashionable, practical, and ultimately unremarkable, the exchange of clothing between Eve and Villanelle deserves further enquiry. Bruzzi suggests that films like *Single White Female* move 'the emphasis away from difference and the victory or otherwise of the emasculated 'hero" by exploring relationships between women.[97] When characters are no longer defined 'against a male opposite', they 'become defined against each other', with the 'most consistently employed oppositional model juxtapos[ing] good and bad women'.[98] As the series progresses, it is not wholly possible to situate Eve and Villanelle

---

[92] Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, p. 9
[93] Yotka, '*Killing Eve* is the Most Fashionable Show on TV'.
[94] de Gaye, qtd. in '*Killing Eve* is the Most Fashionable Show on TV'.
[95] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 44.
[96] While a thorough discussion of accessories is beyond the remit of this chapter section, Villanelle also uses various accoutrements of femininity as lethal weapons. When Cesare Greco finds Villanelle in his bedroom at his house in Tuscany, he asks whether she is a birthday gift, and strokes her hair, telling her that she is beautiful. She removes his hand, stating 'you should really ask before you touch a person', and removes the hairpin holding her chic chignon in place, styled as she arrived near the house. When Villanelle stabs him in the eye, close up shots show us that the hairpin has been modified to contain poison released by a small lever. Grossman frames the style of Cesare's murder as an example of Villanelle 'call[ing] attention to the sexism around her', focusing specifically on her last words to Cesare before she stabs him with the hairpin/poison (Grossman, *The Femme Fatale*, p. 128). This act of violence links back to the 'misapprehension already being played upon in classic *noirs*' – the mocking of the male protagonist's gaze as he depends upon the apparently seamless relationship between what a woman wears and who she really is (Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 143). Villanelle's act of violence when Cesare assumes that she is a 'gift' for his pleasure seeks to 'restore the erotic social gaze to women', as the scopophilic look is returned to Villanelle when she watches Cesare die (Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 122).
[97] *Single White Female*, dir. Barbet Schroeder (Columbia Pictures, 1992); Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 139.
[98] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 139.

within a binary of 'good' and 'bad'. Villanelle's acts of violence are spectacular and excessive, but Eve also feels murderous impulses towards Villanelle following her attack on Bill, and ultimately stabs her in the stomach in episode eight, 'God, I'm Tired'.[99] Instead of thinking about Villanelle and Eve in oppositional terms, I want to focus on how the two characters 'become defined' *through*, rather than 'against each other', with particular reference to what Bruzzi terms as the 'eroticised identification' connected with 'swapping clothes' as a 'social and sexual manoeuvre'.[100]

Looking briefly back to the Berlin sequence, when Villanelle steals Eve's suitcase, Eve has to buy new clothes for dinner that evening. She selects a blue dress for her dinner with Jin Yeong (Lobo Chan) who is a 'big deal within Chinese intelligence'. Eve is instructed by Carolyn to 'play his game, however gross', insinuating that Yeong's behaviour might be inappropriate, and that Eve must play along to get the intel that they require. When Eve is trying on the dress while on the phone to Elena (Kirby Howell-Baptiste), she says: 'You know when your outfit is missing something, but you just don't know what?'. Meanwhile Villanelle, who has been watching Eve while she shops, places a belt on a hook adjacent to the fitting room. Villanelle watches Eve's mirror image as she tries the belt around her waist and appears to be satisfied with the outcome. Therefore, when Bill stops Villanelle to ask about her scarf, both Bill and Eve are unaware that Eve is wearing an outfit that was, in part, constructed by Villanelle. An item belonging to Eve is around Villanelle's neck, and an item gifted by Villanelle is around Eve's waist. When the differences between Eve and Villanelle are initially foregrounded, in part, through sartorial choices, this act of swapping blurs such straightforward distinctions. The swapping of accessories is also an intriguing 'social and sexual manoeuvre' on Villanelle's part.[101] Eve is encouraged by Carolyn to cooperate with Yeong's 'game, however gross' and her outfit is part of the role that she is being urged to play. Here, Eve is being asked to play the role of the 'self-conscious' femme fatale as outlined by Bruzzi, utilising 'a conventionalised, overtly sexual image of femininity' that indicates 'a full awareness of how that image affects men'.[102] In gifting Eve – a character

[99] 'God, I'm Tired', *Killing Eve*, BBC One, 27th May 2018. This blurring of 'good' and 'bad' continues into series two. In episode eight, 'You're Mine', Eve kills Villanelle's handler Raymond (Adrian Scarborough) before telling her: 'You want me to be a mess. You want me to be scared. But I'm like you now. I'm not afraid of anything'. Following this confrontation, Villanelle shoots Eve. ('You're Mine', *Killing Eve*, BBC One, 26th May 2019).
[100] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, pp. 139, 142.
[101] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 142.
[102] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127.

who is consistently practical and utilitarian in her dress – the accessory that completes her outfit, Villanelle contributes to Eve's ability to play this 'game'.

'Don't I Know You?', *Killing Eve*, BBC One, 22 April 2018.

While it may at first appear that Villanelle is leading Eve to dress 'within an exclusively heterosexual framework and with the male erotic gaze in mind', the implications of Eve's

attendance at the dinner imbue this 'manoeuvre' with more complexity.[103] The information that Eve obtains at the dinner leads her to the discovery that Frank is actually a spy for 'The Twelve' – the organisation, or group of individuals, for which Villanelle works. Frank is Villanelle's next target, so in leading her to the dinner, and ensuring that she is 'dressed for success', Villanelle is also ensuring that she and Eve will continue to cross paths. We cannot, therefore, view Villanelle's dressing of Eve within a 'heterosexual framework' alone.[104] Jennifer Craik writes that '[d]espite the rhetoric that women primarily dress to please men, other evidence suggests that women primarily dress to please other women', with 'no clear pattern' emerging 'as to whose 'eyes' women view other women through'.[105] The possibility opened up through Craik's suggestion makes space for the complexity involved in the dynamic outlined above. Villanelle dresses Eve so that she is appealing to Yeong but, by dressing her in this way, Villanelle is simultaneously leading Eve *towards her*.

This dynamic is developed further through Villanelle's theft of Eve's suitcase. When Eve's suitcase is returned to her home address in episode four, 'Sorry Baby', her own items are missing and have been replaced with 'about five grand's worth' of 'expensive clothes, amazing clothes, all [Eve's] size'.[106] Accompanying the clothing is a bottle of 'La Villanelle' perfume, with a note reading: 'sorry baby x'. It is not until episode five, when the contents have been checked and returned as 'safe', that Eve reopens the suitcase at home.[107] She applies 'La Villanelle' perfume to her neck and wrists, before holding a pair of black stiletto heels up to the base of her foot to check the size. They are perfect. The next item that she removes is Roland Mouret's 'Bartlow' dress, an item that is miles away from Eve's usual attire with its figure hugging, halterneck and dynamic two-tone satin design. Unlike the belt/scarf swap, Eve is aware that these items are from Villanelle – the person who has recently murdered one of her close friends.

[103] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 142.
[104] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 142.
[105] Jennifer Craik, *The Face of Fashion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 56.
[106] 'Sorry Baby', *Killing Eve*, BBC One, 29th April 2018.
[107] 'I Have a Thing about Bathrooms', *Killing Eve*, BBC One, 6 May 2018.

'I Have a Thing about Bathrooms', *Killing Eve*, BBC One, 6 May 2018.

The Mouret dress is mostly black, with a distinctive ivory band reaching around the waist and down one side of the skirt. The dress's use of light and dark links back to Bruzzi's comments on the classic femme fatale, and how the femme fatale in light clothes becomes a 'clear example of inverse symbolism', a 'jarring' questioning and underlining of 'the *femmes fatales*' duplicity'.[108] The Mouret dress utilises the contrast between light and dark to form its dynamic structure, an effect that becomes especially apparent when we see how the garment emphasises Eve's figure, previously hidden beneath baggier clothing. When we bear in mind that Villanelle has chosen and gifted the dress to Eve, the dress also becomes a site of communication. If light clothing connotes innocence, and dark clothing connotes danger, Eve wears both qualities well. This reading of the dress thus engages with Bruzzi's suggestion that films focused on relationships between women – rather than a woman and her 'male opposite' – tend to juxtapose 'good and bad women'.[109] Villanelle is telling Eve, through the dress, that she is not wholly good or bad. She has the capacity, like Villanelle, to be both. We first see Eve wearing the dress in her mirror image. Besides the dress itself, the most striking element of this shot is the effect of the size of the mirror and of Eve's stature. Eve is rigid as she regards herself, and the narrow mirror restricts how much of her body we are able to see. The resultant image renders Eve almost mannequin-esque, an effect that is particularly fitting given that she is literally being dressed by Villanelle.

[108] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, pp. 126-7.
[109] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 139.

Place writes about the significance of mirror shots in film noir, suggesting that they serve to 'indicate women's duplicitous nature. They are visually split, thus not to be trusted'.[110] However, Place goes on to indicate that when 'reflections are stronger than the actual woman', or the 'mirror images are seen in odd, uncomfortable angles', this composition seeks to 'create the mood of threat and fear'.[111] I would argue that the dress sequence engages with both of Place's claims. The light and dark of the dress already engages with ideas of duplicity, and the strange, restrictive composition of the mirror shot reflects Eve's ambivalence when passively dressed by Villanelle.[112] However, there is more to this sequence than duplicity and anxiety. As much as the Mouret mirror sequence evokes 'threat and fear' for Eve, there are also distinct, palpable feelings of excitement and pleasure.[113] With this in mind, the idea of the 'transversal' outlined in my discussion of teenage girls in chapter two provides a disruptive way of thinking about this exchange. Though 'friendship' is undoubtedly not the correct way of defining Eve and Villanelle's relationship – especially with reference to the accusations levered against the show of 'queerbaiting' – the kinds of friendships discussed by Colman are useful for my analysis of *Killing Eve* in their recognition of a desire to 'possess the other person' and their polyvocal 'sense of vampiric identity formation'.[114] Friendship is thus positioned as a 'transformative

---

[110] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 58.
[111] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 58.
[112] See also, Kathleen J. Waites, '*Killing Eve* and the Necessity of the Female Villain du Jour', in *Antiheroines of Contemporary Media: Saints, Sinners, and Survivors*, eds. Melanie Haas, N.A. Pierce, and Gretchen Busl (Lanham, MD and London: Lexington Books, 2021), pp. 119-132 (p. 120). Waites identifies the recurrence of 'mirror tropes' throughout *Killing Eve.* When Eve and Villanelle first meet, after all, it is in front of a mirror. Through such use of mirrors, Waites argues, the series simultaneously 'reveals the protagonists' mutual fascination with one another', while subverting the 'Madonna/whore dichotomy' – contained in the distinct characterisations of Eve as the 'frumpy married British Intelligence officer' and Villanelle as the 'stylish psychopathic killer' – that Jennings's spy-novel initially sets out. With this in mind, Waites positions Villanelle as Eve's 'alter ego', a move which 'maps out new terrain' for such narratives.
[113] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 58.
[114] See also, Nicole Woods and Doug Hardman, 'It's just absolutely everywhere': understanding LGBTQ experiences of queerbaiting', *Psychology and Sexuality*, (2021) 1-13 (p. 2) <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2021.1892808>. Woods and Hardman trace the definition of 'queerbaiting' as 'an unrealised queer subtext or plot used to lure queer audiences' which 'may occur in the main body of text, show or film, or equally the paratext and marketing of the work'. In an interview with Sandra Oh and Jodie Comer, Oh responds to questions about a romantic relationship between Villanelle and Eve by stating that viewers 'want to make it into something' that it 'just isn't' (Oh qtd. in William J Connolly, 'Killing Eve interview: Sandra Oh and Jodie Comer discuss their characters' sexuality' (2019). Available at https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/originals/killing-eve-season-two-interview/ [accessed 14th November 2021]). Given the billboards advertising the series, with lines such as 'Have you told your husband about us Eve?' and 'Has anyone seen my girlfriend?', fans and critics thus levered accusations of queerbaiting against the show following Oh's comments (See Ash Percival, 'Killing Eve Accused Of Queerbaiting After Sandra Oh Dismisses Show's Lesbian Undertones' (2019). Available at https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/killing-eve-sandra-oh-queerbaiting_uk_5cf9087ae4b0e3e3df160b9b [accessed 14th November 2021]). However, looking at Oh's comments more closely, it seems that she is refusing to categorise Eve and Villanelle's relationship within existing terms, instead focusing on the fluidity of 'sexuality and [the] discovery of the wider reaches of

passage', containing the 'possibility of becoming not the other, but becoming self-sentient' to our own desires and aspirations.[115] The Mouret dress, I argue, positions Eve in a mode of 'vibratory possibility', providing 'a transversal point that ruptures subjectivity'.[116] After we see the dress through Eve's reflection, a close up shot shows Eve running her hands down from her waist and across her bottom, before moving to the front of her body, up and over her breasts. This series of movements intimates that the dress, and therefore Villanelle, has made Eve aware of the contours of her body in a new way. The dress is a means through which Villanelle is communicating Eve's capacity for desire, urging her to recognise her capacity for darkness, to engage with her own complexity. In this sequence, clothing is thus a site of transformation – and recognition – that interplays the two women's desires. Whether we are following Villanelle around the streets of Berlin or seeing Eve discover herself anew in the Mouret dress, in *Killing Eve* clothing is a site where desire unfolds. The analytical work performed through clothing – through visual allusions to histories of trouser wearing, streetwalking women as well as pre-existing modes of fatal and investigative femininity – effectively redesigns the 'architecture of the woman's Panopticon', presenting the pleasures and dangers that accompany looking and being seen, beyond the previous notions of sexual difference that define the effect of the femme fatale.[117]

Boy Parts

Irina, the protagonist of *Boy Parts*, is a photographer. Echoing the histories of dangerous streetwalking women explored in my discussion of *Killing Eve*, Irina scouts new photographic subjects in public spaces. She exclusively takes often explicit photos of men (or, as she calls them, 'boys'), dressing them in 'costumes' and arranging them into 'improbable, uncomfortable shapes'.[118] When Irina is invited to contribute to a Contemporary Fetish Art exhibition, she navigates through her personal visual archive and pursues new photographic subjects in order to compile work to display. However, as she continues to delve into the violent events of her past – becoming increasingly haunted by one incident in particular – the tangible realities of Irina's day-to-day life falter and shift. While the

---

sexuality' (Oh, 'Killing Eve Interview'). Their sexualities, like their characterisations more broadly, are 'not one thing or another' (Oh, 'Killing Eve Interview'); Felicity Colman, 'Hit Me Harder: The Transversality of Becoming-Adolescent', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 16.3 (2005), 356-371 (p. 358).

[115] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 357.

[116] Colman, 'Hit Me Harder', p. 358.

[117] Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, p. 142; Doane, Mellencamp, Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism', p. 15.

[118] Eliza Clark, *Boy Parts* (London: Influx Press, 2020), pp. 39-40. All further references to Clark's text are to this edition and will be given parenthetically within the body of the thesis.

instability and ultimate denial of 'truth' from Irina's first-person perspective provokes parallels to the femme fatale's propensity to both incite and obstruct the 'epistemological drive' of narrative, *Boy Parts*' theorisation of the relationship between art and 'truth' is also heavily invested in the work from which it takes its epigraph: Susan Sontag's *On Photography*.[119] Sontag identifies how, though we might be inclined to differentiate photography (which 'passes for incontrovertible truth that a given thing happened') from a painting or piece of prose (which can 'never be other than a narrowly selective interpretation'), the former is 'no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth'.[120] In short, 'photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are'.[121] The epigraph to Clark's novel reads: 'Images which idealise are no less aggressive than work which makes a virtue of plainness. There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera'.[122] Sontag theorises this aggression in terms of the 'self-effacing' 'passivity' and 'ubiquity' of the 'photographic record' – the way in which a photograph appears to simply and directly capture a 'neat slice of time'.[123] While this dynamic certainly aggravates understandings of the photographic image as a straightforward representation of reality, the notion of aggression also refers to the structures of power tied to the act of looking and photographing within both Sontag and Clark's texts. Sontag argues that the 'central fantasy' connected to the camera is 'the camera as phallus' – an 'inescapable metaphor that everyone unselfconsciously employs' which is 'named without subtlety whenever we talk about "loading" and "aiming" a camera, about "shooting" a film'.[124] These verbs can also be applied, like the description of a photographic subject 'gazing down the barrel', to the use of guns (p. 42). While, as Sontag identifies, 'the camera/gun does not kill', there is still 'something predatory in the act of taking a picture'.[125] 'To photograph people is to violate them', Sontag continues, 'by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed'.[126] This idea of possession is reflected in Irina's description of her own photographic practice: 'It's like discovering a new flower no one else has noticed. Pressed in a photo; preserved and filed away forever, ageless and lovely and all mine', she states (p. 42).

---

[119] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[120] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, [1977] 2008), pp. 5-6.
[121] Sontag, *On Photography*, pp. 6-7.
[122] Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 7.
[123] Sontag, *On Photography*, pp. 7, 17.
[124] Sontag, *On Photography*, pp. 13-14.
[125] Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 14.
[126] Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 14.

With Sontag's words in mind, how do we position Irina's gaze? How might power dynamics shift when the person who looks, who shoots, is a woman? And what are the limitations of these shifts in power in terms of depictions of feminine agency? In this second section, I argue that *Boy Parts* is concerned with working – and failing – to be seen. In its exploration of how power might be negotiated through clothing, the novel identifies the limitations of the kinds of power women might be able to access within the parameters of patriarchal structures.

Reflecting on her portfolio of work with one subject, a young man named Will, Irina comments on how, as the years pass, she watches 'his hair get longer, and his outfits get skimpier' (p. 41). In addition to the physical changes that can be traced throughout the portfolio, Irina notes how Will gets 'more and more desperate to please [her]' (p. 41). This dynamic is further evident when Irina wraps 'his hair around [her] fist and wrench[es] his neck back' while taking photos, telling him 'not to be such a baby' when he says that he is in pain (p. 40). While the subjugation levered towards Will is overtly violent, the recognition of the power imbalance as he becomes 'desperate to please her' is also constructed in Irina's description of her 'favourite kind of boy to shoot' (p. 41). Irina favours a 'boy who works a demeaning job and has the subtleties of his beauty overlooked by glamorous women […]. The kind of boy who's bewildered, grateful, and will gaze down the barrel of [her] camera and do *anything* for [her]' (p. 41-2, emphasis in original). While the description of a boy gazing 'down the barrel' refers back to Sontag's commentary on the masculine fantasy of the 'camera/gun', this passage also outlines an explicit and deliberate power imbalance where Irina chooses subjects who are stunned by her attention, and will therefore be more likely to do as she asks, however extreme (p. 42).[127] This imbalance links back to Sontag's positioning of photography as an act of symbolic possession, as well as Irina's description of her photographic subjects as 'filed away forever, ageless and lovely and all [hers]' (p. 42).

Another subject, Eddie, asks to wear a mask during their shoot as he does not want to be identifiable within the images. Irina suggests that they use a 'giant bunny head' with an accompanying tail (pp. 115-6). The bunny head is described as a 'big, mascot-looking thing' that is less 'cartoony' and more 'Beatrix Potter', 'a bit like Peter Rabbit's' (p. 126). She pins 'a cotton tail' onto the 'waistband of his briefs (tight, navy blue) and takes what she describes as a 'great shot of his arse, with the little tail – and it's round and fat, and the tail is so fluffy and cute' (p. 126). Irina directs Eddie's movement as she takes photographs, telling him to

[127] Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 14.

'arch [his] hips, roll over, put [his] hands on [his] stomach, get on [his] knees, [and] touch him[self]' (p. 127). The contrast between Eddie's bare body – with 'thick thighs, soft stomach and a flat, ribby chest' – the cotton tail, and the bunny head is described as 'creepy' in a 'sexy gross' way (p. 126). While the costume performs a functional purpose in anonymising Eddie, it also maps on to ideas of looking and objectification. *Playboy* stands out as a key example of the sexualised use and resonance of bunny costumes in the western cultural milieu. In an interview regarding the late Hugh Hefner's legacy as founder and editor-in-chief of *Playboy* magazine, Camille Paglia highlights how second wave feminists were 'irate' about the bunny costumes that were worn by playmates and waitresses at the *Playboy* Club, as they felt that the outfits 'reduced women to animals'.[128] Paglia admits that the bunny is of course 'animal imagery', but also points out that 'a bunny is a child's toy' before suggesting that more valid criticisms of the costumes might argue that the bunny image 'makes a woman juvenile and infantilizes[sic] her'.[129] Paglia herself does not subscribe to this view, and instead suggests that the bunny costume is key to Hefner's sensibility because a bunny is ultimately 'utterly harmless'.[130] With the term '[m]ultiplying like bunnies' in mind, Paglia instead reads the costumes as a 'strange kind of joke' made by Hefner about the entire procreative process'.[131]

Paglia's analysis of the bunny outfit identifies an intriguing comparison with *Boy Parts*' use of costume, especially in terms of the juxtaposition between the bunny as a 'child's toy' – connecting to Irina's use of the 'Peter Rabbit' style mask – and the sexuality connoted by the phrase 'multiplying like bunnies' – linking to Irina's sexualised positioning of Eddie during the shoot (p. 126).[132] In a 1970 interview with Hefner, Gloria Steinem – who also worked undercover as a 'playmate' in 1963 in order to write an exposé of the institution for *Show* magazine – accused *Playboy* of 'objectifying women and exploiting men's insecurities in the name of capitalism'.[133] Like Steinem, I would suggest that the *Playboy* costumes operate as a form of objectification in which women are, in Mulvey's words,

---

[128] Camille Paglia, qtd. in Jeanie Pyun, 'Camille Paglia on Hugh Hefner's Legacy, Trump's Masculinity and Feminism's Sex Phobia' (2017). Available at https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/camille-paglia-hugh-hefners-legacy-trumps-masculinity-feminisms-sex-phobia-1044769/ [accessed 2nd August 2021].
[129] Paglia, 'Camille Paglia on Hugh Hefner's Legacy, Trump's Masculinity and Feminism's Sex Phobia'.
[130] Paglia, 'Camille Paglia on Hugh Hefner's Legacy, Trump's Masculinity and Feminism's Sex Phobia'.
[131] Paglia, 'Camille Paglia on Hugh Hefner's Legacy, Trump's Masculinity and Feminism's Sex Phobia'.
[132] Paglia, 'Camille Paglia on Hugh Hefner's Legacy, Trump's Masculinity and Feminism's Sex Phobia'.
[133] Carrie Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies: The Sexual Politics of Playboy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 1. Pitzulo's text does not perform a prolonged critique of *Playboy*, and instead 'reveals the foundation from which the magazine justifies its current appeal to women in the twenty-first century', reading a 'legacy of inclusive heterosexuality – for men and for women' and an 'overall vision of sexuality' that is 'more modern and equitable than the cultural tradition of male privilege from which [*Playboy*] was born' (p. 12).

'coded for strong visual and erotic impact', 'simultaneously looked at' as objects of pleasure and 'displayed' as the image of a certain mode of subservient, sexualised femininity.[134] This same objectification pulses through Irina's description of her shoot with Eddie. He passively 'does everything [Irina] say[s]'; he is 'responsive, engaged, [and] compliant' with her instructions (p. 127). According to Irina, 'he was made to be shown in two dimensions' (p. 127). This description positions Eddie as an ideal image, flat and void of individual identity. The costume, with its anonymising mask and conspicuous cotton tail, both encourages this removal of identity and invites objectification. With his face covered, it is not possible to read Eddie's reactions or emotions. Instead, he becomes a collection of 'boy parts' as Irina's eye, and therefore the narration, is drawn towards his 'thighs', 'stomach', 'chest', and 'arse' (p. 126). As Irina compares his 'arse' to a 'peach', stating that she 'could bite it', we can read another connotation of the costume that links to her objectifying look: the 'harmless' bunny as prey.[135]

In her discussion of how the violent femmes fatales of the 1990s subvert existing patriarchal power dynamics, Pidduck describes how the figure 'flies in the face of what we know as feminists about statistical gendered violence, and jars uncomfortably with cultural conventions which position women most often as passive objects of male violence'.[136] As I have discussed in chapter one with reference to *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*, this overt and contradictory violence does not always have to be read as a 'sinister reversal' of discourses around gender-based violence and, as Pidduck suggests, can instead offer 'an imagined momentum or venting of rage and revenge fantasies' for feminist spectators.[137] Until this point, Irina's objectification of and desire to possess men goes against, rather than bolsters, the power dynamics of patriarchy. As a result, her 'social, sexual, and physical powers' could be said to provide a potent 'imagined point of contact'.[138] While Irina's work, and her associated desires, cannot be read simply as a 'patriarchal sleight of hand', she also mocks Eddie's positioning of her work – the phrasing of which is 'decidedly similar to a *Vice* write-up' of one of her previous shows – as an example of a '*revolutionary* […] *female gaze*' featuring '*eroticised images of normal men by a woman*' (p. 123, emphasis in original).[139] Irina's disdain of such a commentary, and contemporary feminist discourses more broadly,

[134] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 19.
[135] Paglia, 'Camille Paglia on Hugh Hefner's Legacy, Trump's Masculinity and Feminism's Sex Phobia'.
[136] Julianne Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme: (Dis)Figuring Feminism, Family, Irony, Violence', *Cineaction*, 38 (1995), 64-72 (pp. 71-2).
[137] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', pp. 71-2.
[138] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', pp. 71-2.
[139] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', p. 72.

can be traced throughout the text. When she sneers about 'time's up' while nodding towards the 'Shout Up!' poster that denotes the bar as 'a sexual-harassment-free zone', for example, or when flippantly giving a 'big spiel' about 'how it was impossible to divorce or protect [the female form] from the male gaze in the context of the western art world, yada yada yada' (pp. 16, 105). However, Irina's disdain at her work being positioned as an example of the female gaze can also be understood in reference to Soloway's theorisations. One mode of the female gaze that women have been offered within 'visual arts and literature', Soloway indicates, is 'the opposite of the male gaze': media which presents 'men as objects of female pleasure'.[140] This particular conceptualisation of the female gaze is insufficient according to Soloway, who instead, as I discussed in chapter two, provides alternative avenues to explore and construct feminine ways of looking. That being said, it is significant here that Soloway cites the publication *Playgirl* – as an example of a straightforward reversal of the male gaze masquerading as the female gaze – when we consider the costume Irina uses when photographing Eddie. Irina explains the conceptual underpinnings of such work, noting the realisation that she 'could train a camera on a man and look at him like a man looks at a woman; boys, too, could be objects of desire' (p. 85). Therefore, there is an identification here that her work does not constitute a female gaze and instead looks at men 'like a man looks at a woman' – 'the opposite of the male gaze' (p. 85).[141] This explicit engagement with Mulvey's theorisations begins to illustrate the critical knowingness of the text. As with *Assassination Nation*'s trigger warnings, *Boy Parts* firmly situates itself within its sociocultural moment – a milieu in which the 'male gaze' has become common parlance.

While Irina's work may position 'boys' as 'objects of desire', consequently providing space for the expression of her own desire, while also temporarily reversing the power dynamics associated with the objectifying look, there are limitations to the subversive potential of her photographic practice and style (p. 85). When Irina is shooting Will, she is in control, bending and shaping him as she pleases. In their interactions outside of her studio, he simpers and 'hovers' around her, 'trying to force some "flirty banter"' as she holds him at arm's length, rebutting his attempts to ask her out with a flat 'maybe' (p. 38). Here, and in the studio, it is Irina who holds the power, the 'self-determination', the 'agency'.[142] However, when, at a party, Irina becomes heavily inebriated after taking a plethora of different

---

[140] Joey Soloway, 'Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze' (TIFF Talks, 2016). Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnBvppooD9I&t=2895s [accessed 14th May 2019].
[141] Soloway, 'Jill Soloway on The Female Gaze'.
[142] Joanne Baker, 'Claiming Volition and Evading Victimhood: Post-Feminist Obligations for Young Women', *Feminism and Psychology*, 20.2 (2010), 186-204 (p. 190).

substances, Will attempts to rape her. It is significant that the language used to describe Will's manipulation of Irina's body before the attempted rape echoes that which is employed to depict her direction of Will as a photographic subject. Earlier in the text, Irina wraps Will's hair around her wrist 'wrench[ing] his neck back' and bending his 'soft/stiff body into improbable, uncomfortable shapes' during a shoot (p. 40). She pushes Will's 'ankle closer to his ear' making 'sure he feels how strong' she is, and 'how easy it would be for [her] to keep him knotted up like this' (p. 40). Will later aggressively yanks her 'by the hair' in order to tip water down her throat, brushing her teeth so hard that her 'gums bleed', before lying on top of her 'enraged, grabbing [her] face and squeezing it' (pp. 90-91). Whereas, during the shoot, Irina is the owner of the objectifying look, exhibiting strength and the ability to manipulate Will into the shape of her desire, the passage depicting the attempted rape works to show how the reversal of a 'masculinist, patriarchal' gaze – where [m]en act' and 'women are acted upon' – can just as easily be violently reversed once more.[143] Pidduck argues that it is 'at the level of fantasy' that the femme fatale 'offers us precious moments of wicked escape' from the sociocultural realities of living as a woman under patriarchy.[144] 'Fleeting but potentially empowering', the moments of 'transcendence' offered by such figures serve to 'bolster up our imaginary reserve'.[145] *Boy Parts* takes this idea a step further in its illustration of the 'fantasy' outlined by Pidduck *alongside* 'discourses of […] gendered violence'.[146] Both escapist fantasy and sociocultural reality, the commentary regarding Will and Irina's relationship works to illustrate the limits of the types of power that might be gleaned through a reversal of patriarchal power dynamics.

When Irina's friend Flo tells her that she should report the incident to the police, Irina explains that she will not be doing so for two reasons: 'drugs, and the fact that [she] can sort him out' herself, invoking both the phrase '*all cops are bastards*' and the film *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978/2010) in the process (emphasis in original, p. 93).[147] *I Spit on Your Grave* stands

---

[143] Barry Keith Grant, '"When the Woman Looks": *Haute Tension* (2003) and the Horrors of Heteronormativity', *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, ed. Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 283-95 (p. 292); Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, 'Introduction', in *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture* (London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1988), pp. 1-7 (p. 1).

[144] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', p. 72.

[145] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', p. 72.

[146] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', p. 71.

[147] See also, See Melissa Pandika, 'The Story Behind ACAB, the Anti-Police Tag You're Seeing Everywhere' (2020). Available at https://www.mic.com/p/the-story-behind-acab-the-anti-police-tag-youre-seeing-everywhere-22992554 [accessed 1st September 2021]. Pandika explains that the phrase 'all cops are bastards' (also commonly expressed through the acronym A.C.A.B.) is 'part of a global movement against the policing system'. The movement seeks to identify and emphasise how police officers are 'corrupted' by their 'positions of power, which they use to inflict violence on others', as well as how they have 'historically enforced corrupt

as an archetypal and divisive example of the rape-revenge genre, with David Maguire suggesting that the both the 1978 original and its 2010 remake have been 'instrumental in making rape-revenge *the* narrative' while also attempting to 'make serious comments about sexual violence'.[148] Released at the height of the second wave feminist movement, the 1978 film engendered conflicting reactions 'generated by those who [found] it difficult to marry these films' supposedly anti-patriarchal sentiments with a genre that has traditionally overflowed with gratuitous images of sexually exploited women'.[149] In short, the film follows protagonist Jennifer as she arrives at a cabin in order to finish writing her current novel. Whilst there, she is humiliated and raped by a group of men, before being left for dead. Jennifer survives and tracks each man down, torturing and eventually killing them all. In the 1978 film, Carol Clover identifies that the narrative 'gives equal time and in some sense equal terms to the presentation of rape and the revenge', though there is no doubt that 'its sympathies lie with' protagonist Jennifer.[150] This balance can also be seen in the 2010 remake which, as Despoina Mantziari indicates, 'reignited the critical controversy inspired by its predecessor'.[151] What I want to focus on, however, is Clover's commentary on the 'transformation' of the 'avenger or self-defender' that 'lies in the nature' of revenge

---

laws that disempower marginalized people'. The phrase and concurrent movement, according to Pandika, is 'necessary conversations that shift the focus away from "a few bad cops" to a system founded on white supremacy, and how to dismantle it'. Though the italicisation of the phrase within Irina's dialogue does, initially, seem to be mocking the movement itself, as I suggest later in this section, I would argue that Irina's derision is directed more at Flo's suggestion that she reports Will to the police, given her previous advocacy and usage of the term; *I Spit on Your Grave*, dir. Meir Zarchi (Cinemagic Pictures, 1978); *I Spit on Your Grave*, dir. Stephen R. Monroe (Cinetel Films, 2010).

[148] David Maguire, *I Spit on Your Grave* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), pp. 3-4.

[149] Maguire, *I Spit on Your Grave*, p. 4.

[150] Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1993] 2015), p. 118. According to Maguire, who is drawing on Zarchi's commentary of the 1978 film, the duration and brutality of the rape sequence is 'crucial to Zarchi's pro-feminist agenda', and is ultimately about having an audience 'identify with Jennifer while she is raped' (Maguire, *I Spit on Your Grave*, p. 32). Given what we know statistically about rape and sexual assault – with almost one in three women having been subjected to 'physical and/or sexual violence' at least once in their life – it is clear that many women do not need prolonged depictions of said violence in order to identify with Jennifer as a victim/protagonist ('Facts and figures: Ending violence against women' (2021). Available at https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures [accessed 27th August 2021]). Moreover, when films such as *Hard Candy* (2005) have shown that we can have the cathartic revenge sequence without the potentially gratuitous scenes of violence, it is even more questionable as to whether this equal narrative split is justifiable or valuable.

[151] Despoina Mantziari, 'Sadistic Scopophilia in Contemporary Rape Culture: *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010) and the Practice of "media rape"', *Feminist Media Studies*, 18.3 (2018), 397-410 (p. 397). Mantziari's article focuses on how the 'remake updates the original text by including a diegetic video camera as a further instrument of Jennifer's violation, since one of the men, Stanley (Daniel Franzese), not only participates in her rape but also records the incident', entailing that her physical rape is continued through 'media rape' (pp. 397-98). According to Mantziari, the inclusion of the camera in the 2010 film 'offers an ideal opportunity to analyse how sadistic scopophilia is inscribed as a key principle of both the film's narrative and its mobilising of looking relations', alongside the space to 'reconsider the role sadistic scopophilia plays in the commodification of women's violation' (p. 398).

narratives.[152] This idea of a 'transformation' from victim to 'avenger' seems also to be a movement from passivity to activity, encapsulating a large part of the debate around *I Spit on Your Grave* that questions whether the focus should be on the gratuitous images of Jennifer as a victim, or the new feminist territory that can be explored when she becomes 'as directly […] violent as her assailant[s]'.[153] After Irina invokes *I Spit on Your Grave*, she says 'I can deal with it. He didn't actually stick it in me so as far as I'm concerned…', her sentence tailing off, before stating that she simply 'won't work with him again' (p. 93). Irina refuses victimhood – linked to passivity and 'self-pity' in Joanne Baker's study – and instead undermines the events, opting towards 'self-determination' and 'agency' in the claim that she will 'deal with' Will herself.[154] My point here is not to advocate *for* the evasion of victimhood but rather, as Baker traces, to identify how postfeminist and neoliberal discourses emphasise 'agency' and 'self-determination' in favour of the negative connotations that they associate with victimhood, thus eliminating the 'space available for articulating any sense of unfairness or oppression in social relations'.[155]

Despite Irina's claim that she will take matters into her own hands, her 'revenge' is, especially when compared to the violence exhibited throughout the rest of the text and that of typical rape-revenge narratives, minimal. She asks a barista at Will's place of work whether she has had 'any problems with him and female members of staff', recommending that she 'keep an eye on him' in future (p. 121). Here, we can see that Irina is forming or contributing to a form of whisper network – information passed between women, warning them about men of which they should be wary, or avoid altogether. Theorising the contemporary utilisation of whisper networks in the context of #MeToo and popular feminism, Maria Verena Peters suggests that 'the year 2017' marked a 'turning point' in how 'silence breakers' were received by the media.[156] While the term 'gossip' has been utilised 'as a discursive weapon of the patriarchy to disparage bonds women may form', Peters quotes Alexander Rysman's

---

[152] Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, p. 123.
[153] Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, p. 123.
[154] Baker, 'Claiming Volition and Evading Victimhood', p. 190. See also, Naomi Wolf, *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century* (New York: Random House, 1993) and Katie Roiphe, *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism* (Boston: Little Brown, 1993). In *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), Sarah Projansky identifies how both Wolf and Roiphe's texts 'argue against a "victim feminism" and for a pro-sex feminism' (p. 93). It is emblematic of both authors' postfeminist sentiments that they blame 'the changes [that] feminism has wrought' for the so-called 'confusion around rape and sexuality' (p. 94).
[155] Baker, 'Claiming Volition and Evading Victimhood', p. 190.
[156] Maria Verena Peters, 'From the Whisper Network to #MeToo – Framing Gender, Gossip and Sexual Harassment', *European Journal of American Studies*, 15.4 (2020), 1-10 (p. 3) <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.16587> [accessed 29th August 2021].

assertion that communicating women 'can make trouble for men', in their process of developing 'social ties outside of the institutions of male dominance'.[157] While Irina's communication of her concerns about Will does, on one level, function as a feminist tool of 'solidarity', it is simultaneously undermined by Irina's initial intention – to 'make trouble' for Will – as well as her scathing description of the barista herself (p. 121). The barista, according to Irina, 'has one of those haircuts, like she has a Tumblr and runs a feminist Etsy store; you know, those very short fringes? Like Betty bangs but shorter, like she's seven and she cut them herself' (p. 121). Here, a very specific mode of outwardly *feminist* femininity is signified, and situated in relation to online platforms.

This association takes us back to Peters' commentary on popular feminism, and the way that the internet – often through the use of 'hashtag feminism', or identifying 'gender discrimination' on 'Facebook, Twitter or other social media platforms' – have been increasingly adopted as a means of challenging inequalities.[158] When the barista is associated with these popular and highly visible forms of feminism – the mention of the 'feminist Etsy store' in particular evokes the image of products emblazoned with 'feminist 'hashtags' – Irina's warning is particularly pointed (p. 121).[159] Critiques of 'hashtag feminism' are 'sceptical about the ability of such movements to bring about tangible social change', however Irina's derision of the barista herself enacts a certain distancing from the politics that she represents.[160] Her 'revenge' is less about challenging structural oppression, and more about damaging Will's reputation. We can see this dynamic at play again later in the text, when Irina needs to borrow Will's car after a photoshoot with a middle-aged man has gone violently awry. Irina initially tells Will that she needs to borrow his car because her 'nana is ill' but, when he refuses, she takes a different approach, placing her 'hands on his shoulders, [her] fingernails biting into his skin' as she says:

> My nana is *ill.* And do you know how she got ill? Some cunt gave her *loads* of ketamine, and tried to rape her. […] And wouldn't it be an absolute fucking shitter for him if she posted his picture to her Instagram page, with a warning to women everywhere to avoid this attempted rapist. I'd be shitting myself if I was him, because my nana has *a lot* of followers on Instagram. (pp. 200-201, emphasis in original).

Here, Irina is indirectly addressing her own encounter with Will and leveraging her online following as a means to get what she wants. If Irina was to post Will's picture on her

---

[157] Peters, 'From the Whisper Network to #MeToo', p. 1; Alexander Rysman, 'How the "Gossip" Became a Woman', *Journal of Communication*, 27.1 (Winter 1977), pp. 176-180 (p. 180).
[158] Peters, 'From the Whisper Network to #MeToo', p. 3.
[159] Peters, 'From the Whisper Network to #MeToo', p. 3.
[160] Peters, 'From the Whisper Network to #MeToo', p. 4.

Instagram page, thus joining many of the #MeToo 'silence breakers', she would not be doing so with protecting other women, or challenging rape culture more broadly, in mind.[161] Whereas her warning for the barista has a productive outcome regardless, Irina does not tell anyone else about the attempted rape once Will lets her borrow his car.

Therefore, while Irina's characterisation aligns with that of the classic femme fatale – as she threatens to bring Will 'to his destruction' – her manipulation of Will is about damaging his reputation, and retaining 'agency' and 'self-determination' on an individual basis.[162] With reference back to her question – 'what happened to *all cops are bastards*, Flo?' – Irina's choice to take matters into her own hands, and the limitations of the kind of revenge that she enacts, can be read as a comment on the avenues women have for justice outside of interactions with the police and criminal justice system (p. 93, emphasis in original). Olufemi highlights how the realisation that 'the police and law enforcement do not equal safety for everyone is the first step to rethinking ideas about justice', going on to indicate that 'the more liberal feminists invite law enforcement into our homes, schools and civic life looking for protection, the more we place women on the margins (poor, black, trans, disabled) in danger'.[163] It is important to note that Irina does not fall into these categories – she is avoiding negotiations with the police because drugs were involved during the incident. In reminding Flo of her previous advocacy of anti-police sentiments, however, Irina's narrative can be said to highlight how easily a hashtag, phrase, or buzzword might be dropped when the politics that they represent become knotted within lived realities. Olufemi emphasises that for those who refuse 'to naturalise aggression, domination and violence in men's bodies', and understand that 'these traits have more to do with enforcement of gender as a system than individual action', the issue of gendered violence 'is a systemic problem that requires a collective response'.[164] With this in mind, in eschewing feminist collectivity for individual gain, Irina's actions remain highly ambivalent. In an interview, Clark highlights how she has grown frustrated with the plethora of problematic protagonists within 'pseudo-feminist media' that 'doesn't actively engage with feminism at all'.[165] In writing Irina, she wanted to create a 'hyper, hyper-exaggerated version' of the unlikeable women that exist across such

---

[161] Peters, 'From the Whisper Network to #MeToo', p. 3.
[162] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47; Baker, 'Claiming Volition and Evading Victimhood', p. 190.
[163] Lola Olufemi, *Feminism Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), pp. 110-12.
[164] Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted*, p. 113.
[165] Eliza Clark, qtd. in Lauren O'Neill, 'Ultraviolence, Party Chat and Erotic Photography: The World of Eliza Clark's 'Boy Parts'' (2020). Available at https://www.vice.com/en/article/3azjb3/eliza-clark-boy-parts-author-interview [accessed 29th August 2021].

texts.[166] Crucially, unlike those within 'capitalist feminism-as-marketing-buzzword' media, Irina's narrative eschews and critiques the hypocrisy and inadequacy of liberal feminist politics, thus engaging with feminist discourses and questions around alternative modes of justice, even if they are not embraced by the protagonist herself.[167] While Irina does not embody radical feminist politics, we can read her characterisation as an instance wherein fatal femininity is utilised as a device *through which* contemporary feminism(s) might be critiqued.

Playing Dress-Up: Manic Pixie Dream Girls and More

While I have discussed how Irina costumes her photographic subjects to perform analytical work, another avenue through which she seeks both 'agency' and 'self-determination' is through the curation of her own outfits, or 'looks'.[168] Throughout *Boy Parts*, Irina is highly aware of how she is perceived, and how certain outfits will appeal to certain men. 'Being mistaken for a Manic Pixie Dream Girl', for example, 'has served [Irina] well over the years', especially when looking for new photographic subjects (p. 111). She describes how she would 'go out disguised in a non-threatening sundress and flat sandals, slouching and leaning heavily on [her] left hip, shrinking [herself] down to a less intimidating height' (p. 111). We can trace a departure here from what Bruzzi describes as 'excessive femininity' in Irina's 'non-threatening sundress and flat sandals' – a direct contrast to the 'short, tight black skirts and stilettos' worn by Bridget in *The Last Seduction* – and a corresponding reduction of stature and, as the masquerade dictates, power.[169] In this context, like *Killing Eve*'s Villanelle and, as I will go on to highlight, *Promising Young Woman*'s Cassie, when trawling the streets, exercising her desiring gaze and looking for men that fit the bill, Irina is powerful, agentic and predatory. In order to procure the kind of subject that she likes to photograph, she must perform a passive, non-intimidating mode of femininity.[170] While the subject that Irina

---

[166] Clark, qtd. in Lauren O'Neill, 'Ultraviolence, Party Chat and Erotic Photography'.
[167] Clark, qtd. in Lauren O'Neill, 'Ultraviolence, Party Chat and Erotic Photography'.
[168] Baker, 'Claiming Volition and Evading Victimhood', p. 190.
[169] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127.
[170] See Nathan Rabin, 'The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: *Elizabethtown*' (2007). Available at https://www.avclub.com/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-elizabet-1798210595 [accessed 2nd September 2021]. The term 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl', coined by Nathan Rabin in his review of *Elizabethtown,* dir. Cameron Crowe (Paramount Pictures, 2005), is given to a character who 'exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures'. See also, Laurie Penny, 'Laurie Penny on sexism in storytelling: I was a Manic Pixie Dream Girl' (2013). Available at https://www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/2013/06/i-was-manic-pixie-dream-girl [accessed 2nd September 2021]. Penny notes how the Manic Pixie Dream Girl 'pops up everywhere these days, in films and comics and novels and television', causing real consequences for how women and girls might envision their own 'story': 'Men grow up expecting to be the hero of their own story. Women grow up

is pursuing arrives at her residence 'like he thought he'd just stumbled into the meet cute bit of a rom-com', this narrative does not belong to him (p. 111). Rather, this is one example of how Irina's use of clothing, her performance of a specific, passive mode of femininity, works to manipulate and ensnare men. Irina mocks the 'hapless gaze' of the men that she encounters, describing the ease through which she is able to construct a narrative through her clothing and behaviour – 'Drop a niche interest here, and a little sass there, and they eat me up, every single time' (p. 111).[171] *Boy Parts* lays out this complexity – the duplicity that goes into constructing a certain image of femininity – in order to highlight the 'strange sublimation process' between 'body, mind and clothes' in what men see, and how a feminine gaze might produce a different dynamic of power and looking.[172]

Clark describes the 'weird societal taboo' around 'women acknowledging how much hard work' it takes to be conventionally 'attractive', indicating that literature is 'one of the worst' sites for 'having a protagonist that's just effortlessly beautiful'.[173] It is rare to see such a protagonist, according to Clark, 'intentionally skipping a meal', removing all of her body hair, and drawing 'a new, more attractive face on top of her own face'.[174] Throughout *Boy Parts*, Irina's commentary highlights the work that maintaining conventional beauty standards requires. Firstly, she practices disordered eating in order to maintain a specific weight. When dressing for lunch with Eddie, she recalls how she 'put on half a stone, once, about a year ago', and her 'dresses went from understated-sexy to sausage casing' (p. 231). She took this incident as a 'lesson learned: gluten truly is the devil', and thus avoids gluten – as well as major food groups such as carbohydrates – in the present (p. 231). Here, we can read how clothing operates not only as a means of controlling the effect that Irina's image has on others, but also the negative effect that it might have on her self-image and the way that she conceives of her own body. When the plastic surgeon indicates that Irina is one of the girls who are 'just born lucky', she lists the work that has amounted to this image of effortless beauty:

> My mam actually had my ears pinned back when I was twelve – and then there's my teeth. While I always had a good waist-to-hip ratio, what I have now is the product of

---

expecting to be the supporting actress in somebody else's'. Here, we find the same threads of the active/male and passive/female binary, endemic throughout filmic representation, and also apparent in the aforementioned theorisations of femininity and dress discussed by Bruzzi – 'the feminine image' as 'passive in relation to an active male gaze' (Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. xvii).

[171] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127.

[172] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 126.

[173] Clark, qtd. in Lauren O'Neill, 'Ultraviolence, Party Chat and Erotic Photography'.

[174] Clark, qtd. in Lauren O'Neill, 'Ultraviolence, Party Chat and Erotic Photography'.

> years of dedicated waist training and exercise. My hair is dyed, and I have extensions. I smile, with my teeth, and he tells me that my veneers look very natural. (p. 130).

In highlighting the combination of surgical procedures and regular acts of maintenance that Irina has undertaken, *Boy Parts* addresses and acknowledges the work that it takes to maintain a particular standard of beauty. Her appearance is not '*natural*'; it is 'yoga and corsets and salads and hours of [her] time' (p. 131, emphasis in original). Gill theorises this maintenance within the context of postfeminism's emphasis 'upon personal choice'.[175] The 'body is', Gill continues, 'presented simultaneously as women's source of power *and* as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling […] in order to conform to ever narrower judgements of female attractiveness'.[176]

Irina's strict diet, exercise regime, and skincare routine all work to position her performance of femininity as 'contingent – requiring constant anxious attention, work and vigilance'.[177] When Irina watches a video of herself, furious that this image of her 'gets to be there forever. Skinny and gorgeous and young' while she is 'stuck watching the video over and over again, rotting' (p. 239). Elsewhere, she describes her reflection: 'smudged eyeliner and messy hair, the tracks of her extensions on display […] this *thing*, which burps and pisses and has to be washed and fed and fucked', thus emphasising the unruliness of the body (p. 137, emphasis in original). Besides Flynn's novel *Gone Girl*, and in some places Lippman's *Sunburn*, the labour that goes into maintaining conventional attractiveness is not represented across femme fatale narratives. The femme fatale is typically unquestionably constructed as a beautiful, seductive, dangerous woman. Perhaps this is due to the fact that traditionally, the narrative inclusion of a femme fatale is about her effect on men, rather than an interrogation into the constructed nature of her particular mode of femininity. While Irina may find agency though the 'possession' of her own image, it is important to ask whether her clothing would have the same effect if she were not already conforming to 'ever narrower judgements of female attractiveness'.[178] Here, *Boy Parts* strikes the same balance as it does in its representation of sexual violence and revenge fantasies – showing us both the agentic capacities of clothing, and its struggle with the restrictive 'real life' discourses around the

[175] Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 261.
[176] Gill, *Gender and the Media*, p. 255.
[177] Gill, *Gender and the Media*, p. 261.
[178] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127; Gill, *Gender and the Media*, p. 255.

body, femininity, and power thus functioning, like Bruzzi's commentary on clothing, as 'an exclusory dialogue between a female image and a female spectatorship'.[179]

By the time that the Contemporary Fetish Art exhibition has arrived, Irina's life has spiralled out of control. When she finds polaroid pictures of a dead, mutilated boy hidden in a DVD case behind 'films that were rejected by the BBFC' (British Board of Film Classification), we find out that Irina killed the boy in the images (p. 212). In one image, his face is 'full of glass', with his head 'separated from the shoulders' (p. 215). Further photographs show 'each leg, each arm, and his torso', combining to make a 'jigsaw' of 'boy parts' that Irina can 'arrange on [her] living room floor' (p. 215). It is at this point that Irina's many references to 'her boy', and the imagined shards of glass in her own and others eyes throughout the novel, are contextualised – the past is constantly impinging upon her present, destabilising the controlled existence that she has strived to maintain. Whereas the photographs that she takes of other people are 'perfect little imprints, like those photos of [her] boy', that she can keep once they are gone, she does not 'go away after [she has] had [her] photo taken' – images of her are 'a record' of her 'own gradual decay' (p. 170). Here, as with the video that she has captured of herself where she is 'gorgeous and young' 'forever', Irina is envious of the fixed state in which the subjects of her photographs exist (p. 239). Here, we can see how Sontag's suggestion that photography 'turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed' illuminates Irina's anxieties and desires.[180] Irina cannot sufficiently possess her 'unruly' body or, ultimately, the image of the boy that resurfaces both physically behind the DVDs and within her own psyche.[181] The movement between past and present that takes place throughout the narrative – enabled by both the exploration of her photographic archive and the intrusive visualisations of the boy – mirrors the dialogue between Irina as a contemporary femme fatale, and her filmic precedents. At the end of the classic femme fatale narrative, as Doane suggests, the figure must be 'aggressively revealed, unmasked, [or] discovered' – a device that is 'fully compatible with the epistemological drive of narrative'.[182] It has been previously theorised that, for the femme fatale, this unmasking – that often equates, or at least leads, to death or another form of punishment – also means that the 'sexually aggressive' and 'unacceptable' woman is 'controlled', arguably ending the possibility and fantasy of feminine agency that the figure represents.[183] Unlike the

[179] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', p. 71; Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. xix.
[180] Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 14.
[181] Gill, *Gender and the Media*, p. 255.
[182] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[183] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 48.

contemporary femmes fatales that I have discussed so far, Irina is not satisfied with getting away with her transgressions. Instead, she seeks out the recognition, the unmasking and retribution, that the classic femme fatale would have been allotted in previous filmic modes. Unlike these femmes fatales, however, Irina's need to be seen for what she has done is conceptualised as a part of her attempting to claw back a sense of agency, rather than its abrupt culmination.

Considering the ease with which she gets away with violent and murderous actions, Irina asks:

> I wonder what the fuck I have to do for people to recognise me as a threat, you know? It's like… am I even doing this shit? Have I even fucking done anything? Like, do I have to snap the wine bottle inside of him to get him to stop sending me sad emails? Do I have to cut his nipple off for him to realise that he should probably ring the police? Do I have to cave his head in with my camera, rather than hit him the once? Do I have to crash his car? Do I have to smash a glass over the head of every single man I come into contact with, just so I leave a fucking mark? (p. 285).

By the end of the text, Irina has 'aggressively revealed' and 'unmasked' *herself* – confessing murder to a wealthy older man, before publicly assaulting him in a restaurant – and yet still does not leave a 'mark' on those around her.[184] The final page of the novel follows Irina as she wades into a pond and sees 'the milky-eyed face of [her] boy, his head bobbing to the surface' (p. 297). On closer inspection, the head is just a knot of plastic bags: 'it isn't him', Irina surmises, 'it never is' (p. 297). The boy haunts Irina throughout the novel because he is the only person who recognises what she is really capable of, who she has truly left a 'mark' on (p. 285). While the femme fatale is removed from the narrative so that the patriarchal status quo can resume, Irina's admission of murder does nothing to change the way that she is treated by those around her. As a 'hyper, hyper-exaggerated version' of the problematic women proliferating across cultural texts, Irina's struggle for agency, recognition and visibility indicates how texts which elevate feminine unlikability and violence as a key theme, without engaging with feminism, are more restrictive than they may first appear.[185] From her reversal of the power dynamics inherent in looking, to her use of clothing to project a certain image, and recognition of the work that goes into maintaining patriarchal beauty standards, Irina's narrative illustrates the limitations of fantasies of power and individualistic conceptions of agency.

---

[184] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[185] Clark, qtd. in Lauren O'Neill, 'Ultraviolence, Party Chat and Erotic Photography'.

Promising Young Woman

Alongside Irina and Villanelle, *Promising Young Woman*'s protagonist Cassie's costuming utilises certain styles of clothing in order to subvert the expectations of those around her.[186] The most overt example of such trickery occurs when Cassie dresses up to visit nightclubs, pretending to be drunk, and waiting for a man to take her home and try to have sex with her. While, when looking for men to target, Cassie's attire does not always position her alongside *The Last Seduction*'s Bridget as a 'conventionalised, overtly sexual image of femininity', she still illustrates 'a full awareness of how [her] image affects men'.[187] In the sequence with Jerry and his friends at the beginning of the film, Cassie is, like the men, dressed in business attire. Prior to their encounter with Cassie, the men have been discussing a woman from their work in highly misogynist terms. While this conversation, in which Jerry tries to interject, works to set him out as the 'nice guy' against his misogynistic colleagues – a division which is quickly revoked – it also says something about how Cassie chooses to style herself for these encounters.

Promising Young Woman, dir. Emerald Fennel (FilmNation Entertainment, 2020).

She is positioning herself akin to someone that they might work with and, with their conversations in mind, someone that they would consider to be 'beneath them' in a workplace setting. In later scenes, Cassie wears multicoloured hair extensions and a leopard print skirt when she is with Neil, who wants to write a clichéd novel about 'what it's like to be a guy in the world right now'. We also hear an auditory flashback of a man complimenting

[186] *Promising Young Woman*, dir. Emerald Fennel (FilmNation Entertainment, 2020).
[187] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127.

her pigtails and, when he asks her age, responding on her behalf with 'old enough, right?'. In each scenario, Cassie is constructing herself as a distinct mode of femininity which aligns with the desires of the men that she is going to target. If he thinks of himself as an 'edgy' novelist, he will want an 'edgy' girl, for example. However, the very end of the film aside, Cassie is not going to places to seek out and trick a particular man. Rather, she switches her attire based on the location at which she is hunting, and therefore the aesthetic and desires of her target, whoever he may be.[188]

Cassie's awareness of her surroundings calls to mind *Killing Eve*'s Villanelle as a 'chameleon' character, always fitting into her environments and working them to her advantage, but also Irina's commentary on the 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl' in *Boy Parts* (*Boy Parts*, p. 111).[189] When looking for subjects, '[b]eing mistaken for a Manic Pixie Dream Girl has served [Irina] well over the years' (p. 111). Letting men believe that they are the active subject, that they are in control, has allowed her to get what she wants. In turn, the 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl' has connections to Amy's commentary on, and performance of, the 'Cool Girl' in *Gone Girl*. If the man is 'a vegetarian, [the] Cool Girl loves seitan and is great with dogs; or maybe he's a hipster artist, so Cool Girl is a tattooed, bespectacled nerd who loves comics' (*Gone Girl,* p. 223). While Amy's diatribe is more a condemnation of women's 'collusion' in their 'own degradation', she also constructs *herself* as stereotypes of femininity in order to control how she is perceived (*Gone Girl*, p. 223). Therefore, like Amy and Irina's utilisation of the 'Cool Girl' and 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl', Cassie's knowing performances of femininity utilise and subvert the idea that women dress for men – that 'the feminine

---

[188] Like Villanelle, Cassie's subjects are not always men. When she meets with an old college friend Madison (Alison Brie) in order to discuss what happened to Nina, Cassie wears a crisp white shirt, black trousers and heeled shoes, matching Madison's ensemble of a cream, fitted shift dress and heels in tone, as well as the environment of the restaurant. In matching herself to Madison's aesthetic, Cassie establishes a level of similarity and trust with Madison before they have even started talking. Cassie's clothing also ensures that she will not look out of place in the restaurant, and can therefore follow her plan unnoticed. Cassie then plies Madison with alcohol, and later begins to talk to her about Nina. It is revealed that Madison did not believe, or stand up for, Nina when she told her what had happened, and says to Cassie: 'If you have a reputation for sleeping around then people won't believe you when you say something happened. It's crying wolf […] Don't get blackout drunk all the time and then get mad when you have sex with someone you don't want to'. This sequence is particularly striking as it shows that women, too, can uphold and reproduce this kind of victim-blaming rhetoric. Madison's comments also echo the can-do/at-risk dichotomy critically associated with girlhood. Her condemnations can be translated to: do not make the wrong choices. There is no space in this individualising theorisation of femininity and 'success' for the plethora of sociocultural factors that contribute to systemic violence against women, and the consequent 'lingering effects of trauma' (Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall, *Witnessing Girlhood: Toward an Intersectional Tradition of Life Writing* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), p. 42). Cassie approaches a man at the bar, and tells him where Madison is sitting, giving him a hotel room key. It is unclear what she has planned but, when she receives a voicemail from Madison the next day asking what happened with the man, it is clear that she has sought to receive retribution that engages with the rhetoric put forth by Madison the day before.

[189] de Gaye, qtd. in '*Killing Eve* Is the Most Fashionable Show on TV'.

image' is 'passive in relation to an active male gaze'.[190] Like Bruzzi's theorisations in relation to classic noir, it is the 'gaze of the hapless men' that is 'at least in part mocked because they never understand the complexity of what they are looking at' in *Promising Young Woman*.[191] Cassie's knowledge of distinct environments, and the men that populate them, means that she is aware of and controls the effect of her image for her retributive purposes.

Cassie accepts Jerry's invitation to go to his apartment for a drink. As far as he knows, she is already incredibly drunk, and has spent a good portion of the journey home with her head out of the car window. Despite this, he pours Cassie a large drink – much larger than the one that he pours himself – back at his apartment, and attempts to initiate sex with her. At this point, Jerry's 'nice guy' persona is already littered with red flags, and the situation does not improve when Cassie says that she needs to lie down. He follows her to the bedroom, lies on top of her, and continues to initiate sexual activity. In one of the more vitalising moments of the film, Cassie goes from slurring 'wait' and 'what are you doing?' to staring directly down the lens of the camera, suddenly sober. She addresses Jerry, 'I said, what are you doing?'. In this moment, two shifts occur. Jerry's 'nice guy' persona proves to be performative, as he takes advantage of Cassie's (also performed) inebriation. This shift is accompanied by Cassie's abrupt change in state. At the moment when sexual violence is about to occur, Cassie's interruption shifts the balance of power. Before, Jerry was active while Cassie was passive. Now, it is revealed that Cassie was performing passivity all along.

Promising Young Woman, dir. Emerald Fennell (FilmNation Entertainment, 2020).

[190] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. xvii.
[191] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127.

Cassie operates with an acute awareness of how men like this might act when given the chance – an awareness based on past trauma, we discover – and she exploits these conventions, the behaviour of such men, in order to teach them a lesson. The content of these lessons is unclear – a point to which I will return later in my discussion of the film's relationship to the rape revenge genre. However, in these moments, the film is pointing towards contemporary feminist discourses, particularly in the context of #MeToo, about sex and consent. In their study of sexual consent, Milena Popova indicates how 'impairment to communication and decision-making abilities […] through drugs or alcohol' is a 'common challenge to consent negotiation'.[192] Popova goes on to 'compare and contrast' two statements commonly associated with contemporary conversations around intoxication and consent: '"He was drunk, he didn't know what he was doing" with "She was drunk, what did she think would happen?"'.[193] In *Promising Young Woman*, such statements and their hypocrisies are drawn out and questioned. When Jerry's friends turn their attention to Cassie, their comments directly echo the sentiments highlighted by Popova: 'They put themselves in danger, girls like that', they say, 'if she's not careful, someone's gonna take advantage'. If, as *Promising Young Woman* seems to suggest, 'nice guys' like Jerry are 'hiding-in-plain-sight', Cassie's predatory, retributive actions position her as a site of danger.[194] In this sequence, especially as we do not know exactly what happens once she has revealed herself to be sober, Cassie is, like the classic femme fatale, a 'figure of a certain discursive unease'.[195]

Girlish Garments

Adrian Horton and Caetlin Benson-Allott argue that Cassie is *always* dressed to trick those around her. From her everyday 'feathery bangs, rainbow manicure and bubblegum pink wardrobe' to the business attire that she wears during her encounter with Jerry, Cassie is constantly using 'her appearance to disguise her dark intentions'.[196] In contrast to these critical perspectives, I suggest that Cassie's costuming is not solely concerned with ensuring that she will not be seen as a threat and, at some points, actually reveals much more than it

---

[192] Milena Popova, *Sexual Consent* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019), p. 52.
[193] Popova, *Sexual Consent*, p. 52.
[194] Yotka, '*Killing Eve* is the Most Fashionable Show on TV'.
[195] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[196] Adrian Horton, 'How Promising Young Woman shows the limits of #MeToo revenge' (2021). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/jan/05/promising-young-woman-metoo-revenge-carey-mulligan [accessed 17th November 2021]; Caetlin Benson-Allott, "Promising Young Woman' confuses viewers. That's what makes it brilliant' (2021). Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/04/24/promising-young-woman-genre-confusion/ [accessed 17th November 2021].

conceals thematically. We can trace this dynamic in Cassie's day-to-day clothing, where the overt girlishness of her look points more to trauma and existing narratives around girlhood than straightforward weaponisation.[197] As the narrative progresses, we discover that Cassie dropped out of medical school, alongside her childhood friend Nina, after their classmate Al Monroe (Chris Lowell) raped Nina while she was intoxicated. Nina killed herself shortly after, and Cassie has not been able or willing to 'move on' with her life since. The film constructs a distinct sense that Cassie's trajectory, her position as a 'promising young woman', has been understandably interrupted by this traumatic event. It is here that the film's preoccupation with ideas of 'failure' begins to rear its head. At thirty years old – an age which would have passed without recognition for Cassie, who forgets her own birthday – she is living at home with her parents, and working in a coffee shop. The emphasis on Cassie's age, and its relationship to her living and employment situation, points to a pernicious, culturally embedded myth about femininity and ageing. The age of thirty is not only positioned as a milestone, but one which women should dread. McRobbie's discussion of *Bridget Jones's Diary* in relation to postfeminism emphasises Bridget's position as a single thirty-year-old woman with no children. Bridget is preoccupied with 'new anxieties': the fear of loneliness […], the stigma of remaining single, and the risks and uncertainties of not finding the right partner to be a father to children as well as a husband'.[198] All of these anxieties are heightened in *Bridget Jones's Diary* as, at thirty years old, 'her biological clock is ticking'.[199] In a 2020 *Elle* article titled 'What It Feels Like To Turn 30: Four Women On The 'Big' Milestone', we can trace the same anxieties explored by McRobbie. Hannah Nathanson suggests that women still fear turning thirty due to the 'pressures that [they] feel to be a certain way or to have achieved a certain set of goals by that time'.[200] Alongside McRobbie's reading of the anxieties in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, these goals include, as well as maintaining a stable living and working situation, having a husband and a child. This cultural emphasis on turning thirty is thus less about the age itself, and more about what women are told that they should have accomplished. We can also think about turning thirty as an end of girlhood as defined by Driscoll: 'an idea of mobility preceding the fixity of womanhood and

---

[197] Horton, 'How Promising Young Woman shows the limits of #MeToo revenge'; Benson-Allott, "Promising Young Woman' confuses viewers'.
[198] Angela McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime', in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 27-39 (p. 36).
[199] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', p. 37.
[200] Hannah Nathanson, What It Feels Like To Turn 30: Four Women On The 'Big' Milestone' (2020). Available at https://www.elle.com/uk/life-and-culture/culture/a32329808/what-it-feels-like-to-turn-30/ [accessed 30th November 2021].

implying an unfinished process of personal development'.[201] This definition becomes all the more relevant when combined with Wasserman's assertion, utilised alongside Driscoll in chapter two of this thesis, that 'the transition from girlhood to womanhood' is culturally theorised as a transition to 'being someone's wife, someone's mother'.[202] Cassie has not 'moved on' from Nina's death, and so she is trapped within a perpetual girlhood. The ribbons in her hair, cuddly toys on her bed, and her pastel wardrobe all work to reinforce this position.

Promising Young Woman, dir. Emerald Fennel (FilmNation Entertainment, 2020).

Here, therefore, we can also trace how clothing might operate as an 'exclusory dialogue' between women, though in a different way than suggested by Bruzzi.[203] Horton describes this focus on trauma as an 'annihilating obsession', a 'reduction of her character to the long shadow of the worst thing that's ever happened to her'.[204] For Horton, this attention feels like 'a very recent relic of the early, heady days of public #MeToo rage […] not giddy

[201] Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 47.
[202] Robin Wasserman, 'What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?' (2016). Available at https://lithub.com/what-does-it-mean-when-we-call-women-girls/ [accessed 5th January 2019].
[203] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. xix.
[204] Horton, 'How Promising Young Woman shows the limits of #MeToo revenge'.

or revelatory but frustratingly dead-ending'.[205] While there is certainly a point to be made about the jarring conclusion of the film, a discussion to which I will return later in this section, Horton's derision of Cassie's 'annihilating obsession' ignores how the film centres what Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall describe as 'women's understanding of the lingering effects of trauma'.[206] Like the interlocking friendship necklaces that belonged to the girls, now kept in Cassie's bedroom, her clothing keeps her close to girlishness, and therefore close to Nina.

Cassie's parents buy her a suitcase for her thirtieth birthday, a gift that she describes to coffee shop co-worker Gail (Laverne Cox) as 'the fanciest get-the-fuck-out-of-our-house metaphor that [she has] received so far'. Gail, who has tried to get Cassie to apply for a more senior Head Office role, asks her why she does not move out, nodding to Cassie's cinematic antecedents when she suggests that she could '*Single White Female* some girl'. Cassie points out that, when Gail and her parents encourage her towards certain ideals around her work, housing, and lifestyle, that they are working on the assumption that she desires these things. If she wanted a yoga class, children, or a partner, Cassie says, she could get them in ten minutes, but she does not want them. In a similar vein, Ryan asks Cassie why she dropped out of medical school when she was 'so good', 'ahead of everybody' and 'would have made a great doctor'. At this point in the film, we are not aware what happened to Nina, and why Cassie might have felt that she could no longer continue with her studies. However, her response – 'I didn't want to, I guess' – is framed in the same way as her response to Gail. Cassie's vigilante exploits, and her apparent stasis as a thirty-year-old still living at home, thus take on new meaning. It is not that she cannot move on from what happened to Nina; she has no desire to do so. While we can certainly theorise this lack of willing within the context of trauma, it is also interesting to consider how those around Cassie imagine what 'moving on' might look like and, with this in mind, what else Cassie might be refusing ideologically.[207] Cassie's disinterest in becoming a doctor, leaving the coffee shop, having children, and finding a partner and a yoga class also indicates a rejection of the pressures outlined in both McRobbie's chapter and the *Elle* article. This argument is reinforced by the fact that when Cassie eventually, for a little while at least, takes Nina's mother's advice to

---

[205] Horton, 'How Promising Young Woman shows the limits of #MeToo revenge'.
[206] Horton, 'How Promising Young Woman shows the limits of #MeToo revenge'; Gilmore and Marshall, *Witnessing Girlhood,* p. 42.
[207] See Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, brain and body in the transformation of trauma* (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 21. Van der Kolk writes how patients experiencing the effects of trauma 'felt fully alive only when they were revisiting their traumatic past', with the 'very event that had causes them so much pain' also becoming 'their sole source of meaning'.

'move on […] for all of us', she stops tricking men in bars and instead commits to her relationship with Ryan. It is particularly striking that, while pastel colours and fluffy textures still feature in Cassie's wardrobe during this time, her sartorial choices also begin to feature bright, primary colours and larger patterns. When Ryan visits her home for dinner with her parents, he and Cassie mirror her parents in their positions across the table, but also in their clothing. While Ryan and Cassie's father wear different blue cable knit jumpers over shirts, Cassie wears a bright red dress with a white pattern, with her mother wearing a white dress with a reddish pink pattern. In dress alone, we can see how 'moving on' means entering a heterosexual relationship and, this sequence suggests, becoming like her suburban parents.

Promising Young Woman, dir. Emerald Fennel (FilmNation Entertainment, 2020).

Discourses around girlhood and success are also detectable in Ryan's comments about Cassie's prior potential in medical school. Cassie used to be a 'promising young woman', a phrase which, in its suggestion of a future-driven trajectory, is strikingly similar to Harris's theorisation of the 'future girl', a young woman with '[p]ower, opportunities, and success' who is able to 'take charge of her life, seize chances, and achieve her goals'.[208] Promise, future and 'moving on' all evoke a forward movement, and in 'moving on' with Ryan, Cassie is no longer within her assumed stasis – her trajectory is no longer halted. However, when Madison gives Cassie a video of Nina's assault showing Ryan to be present, aware of what is happening, and laughing, Cassie ends their relationship. At first he is apologetic, begging for

[208] Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

her forgiveness and telling her that he loves her. When Cassie tells Ryan that she is going to send the video to his colleagues, friends and family unless he tells her the location of Al's bachelor party, wondering aloud if he will lose his job, Ryan responds: 'And then we both won't be doctors, you fucking failure'. To have no 'promise', no 'future', is to fail. Here, Ryan's response also engages with the discourses proffered by Harris when she states that the 'depictions of girls as either can-do or at-risk' show us 'what it means to prevail or lose out' – what it means to be 'promising' and what it means to 'fail'.[209] This account aligns with both postfeminism and neoliberal feminism's individualising regimes. As Harris indicates, 'success' and 'choice' in this context actually 'remain[s] highly constrained' for the vast majority of individuals, due to factors such as class, race, ability and sexuality.[210] While Cassie is inarguably privileged as a white, able-bodied, heterosexual woman living with her middle-class parents, she is still positioned as a failure by Ryan because she has not made the 'right choices'. For Cassie, 'moving on' along demarcated, heterosexual lines has not shifted her onto the 'correct' trajectory. In fact, Ryan's complicity with his friends' actions is part of the reason that she left medical school, and therefore a factor in her apparent inability to be 'responsive to the regime of personal responsibility'.[211]

The Promise of Failure

With this in mind, I want to return to Cassie's lack of interest in 'moving on' in the context of her engagement with 'failure'. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam frames failure as 'a tale of anticapitalist, queer struggle'.[212] Bound up in this struggle is 'the refusal of legibility', a 'narrative without progress' and an 'art of unbecoming'.[213] We recall how, though people around Cassie situate her as 'stuck' in the past, *unable* to move on from what Al Monroe did to Nina and the events that followed, it is more that she is *unwilling* to let go. The film seems to offer Cassie two avenues for progression: work and family. Whether Cassie is encouraged to acquire more capital through employment – moving 'up' from the apparently lowly position of coffee shop worker and therefore closer to the means of production – or to commit to a relationship with Ryan and therefore mirror her own parents – reproducing 'propertarian, dyadic modes of doing family' – both proposed trajectories are

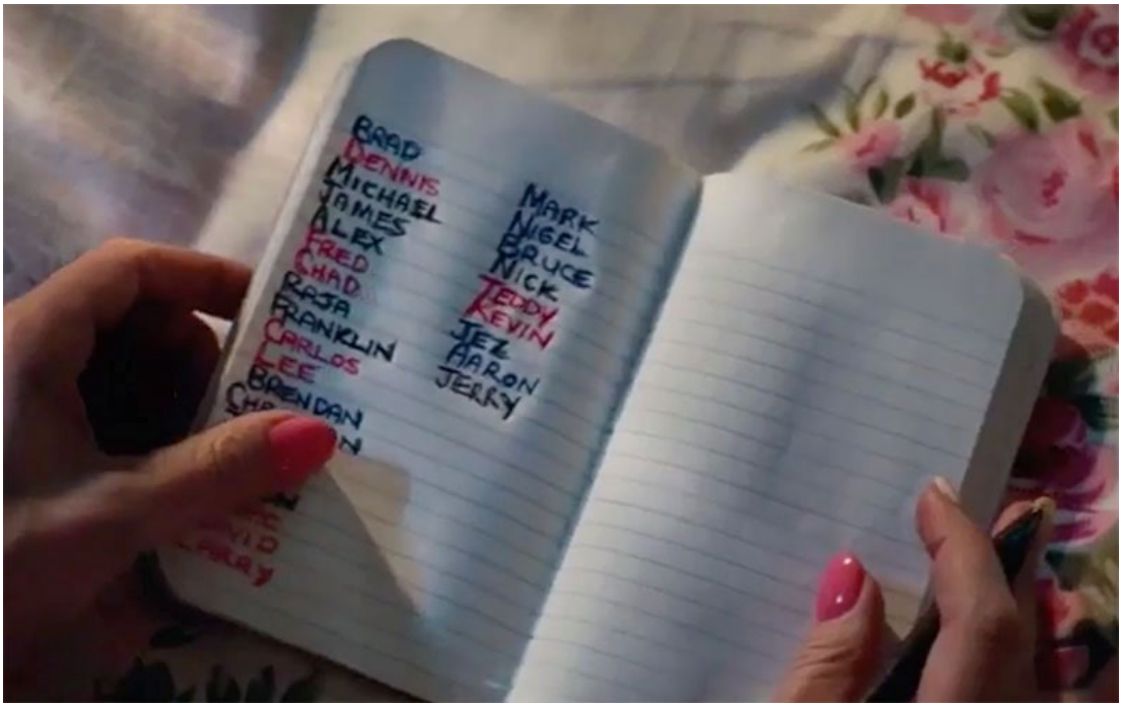
[209] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 14.
[210] Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 5.
[211] McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', pp. 35-6.
[212] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 88.
[213] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 88. *Promising Young Woman*'s denouement is however, as I will go on to discuss, problematic in reference to Halberstam's positioning of failure as 'anticolonial'.

intimately bound with capitalism.[214] Cassie's illegibility as a girlish, thirty-year-old woman living with her parents, her 'narrative without progress', can thus be read as such a mode of 'failure'.[215] Her desire to work against existing trajectories, while engaging with the 'lingering effects of trauma', also stands as a refusal to 'acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline' and, therefore, 'as a form of critique'.[216] 'Power is never total or consistent', Halberstam continues, positioning failure as a means to 'exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities'.[217] However, of course, the film is not wholly concerned with Cassie's life as a single woman working in a coffee shop, and how such a mode of femininity works as a site of critique. Her other vocation – revenge – is also a site where Cassie critiques 'dominant logics of power and discipline', in relation to rape culture specifically.[218] Whether she is teaching men a lesson about consent, or effectively kidnapping the daughter of the Dean who ignored Nina's accusations, Cassie's revenge-seeking vocation teases out injustices, calls for accountability, and, when we consider her sartorial and behavioural disguises, exploits 'unpredictability'.[219]

Within this adjacent vocation, Cassie seeks revenge on those who assaulted Nina and those who covered up or diminished her accusations. Cassie's streetwalking ventures – consciously luring men before holding them to account for their predatory behaviour – is also a form of retribution, connected to her project of avenging Nina. All of Cassie's activities are either planned or recorded in her notebook, calling to mind Amy's calendar and to-do lists in *Gone Girl*. However, unlike *Gone Girl* and rape revenge cinema – another cinematic lineage in which *Promising Young Woman* is invested – we do not see any of the violence promised through the film's marketing and Cassie's vengeful pursuits. In her notebook, the names and tallies recording her encounters with the men that she meets in nightclubs are written in different colours of ink: red, black, and blue.

---

[214] Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (London and New York: Verso, 2019), p. 22.
[215] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 88.
[216] Gilmore and Marshall, *Witnessing Girlhood*, p. 42; Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 88.
[217] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 88.
[218] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 88.
[219] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 88.



Promising Young Woman, dir. Emerald Fennel (FilmNation Entertainment, 2020).

We are not privy to Cassie's code, and therefore do not know what the different colours might represent, if anything, lying in stark contrast to Amy's spectacular murder of Desi. *Promising Young Woman* therefore operates on the *promise* of violence, hinting and implying rather than showing and telling. The lack of overt displays of violence also marks the film as distinctive from a large proportion of those belonging to the rape revenge genre.[220] Additionally, unlike, for example, *I Spit on Your Grave*, we also do not see the assault that Cassie is avenging. In my discussion of *Boy Parts*, I referred to Clover's commentary on the 'transformation' of the 'avenger or self-defender' that 'lies in the nature' of revenge narratives, thinking about the feminist possibilities that are opened up when such a figure becomes 'as directly […] violent as her assailant[s]'.[221] Clover's account thus ties in with Pidduck's suggestion that the social, sexual, and physical powers' belonging to the 'fatal femme' of the 1990s provides a powerful 'imagined point of contact', a 'momentum or venting of rage and revenge fantasies'.[222] Such visual displays subvert 'cultural conventions which position women most often as passive objects of male violence', an assertion that links

[220] See Carmen Maria Machado, 'How "Promising Young Woman" Refigures the Rape-Revenge Movie' (2021). Available at https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/how-promising-young-woman-refigures-the-rape-revenge-movie [accessed 8th December 2021]. Machado highlights how, while the film does not show sexual violence, the sequence in which Cassie is murdered is 'as brutal as watching the rape we've never been witness to'.
[221] Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, p. 123.
[222] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', pp. 71-2.

back again to Clover's idea of 'transformation', a movement from passivity to activity for feminist spectators.[223] Here, we can see how and why showing acts of violence can be productive for feminist readings of cinematic texts, while bearing in mind that rape revenge cinema has been problematised for its gratuitous displays of rape. Films like *Hard Candy* have illustrated that it is indeed possible to show an avenging woman, or girl, without also showing the incident for which she seeks retribution. So why, in *Promising Young Woman*, did Fennell choose to move away from displaying such acts of violence? Is the promise of violence, alone, sufficient for feminist spectators?

Fennell encapsulates her subversion of the genre as 'part of the fun of making something, the smoke and mirrors and the misdirections', commenting on 'how much we want violence […] how much instinctively as an audience we're begging for blood'.[224] Cassie's eventual demise, therefore, is both a denial and upending of audience expectations. In this chapter, and this thesis as a whole, I have discussed the productive potentialities of the contemporary femme fatale as a 'figure of a certain discursive unease', who evades fixity and cannot be pinned down to a single fixed meaning.[225] While, as Doane suggests, this positioning of 'woman' as a 'secret, something which must be aggressively revealed, unmasked, [and] discovered', makes the femme fatale 'fully compatible with the epistemological drive of narrative', in *Promising Young Woman* the 'misdirections' of the narrative appear to operate independently from the characterisation of Cassie as an avenger, or femme fatale.[226] Cassie's story is, Fennell suggests, 'also an allegory' for the 'cycle of addiction' which 'generally' can only 'go in one direction'.[227] While this may be the intention, when Cassie is murdered by the man who raped Nina, Fennell appears to be less concerned with engaging with rape revenge cinema in a meaningful way – a way that engages with *how* and *why* feminist spectators might find such narratives pleasurable – and more concerned with subversion for subversion's sake. If a film plays with narrative convention, it should surely also consider the ideological implications of such shifts, rather than simply how it might interact with audience expectation. Even when placing Cassie's narrative within the context of addiction, there can be, as Horton notes of rape revenge

---

[223] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', pp. 71-2; Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, p. 123.
[224] Emerald Fennell, qtd. in Kate Erbland, ''Promising Young Woman': Emerald Fennell on Her Mission to Upend Moviegoers' Thirst for Violence' (2020). Available at https://www.indiewire.com/2020/12/promising-young-woman-emerald-fennell-interview-1234605075/ [accessed 8th December 2021].
[225] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1.
[226] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1; Fennell, ''Promising Young Woman''.
[227] Fennell, ''Promising Young Woman''.

cinema, the possibility of a 'next chapter […] healing, or change, or potential, or complication'.[228] These stories do not have to 'go in one direction'.[229]

This emphasis on the inevitability of death brings us back to the femme fatale narratives of mid-twentieth-century film noir in which, due to the Production Code, the figure must be 'aggressively revealed, unmasked, [or] discovered', translating on a narrative level to being 'contained through death, incarceration, and occasionally normative romance'.[230] With this in mind, I finally want to focus on how Cassie's death is presented at the end of *Promising Young Woman*, and think about how her narrative culmination intersects with, and jars against, both existing femme fatale criticism and contemporary feminist discourses. The final part of the film features Cassie going to Al's bachelor party disguised as a 'stripper' or sex worker, wearing a nurse's costume complete with white stockings, red shiny platform stiletto heels, a pastel multicoloured wig topped with a nurse's cap, and heavy make-up. While the costume is a nod to her past, or her previously prescribed 'promise', it also works as a means of hiding her identity. This obfuscation works on two levels: practically, through the visual layers created by the wig and heavy make-up, but also ideologically.

Promising Young Woman, dir. Emerald Fennel (FilmNation Entertainment, 2020).

When the men open the door, a call of 'stripper time baby! Let's go!' sets the tone for how Cassie, as a sex worker, is going to be received. She is not an individual, she is 'the stripper'. We can read echoes of Bruzzi's comments on the mocking of the 'gaze of hapless men' who

[228] Horton, 'How Promising Young Woman shows the limits of #MeToo revenge'.
[229] Fennell, ''Promising Young Woman''.
[230] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1; *Farrimond*, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 14.

'never understand the complexity of what they are looking at' in this sequence, as the partygoers drop to their knees at her command, allowing her to pour alcohol that has been spiked with a substance that will make them pass out for the night directly into their open mouths.[231] Close-up shots of Cassie's cleavage displaying Nina's half of their friendship necklace are intersected with images of open mouths and leering eyes, emphasising the men's inability to read or imagine the situation beyond their own conceptions. Here, therefore, Cassie is not just utilising the 'gaze of hapless men' for her own means, but also the dehumanising gaze that is geared towards sex workers.[232] This reading is reinforced when Cassie takes Al upstairs who, when he has confirmed that he does not want to engage in sexual activities with her, asks for her name. When she responds with 'Candy', he asks for her real name, to which she answers 'Nina Fisher'. At this point, the tone changes. The situation has been removed from the realm of fantasy as Al recognises Cassie, and thus the 'complexity' of what had appeared to be a straightforward, culturally scripted scenario.[233]

This sequence therefore begins with Cassie utilising a 'conventionalised, overtly sexual image of femininity' and her 'full awareness of how that image affects men', or how they will respond to it in this particular context, entailing that she 'controls the effect' of her image.[234] The fantasy created through this image has also reached beyond the film itself, evidenced by the plethora of identical wigs and costumes available to purchase since its release. However, when we look closer, there are hints towards Cassie's murder in the details of her appearance or, more specifically, her make-up. Lead of the make-up department for the film, Angie Wells, states that when she 'saw the costume and thought about what [Cassie] was going to be doing, [she] thought of an evil blow-up doll'.[235] Continuing along the lines of doll imagery, Wells focused on creating the 'illusion' of a 'much rounder, bigger eye', an effect that is later compared to 'Chucky', the doll from the *Child's Play* media franchise.[236] Wells' choice to use a deep pink lipstick rather than red is also framed by Kim Renfro as a means through which to 'keep Cassie's face looking doll-like'.[237] Whereas Cassie's arrival and costume are vibrant in purpose and effect, her make-up is more concerned with her looking like a doll and, while 'Chucky' is infamously animate, dolls generally, and 'blow-up

[231] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127.
[232] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127.
[233] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127.
[234] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127.
[235] Angie Wells, qtd. in Kim Renfro, '14 hidden details you might have missed in 'Promising Young Woman'' (2021). Available at https://www.insider.com/promising-young-woman-details-you-missed-spoilers-ending-2021-4 [accessed 9th December 2021].
[236] Wells, '14 hidden details you might have missed in "Promising Young Woman"'.
[237] Renfro, '14 hidden details you might have missed in "Promising Young Woman"'.

doll[s]' specifically, are inanimate and passive.[238] Lurking within her dynamic disguise, therefore, is a hint of what is to come.[239] When Cassie, overpowered by Al, begins to stop moving – as Carmen Maria Machado states, 'it takes an agonizingly[sic] long time for her to die' – the camera pans across and up towards Al, until Cassie, now dead, is literally and metaphorically out of the picture.[240] We are waiting for Cassie to move, for the narrative to twist in another direction, but instead we see Joe throwing her wig into the flames and kicking her hand, replete with matching pastel nail polish, into the fire as Al stands beside him. We are reminded through this sequence of the moments throughout the film where this exact dynamic – wherein women are situated as collateral damage in men's pursuits towards 'success' – have been questioned: how Al was able to graduate from college once Cassie and Nina had left, or how the Dean ignored Nina's accusations, stating that they have to give boys the benefit of the doubt, to name a few. We have been rooting for Cassie, and she is violently removed from the narrative. Yes, this sequence hugely subverts audience expectations. But when we have seen her critique the injustices mentioned above, only to become subject to it herself, what kind of work is this film doing? When the femme fatale of mid-twentieth-century film noir was also, in a sense, utilised as a plot point against which the bemused hero struggles for his own narrative trajectory, with her removal key to his 'success', where does *Promising Young Woman* leave the contemporary femme fatale?

Benson-Allott suggests that the ending of the film presents us with a juxtaposition, as '[v]iewers are encouraged to revel in Cassie's sharp retorts while recognizing that her life has been destroyed by the violent sexism they deride'.[241] As a result, we are forced to 'question [our] own reactions to rape media – to ask [ourselves] what [we] were expecting and why'.[242] As Fennell has herself indicated, we expect a certain outcome because the film leads us

---

[238] Wells, '14 hidden details you might have missed in "Promising Young Woman"'.
[239] We can trace additional foreshadowing in Joe's comments as Cassie takes Al upstairs: 'I wanna see her crawl out of here in the morning. She better not be able to walk'. The fact that Cassie is *not* able to walk out of the cabin the next day works to highlight the presence of violence in such turns of phrase that might otherwise be viewed as camaraderie, or 'banter', between men. A similar exchange takes place *after* Al has smothered Cassie with a pillow. When Joe enters the bedroom the next morning, he does not believe that Al has killed 'the stripper' and thinks that he is being 'ironic': 'you killed the stripper at your bachelor party? What is this, the 90s?', he jokes. With this temporal reference, the film is making an intertextual link to the films *Stag* and *Very Bad Things*, a thriller and black comedy respectively, which involve a sex worker being accidentally killed during a bachelor party (*Stag*, dir. Gavin Wilding (Lionsgate Films, 1997); *Very Bad Things*, dir. Peter Berg (Initial Entertainment Group, 1998)). In each film, the sex worker's death works as a catalyst for the narrative that follows, as the male characters attempt to cover up and deal with the aftermath of the events. In terms of tone and focus, the premise of both *Stag* and *Very Bad Things* feels like the antithesis of *Promising Young Woman* and yet, after Cassie is murdered, the exchanges that take place between Joe and Al feel as if they belong to a film that might exist alongside the aforementioned male-focused narratives.
[240] Machado, 'How "Promising Young Woman" Refigures the Rape-Revenge Movie'.
[241] Benson-Allott, "Promising Young Woman' confuses viewers'.
[242] Benson-Allott, "Promising Young Woman' confuses viewers'.

towards that expectation. However, the fact that an audience might desire this level of violence or, in Fennell's words, be 'begging for blood', is not simply because we have seen it before and have grown passively aware of generic visual codes.[243] Rather, in line with Pidduck's claims, I argue that such scenes function as something of an antidote, a 'venting of rage and revenge fantasies', to work against the 'evidence of [women's] increasing vulnerability, poverty, and limited social power'.[244] Cassie's planned revenge is revealed in a monologue in which she talks about Nina at length and how Al's actions – and the fact that she heard *his* name 'all around her, all over her all the time' – eventually 'just…squeezed her out'. With a scalpel in her hand, she reasons that the inverse should be true: 'Al, you should be the one with her name all over you'. We can only imagine how this scene might have unfolded had Cassie not been overpowered, but I would speculate that such scenes would have allowed a direct engagement with the fantasies outlined in Pidduck's argument. To spend a narrative critiquing and subverting the systems which contribute to women's 'vulnerability' and 'limited social power', only to have a protagonist murdered, directly evidencing those exact factors, denies the 'imagined point of contact' that the femme fatale might provide, making for a wholly unsatisfying conclusion for feminist spectators.[245]

Overall, however, *Promising Young Woman*'s denouement brings us back to the central question provoked by rape revenge cinema, effectively articulated by Machado: 'Do filmmakers owe us realistic portrayals of rape and its aftermath, or may we take pleasure in revenge fantasies, in which real-life obstacles are cast aside?'[246] Should films give us carefully concocted revenge like *Hard Candy*, or illustrate the insufficiencies of the justice system, or the quiet, oppressive realities of institutions which allow sexual violence to flourish like *The Assistant* (2019), for example?[247] I argue that this question is less about what filmmakers 'should' do, or what we are 'owed' as an audience, and instead about what is and is not productive for feminist readings of the genre and, in terms of this thesis, of the contemporary femme fatale. *Promising Young Woman* falters in terms of feminist potentialities because it does not deliver an effective fantasy *or* reflection of lived realities. When they report her as a missing person, Cassie's mother and father tell detectives,

---

[243] Fennell, ''Promising Young Woman''.
[244] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', p. 72.
[245] Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme', p. 72.
[246] Machado, 'How "Promising Young Woman" Refigures the Rape-Revenge Movie'.
[247] *The Assistant*, dir. Kitty Green (Forensic Films, 2019). In Green's film, as with the majority of *Promising Young Woman*, there is no visual representation of violence. Rather, the trajectory focuses on a day in the life of the protagonist, Jane, as she works in an office. The office is loosely based on Miramax, the American entertainment company founded by the Weinstein brothers.

simultaneously reassuring themselves, that 'she always comes back'. The final narrative twist, which falls remarkably flat, does indeed involve Cassie coming back, through a planned release of text messages and a parcel delivered to the lawyer that initially defended Al. The parcel contains the phone with the video of Nina being raped, as well as the address for the cabin at which Al's bachelor party was held. The text messages are delivered to Ryan when he is attending Al's wedding, right before the party is interrupted by the arrival of police cars, and Al is arrested. The text messages read: 'You didn't think this was the end, did you?', 'It is now', 'Enjoy the wedding!', 'Love, Cassie & Nina', finished with a 'wink' emoticon. The final shot focuses on and zooms into this 'wink' emoticon before moving to the film credits, entailing that we are left with a gesture that connotes a secret, flirtation or joke. One might assume that we are, as an audience, to be satisfied that Cassie has had the last word, that she has managed to achieve 'justice' for herself and Nina. Even if, this time around, the evidence is damning enough to ensure that Al receives convictions for raping Nina and murdering Cassie, it is hard to ignore the fact that two women have had to die in order for this to happen. While Cassie may have succeeded in securing some kind of 'justice', her trajectory as a contemporary femme fatale does not live up to readings of the figure as a feminist analytical tool. Any feminist reading of this conclusion must consider the political efficacy of such a reliance on the police and criminal justice system. Olufemi outlines the promise of carceral forms of justice in the 'liberal feminist rationale': 'the police and prisons are necessary because they protect women from danger'.[248] However, as Olufemi goes on to highlight, when black women:

> die disproportionately at the hands of the police, historically and in the present moment, we must ask, what is the purpose of the police and detention system? Is it right that *some* women must die so that others are protected? Do we wish to be the recipients of that kind of protection? When we understand race and gender as inseparable, there is no feminist case for the existence of the police (emphasis in original).[249]

The question posed by Olufemi, 'do we wish to be the recipients of that kind of protection?' is key when considering *Promising Young Woman*'s conclusion.[250] As Phipps argues, 'the criminal punishment system is usually called on to deal with sexual violence, but this system is fundamentally racist. And white women are still not listening'.[251] The latter part of

[248] Olufemi, *Feminism Interrupted*, p. 31.
[249] Olufemi, *Feminism Interrupted*, p. 31.
[250] Olufemi, *Feminism Interrupted*, p. 31.
[251] See Alison Phipps, *Me, Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), p. 64.

Phipps's assertion is fully reflected by Fennell's choice of ending, with its cheeky 'wink' emoticon failing to fulfil the 'gotcha' moment that it intends to deliver, and the feminist satisfaction that it seems to want to provoke. If Cassie's way of living was an exercise in embracing a certain mode of failure, this narrative conclusion undercuts the queer, anti-capitalist sensibilities of this work. Horton identifies that while the film's initial revenge fantasy **'**largely hinges on Cassie's blonde, white femininity', the lack of recognition of how she might weaponise 'the benefit of the doubt' afforded to such a mode of femininity is 'an undeniable limitation'.[252] When we take into account Olufemi and Phipps's arguments concerning race and carceral forms of justice, as well as the film's conclusion, this lack of attention is all the more problematic. Furthermore, if the 'feminist' justification for carceral justice hinges on the institution's abilities to protect women, despite the fact that the police disproportionately harms black women and men, the façade generated by such a justification has been shattered by recent events in the UK. In 2021, Metropolitan Police officer Wayne Couzens was charged for the kidnap, rape and murder of Sarah Everard. While the kind of social consciousness outlined by Olufemi and Phipps should not necessitate the existence of a white victim, this incident further substantiates the claim there is no 'feminist case for the existence of the police', even within the white, liberal feminist 'rationale'.[253]

On the other hand, thinking along the lines of Lauren Berlant's 'cruel optimism', there is an argument to be made for the film's rejection of the rape-revenge fantasy. Berlant writes about 'object[s] of optimism' and their promise 'to guarantee the endurance of something, the arrival of something'.[254] 'The hope is that', Berlant writes, 'what misses the mark and disappoints won't much threaten anything in the ongoing reproduction of life, but will allow zones of optimism a kind of compromised endurance'.[255] Therefore, while *Promising Young Woman* might 'miss the mark' or 'disappoint' feminist spectators in its movement away from violent retribution, the narrative's recognition of the impossibility of such an ending on 'real life' terms leads to 'a kind of compromised endurance' – the desire for life, with its structural inequalities and injustices, to be otherwise.[256] There is a productive lilt to the ending of *Promising Young Woman* on these terms, but not for the femme fatale archetype specifically. When the classic femme fatale's containment through 'death, incarceration, and occasionally normative romance' is seen as a necessary closure, restoring

[252] Horton, 'How Promising Young Woman shows the limits of #MeToo revenge'.
[253] Olufemi, *Feminism Interrupted*, p. 31.
[254] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 47.
[255] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 47.
[256] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 47.

agency and power to the masculine protagonist, Cassie's death, and the film's attempt at a satisfactory ending through the arrival of the police, is both disappointing and ineffectual for feminist spectators of the contemporary fatal woman.[257] *Promising Young Woman* simultaneously proffers a contemporary mode of encapsulation for the femme fatale, speculatively named here as a reliance on carceral retribution.

With reference to the mid-twentieth-century femme fatale, Place argues that the feminist potentialities of the figure do not have to be limited by the fact that they are 'destroyed' by the close of the narrative.[258] Reading femmes fatales 'despite their regressive ideological function on a strictly narrative level', Place suggests, leaves us with a compelling visual representation of women as 'deadly but sexy, exciting and strong'.[259] It is these specific impressions that resonate, during the time that Place was writing and, indeed, as this project has illustrated, to the present day. In the case of *Promising Young Woman*, however, the impression that we are left with does not align with Place's assertions, despite Fennell's attempt at making Cassie's presence reverberate beyond her death. Returning to her parents' comment – 'she always comes back – Cassie's particular 'comeback' is represented through her plan, concocted because she was, to some degree, anticipating her own murder. The arrival of the police at Al's wedding – accompanied by the non-diegetic blasting of Juice Newton's 'Angel of the Morning' – is thus figured as Cassie's return from beyond the grave. Camila Barbeito writes that Newton's lyrics 'speak to victimhood and sinners, painting Cassie as the angel up in the sky descending justice upon the men who harmed her and her best friend'.[260] Cassie's resonance is therefore already constructed within the filmic narrative, and while it might be 'exciting' on one level, the inclusion of the police as a means of delivering justice performs a 'regressive ideological function' that is hard to disregard in light of Olufemi and Phipps' arguments when thinking about the feminist potentialities of the contemporary femme fatale.[261] A reliance on carceral retribution thus stands as a mode of encapsulation which severely limits the contemporary femme fatale's intersectional feminist capacities. If the femme fatale 'always comes back', pointing to the tenacity and cyclical popularity of the figure, we must question whose fantasy she is coming back to fulfil and whether such fantasies are fruitful for the futurity of feminist discourses.

---

[257] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 1; *Farrimond*, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, p. 14.
[258] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 63.
[259] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 63.
[260] Camila Barbeito, 'So You're Still Thinking About Promising Young Woman's Soundtrack? This Might Be Why' (2021). Available at https://www.popsugar.co.uk/entertainment/photo-gallery/48139000/embed/48138999/embed [accessed 14th December 2021].
[261] Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 63.

Conclusion: Frustration, Backlash and Fatal Futures?

This project started with the spectacular Amy Dunne, a ruthless, unstoppable figuration of the contemporary femme fatale. Amy's influence extends beyond the close of *Gone Girl*, both in terms of the enduring threat that she poses at the narrative culmination and the effect that the text and Amy's characterisation have had on subsequent representations of 'bad' femininity, both in novels and on-screen. In 2015, Hughes used the term '*Gone Girl* effect' to describe the influx of 'unreliable women' in fiction since Flynn's novel and Fincher's adaptation.[1] While it is not possible to pinpoint exactly where the proliferation of 'bad' femininity in our contemporary moment began, this positioning of *Gone Girl* makes the text a pretty solid starting point. As Grossman indicates, sociohistorical narratives regarding gender roles, agency and power consistently inform 'depictions of "bad" women'.[2] *Gone Girl* was published and adapted in 2012 and 2014 respectively, three years before Alyssa Milano's tweet took the #MeToo movement viral in 2017. Grossman highlights how the femme fatale – and conversations around 'bad' women more broadly – are informed by their contexts both 'pre- and post-#MeToo'.[3] While, as I have emphasised previously, the #MeToo movement was actually started by Burke in 2006, the effect of Milano's tweet positions *Gone Girl* as a text emerging just before the #MeToo movement went viral. *Gone Girl* was not the calm before the storm, but a signifier of the simmering rage that would lead to the #MeToo movement providing a point of identification for a large number of women.

Discussed alongside Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train* in the first chapter of this project, my analysis of *Gone Girl* provided a promising start to thinking about the feminist, analytical capacities of the contemporary femme fatale. Considering how the re-emergence of the past troubles 'knowledge', I argued that the thematic focus of this first chapter echoes the discursive possibilities of the 'silence breakers' of the #MeToo movement in exposing past incidents of violence to trouble the power dynamics which continue to inform the present. Positioning the 'girlish' women of domestic noir in the context of discourses around girlhood, this chapter drew productive comparisons between girlhood as a mode of becoming-woman and the femme fatale as an elusive, enigmatic mode of femininity. While Flynn's and Hawkins's texts invoke previous feminist discourses around memory to problematise

[1] Sarah Hughes, 'The Gone Girl Effect Sparks Year of Flawed Women Behaving Badly' (2015). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/03/gone-girl-effect [accessed 28th October 2018].
[2] Julie Grossman, *The Femme Fatale* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), p. 11.
[3] Grossman, *The Femme Fatale*, p. 11.

postfeminist rhetoric, their filmic adaptations build on the destabilisation of 'truth' through the subversion of chronological narrative form and the use of flashbacks. The link between sight and knowledge is thus made malleable or 'girled' through these formal qualities, with references back to earlier modes of fatal femininity in mid-twentieth-century film again calling upon the past to trouble the present with pragmatic, feminist intent.

Chapter two considered the novels and film as texts that are consciously engaged with the effects of the gaze on processes of becoming-woman. Utilising Soloway's formulation of the 'gazed gaze', I argued that these narratives untangle the patriarchal discourses that form contemporary understandings of teenage girlhood, holding them up for examination. In the second part of this chapter, I redeployed Colman's discussion of the 'transversal gaze': an alternative mode of becoming that is based on girls looking at each other. Notably, the transversal gaze was absent in Levinson's *Assassination Nation*, pointing to the efficacies of women writers in forming this particular way of looking in narrative form. I still find the lack of the transversal gaze in *Assassination Nation* particularly striking given the fact that it is a film, a form that we might expect to be more able in exploring the role of looking and being seen. In the scene where we watch Mark watch Lily through his iPhone lens, the text takes full advantage of film's ability, as a visual mode, to construct multiple, intersecting gazes. Indeed, the film was fully engaged with the sexualisation of teenage girls, the agency that this sexualisation might appear to offer on one hand and the contradictory, double-binding strike that it might deliver with the other. Nonetheless, the teenage girl was positioned, as Farrimond suggests of *Wild Things* and *Mini's First Time*, as 'sexy rather than sexual' in this film.[4] *Assassination Nation*'s lingering camera shots and sequences showing Lily's nude photos provoke its audience to question their own desire to see these sequences or the nature of such images, thus tying in with the monologue delivered by Lily about the self-manipulation involved in taking the photographs for consumption. That being said, they still feel uneasy, especially when coupled with the aforementioned critiques of Levinson's approach to filming young women in my note accompanying the mention of the television series *Euphoria* in the conclusion of chapter two. Overall, though, this chapter argues for the analytical potential of the modes of teenage femininity constructed through *The Girls*, *Girls on Fire* and *Assassination Nation*. Here, the teenage femme fatale works to identify and deconstruct discourses around the teenage girl. The texts look back at the multiple gazes to

[4] Katherine Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and American Cinema* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 90.

which they are subjected and, in *The Girls* and *Girls on Fire*, construct a sense of selfhood through interactions with other girls. My formulation of the transversal gaze thus indicates a movement away from individualistic, exceptional modes of the teenage femme fatale towards a collective construction of identity beyond the parameters of the patriarchal gaze.

Chapter three destabilised the apparent critical division between the femme fatale and discourses around maternity. This chapter aligns Rose's claim that mothers 'slip in and out […] of focus' in contemporary sociocultural discourses with the suggestion that the femme fatale 'never really is what she seems to be'.[5] The mothers' links with criminality entail that they are always on-the-run – whether this is a literal evasion from law enforcement or people who seek to harm them, or a more metaphorical evasion of fixed modes of categorisation. By perpetrating violence (and breaking other laws), the protagonists discussed in this chapter are already shoving the ever-shifting boundaries of 'good' motherhood. Redeploying Frances-White's critique of the 'plot killer' in contemporary media, I argued that the protagonists seek to 'kill plots' regarding acceptable femininity and motherhood. 'Entertainment' does not happen 'despite [their] best efforts'; the characters control the narrative while holding the contradictory and oppressive discourses around 'good' mothering up for examination.[6] In *Sunburn* and *A Simple Favor*, the protagonists' murderous, duplicitous actions are positioned as a means of giving their children a better life. Both texts maintain an uneasy alignment with postfeminist and neoliberal ideas around individual success, particularly when achieved at the expense of the women around them. However, as with *Gone Girl*'s Amy, the threat that Polly and Emily present to those around them lingers at the close of the literary narratives. While 'Polly can't imagine being gone' (*Sunburn*, p. 286), Emily frames Stephanie for murder before going 'off the grid for a while', perhaps revisiting Sean and becoming 'the cat again – with yet another mouse' (p. 298). While *Sunburn* and *A Simple Favor*'s denouements suggest that fatal femininity is fully compatible with motherhood, they have not quite shaken off the sense of individualism often associated with the exceptional femmes fatales of the 1990s.

In contrast to the lack of solidarity exemplified in *Sunburn* and *A Simple Favor*, the three protagonists of *Good Girls* act as a collective. Reviews have compared the television series *Breaking Bad*, with both narratives following protagonists as they enter the world of criminality with the safety and happiness of their families in mind. Their actions are driven

---

[5] Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 1.

[6] Deborah Frances-White, 'Dangerous Women on Film with Nat Luurtsema and Guest Yasmine Akram' (2018), The Guilty Feminist [Podcast]. Available at http://guiltyfeminist.com/episodes/ [accessed 10th November 2018].

by a tangible economic need. However, *Breaking Bad* is positioned by Frances-White as a kind of 'plot killer' urtext, or at least a prime example of this pattern of representation. *Good Girls* places the mothers at the centre of the narrative, controlling the action, and managing issues that arrive. They are not the background noise, creating conflict and getting in the heroes' way. *Good Girls* also stands out from *Sunburn* and *A Simple Favor* through its rejection of individualism and further analysis of race and class in a healthcare setting. We might look towards generic and modal difference in order to trace the reasons behind this specific strength. In terms of genre, *Sunburn* and *A Simple Favor* are more invested in the trappings of noir and domestic noir, whereas *Good Girls* is somewhere between a crime thriller and a comedy. Still, this comparison does not speak to the capacities of one genre over the other for such analysis, especially as there is a crossover between where we might place these texts. Maria Sulimma indicates how serial storytelling offers 'complex negotiations of identity'.[7] It is here that the format of serial television positions the mode as highly appropriate for the analysis of gender, race and class-based oppression. Sulimma argues that serials which represent and interrogate shifting notions of gender 'cannot be approached as separate from the processes that produce them'.[8] That is, there is a connection between the representation of gender as an ongoing, performative process and the continuous nature of the television serial.[9] Performances of gender are, like my thematic proposition of 'mums-on-the-run', 'never final, never completed, and never stably achieved'.[10] Here, there is a distinct parallel between seriality, gender as performance, and the feminist potentialities of the contemporary televised femme fatale. If her critical currency lies in the fact that she 'never really is what she seems to be', refusing fixity and straightforward resolution, then seriality provides a productive home for figurations of the femme fatale.[11]

As with the storytelling of serial television, the performance of gender 'balances competing demands towards closure and continuity. They provide recognisable aspects that are legible, as well as new, […] more than a clichéd repetition'.[12] The femme fatale carries cultural signifiers that allow legibility, but she must be innovative – engaged with our contemporary cultural milieu – if she is to move beyond cliché. *Good Girls*' serial format

---

[7] Maria Sulimma, *Gender and Seriality: Practices and Politics of Contemporary US Television* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 1.
[8] Sulimma, *Gender and Seriality*, p. 1.
[9] A key theme of Sulimma's theorisations – that 'gendered selfhood is not expressed through the performance of subjectivity but constituted through it' – finds its basis in the work of Judith Butler (Sulimma, *Gender and Seriality*, p. 10). See also, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2008).
[10] Sulimma, *Gender and Seriality*, p. 18.
[11] Doane, *Femmes Fatales,* p. 1.
[12] Sulimma, *Gender and Seriality*, p. 18.

allows the emergence of a new femme fatale figure which indicates, like *Sunburn* and *A Simple Favor*, that fatal femininity is fully compatible with motherhood, and taking sociocultural analysis a step further through characterisation and narrative trajectory. The context from which *Good Girls* stems is tangible throughout the series. *Good Girls* creator Bans wrote the series as a 'love letter' to her mother, a restorative boost amidst the atmosphere of misogyny and defeat felt during Trump's presidential campaign.[13] It is this political engagement that makes *Good Girls* more occupied with intersecting issues involving gender, race, and class. This analysis also lends further credence to the critical tracing of the femme fatale and her emergence during significant moments of 'gender trouble'. Whereas *Sunburn* and *A Simple Favor* snap back to individualistic modes of femininity, thus leaning more towards 'clichéd repetition', *Good Girls*' representation of fatal motherhood is politically engaged, and moreover is engaged with collectivity.[14] All representations of the femme fatale are going to involve looking back to previous cultural productions in the interest of legibility. Chapter four argues that this looking back must also be balanced with a looking around *and* looking ahead. For formulations of analytical fatal motherhood, we should be also looking in the direction of seriality.

Chapter four examines the limitations of the femme fatale as a subject who controls her own image through clothing. This chapter picks up on existing threads regarding the femme fatale as threatening career woman and asks: what role does clothing play in this particular formation? What kind of analytical work is clothing, and the work of the femme fatale in itself, doing? Series one of *Killing Eve* engages with multiple discourses around femininity, clothing and costuming, with the swapping or gifting of clothing exhibiting another example of a transversal discourse between women. This active use of clothing marks a departure from existing discourses around the femme fatale and costuming, where garments are used to convey something about the woman (thinking back to Bruzzi's comments on 'reverse symbolism', for example).[15] The potential for new desires and different formations of selfhood are made possible through the gifting of garments. The use of clothing as a site of communication between women builds on existing femme fatale criticism, with the garments themselves utilised to make distinctions between the femme fatale and female investigator –

---

[13] Debra Birnhaum, 'Good Girls' Creator Jenna Bans on How Donald Trump's Election Fueled Her' (2018). Available at https://variety.com/2018/tv/news/good-girls-jenna-bans-donald-trump-1202674831/ [accessed 3rd March 2021].
[14] Sulimma, *Gender and Seriality*, p. 18.
[15] Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 126.

'good' and 'bad' femininity – malleable. This chapter section thus argues for the potentiality of clothing as a discourse between women in future femme fatale texts.

Moving into *Boy Parts*, this chapter further considers central questions to the formation of the femme fatale: the role of looking, who is in control of the gaze, and who can make it work to their advantage. At the outset of the text, Irina is constructed as highly agentic, curating her looks with an eye on the effect that it will have on those around her. As she manipulates her body into adherence with conventional beauty standards, she physically bends her photographic subjects into submission. In its explication of contemporary political movements such as Black Lives Matter, gestures to contemporary stereotypes around femininity (the Tumblr and Etsy store-owning barista, for instance), and references to Mulvey's theorisations around the gaze, *Boy Parts* is the most critically knowing of the texts explored within this thesis. However, it is in the text's engagement with Mulvey's 1975 theorisations around the gaze that the strain between *Boy Parts*' representation of the femme fatale, and her (lack of) control over the effect that she has, begins to come to the fore. A reversal of the male gaze does not sufficiently or sustainably subvert existing gendered power dynamics. Even when she is outright violent, even murderous, Irina finds that she cannot truly be seen for who and what she is by those around her.

This revelation recalls Sulimma's point around gender and seriality. Irina is highly 'legible' as a femme fatale – she dresses herself for and reverses existing scripts around looking and being seen – but she is, ultimately, a 'clichéd repetition'.[16] Throughout the text, she attempts to maintain a strict alignment with contemporary beauty ideals, a theme that is exemplified most prominently through discussions of plastic surgery and the restriction of her caloric intake. Here, Irina can be read as the embodiment of postfeminist and neoliberal discourses regarding the body as a site to be constantly upheld, worked upon, and improved. She is so in control of how she *wants* to be perceived that she eventually becomes illegible. *Boy Parts* ends on a note of ambiguity. We do not know whether Irina will be held to account for her actions, or whether they happened in the first place. What we do know is, despite many points of identification between the two characters, Irina's narrative does not close with the enduring threat embodied by *Gone Girl*'s Amy. Irina's snarky vitality moves to chaotic decline throughout the course of the novel, with narrative clarity stymied by her shifting memories and altering state of mind. *Boy Parts* conclusion thus proffers a contemporary femme fatale so imbued with multiple discourses that her subversive, violent actions have no

[16] Sulimma, *Gender and Seriality*, p. 18.

grounding in the present, no real effect. When we begin to consider the trajectory of femmes fatales from the beginning of the thesis to this penultimate text, we find ourselves at a distinct shift in the positioning of characters at the point of narrative culmination.

Promising Young Woman charts a similar course. I've considered the idea of what it means to be promising and how Cassie's life does not match up to ideas of success perpetuated in our current culture. Despite this lurking notion of failure, Cassie's vocation, the promise of revenge, keeps her afloat. She constructs herself as a personalised honey trap for each encounter. The command that she suddenly acquires, in situations where she has previously been perceived as powerless, is undoubtedly pleasurable for feminist spectators. However, Cassie's anticipation of her own death when finally 'punishing' the man who raped her best friend undercuts the promise that the filmic narrative presents. When we consider this ending as something of a cruel attachment, with the 'real life' terms of the ending awakening us to an ongoing 'desire' for events to have unfolded differently, it is still hard to ignore the conclusion's reliance on carceral intervention.[17] While it might make us hope for something different, the filmic narrative does not point towards this kind of reading. Instead, it is as if we are to take Al's arrest as something of a compromise – Yes, Cassie is dead, but at least he has finally been found out. If *Boy Parts* ended on a note of illegibility, *Promising Young Woman* takes us right back to the femmes fatales of the mid-twentieth-century. Cassie is removed from the narrative by the conclusion of the film. If we are to consider the 'justice' allotted to Al as a signifier of Cassie's enduring threat, the promise that she – and the femme fatale more broadly – will 'always come back', then this reckoning is a light touch in comparison with this thesis' starting point, the unstoppable Amy Dunne.

Looking at the conclusions of this chapter as a whole, *Killing Eve* seems to emerge as the most productive when thinking about the contemporary femme fatale and her diversions from previous formations of fatal femininity. However, due to the milieu in which it appeared, I only focused on the first series of the programme. Since then, the finale of series four, the end of the series as a whole, has aired. At the end of the final episode, Eve and Villanelle embrace on a boat cruising along the River Thames, glimpsing at what might finally be their happy ending – an ending, too, to the aforementioned accusations of queerbaiting – as lights twinkle around them.[18] The mise en scène depicts the pair standing in front of Tower Bridge, which lifts behind their embrace as if to suggest that the barriers that

[17] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 47.
[18] 'Hello, Losers', *Killing Eve*, BBC One, 10th April 2022.

have interplayed between them are also, finally, lifting. Suddenly, Villanelle is shot. The pair jump into the Thames where Villanelle is shot again, and again. Eve reaches for her hand but they do not touch. Villanelle floats into darkness.

'Hello, Losers', *Killing Eve*, BBC One, 10th April 2022

Waller-Bridge's adaptation of *Killing Eve* successfully sought to move away from multiple aspects of the literary texts. Eve and Villanelle were no longer defined solely through the gaze of the men around them. Critics spoke to the strength of the first series in its ability to

take a text so 'steeped in the masculine' and 'feminize it'.[19] Therefore, it is incredibly striking to read a review of the series finale by the author of the *Killing Eve* texts and find many points of agreement. Jennings describes the ending of season four as a 'bowing to convention':

> A punishing of Villanelle and Eve for the bloody, erotically impelled chaos they have caused. A truly subversive storyline would have defied the trope which sees same-sex lovers in TV dramas permitted only the most fleeting of relationships before one of them is killed off (Lexa's death in The 100, immediately after sleeping with her female love interest for the first time, is another example). How much more darkly satisfying, and true to Killing Eve's original spirit, for the couple to walk off into the sunset together?[20]

Indeed, how much more in line with the original argument of this thesis would it have been to have Eve and Villanelle end the series in an embrace, celebrating their fatal triumphs (perhaps in complementing Roland-Mouret dresses). Jennings ends his condemnation with the claim that 'Villanelle lives. And on the page, if not on the screen, she will be back'.[21] In outlining this particular shift, I am not seeking to point to a rigid binary between male authorship and feminist intent. However, it is notable that the series intended to rework particular elements of Jennings' text, only to circle back around to the point where the author's criticisms are more in line with the first redeployment. At the close of chapter four, we have one femme fatale in a form of ambiguous defeat, and two who are dead. We could not be further from Amazing Amy. So what has happened?

Post #MeToo?

In the introduction to this thesis, I outlined the emergence of the #MeToo movement and the framing of 2018 as the 'Year of the Woman'. Across each chapter, I have drawn on previous and contemporary feminist discourses while analysing twenty-first century formations of the femme fatale. As I am writing this concluding chapter, the #MeToo movement has shifted dramatically. Another backlash against feminism appears to be already underway. The backlash against #MeToo specifically exceeds the resistance that the movement has faced since its conception. One recent site where this shift is rendered explicitly is the defamation case between actor Johnny Depp and his ex-wife, actress Amber Heard. The trial arose from

---

[19] Jen Chaney, 'BBC America's *Killing Eve* Is Instantly Addictive Television' 2018. Available at https://www.vulture.com/2018/04/killing-eve-review.html [accessed 17th September 2021].
[20] Luke Jennings, "Villanelle will be back!' Killing Eve's author speaks out over the catastrophic TV finale' (2022). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2022/apr/22/killing-eve-writer-tv-finale [accessed 15th July 2022].
[21] Jennings, "Villanelle will be back!".

a 2018 op-ed written by Heard, 'I spoke up against sexual violence — and faced our culture's wrath. That has to change'. Published in the midst of #MeToo, Heard's article begins:

> I was exposed to abuse at a very young age. I knew certain things early on, without ever having to be told. I knew that men have the power— physically, socially and financially— and that a lot of institutions support that arrangement. I knew this long before I had the words to articulate it, and I bet you learned it young, too.[22]

Visiting the article in 2022, an editor's note has been added just before these opening lines, detailing the statements which were found as false and defamatory: 'I spoke up against sexual violence — and faced our culture's wrath. That has to change', 'Then two years ago, I became a public figure representing domestic abuse, and I felt the full force of our culture's wrath for women who speak out' and 'I had the rare vantage point of seeing, in real time, how institutions protect men accused of abuse'.[23] Michael Hobbes's article, 'The Bleak Spectacle of the Amber Heard-Johnny Depp Trial', traces the timeline of events that unfolded in Heard and Depp's relationship, as well as the 'conspiracy' that has led to Heard being described as one of the most hated women in America.[24] It is undoubtable to me, as it is to Hobbes and many others, that Heard's testimony and overall narrative 'follows well-established patterns of interpersonal violence'.[25] In 2018, Depp sued *The Sun* for libel due to its description of him as a 'wife beater'. Heard testified, citing fourteen incidents of violence with photos, communications, videos, witnesses and tapes corroborating her side of events.[26] In the heights of the #MeToo movement, the tagline of 'Believe Women' was everywhere. The wealth of evidence presented by Heard would have been more than enough to have the public on her side. Once again, I find myself asking: what has happened here?

To watch these events unfold is to feel decades away from the 'Believe Women' mantra of the height of the #MeToo movement. To watch this unfold is to feel that, in the eyes of our contemporary milieu, the only 'good', 'real' victim is a dead one. Heard's 2018 op-ed shared her experience of 'seeing, in real time, how institutions protect men abused of abuse'.[27] This perspective is as accurate now as it was when the piece was published in 2018. The defamation trial alone has proved that. For Rayne Fisher-Quann, the positioning of the

---

[22] Amber Heard, 'Amber Heard: I spoke up against sexual violence — and faced our culture's wrath. That has to change' (2018). Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/ive-seen-how-institutions-protect-men-accused-of-abuse-heres-what-we-can-do/2018/12/18/71fd876a-02ed-11e9-b5df-5d3874f1ac36_story.html [accessed 15th July 2022].
[23] Heard, 'Amber Heard: I spoke up against sexual violence — and faced our culture's wrath'.
[24] Michael Hobbes, 'The Bleak Spectacle of the Amber Heard-Johnny Depp Trial' (2022). Available at https://www.readthepresentage.com/p/johnny-depp-amber-heard?s=r [accessed 15th July 2022].
[25] Hobbes, 'The Bleak Spectacle of the Amber Heard-Johnny Depp Trial'.
[26] Heard, 'Amber Heard: I spoke up against sexual violence — and faced our culture's wrath'.
[27] Heard, 'Amber Heard: I spoke up against sexual violence — and faced our culture's wrath'.

trial as a backlash against #MeToo is 'uniquely terrifying' because the 'mainstream MeToo movement' was not 'ever actually materially effective in the first place':

> the mainstream MeToo movement offered temporary catharsis in place of systemic change; Hollywood play-acted a revolution so that its men could keep up their abuse unscathed. There is something phenomenally painful in watching a material backlash erupt in response to a movement that was never allowed to be anything more than aesthetic. Now that the state of discourse has moved forward without bringing women's material conditions with it, men like Johnny Depp are able to benefit from violent systemic misogyny while posturing themselves as radical, anti-establishment activists. Recent events are not so much a pendulum swing as they are a pendulum being repeatedly beaten in one direction for fear it might one day gain a centimetre of ground.[28]

If 2018 was the 'Year of the Woman', 2022 is coming to feel like the year of regression. Both Hobbes and Fisher-Quann make references to the mid-twentieth century, with the former describing 'America's march backward toward the 1950s'.[29] The 1950s, and the associated image of the 1950s housewife, functions here as a 'convenient cultural shorthand for oppressed womanhood', as well as a significant re-entrenchment of American right-wing politics.[30] In addition, the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 has brought tensions regarding domestic labour and gendered inequities to the surface of public discourse. While the first UK lockdown in March 2020 saw reports of 'a rebalancing of the domestic chores between men and women', research into subsequent lockdowns indicated that mothers were 'potentially more likely to be interrupted while working to take on childcare and help with homeschooling'.[31]

This thematic of regression is also reflected and developed in discourses around another recent political event: the overturning of Roe vs Wade in June 2022. Writing for *The New Yorker*, Jia Tolentino identifies how the slogan 'we won't go back' has been revived since the draft of the Supreme Court's decision was leaked months ago.[32] Chanted 'defiantly but also somewhat awkwardly, given that this is plainly an era of repression and regression, in which abortion rights are not the only rights disappearing', Tolentino frames the slogan as

---

[28] Rayne Fisher-Quann, 'Who's Afraid of Amber Heard?' (2022). Available at https://internetprincess.substack.com/p/whos-afraid-of-amber-heard [accessed 15th July 2022].
[29] Hobbes, 'The Bleak Spectacle of the Amber Heard-Johnny Depp Trial'; Fisher-Quann, 'Who's Afraid of Amber Heard?'.
[30] Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 71.
[31] Michael Savage, 'Housework falls to mothers again after Covid lockdown respite' (2021). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/dec/19/housework-falls-to-mothers-again-after-covid-lockdown-respite [accessed 11th September 2022].
[32] Jia Tolentino, 'We're Not Going Back to the Time Before Roe. We're Going Somewhere Worse' (2022). Available at https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/07/04/we-are-not-going-back-to-the-time-before-roe-we-are-going-somewhere-worse [accessed 31st July 2022].

'almost divorced from reality'.[33] For Tolentino, this distance indicates an underestimation of, or inability to comprehend, the power and 'right-wing extremism' of the Supreme Court as it stands.[34] We are not 'going back' in the sense that the slogan suggests. Instead, Tolentino argues, increased state surveillance and widespread criminalisation of 'anyone who comes into meaningful contact with a pregnancy that does not end in a healthy birth' entails that the danger is differently placed and even more far-reaching.[35] In chapter three, I utilised the idea of fatal mums-on-the-run to exemplify the shifting and elusive category of contemporary motherhood, the gap between discourses and lived realities. At the point of writing this conclusion, ending a pregnancy has been banned, or banned after six weeks, in fourteen states. This attack on reproductive rights and the criminalisation of abortion, abhorrently, lends further significance to the thematics of evasion.

In the introduction, I drew a parallel between 1992 and 2018 as 'Year(s) of the Woman', connected not only by their status as particular moments within femme fatale 'cycles' but also as points where women were gaining political power. I quoted Zhou's observation on Clarence Thomas's succession to the Supreme Court while being accused of sexual harassment, further connecting 1992 to a particular climate of feminine rage and resistance, and parallel constructions of the hyperviolent, agentic femme fatale.[36] Thomas's name emerges once again in the context that concludes this thesis. In his concurrent opinion to the overturning of Roe vs Wade, Thomas stated that the 'same rationale that the Supreme Court used to declare there was no right to abortion […] should also be used to overturn cases establishing rights to contraception, same-sex consensual relations and same-sex marriage'.[37] Throughout this project, I have argued that the femme fatale reflects and refracts contemporary discourses around feminism and femininity. Positioning 1992 and 2018 together as 'Year(s) of the Woman' started this project on a somewhat hopeful note. If the #MeToo movement had its limitations, it was at least a time in which change felt imminent. The social and political contexts that surround and inform the contemporary re-emergence of the femme fatale have changed rapidly throughout the process of writing this thesis. The Heard vs Depp trial and overturning of Roe vs Wade are significant moments, part of a much

[33] Tolentino, 'We're Not Going Back to the Time Before Roe'.
[34] Tolentino, 'We're Not Going Back to the Time Before Roe'.
[35] Tolentino, 'We're Not Going Back to the Time Before Roe'.
[36] Li Zhou, 'The striking parallels between 1992's "Year of the Woman" and 2018, explained by a historian' (2018). Available at https://www.vox.com/2018/11/2/17983746/year-of-the-woman-1992 [accessed 1st July 2022].
[37] Sheryl Gay Stolberg, 'Thomas's concurring opinion raises questions about what rights might be next' (2022). https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/24/us/clarence-thomas-roe-griswold-lawrence-obergefell.html [accessed 31st July 2022].

broader movement towards right-wing values. Alongside media coverage regarding the rights of transgender people and the emergence of so-called 'Gender Critical' feminists, it is safe to say that we are once again in a time of 'gender trouble'. From 2018 to 2022, the optimism that we might have felt as feminists has taken a downwards turn, corresponding with the findings of this thesis. Starting with *Gone Girl*'s Amy and closing with *Promising Young Woman*'s not so promising Cassie, contemporary representations of the femme fatale have moved from being exciting, propelled by the urgency and vitality of the #MeToo movement, to an ending infused with disappointment, an aching for more violence, more justice.

If we are within another backlash against feminist values, the future of the femme fatale might look a lot more similar to the past, more at home in mid-twentieth-century film, than feminist spectators might like. When, as Place identifies, 'popular culture functions as myth for our society', expressing and reproducing 'the dominant ideologies necessary to the existence of the social structure', how will future femmes fatales look amidst a contemporaneous backlash against feminism?[38] Will we find ourselves back with the thematics of 'textual eradication', with the femme fatale signifying a 'symptom of male fears about feminism', rather than 'the subject of feminism'?[39] A slew of retrograde representations would feel particularly disjointed when following the texts explored within this thesis, with many not just inflected by but knowingly engaged with contemporary feminism(s). Whilst not an example of a retrograde text, Netflix's *The Woman in the House Across the Street from the Girl in the Window* (2022) provides a glimpse towards where domestic noir narratives might go next.[40] As its lengthy title suggests, the series is a parodical take on the trappings of domestic noir, starring Kristen Bell as Anna, a divorced, bereaved woman who believes that she witnessed a murder from her suburban home. Anna is an alcoholic. She hallucinates. She has a phobia of rain. When those around her do not take her story seriously, she decides to find out the truth. Clearly, this premise takes tangible influence from *The Girl on the Train*, as well as A.J. Finn's *The Woman in the Window* and its subsequent adaptation.[41] Given the sociocultural basis of texts like *The Girl on the Train* – their engagement with women's lived experiences in the home and workplace and how these sites can be dangerous – the comedic moments of *The Woman in the House Across the Street*

[38] Janey Place, 'Women in Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 47-68 (p. 47).
[39] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, pp. 2-3.
[40] *The Woman in the House Across the Street from the Girl in the Window*, Netflix, January 28 2022.
[41] A.J. Finn, *The Woman in the Window* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018); *The Woman in the Window*, dir. Joe Wright (20th Century Studios, 2021).

read as incoherent, and in poor taste when read against domestic noir's initial aims. If domestic noir, a genre related to the femme fatale, has undergone this kind of treatment at the beginning of 2022, it is fair to assume that other femme fatale texts might follow suit.

Towards the end of my discussion of *Boy Parts*, I asked whether the femme fatale's clothing would have the same effect if she were not already conforming to, in Bruzzi's words, 'ever narrower judgements of female attractiveness'.[42] This question also emerges when considering the disguises worn by Cassie and the effect of her retributive work, but really a variation on this question could be asked of any of the texts discussed within this thesis. The femme fatale's reliance on conventional attractiveness, her alignment with white, Eurocentric beauty standards, is both a hallmark of femme fatale narratives historically and a limitation to the feminist analytical work that the figure can perform. The femme fatale's insistent reliance on such modes of beauty potentially works to uphold and sustain such systems. One site in which twenty first century formations of the femme fatale have consistently fallen short is in their relationship to contemporary discourses around race and representation. The femme fatale's insistent relation to white femininity is something that I have commented on throughout this thesis. In each text discussed, all of the femmes fatales have been white, with the exception of *Good Girls*' Gloria – a character who is not a prototypical femme fatale, but whose characterisation and narrative trajectory illuminate important tensions at the intersection of race, gender and class. This focus on white characters has not been a conscious decision on my behalf, but rather a result of tracing prominent modes of fatal femininity across the media of the last decade. In relation to mid-twentieth-century film noir, Manthia Diawara indicates how feminist commentators' focus on form, with patriarchy maintained through the positioning of woman, and anyone who occupies 'indeterminate and monstrous spaces', as 'treacherous'.[43] For Diawara, the formal focus on dark and light, good and evil, illuminates how the 'bad guys' of film noir come to occupy spaces 'such as whiteness traditionally reserves for blackness'.[44] Writing on spectatorship more broadly, hooks identifies a comparable lack of space for black women to identify with 'woman' in cinematic texts. In response to Mulvey's theorisations on the gaze, hooks outlines the 'cinematic context' that denies black femininity 'as to perpetuate white supremacy and with it a phallocentric spectatorship where the woman to be looked at and desired is

[42] Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, p. 127; Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 255.
[43] Manthia Diawara, '*Noir* by *Noirs*: Toward a New Realism in Black Cinema', in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London and New York: Verso, 1993), pp. 261-278 (p. 262).
[44] Diawara, '*Noir* by *Noirs*', p. 262.

"white"'.[45] Though hooks points out that 1990s film did not necessarily align with this exact dynamic, her point is still pressing when thinking about why the femme fatale figure, who has intricate ties to the structures around looking, might be historically centred around whiteness.

In my introduction, I highlighted how Burke, the founder of the #MeToo movement, described black women's exclusion from a movement that was started with them and for them. Media coverage of the movement as it emerged in 2016 did not care about the stories of black women and women of colour, entailing that they did not see themselves within the movement and did not feel comfortable sharing their experiences.[46] While I am not suggesting that this exclusion is the sole reason for the backlash against #MeToo in our contemporary moment, it must be part of the reason that the movement did not, to use Fisher-Quann's words, become 'anything more than aesthetic', with the 'state of discourse' moving forward 'without bringing women's material conditions with it'.[47] The #MeToo movement established itself as a collective speaking out, while simultaneously excluding the women that started the movement and shifting it away from its radical roots. If feminist spectators were angry about men abusing positions of power during the femmes fatales cycles of the late twentieth century, and again in 2018, this rage can only have increased in our current sociocultural moment. There is an audience for the exciting, pragmatically bad, analytical fatal women. Discourses around looking and being seen are central to how the femme fatale appears and, indeed, have been central to this thesis. In her study of #MeToo, Boyle suggests that popular feminism is ultimately also concerned with 'being *seen*—as a feminist, supporting feminist issues—rather than, necessarily, about *doing* feminism' (emphasis in original).[48] We must continue to ask of the femme fatale, as she inevitably reappears: '*what is being said about women here, who is speaking, for whom*?' (emphasis in original).[49] The same questions can and should be asked of contemporary feminisms. If nothing else, we can be sure of this: The future of the femme fatale lies with the future of feminism.

---

[45] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 118.
[46] Tarana Burke, qtd. in Aisha Harris, 'She Founded Me Too. Now She Wants to Move Past the Trauma' (2018). Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/arts/tarana-burke-metoo-anniversary.html [accessed 25th January 2019].
[47] Fisher-Quann, 'Who's Afraid of Amber Heard?'.
[48] Karen Boyle, *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot, 2019), p. 2.
[49] Christine Gledhill, '*Klute* 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 20-34 (p. 27).

Bibliography

Primary Texts

A Simple Favor, dir. Paul Feig (Lionsgate, 2018)

Assassination Nation, dir. Sam Levinson (BRON Studios, 2018)

Bell, Darcey, *A Simple Favor* (2017) (New York: Harper, 2018)

Clark, Eliza, *Boy Parts* (London: Influx Press, 2020)

Cline, Emma, *The Girls* (London: Penguin, 2016)

Flynn, Gillian, *Gone Girl* (New York: Broadway Books, 2012)

Gone Girl, dir. David Fincher (Twentieth Century Fox, 2014)

Good Girls, NBC (2018-21)

- 'Pilot', 26th February 2018
- 'Mo Money Mo Problems', 5th March 2018
- 'Shutdown', 16th April 2018

Hawkins, Paula, *The Girl on the Train* (London: Black Swan, [2015] 2016)

Killing Eve, BBC One (2018-22)

- 'Nice Face', 8th April 2018
- 'I'll Deal With Him Later', 15 April 2018
- 'Don't I Know You?', 22 April 2018
- 'Sorry Baby', 29th April 2018
- 'I Have a Thing about Bathrooms', 6th May 2018
- 'God, I'm Tired', 27th May 2018
- 'You're Mine', 26th May 2019
- 'Hello, Losers', 10th April 2022

Lady on a Train, dir. Charles David (Universal Pictures, 1945)

Lippman, Laura, *Sunburn* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018)

The Girl on the Train, dir. Tate Taylor (DreamWorks Pictures, 2016)

Wasserman, Robin, *Girls on Fire* (London: Little Brown, 2016)

Secondary Texts

A Place Called Lovely, dir. Sadie Benning (1991)

A Rage in Harlem, dir. Bill Duke (Palace Productions, 1991)

Aapola, Sinikka, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris, *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)

Ahmed, Sara, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017)

——— *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010)

Atomic Blonde, dir. David Leitch (Focus Features, 2017)

Baby Doll, dir. Elia Kazan (Newtown Productions, 1965)

Badmington, Neil, *Hitchcock's Magic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012)

Baker, Joanne, 'Claiming Volition and Evading Victimhood: Post-Feminist Obligations for Young Women', *Feminism and Psychology*, 20.2 (2010), 186-204

Baldwin, Kristen, 'Good Girls is a gentler, girlier Breaking Bad: EW review' (2018). Available at https://ew.com/tv/2018/02/09/good-girls-nbc-review/ [accessed 12th January 2021]

Banet-Weiser, Sarah, 'Postfeminism and Popular Feminism', *Feminist Media Histories*, 4.2 (2018), 152-156

Banet-Weiser, Sarah, Rosalind Gill, Catherine Rottenberg, 'Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in conversation', *Feminist Theory*, 21. 1 (2020), 3-24

Banks-Walker, Hannah, 'Killing Eve: How To Shop Villanelle's Wardrobe On The High Street Ahead Of Season Four' (2021). Available at https://graziadaily.co.uk/fashion/shopping/shop-killing-eve-fashion-look-for-less-as-jodie-comer-reaches-style-icon-status/ [accessed 28th October 2021]

Barbeito, Camila, 'So You're Still Thinking About Promising Young Woman's Soundtrack? This Might Be Why' (2021). Available at https://www.popsugar.co.uk/entertainment/photo-gallery/48139000/embed/48138999/embed [accessed 14th December 2021]

Barber, Felicity H., 'San Francisco Women's March — in pictures' (2017). Available at https://medium.com/@felicitybarber/san-francisco-womens-march-in-pictures-9ac3993f3006 [accessed 24th July 2019]

Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage [1957] 1993]

Basic Instinct, dir. Paul Verhoeven (TriStar Pictures, 1992)

Baudelaire, Charles, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (London and New York: Phaidon, 2008)

Baumgardner, Jennifer, and Amy Richards, 'Feminism and Femininity: Or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Thong', in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2004), pp. 59-67

Baumgardner, Jennifer, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000)

Baxter, Holly, "Care. No matter what' isn't a promise in Alabama, it's a battle cry' (2019). Available at https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/abortion-law-pro-life-choice-donald-trump-alabama-a8998671.html [accessed 24th July 2019]

Beauvoir, Simone de, *The Second Sex*, trans, and ed. H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, [1949] 1997)

Bechdel, Alison, *Dykes to Watch Out For* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1986)

Beckman, Frida, 'From Irony to Narrative Crisis: Reconsidering the Femme Fatale in the Films of David Lynch', *Cinema Journal*, 52.1 (Fall, 2012), 25-44

Bennett, Andrew, and Nicholas Royle, 'Narrative', in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 3rd edn (Harlow: Pearson, 2004), pp. 52-59

Benson-Allott, Caetlin, "Promising Young Woman' confuses viewers. That's what makes it brilliant' (2021). Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/04/24/promising-young-woman-genre-confusion/ [accessed 17th November 2021]

Berer, Marge, 'Whatever Happened to a 'Woman's Right to Choose'?', *Feminist Review*, 29 (Summer, 1988), 24-37

Berger, John, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin, 1972)

Berlant, Lauren, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011)

Biesen, Sheri Chenin, *Film Censorship: Regulating America's Screen* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2018)

Billson, Anne, 'How the 'rape-revenge movie' became a feminist weapon for the #MeToo generation'. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/may/11/how-the-rape-revenge-movie-became-a-feminist-weapon-for-the-metoo-generation [accessed 20th November 2019]

Birnhaum, Debra, "Good Girls' Creator Jenna Bans on How Donald Trump's Election Fueled Her' (2018). Available at https://variety.com/2018/tv/news/good-girls-jenna-bans-donald-trump-1202674831/ [accessed 3rd March 2021]

Bitel, Anton, 'Assassination Nation', *Sight and Sound*, 28.12 (December, 2018), p. 59

Blair, Olivia, 'Killing Eve: Villanelle's Best Ever Fashion Moments' (2020). Available at https://www.elle.com/uk/fashion/celebrity-style/g32156498/villanelle-best-outfits-killing-eve/ [accessed 28th October 2021]

Bloom, Lynn Z., '"I Write for Myself and Strangers": Private Diaries as Public Documents', in *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries*, ed. Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia A. Huff (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), pp. 23-37

Bonnett, Alastair, *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010)

Bradshaw, Peter, 'Assassination Nation Review – Social Media Revenge Porn' (2018). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/oct/19/assassination-nation-review-social-media-revenge-porn [accessed 9th April 2019]

Braun, Heather, *The Rise and Fall of the Femme Fatale in British Literature, 1790-1910* (Lanham, MA: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012)

Breaking Bad, AMC (2008-13)

Brick, dir. Rian Johnson (Bergman Lustig Productions, 2005)

Bristow, Daniel, *2001: A Space Odyssey and Lacanian Psychoanalytic Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)

Bronfen, Elisabeth, 'Femme Fatale: Negotiations of Tragic Desire', *New Literary History*, 35. 1 (2004), 103-116

Brown, Krystian, 'The Omniscient 21st Century Femme Fatale: Genre and Gender Under Surveillance in *Gossip Girl* and *Pretty Little Liars*', *Mãnoa Horizons*, 1 (2016), 122-127

Brownmiller, Susan, *Femininity* (London: Paladin, 1984)

Bruzzi, Stella, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997)

Buchanan, Daisy, 'Why I'm proud to be a 'basic bitch'' (2014). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/14/proud-to-be-basic-bitch [accessed 16th April 2021]

Buckley, Cara, 'They Couldn't Get Past the 'Mimbos'' (2008). Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/16/fashion/16playgirl.html [accessed 27th June 2019]

Bunkers, Suzanne L., and Cynthia A. Huff, 'Issues in Studying Women's Diaries: A Theoretical and Critical Introduction', in *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries*, ed. Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia A. Huff (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), pp. 1-20

Burke, Eva, 'From Cool Girl to Dead Girl: *Gone Girl* and the Allure of Female Victimhood', in *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, ed. Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 71-86

Burkeman, Oliver, 'Gillian Flynn on her Bestseller Gone Girl and Accusations of Misogyny'. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/01/gillian-flynn-bestseller-gone-girl-misogyny [accessed 10th June 2017]

Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

Caputi, Jane, *Goddesses and Monsters: Women, Myth, Power, and Popular Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004)

Cardini, Tiziana, 'Dior's Bar Jacket: A Brief History' (2020). Available at https://www.vogue.com/article/christian-dior-bar-jacket-a-brief-history [accessed 8th November 2021]

Chambers, Seve, 'The Rise of Black Cops and Policing Films' (2019). Available at https://www.blackartinamerica.com/index.php/2019/11/23/the-rise-of-black-cops-and-policing-films/ [accessed 14th December 2021]

Chaney, Jen, 'BBC America's *Killing Eve* Is Instantly Addictive Television' 2018. Available at https://www.vulture.com/2018/04/killing-eve-review.html [accessed 17th September 2021]

Charlie Says, dir. Mary Harron (Epic Level Entertainment, 2019)

Chemaly, Soraya, *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2018)

Child, Ben, 'Gone Girl's Ending Rewritten for Movie Adaptation' (2014). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/jan/10/gone-girl-ending-rewrite-david-fincher [accessed 24th March 2019]

Cixous, Hélène, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs*, 1.4 (Summer, 1976), 875-893

Clover, Carol, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1993] 2015)

Clueless, dir. Amy Heckerling (Paramount Pictures, 1995)

Cohen, Paula Marantz, 'What Have Clothes Got to Do with It? Romantic Comedy and the Female Gaze', *Southwest Review,* 95.1-2 (2010), 78-88

Collins, K. Austin, '*Assassination Nation* Needs a Little Less Conversation, a Little More Action' (2018). Available at https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/09/assassination-nation-review?mbid=social_twitter&verso=true [accessed 9th March 2019]

Colman, Felicity, 'Hit Me Harder: The Transversality of Becoming-Adolescent', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 16.3 (2005), 356-371

Colman, Roche, 'Was Eve the First *Femme Fatale*?', *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 42.1 (2021), pp. 1-9

Conboy, Katie, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury, 'Introduction', in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 1-12

Connley, Courtney, '7 Female Activists Under 23 Who Are Changing the World' (2018). Available at https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/08/these-7-young-female-leaders-are-changing-the-world.html [accessed 9th June 2019]

Connolly, William J., 'Killing Eve interview: Sandra Oh and Jodie Comer discuss their characters' sexuality' (2019). Available at https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/originals/killing-eve-season-two-interview/ [accessed 14th November 2021]

Coward, Rosalind, *Our Treacherous Hearts: Why Women Let Men Get Their Way* (London: Faber, 1993)

Cowie, Elizabeth, 'Film Noir and Women', in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 121-166

Cox, David, 'Gone Girl Revamps Gender Stereotypes for the Worse' (2014). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2014/oct/06/gone-girl-female-stereotype-women [accessed 5th February 2019]

Craik, Jennifer, *The Face of Fashion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994)

Creed, Barbara, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 1993)

Crenshaw, Kimberlé, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1.8 (1989), 139-167

Crispin, Jessa, 'Mean Girls: Megan Abbott's *Dare Me*' (2012). Available at https://www.kirkusreviews.com/features/mean-girls-megan-abbotts-dare-me/ [accessed 12th May 2019]

Crockett, Maya, 'Deborah Frances-White on danger, romance and making her first movie' (2019). Available at https://www.stylist.co.uk/people/deborah-frances-white-guilty-feminist-film-say-my-name/260310 [accessed 10th March 2020]

Crouch, Julia, 'Foreword: Notes from a Genre Bender', in *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, ed. Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. v-viii

——— 'Genre Bender' (2013). Available at http://juliacrouch.co.uk/blog/genre-bender [accessed 7th April 2019]

Crush, dir. Alison Maclean (Hibiscus Films, 1992)

D., Chris, *Outlaw Masters of Japanese Film* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005)

Dargis, Manohla, 'Review: Smother Mother Meets Femme Fatale in 'A Simple Favor'' (2018). Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/13/movies/simple-favor-review.html [accessed 10th March 2020]

Davis, Angela, *Modern Motherhood: Women and Family in England, c. 1945-2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012)

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, [1980] 1987)

Demolder, Kate, 'The Ultimate Feminist Issue: How to Save for a Runaway Fund' (2020). Available at https://irishtatler.com/lifestyle/runaway-fund [accessed 14th August 2022]

Depp II v News Group Newspapers Ltd & Anor [2020] EWHC 2911 (QB) (02 November 2020). Available at https://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2020/2911.html [accessed 15th July 2022]

deYoung, Mary, 'Another Look at Moral Panics: The Case of Satanic Day Care Centers', *Deviant Behavior*, 19.3 (1998), 257-278

Diawara, Manthia, '*Noir* by *Noirs*: Toward a New Realism in Black Cinema', in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London and New York: Verso, 1993), pp. 261-278

Dijikstra, Bram, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986)

Dillaway, Heather, and Elizabeth Paré, 'Locating Mothers: How Cultural Debates About Stay-at-Home Versus Working Mothers Define Women and Home', *Journal of Family Issues*, 29. 4 (April, 2008), 437-464

Ditum, Sarah, 'The Girls by Emma Cline review – the Charles Manson 'family' reimagined' (2016). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jun/08/the-girls-by-emma-cline-review-charles-manson [accessed 19th June 2019]

Diversion, dir. James Dearden Faludi (Dearfilm, 1979)

Doane, Mary Ann, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991)

Doane, Mary Ann, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams, 'Feminist Film Criticism: An Introduction', in *Re-vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles, CA: The American Film Institute, 1984), pp. 1-17

Dockterman, Eliana, 'Good Girls Is the Perfect Show for This Moment' (2018). Available at https://time.com/5163688/good-girls-nbc-review/ [accessed 12th January 2021]

——— 'Is *Gone Girl* Feminist or Misogynist?' (2014). Available at http://time.com/3472314/gone-girl-movie-book-feminist-misogynist/ [accessed 6th February 2019]

Donahue, Anne T., 'Ask Not What You Can Do for Your Country, but What Witchcraft Can Do for You' (2018). Available at https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a25131301/witchcraft-occult-movies-tv-shows-2018/ [accessed 9th July 2019]

Donovan, Nina, 'I Am a Nasty Woman'. Available at https://www.howlnewyork.com/home/poets-corner-nasty-woman-by-nina-donovan [accessed 25th January 2019]

Double Indemnity, dir. Billy Wilder (Paramount Pictures, 1944)

Driscoll, Catherine, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002)

Duffy, Nick, '11-year-old Good Girls character comes out as trans in beautiful scene' (2019). Available at https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2019/04/23/11-year-old-good-girls-character-comes-out-as-trans-in-beautiful-scene/ [accessed 14th December 2021]

Durham, Meenakshi Gigi, 'The Girling of America: Critical Reflections on Gender and Popular Communication', *Popular Communication*, 1.1 (2003), 23-31

——— *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What We Can Do About It* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2009)

Echols, Alice, 'Nothing Distant about It: Women's Liberation and Sixties Radicalism', in *Women Transforming Politics: An Alternative Reader*, ed. Cathy J. Cohen, Kathy B. Jones, and Joan C. Tronto, (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997), pp. 456-76

Edwards, Karen L., 'The Mother of All Femme Fatales: Eve as Temptress in Genesis 3', *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts* , eds. Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 35-44

Elizabethtown, dir. Cameron Crowe (Paramount Pictures, 2005)

Elkin, Lauren, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City* (London: Vintage, 2016)

Entwistle, Joanne, "Power Dressing' and the Construction of the Career Woman', in *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, ed. Malcolm Barnard (Routledge: Oxon and New York, 2007), pp. 208-219

Erbland, Kate, ‘‘Promising Young Woman’: Emerald Fennell on Her Mission to Upend Moviegoers’ Thirst for Violence’ (2020). Available at https://www.indiewire.com/2020/12/promising-young-woman-emerald-fennell-interview-1234605075/ [accessed 8th December 2021]

——— “A Simple Favor’ Review: Blake Lively and Anna Kendrick Shine in Paul Feig’s Campy, Overcooked ‘Gone Girl’ Knockoff’ (2018). Available at https://www.indiewire.com/2018/09/a-simple-favor-review-blake-lively-anna-kendrick-paul-feig-adaptation-1202000669/ [accessed 4th January 2021]

Ezard, John, ‘Bainbridge Tilts at ‘Chick Lit’ Cult’ (2001). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/aug/24/books.generalfiction [accessed 3rd May 2019]

‘Facts and figures: Ending violence against women’ (2021). Available at https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures [accessed 27th August 2021]

Faludi, Susan, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Vintage, [1991] 1993)

Farrimond, Katherine, ‘Bad Girls in Crisis: The New Teenage Femme Fatale’, in *Women on Screen: Feminism and Femininity in Visual Culture*, ed. Melanie Waters (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 77-89

——— “Stay Still So We Can See Who You Are’: Anxiety and Bisexual Activity in the Contemporary Femme Fatale Film’, *Journal of Bisexuality*, 12.1 (2012), 138-154

——— *The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2018)

Fatal Attraction, dir. Adrian Lyne (Paramount Pictures, 1987)

Feasey, Rebecca, *From Happy Homemakers to Desperate Housewives: Motherhood and Popular Television* (Anthem Press: London and New York, 2012)

Ferriss, Suzanne, and Mallory Young, ‘Introduction’, in *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1-13

Filipovic, Jill, ‘Our President Has Always Degraded Women — And We’ve Always Let Him’ (2017). Available at https://time.com/5047771/donald-trump-comments-billy-bush/ [accessed 12th January 2021]

Finn, A.J., *The Woman in the Window* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018)

Fischer, Gayle V., *Pantaloons and Power: A Nineteenth-Century Dress Reform in the United States* (Kent, Ohio and London: The Kent State University Press, 2001)

Fisher-Quann, Rayne, ‘Who’s Afraid of Amber Heard?’ (2022). Available at https://internetprincess.substack.com/p/whos-afraid-of-amber-heard [accessed 15th July 2022]

Flat is Beautiful, dir. Sadie Benning (1995)

Flory, Dan, ‘Cinematic Presupposition, Race, and Epistemological Twist Films’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 68. 4 (Fall, 2010), 379-387

Ford, Elizabeth A., and Deborah C. Mitchell, *The Makeover in Movies: Before and After in Hollywood Films, 1941-2002* (Jefferson: McFarland and Co, 2004)

Fox, Suzanne, 'PW Talks with Emma Cline', *Publishers Weekly*, 263.14 (April, 2016), p. 51

Frances-White, Deborah, 'Dangerous Women on Film with Nat Luurtsema and Guest Yasmine Akram' (2018), *The Guilty Feminist* [Podcast]. Available at http://guiltyfeminist.com/episodes/ [accessed 10th November 2018]

Fredrickson, Barbara L., and Tomi-Ann Roberts, 'Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks', *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21 (1992), 173-206

Freud, Sigmund, 'Femininity', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XXII (1932-36)*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, [1933] 1995), pp. 112-35

——— 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (London: Vintage, 1995), pp. 239-93

Friedan, Betty, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, [1963] 2001)

Friedman, Seth, 'Misdirection in Fits and Starts: Alfred Hitchcock's Popular Reputation and the Reception of His Films', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 29.1 (2012), 76-94

Gamman, Lorraine, and Margaret Marshment, 'Introduction', in *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture* (London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1988), pp. 1-7

Garcia, Antero, 'Temporal Windows and Historic Mirrors: Challenging Historical Fiction', *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 60.4 (2017), 481-484

Gibbons, Fiachra, 'Stop Rubbishing Chick Lit, Demands Novelist' (2003). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/aug/21/books.booksnews [accessed 3rd May 2019]

Gill, Rosalind, and Christina Scharff, 'Introduction' in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp.1-17

Gill, Rosalind, 'Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising', *Feminism & Psychology*, 18.1 (2008), 35-60

——— 'Sexism Reloaded, or, it's Time to get Angry Again!', *Feminist Media Studies*, 11.1 (2011), 61-71

——— *Gender and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007)

Gillespie, Rosemary, 'Childfree and Feminine: Understanding the Gender Identity of Voluntarily Childless Women', *Gender and Society*, 17.1 (Feb., 2003), pp. 122-136

Gillis, Stacy, 'Cyber Noir: Cyberspace, (Post)Feminism and the *Femme Fatale*, in *The Matrix Trilogy: Cyberpunk Reloaded*, ed. Stacy Gillis (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), pp. 74-85

Gilmore, Leigh, and Elizabeth Marshall, *Witnessing Girlhood: Toward an Intersectional Tradition of Life Writing* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019)

Girl Power, dir. Sadie Benning (1992)

Gledhill, Christine, '*Klute* 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 20-34

Goodley, Dan, *Dis/ability Studies: Theorising Disablism and Ableism* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2014)

Gordon, Suzy, 'The Problem of 'Anxiety' in Psychoanalytic-Feminist Approaches to Noir', in *Neo-Noir*, eds. Mark Bould, Kathrina Glitre and Greg Tuck (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2009), pp. 203-220

Grant, Barry Keith, '"When the Woman Looks": *Haute Tension* (2003) and the Horrors of Heteronormativity', *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, ed. Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 283-95

Greene, Gayle, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', *Signs*, 16.2 (Winter, 1991), 290-321

Greer, Germaine, *The Whole Woman* (London: Transworld Publishers, 1999)

Griffin, Christine, 'Good Girls, Bad Girls: Anglocentrism and Diversity in the Constitution of Contemporary Girlhood', in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2004), pp. 29-43

Grossman, Julie, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for Her Close-Up* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)

——— *The Femme Fatale* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020)

Guattari, Félix, 'Toward a New Perspective on Identity', trans. Josep-Anton Fernández, in *The Guattari Reader*, ed. Gary Genosko (Oxford: Blackwell, [1992] 1996), pp. 215-17

Gunn, Anna, 'I Have a Character Issue' (2013). Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/24/opinion/i-have-a-character-issue.html [accessed 7th April 2020]

Haglund, David, 'The Strange Thing David Fincher Does With the "Cool Girl" Speech in Gone Girl' (2014). Available at https://slate.com/culture/2014/09/gone-girl-movie-cool-girl-speech-is-in-it-but-there-are-no-men-seen-during-the-voiceover.html [accessed 9th February 2019]

Halberstam, Jack, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011)

——— 'Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representation, Rage, and Resistance', *Social Text*, 87 (Winter, 1993), 187-201

Halliwell, Kate, 'Every Single Outfit Worn by Villanelle on 'Killing Eve,' Ranked' (2020). Available at https://www.theringer.com/tv/2020/4/8/21212957/killing-eve-villanelle-outfits-ranked-ranking [accessed 28th October 2021]

Hanson, Helen, and Catherine O'Rawe, 'Introduction: 'Cherchez la femme' in *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts*, ed. Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 1-8

Hanson, Helen, *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007)

——— 'The Big Seduction: Feminist Film Criticism and the *Femme Fatale*', in *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts*, ed. Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 214-227

Haraway, Donna J., 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), pp. 149-81

Hard Candy, dir. David Slade (Lionsgate Films, 2005)

Harris, Aisha, 'She Founded Me Too. Now She Wants to Move Past the Trauma'. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/arts/tarana-burke-metoo-anniversary.html [accessed 25th January 2019]

Harris, Anita, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2004)

——— 'Introduction', in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2004), pp. xvii – xxv

Harvey, Sylvia, 'Woman's Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 35-46

Heard, Amber, 'Amber Heard: I spoke up against sexual violence — and faced our culture's wrath. That has to change' (2018). Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/ive-seen-how-institutions-protect-men-accused-of-abuse-heres-what-we-can-do/2018/12/18/71fd876a-02ed-11e9-b5df-5d3874f1ac36_story.html [accessed 15th July 2022]

Hedgecock, Jennifer, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat* (Amherst, NY: Cambria press, 2008)

Held, Virginia, 'Birth and Death', *Ethics*, 99.2 (Jan, 1989), 362-388

Hermes, Joke, and Leonie Stoete, 'Hating Skyler White: audience engagement, gender politics and celebrity culture', *Celebrity Studies*, 10. 3 (2019), 411-426

Hewett, Heather and Mary K. Holland, 'Introduction: Literary Studies as Literary Activism', in *#MeToo and Literary Studies: Reading, Writing, and Teaching about Sexual Violence and Rape Culture*, ed. Mary K. Holland and Heather Hewett (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 1-27

Higgins, Charlotte, 'The Age of Patriarchy: How an Unfashionable Idea Became a Rallying Cry for Feminism Today' (2018). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jun/22/the-age-of-patriarchy-how-an-unfashionable-idea-became-a-rallying-cry-for-feminism-today [accessed 10th July 2019]

Highfill, Samantha, 'Best of 2014: Cinematographer Talks Desi's Death Scene in 'Gone Girl'' (2014). Available at https://ew.com/article/2014/12/12/best-of-2014-gone-girl-desi-death/ [accessed 28th March 2019]

Hobbes, Michael, 'The Bleak Spectacle of the Amber Heard-Johnny Depp Trial' (2022). Available at https://www.readthepresentage.com/p/johnny-depp-amber-heard?s=r [accessed 15th July 2022]

hooks, bell, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto, 1982)

——— *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992)

——— *Reel to Real: Race, Class and Sex at the Movies* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009)

Horton, Adrian, 'How Promising Young Woman shows the limits of #MeToo revenge' (2021). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/jan/05/promising-young-woman-metoo-revenge-carey-mulligan [accessed 17th November 2021]

Hughes, Sarah, 'The Gone Girl Effect Sparks Year of Flawed Women Behaving Badly' (2015). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/03/gone-girl-effect [accessed 28th October 2018]

Hunting, Kyra, 'Women Talk: Chick Lit TV and the Dialogues of Feminism', *The Communication Review*, 15.3 (2012), 187-203

Hutcheon, Linda, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006)

I Spit on Your Grave, dir. Meir Zarchi (Cinemagic Pictures, 1978)

I Spit on Your Grave, dir. Stephen R. Monroe (Cinetel Films, 2010)

I Wake Up Screaming, dir. H. Bruce Humberstone (20th Century Fox, 1941)

Ide, Wendy, 'Assassination Nation Review – Revenge Horror Packed with Insight' (2018). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/nov/25/assassination-nation-review-revenge-horror [accessed 9th April 2019]

If Every Girl Had a Diary, dir. Sadie Benning (1990)

In the Cut, dir. Jane Campion (Columbia Pictures, 2003)

It Wasn't Love, dir. Sadie Benning (1992)

Infanger, Martina, Laurie A. Rudman, and Sabine Sczesny, 'Sex as a Source of Power? Backlash Against Self-Sexualizing Women', *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 19.1 (2016), 110-124

Irigaray, Luce, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985)

Jaber, Maysaa Husam, *Criminal Femmes Fatales in American Hardboiled Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

Jancovich, Mark, 'Phantom Ladies: The War Worker, the Slacker and the 'Femme Fatale'', New Review of Film and Television Studies, 8.2 (2010), 164-178

Jason, Philip K., 'Modern Versions of the Villanelle', *College Literature*, 7.2 (Spring, 1980), 136-145

Jeffries, Stuart, 'What, No Whistlestop? Why The Girl on the Train Should Have Stayed in Bleak Backyard Britain' (2016). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/oct/10/the-girl-on-the-train-relocating-movies [accessed 24th March 2019]

Jennings, Luke, "Villanelle will be back!' Killing Eve's author speaks out over the catastrophic TV finale' (2022). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2022/apr/22/killing-eve-writer-tv-finale [accessed 15th July 2022]

Johnson, Evan, 'Heterosexuality, Homosexuality and Masculinity', *InPrint*, 2.1 (June, 2013), 93-100

Johnston, Claire, 'Double Indemnity', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1998), pp. 89-98

Jolles, Marjorie, 'Going Rogue: Postfeminism and the Privilege of Breaking Rules', *Feminist Formations*, 24.3 (Winter, 212), 43-61

Jones, Trina, and Kimberley Jade Norwood, 'Aggressive Encounters & White Fragility: Deconstructing the Trope of the Angry Black Woman', *Iowa Law Review*, 102.5 (Jul 2017), 2017-2069

Joyce, Laura, 'Introduction to *Domestic Noir*', in *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, ed. Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 1-7

Kahane, Claire, 'The Gothic Mirror', in *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Criticism*, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, Madelon Sprengnether (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 334-51

Kaplan, E. Ann, 'Introduction to 1978 Edition', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 15-19

——— 'Introduction to New Edition', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 1-14

——— 'The Place of Women in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 81-88

Kawash, Samira, 'New Directions in Motherhood Studies', *Signs*, 36.4 (Summer 2011), pp. 969-1003

Kennedy, Victoria, "Chick Noir': *Shopaholic* meets *Double Indemnity*', *American, British and Canadian Studies*, 28.1 (June, 2017), 19-38

Kern, Leslie, *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-made World* (London and New York: Verso, 2020)

*Kevin Can Go F*** Himself* , AMC (2021-)

Khatchatourian, Maane, 'Box Office: Gone Girl Becomes David Fincher's Highest-Grossing Film in U.S.'. Available at https://variety.com/2014/film/box-office/gone-girl-david-fincher-top-domestci-film-1201344997/ [accessed 24th March 2019]

'Killing Eve Costume Designer Phoebe de Gaye on Dressing Villanelle and Eve | Talking TV' (2019). Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqOegZj2ltQ [accessed 2nd November 2021]

Knock Knock, dir. Eli Roth (Lionsgate Premiere, 2015)

Korbel, Marissa, '24-Hour Women: Drinking to Escape Patriarchy' (2018). Available at https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/the-real-reason-women-drink [accessed 23rd April 2019]

Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)

Lane, Harriet, 'Strangers in the Night, Exchanging Genre Conventions' (2018). Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/08/books/review/laura-lippman-sunburn.html [accessed 19th June 2020]

Lavoie, Dusty, '"No, Not That Twilight": The comic critique of gendered/raced identity, politics, pedagogy, and performance', *Feminist Media Studies*, 10. 3 (2010), 364-367

Lazar, Michelle M., 'The Right to be Beautiful: Postfeminist Identity and Consumer Beauty Advertising', in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, ed. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 37-51

Lemaster, Tracy, '"Girl with a pen": Girls' Studies and Third-Wave Feminism in *A Room of One's Own* and "Professions for Women"', *Feminist Formations*, 24.2 (Summer, 2012), 77-99

Levinson, Alana Hope, 'Fifty Shades of Daddy' (2016). Available at https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/fifty-shades-of-daddy [accessed 25th June 2019]

Lewis, Sophie, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (London and New York: Verso, 2019)

Lindop, Samantha, 'Female Subjectivity, Sexuality, and the Femme Fatale in *Born to Kill*', *Quarterly Film Review of Film and Video*, 33.4 (2016), 322-331

——— *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

——— 'Postmillenial Cinema and the Avenging *Fatale* in *Sin City*, *Hard Candy*, and *Descent*', *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies*, 26 (February, 2014). Available at https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/issues/2014/february-issue-26.aspx [accessed 2nd October 2018]

Lippman, Laura, 'Top 10 runaway mothers in fiction' (2018). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/21/top-10-runaway-mothers-in-fiction [accessed 27th April 2020]

Lolita, dir. Adrian Lyne (Pathé, 1997)

Lolita, dir. Stanley Kubrick (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1962)

Lopez, Lori Kido, 'The Radical Act of 'Mommy Blogging': Redefining Motherhood Through the Blogosphere', *New Media & Society*, 11.5 (2009), 729-747

Machado, Carmen Maria, 'How "Promising Young Woman" Refigures the Rape-Revenge Movie' (2021). Available at https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/how-promising-young-woman-refigures-the-rape-revenge-movie [accessed 8th December 2021]

Macnab, Geoffrey, 'A Simple Favour review: An updated version of Gone Girl with extra comic elements thrown in' (2018). Available at https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/simple-favour-review-cast-blake-lively-anna-kendrick-henry-golding-a8545256.html [accessed 11th November 2020]

Maguire, David, *I Spit on Your Grave* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018)

Maguire, Emma, *Girls, Autobiography, Media: Gender and Self-Mediation in Digital Economies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

Mann, K. H., *Leeches (Hirudinea): Their Structure, Physiology, Ecology and Embryology* (Oxford, London, New York, Paris: Pergamon Press, 1962)

Manne, Kate, 'Why I Use Trigger Warnings' (2015). Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/opinion/sunday/why-i-use-trigger-warnings.html [accessed 30th July 2019]

Manson, dir. Robert Hendrickson and Laurence Merrick (Merrick International, 1973)

Mantziari, Despoina, 'Sadistic Scopophilia in Contemporary Rape Culture: *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010) and the Practice of "media rape"', *Feminist Media Studies*, 18.3 (2018), 397-410

Marks, Laura U., 'Video haptics and erotics', *Screen,* 39.4 (Winter, 1998), 331-348

Marks, Patricia, *Bicycles, Bangs, and Bloomers: The New Woman in the Popular Press* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1990)

Martin, Gina, *Be The Change: A Toolkit for the Activist in You* (London: Little Brown, 2019)

Mason, Melissa, 'Why is "Euphoria" Hypersexualising Cassie?' (2022). Available at https://graziamagazine.com/articles/euphoria-male-gaze-cassie/ [accessed 14th February 2022]

McGill, Mary, 'How the Light Gets In: Notes on the Female Gaze and Selfie Culture' (2018). Available at https://maifeminism.com/how-the-light-gets-in-notes-on-the-female-gaze-and-selfie-culture/ [accessed 25th June 2019]

McRobbie, Angela, 'Feminism, the Family and the new 'Mediated' Maternalism', *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/*Politics, 80-81 (2013), 119-137

——— 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime', in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 27-39

——— *The Aftermath of Feminism*: *Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009)

Menta, Anna, "Assassination Nation' is a Stellar Feature Debut for Rising Star Hari Nef' (2019). Available at https://decider.com/2019/03/18/hari-nef-assassination-nation-hulu/ [accessed 9th April 2019]

Metz, Christian, 'The Imaginary Signifier', *Screen*, 16.2 (Summer, 1975), 14-76

Meyers, Helene, *Femicidal Fears: Narratives of the Female Gothic Experience* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001)

Mildred Pierce, dir. Michael Curtiz (Warner Bros., 1945)

Miller, Emma V., '"How Much Do You Want to Pay for This Beauty?": Domestic Noir and the Active Turn in Feminist Crime Fiction', in *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st*

Century Crime Fiction, ed. Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 89-113

Mini's First Time, dir. Nick Guthe (First Independent Pictures, 2006)

Mitchell, Elspeth, 'The Girl and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*: Feminine Becomings', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 32.93 (2017), 259-275

Modleski, Tania, Loving With a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women (New York and London: Routledge, 1990)

Morgan, Danielle Fuentes, 'Visible Black Motherhood is a Revolution', *Biography*, 41.4 (Fall, 2018), 856-875

Morgan, Robin, *Sisterhood is Powerful* (New York: Random House, 1970)

Morse, Holly, *Encountering Eve's Afterlives: A New Reception Critical Approach to Genesis 2-4* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020)

Moseley, Rachel, 'Glamorous Witchcraft: Gender and Magic in Teen Film and Television', *Screen*, 43.4 (Winter, 2002), 403-422

Mulkerrins, Jane, 'How Emma Cline's family inspired her cult novel on the Manson murders' (2017). Available at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/emma-clines-family-inspired-cult-novel-manson-murders/ [accessed 19th June 2019]

Mull, Amanda, 'The Girlboss Has Left the Building' (2020). Available at https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/06/girlbosses-what-comes-next/613519/ [accessed 7th April 2021]

Mulvey, Laura, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (London: British Film Institute, 1996)

——— *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989)

Munford, Becky, 'Medical Bloomers and Irrational Rationalists: Pathologising the Woman in Trousers', *Women's History Review*, 28.6 (2019), 988-1008

Munford, Rebecca, "Wake Up and Smell the Lipgloss': Gender, Generation and the (A)politics of Girl Power', in *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, ed. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 266-79

Munford, Rebecca, and Melanie Waters, *Feminism & Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014)

Naremore, James, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2008)

Nash, Jennifer C., 'The Political Life of Black Motherhood', *Feminist Studies*, 44. 3 (2018), pp. 699-712

Nathanson, Hannah, What It Feels Like To Turn 30: Four Women On The 'Big' Milestone' (2020). Available at https://www.elle.com/uk/life-and-culture/culture/a32329808/what-it-feels-like-to-turn-30/ [accessed 30th November 2021]

Neely-Barnes, Susan L., J. Carolyn Graff, Ruth J. Roberts, Heather R. Hall, and Jane S. Hankins, '"It's Our Job": Qualitative Study of Family Responses to Ableism', *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, 48. 4 (August, 2010), 245-258

Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

O'Dell Madison, Katie, 'Our Daughters in Danger', *School Library Journal*, 44.1 (Jan, 1998), 40-41

O'Neill, Lauren, 'Ultraviolence, Party Chat and Erotic Photography: The World of Eliza Clark's 'Boy Parts" (2020). Available at https://www.vice.com/en/article/3azjb3/eliza-clark-boy-parts-author-interview [accessed 29th August 2021]

Okoro, Olihe N, Lisa A Hillman, and Alina Cernasev,'"*We get double slammed*!": Healthcare experiences of perceived discrimination among low-income African-American women', *Women's Health*, 16 (2020), pp. 1-12

Olufemi, Lola, *Feminism Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2020)

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood, dir. Quentin Tarantino (Columbia Pictures, 2019)

Oppenheim, Maya, "#MeToo has not gone far enough': Survey finds movement virtually unheard of by women in developing countries' (2019). Available at https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/international-womens-day-metoo-afghanistan-nigeria-assault-a8812121.html [accessed 17th June 2019]

Out of the Past, dir. Jacques Tourneur (RKO Radio Pictures, 1947)

Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'agency'. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/3851?redirectedFrom=agency#eid [accessed 29th November 2018]

——— definition of 'angst'. Available at https://www-oed-com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/7626 [accessed 9th June 2019].

——— definition of 'animate'. Available at https://www-oed-com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/7778 [accessed 29th May 2020]

——— definition of 'au courant'. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/12992?redirectedFrom=au+courant#eid [accessed 10th February 2019]

——— definition of 'bloom'. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/20457 [accessed 8th February 2019]

——— definition of 'breed'. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/23019 [accessed 21st February 2019]

——— definition of 'coveted'. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/43390 [accessed 24th April 2019].

——— definition of ‘economy’. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/59393 [accessed 10th February 2019]

——— definition of ‘head’. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/84896 [accessed 27th March 2019]

——— definition of ‘loom’. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/110153 [accessed 8th February 2019]

——— definition of ‘maiden’. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/112442 [accessed 19th February 2019]

——— definition of ‘mobility’. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/120494?rskey=igDZJj&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid [accessed 4th January 2019]

——— definition of ‘mother’. Available at https://www-oed-com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/122642 [accessed 13th May 2020]

——— definition of ’multivalent’. Available at https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/123646?redirectedFrom=multivalent#eid [accessed 24th October 2019]

——— definition of ‘optical illusion’. Available at https://www-oed-com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/259611?redirectedFrom=optical+illusion#eid [accessed 13th July 2019]

——— definition of ‘otherworldliness’. Available at https://www-oed-com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/133249 [accessed 10th November 2019]

——— definition of ‘perverse’. Available at https://www-oed-com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/141672 [accessed 7th November 2021]

——— definition of ‘pragmatic’. Available at http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/149289?rskey=hN3z61&result=1#eid [accessed 28th October 2018]

——— definition of ‘revelation’. Available at https://www-oed-com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/164694?redirectedFrom=revelation#eid [accessed 20th November 2019]

——— definition of ‘stark’. Available at https://www-oed-com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/189130 [accessed 29th May 2020]

——— definition of ‘univocal’. Available at https://www-oed-com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/214806 [accessed 10th November 2019]

Palmer, Robert, ‘Gone Girl and the Specter of Feminism’ (2012). Available at https://moviethots.wordpress.com/2012/08/20/gone-girl-and-the-specter-of-feminism/ [accessed 8th April 2019]

Pandika, Melissa, 'The Story Behind ACAB, the Anti-Police Tag You're Seeing Everywhere' (2020). Available at https://www.mic.com/p/the-story-behind-acab-the-anti-police-tag-youre-seeing-everywhere-22992554 [accessed 1st September 2021]

Park, Shelley M., *Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood: Resisting Monomaternalism in Adoptive, Lesbian, Blended, and Polygamous Families* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013)

Patton, Rebecca, 'Villanelle's 21 Best Outfits From 'Killing Eve,' Because Her Style Is Just As Dramatic & Beautiful As She Is' (2019). Available at https://www.bustle.com/p/villanelles-21-best-outfits-from-killing-eve-because-her-style-is-just-as-dramatic-beautiful-as-she-is-17865977 [accessed 28th October 2021]

Pearce, Matt, 'Gabby Petito and one way to break media's 'missing white woman syndrome'' (2021). Available at https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2021-10-04/gabby-petito-and-breaking-the-white-missing-women-syndrome [accessed 21st January 2022]

Penny, Laurie, *Bitch Doctrine: Essays for Dissenting Adults* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017)

——— 'Laurie Penny on sexism in storytelling: I was a Manic Pixie Dream Girl' (2013). Available at https://www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/2013/06/i-was-manic-pixie-dream-girl [accessed 2nd September 2021]

Percival, Ash, 'Killing Eve Accused Of Queerbaiting After Sandra Oh Dismisses Show's Lesbian Undertones' (2019). Available at https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/killing-eve-sandra-oh-queerbaiting_uk_5cf9087ae4b0e3e3df160b9b [accessed 14th November 2021]

Perez, Lexy, 'Gillian Flynn Reflects on 'Gone Girl' Legacy and the Growing Appetite for Anti-Heroines in Books' (2019). Available at https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/gillian-flynn-reflects-gone-girl-legacy-rise-anti-heroines-1260003 [accessed 11th November 2020]

Peters, Fiona, 'The Literary Antecedents of Domestic Noir', in *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, ed. Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 11-25

Peters, Maria Verena, 'From the Whisper Network to #MeToo – Framing Gender, Gossip and Sexual Harassment', *European Journal of American Studies*, 15.4 (2020), 1-10

Petersen, Emily January, 'Redefining the Workplace: The Professionalization of Motherhood Through Blogging', *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 44.3 (2014), 277-296

Phantom Lady, dir. Robert Siodmak (Universal Pictures, 1944)

Phipps, Alison, *Me, not You: The trouble with mainstream feminism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020)

Pidduck, Julianne, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme: (Dis)Figuring Feminism, Family, Irony, Violence', *Cineaction*, 38 (1995), 64-72

Pinedo, Isabel C., *Difficult Women on Television Drama: The Gender Politics of Complex Women in Serial Narratives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021)

Piotrowska, Agnieszka, *The Nasty Woman and The Neo Femme Fatale in Contemporary Cinema* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2019)

Pipher, Mary, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994)

Pitzulo, Carrie, *Bachelors and Bunnies: The Sexual Politics of Playboy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011)

Place, Janey, 'Women in Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 47-68

Pollack, Neal, "A Simple Favor' Is A 'Gone Girl' Parody That's Also Not A Parody, Or Is It?' (2018). Available at https://bookandfilmglobe.com/film/movie-review-blake-lively-anna-kendrick-paul-feig-henry-golding-simple-favor/ [accessed 11th November 2020]

Pomfrett, Stephanie, ''Killing Eve' strayed from the book. That was a smart move' (2019). Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/killing-eve-strayed-from-the-book-its-based-on-it-was-a-smart-move/2019/03/04/e2abad82-3eae-11e9-9361-301ffb5bd5e6_story.html [accessed 17th September 2021]

Poniewozik, James, 'Review: 'Good Girls' Offers Equal Time for Antiheroines' (2018). Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/25/arts/television/good-girls-review-nbc-christina-hendricks.html [accessed 12th January 2021]

Poole, Steven, 'Trigger warning: how did 'triggered' come to mean 'upset'?' (2019). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/25/trigger-warning-triggered-emotionally-upset-word-of-week [accessed 29th July 2019]

Popova, Milena, *Sexual Consent* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019)

Pribram, E. Deidre, 'Consorting with Criminality: The Female Detective in Killing Eve', *MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture*, 7 (2021). Available at https://maifeminism.com/consorting-with-criminality-the-female-detective-in-killing-eve/ [accessed 22nd September 2021]

Projansky, Sarah, 'Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections on Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminism's Daughters', in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular* Culture, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 40-72

——— *Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2014)

——— *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001)

Promising Young Woman, dir. Emerald Fennel (FilmNation Entertainment, 2020)

Psycho, dir. Alfred Hitchcock (Paramount Pictures, 1960)

Purse, Lisa, 'Return of the "Angry Woman": Authenticating Female Physical Action in Contemporary Cinema', in *Women on Screen: Feminism and Femininity in Visual Culture*, ed. Melanie Waters (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 185-198

Pyun, Jeanie, 'Camille Paglia on Hugh Hefner's Legacy, Trump's Masculinity and Feminism's Sex Phobia' (2017). Available at https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/camille-paglia-hugh-hefners-legacy-trumps-masculinity-feminisms-sex-phobia-1044769/ [accessed 2nd August 2021]

Rabin, Nathan, 'The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: *Elizabethtown*' (2007). Available at https://www.avclub.com/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-elizabet-1798210595 [accessed 2nd September 2021]

Radner, Hilary and Rebecca Stringer, 'Introduction: "Re-Vision"?: Feminist Film Criticism in the Twenty-first Century', in *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, ed. Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 1-9

Redhead, Leigh, 'Teenage Kicks: Performance and Postfeminism in Domestic Noir', in *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, ed. Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 115-135

Renfro, Kim, '14 hidden details you might have missed in 'Promising Young Woman'' (2021). Available at https://www.insider.com/promising-young-woman-details-you-missed-spoilers-ending-2021-4 [accessed 9th December 2021]

Resti, Sandra Widya, and Titien Diah Soelistyarini, 'From Enchantress to Murderess: The Portrayal of Amy Dunne as 'Femme Fatale' in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*', *Allusion*, 5.2 (August, 2016), 134-140

Rich, Adrienne, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1977)

——— 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *College English*, 34.1 (Oct, 1972), 18-30

Ridout, Alice, *Contemporary Women Writers Look Back: From Irony to Nostalgia* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010)

Riley, Sarah, Adrienne Evans, Alison Mackiewicz, 'It's Just Between Girls: Negotiating the Postfeminist Gaze in Women's 'Looking Talk'', *Feminism & Psychology*, 26.1 (2016), 94-113

Roberts, Martin, 'The Fashion Police: Governing the Self in *What Not to Wear*', in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular* Culture, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 227-248

Robertson, Adi, 'Assassination Nation is a Vicious, Cathartic Horror Film About Misogyny' (2018). Available at https://www.theverge.com/2018/1/24/16921552/sundance-2018-assassination-nation-film-review-sam-levinson [accessed 9th April 2019].

Robinson, Victoria, 'The accomplishment of happiness: feminism, pleasure, heterosexuality and consumption', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26.1 (2017), 13-22

Roiphe, Katie, *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism* (Boston: Little Brown, 1993)

Romano, Aja, 'The History of Satanic Panic in the US – And Why It's Not Over Yet' (2016). Available at https://www.vox.com/2016/10/30/13413864/satanic-panic-ritual-abuse-history-explained [accessed 17th July 2019]

Rose, Jacqueline, 'Corkscrew in the Neck', *London Review of Books*, 37.17 (Sept, 2015), 25-6. Available at https://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n17/jacqueline-rose/corkscrew-in-the-neck [accessed 28th March 2019]

——— *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018)

Rosenberg, Alyssa, 'Is Gone Girl's Amy a Misogynist? A Misandrist? Or Both?' (2014). Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2014/10/03/is-gone-girls-amy-a-misogynist-a-misandrist-or-both/?utm_term=.5e94a64fa5d1 [accessed 5th February 2019].

Ross, Ellen, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London 1870-1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993)

Rottenberg, Catherine A., *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018)

Rysman, Alexander, 'How the "Gossip" Became a Woman', *Journal of Communication*, 27.1 (Winter 1977), pp. 176-180

S, F., 'A Perfect Adaptation' (2014). Available at https://www.economist.com/prospero/2014/10/03/a-perfect-adaptation [accessed 24th March 2019].

Savage, Michael, 'Housework falls to mothers again after Covid lockdown respite' (2021). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/dec/19/housework-falls-to-mothers-again-after-covid-lockdown-respite [accessed 11th September 2022]

Scarlet Street, dir. Fritz Lang (Universal Pictures, 1945)

Schaub, Michael, "Girls on Fire' Author Robin Wasserman Sees Parallels Between '90s and Today in Politics and Women's Empowerment' (2017). Available at https://www.latimes.com/books/la-ca-jc-robin-wasserman-20170415-story.html [accessed 17th July 2019]

Seglem, Robyn, 'The Girls. Emma Cline. 2016', *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 60. 4 (January/February, 2017), 482-483

Sellers, Susan, *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001)

Sharf, Zack, 'Sydney Sweeney Says 'Euphoria' Creator Allowed Her to Cut 'Unnecessary' Season 2 Nudity' (2022). Available at https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/sydney-sweeney-euphoria-nude-scenes-1235163094/ [accessed 14th October 2022]

Shepherd, Jack, 'Henry Cavill apologises for #MeToo comments following online backlash' (2018). Available at https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/henry-cavill-metoo-dating-rape-flirting-mission-impossible-fallout-a8445546.html [Accessed 17th June 2019].

Sherwin, Miranda, 'Deconstructing the Male: Masochism, Female Spectatorship, and the Femme Fatale in *Fatal Attraction*, *Body of Evidence*, and *Basic Instinct*', 35.4 (2008), 174-182

Shoard, Catherine, 'Gone Girl's Ending: Discuss the Movie with Spoilers' (2014). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2014/oct/04/gone-girl-ending-movie-book-changes-spoilers [accessed 24th March 2019]

Showalter, Elaine, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, [1991] 2010)

Simkin, Stevie, *Cultural Constructions of the Femme Fatale: From Pandora's Box to Amanda Knox* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

Simonpillai, Radheyan, "Long history of neglect': why are missing Black people still less likely to be found?' (2021). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/nov/20/black-and-missing-documentary-hbo [accessed 21st January 2022]

Sinclair, Iain, 'Aesthetic labour, beauty politics and neoliberalism: An interview with Rosalind Gill' (2017). Available at https://neweconomics.opendemocracy.net/aesthetic-labour-beauty-politics-neoliberalism-interview-rosalind-gill/ [accessed 6th July 2020]

Single White Female, dir. Barbet Schroeder (Columbia Pictures, 1992)

Smith, Imogen Sara, '*Gone Girl*: A Modern Noir Marriage?', *Noir City*, 9.3 (Winter, 2015), 57-61

Smith, Joan, 'Gone Girl's Recycling of Rape Myths is a Disgusting Distortion' (2014). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/06/gone-girl-rape-domestic-violence-ben-affleck [accessed 5th February 2019]

Smith, Murray, 'Altered States: Character and Emotional Response in the Cinema', *Cinema Journal*, 33.4 (Summer, 1994), 34-56

Soloway, Joey, 'Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze' (TIFF Talks, 2016). Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnBvppooD9I&t=2895s [accessed 14th May 2019]

Sontag, Susan, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, [1977] 2008)

Soo Hoo, Fawnia, 'The Assassination Nation Costumes Turn the Concept of the 'Male Gaze' On Its Head' (2018). Available at https://fashionista.com/2018/09/assassination-nation-movie-costumes-outfits [accessed 25th July 2019]

Spring Breakers, dir. Harmony Korine (A24, 2013)

Stables, Kate, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing the *Femme Fatale* in 90s Cinema', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 164-82

Stag, dir. Gavin Wilding (Lionsgate Films, 1997)

Stage Fright, dir. Alfred Hitchcock (Warner Bros.,1950)

Stam, Robert, 'Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation' in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (London: Athlone Press, 2000), pp. 54-76

Stoker, Bram, *Dracula* (New York: Oxford University Press, [1897] 1996

Stoker, dir. Park Chan-Wook (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2013)

Stolberg, Sheryl Gay, 'Thomas's concurring opinion raises questions about what rights might be next' (2022). https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/24/us/clarence-thomas-roe-griswold-lawrence-obergefell.html [accessed 31st July 2022]

Stott, Rebecca, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, [1992] 1996)

Strafford, Jay, 'Mysteries: 'Devil's Breath.' 'Almost Missed You,' 'A Simple Favor,' and 'All By Myself, Alone" (2017). Available at https://richmond.com/entertainment/books/mysteries-devil-s-breath-almost-missed-you-a-simple-favor/article_6464ed4e-6aef-5576-8f70-8611cc9bbd61.html [accessed 11th November 2020]

Stranger on the Third Floor, dir. Boris Ingster (RKO Pictures, 1940)

Straw Dogs, dir. Sam Peckinpah (ABC Pictures, 1971)

Stringer, Rebecca, 'From Victim to Vigilante: Gender, Violence, and Revenge in *The Brave One* (2007) and *Hard Candy* (2005), in *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, ed. Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 268-82

Sulimma, Maria, *Gender and Seriality: Practices and Politics of Contemporary US Television* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020)

Sutton, Henry, 'Gone Genre: How the Academy Came Running and Discovered Nothing Was As It Seemed', in *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, ed. Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 53-69

Tasker, Yvonne, and Diane Negra, 'In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Studies', *Cinema Journal*, 44.2 (Winter, 2005), 107-110

——— 'Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture', in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 1-25 (p. 2).

Tasker, Yvonne, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998)

Taylor, Jessica, 'Romance and the Female Gaze Obscuring Gendered Violence in *The Twilight Saga*', *Feminist Media Studies*, 14.3 (2014), 388-402

Tejada, Chloe, 'Ashley Judd's Women's March Speech Was Written by a 19-Year-Old Poet'. Available at https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/01/23/ashley-judd-womens-march-speech_n_14334944.html [accessed 25th January 2019]

Thackeray, William M., *Vanity Fair* (New York: Everyman Library, [1848] 1991)

Thirteen, dir. Catherine Hardwicke (Searchlight Pictures, 2003)

The Assistant, dir. Kitty Green (Forensic Films, 2019)

The Dark Corner, dir. Henry Hathaway (20th Century Fox, 1946)

The Girl on the Train, dir. Ribhu Dasgupta (Reliance Entertainment, 2021)

The Last Seduction, dir. John Dahl (ITC Entertainment, 1994)

The Virgin Suicides, dir. Sofia Coppola (American Zoetrope, 1999)

The Woman in the Window, dir. Joe Wright (20th Century Studios, 2021)

'The World's Abortion Laws', Center for Reproductive Rights. Available at https://reproductiverights.org/worldabortionlaws?category[294]=294 [accessed 24th April 2020]

Thompson, Ethan, and Jason Mittell, 'Introduction: An Owner's Manual for Television', in *How to Watch Television*, ed. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (New York: New York University Press, 2013), pp. 1-12

Thornham, Helen, and Elke Weissmann, 'Introduction: Renewing-Retooling Feminisms', in *Renewing Feminisms: Radical Narratives, Fantasies and Futures in Media Studies*, ed. Helen Thornham and Elke Weissmann (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), pp. 1-10

Thunberg, Greta, *No One is Too Small to Make a Difference* (London: Penguin, 2019)

Tincknell, Estella, 'Scourging the Abject Body: *Ten Years Younger* and Fragmented Femininity under Neoliberalism', in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, ed. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 83-95

Tolentino, Jia, 'We're Not Going Back to the Time Before Roe. We're Going Somewhere Worse' (2022). Available at https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/07/04/we-are-not-going-back-to-the-time-before-roe-we-are-going-somewhere-worse [accessed 31st July 2022]

Turim, Maureen, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013)

Tyler, Anne, *Ladder of Years* (New York: Penguin Random House, 1995)

Tyler, Imogen, 'Pregnant Beauty: Maternal Femininities under Neoliberalism', in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity,* ed. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 21-36

Valenti, Jessica, *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2010)

Van der Kolk, Bessel, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, brain and body in the transformation of trauma* (London: Penguin, 2014)

Vargas, Theresa, 'She coined the term 'glass ceiling.' She fears it will outlive her' (2018). Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/03/01/she-coined-the-phrase-glass-ceiling-she-didnt-expect-it-to-outlive-her/ [accessed 7th April 2021]

Very Bad Things, dir. Peter Berg (Initial Entertainment Group, 1998)

Waites, Kathleen J., '*Killing Eve* and the Necessity of the Female Villain du Jour', in *Antiheroines of Contemporary Media: Saints, Sinners, and Survivors*, eds. Melanie

Haas, N.A. Pierce, and Gretchen Busl (Lanham, MD and London: Lexington Books, 2021), pp. 119-132

Walker, Deborah, 'Re-reading the femme fatale in film noir: an evolutionary perspective', *Journal of Moving Image Studies*, 5 (2006), 1-25

Walker, Peter, and Rory Carroll, 'MPs vote to extend abortion and same-sex marriage rights to Northern Ireland' (2019). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/jul/09/mps-vote-to-extend-same-sex-marriage-to-northern-ireland [accessed 24th July 2019].

Wasserman, Robin, 'What Does It Mean When We Call Women Girls?' (2016). Available at https://lithub.com/what-does-it-mean-when-we-call-women-girls/ [accessed 5th January 2019]

Waters, Melanie, 'The Horrors of Home: Feminism and Femininity in the Suburban Gothic', in *Women on Screen: Feminism and Femininity in Visual Culture*, ed. Melanie Waters (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 58-73

Waters, Terri, '7 Tests (That Aren't The Bechdel Test) That Measure Movies For Gender Equality And Representation' (2018). Available at https://www.the-unedit.com/posts/2018/8/20/7-tests-that-arent-the-bechdel-test-that-measure-movies-for-gender-equality-and-representation [accessed 7th April 2020].

Waterson, Jan, *Women and Alcohol in Social Context: Mother's Ruin Revisited* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000)

Wild Things, dir. John McNaughton (Columbia Pictures, 1998)

Wilkinson, Alissa, 'Stop Comparing Gone Girl and The Girl on the Train. Gone Girl's Way Better' (2016). Available at https://www.vox.com/2016/10/11/13227626/girl-on-the-train-gone-girl-mortgage-crisis-spoilers [accessed 24th March 2019]

Williams, Linda Ruth, 'A Woman Scorned: The Neo-Noir Erotic Thriller as Revenge Drama', in *Neo-Noir*, eds. Mark Bould, Kathrina Glitre and Greg Tuck (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2009), pp. 168-185

Wilson, George, 'Transparency and Twist in Narrative Fiction Film', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 64.1 (Winter, 2006), 81-95

Wittig, Monique, *Les Guérillères*, trans. David Le Vay (Boston: Beacon Press, [1969]1989)

Wolf, Naomi, *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century* (New York: Random House, 1993)

Wolff, Janet, 'The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity', *Theory, Culture & Society* 2.3 (1985), 37-46

Wood, Michelle J., 'The Gay Male Gaze', *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 17.2 (Oct, 2004), 43-62

Woods, Nicole, and Doug Hardman, 'It's just absolutely everywhere': understanding LGBTQ experiences of queerbaiting', *Psychology and Sexuality*, (2021) 1-13

Yaeger, Lynn, 'Molly Goddard on Her Distinct Vision and Dedicated Following (2018). Available at https://www.vogue.com/article/molly-goddard-interview-vogue-march-2018-issue [accessed 2nd November 2021]

Yotka, Steff, '*Killing Eve* Is the Most Fashionable Show on TV' (2018). Available at https://www.vogue.com/article/killing-eve-is-the-most-fashionable-show-on-tv [accessed 28th October 2021]

Young, Alison, *The Scene of Violence: Cinema, Crime Affect* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2010)

Yue, Genevieve, *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021)

Zhou, Li, 'The striking parallels between 1992's "Year of the Woman" and 2018, explained by a historian' (2018). Available at https://www.vox.com/2018/11/2/17983746/year-of-the-woman-1992 [accessed 1st July 2022]

Zimmerman, Tegan, 'The Politics of Writing, Writing Politics: Virginia Woolf's A [Virtual] Room of One's Own', *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, 3.3 (Fall, 2012), 35-55