
The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and American Cinema

By Katherine Farrimond

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In *The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and American Cinema*, Katherine Farrimond demonstrates how the femme fatale's cinematic presence—commonly associated and discussed within the parameters of 1940s and 50s Film Noir—has remained buoyant and flexible in American cinema even after the post-war period. By charting the femme fatale's articulation in a variety of film genres—particularly from the past twenty-five years—Farrimond argues for the figure's significance as a site worthy of feminist discussion due to its complicated relationship with patriarchy and representation of female power. In doing so, Farrimond presents a new critical approach to the femme fatale and establishes her rightful position in current feminist discourse, whilst freeing her from the confines and limitations of Film Noir scholarship.

In the introductory chapter of *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, Farrimond unpacks the femme fatale's complex definition by working through how history, culture, industry, politics, and genre have shaped the cinematic character's modality in public, cultural, and academic consciousness. By examining the femme fatale's post-war noir origins from which she has gained her archetypal characteristics—mainly complicated sexual allure, danger, and mystery—Farrimond establishes a set of foundational attributes with which the figure can be retheorised and argued within the contemporary context. Observing how the femme fatale's presence is made visible through various visual and narrative markers, such as being sexually demanding, morally ambiguous, heteronormatively beautiful, and ambitious to improve her status and circumstances, the figure can be read and witnessed in contemporary American cinema.

Before launching her thesis, Farrimond outlines the possibility of and necessity for a feminist study of the femme fatale, which when read through an early feminist lens can appear as a figure forged by patriarchy and its gaze. Acutely aware of the misogynistic implications of the figure, particularly in relation to her sexual presence and function within a film text, Farrimond refers to the shared ideology of third wave and post-feminism—which claims that women are entitled to use their bodies in any which way they like to gain power and success—to argue the possibility of a new, radically feminist reading for the femme fatale.

Herein lies the femme fatale's conflicted place between female empowerment and patriarchy, and consequently realism and fantasy. While early feminist theory understands the femme fatale's sexuality in terms of male fantasy, fetish, image, symptom and projection, current critical feminist intervention sees her sexuality as a valuable source deserving of feminist revision.

Whether the femme fatale only appears for a fleeting moment in a film, or is fundamental to its action, her cinematic presence transcends genre and narrative and offers numerous representations of female agency and power. *The Contemporary Femme Fatale* is split into four parts of two chapters each: 'Part I: Retro', 'Part II: Girls', 'Part III: Bisexuality', and 'Part IV: Monstrosity'.

'Part I: Retro' focuses on the femme fatales of retro noir films, identified and clustered together by how their physical presence in these films is built on visual systems of the past—nostalgia and glamour. In Chapter One, 'The Femme Fatale Who Wasn't There: Retro Noir's Glamorous Ghosts', Farrimond looks at films such as *Sin City* (Frank Miller et al, 2005), *L.A. Confidential* (Curtis Hanson, 1997), *Devil in a Blue Dress* (Carl Franklin, 1995) and *Gangster Squad* (Ruben Fleischer, 2013), and finds that although the femme fatale's sexuality and agency is dissolved into the margins of the text, her feminism arises in her ability to offer visual pleasure for the female spectator. In Chapter Two, 'Dead Girls on Film: Retro Noir and the Corpse of the Femme Fatale', Farrimond looks at films such as *Sin City*, *Shutter Island* (Martin Scorsese, 2010), *The Black Dahlia* (Brian De Palma, 2006) and *Mullholland Falls* (Lee Tamahori, 1996) whose narratives are centred on the image of a dead but beautiful woman. Farrimond argues that although such an image is at first seemingly patriarchal and misogynistic, the femme fatale attains power in the film from her ability to hold men in an erotic thrall even from beyond the grave, and thus dominate the narrative.

'Part II: Girls' centres on the emergence of the femme fatale in the image of the teenage girl. Chapter Three, 'Bad Girls Don't Cry? Desire, Punishment and Girls in Crisis', Farrimond observes the trajectory of the teenage femme fatale throughout the decades to argue for her prominence in the 90s. Looking at incarnations of the teenage femme fatale in figures such as 'Lolita' or 'Girls at Risk', in which her identity is inherently linked to her body, Farrimond contends that although the femme fatale's body is presented as physically desirable it functions as a site of vulnerabilities and anxieties which ultimately problematises its sexual function and meaning. Chapter Four, 'Getting Away with It: Postfeminism and the Victorious Girl', examines how the certain teenage femme fatales in films such as *Knock Knock* (Eli Roth, 2015) and *Spring Breakers* (Harmony Korine, 2013) to argue how, unlike the early femme

fatale of film noir, these specific figures emerge as triumphant victors offering thus a different representation of female agency and power.

'Part III: Bisexuality' examines films in which the femme fatale's sexuality and sexual activities are explicitly put on display. In Chapter Five, 'Bisexual Detection: Visibility, Epistemology and Contamination', Farrimond argues that while the femme fatale's bisexual behaviour in films such as *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) and *Bound* (The Wachowskis, 1996) becomes a synonym for her duplicity, it is also a source of anxiety for the male spectator as there is ambiguity surrounding her sexuality. In Chapter Six, 'Bisexual Fragmentation: Failures of Representation', Farrimond complicates her findings in the previous chapter by looking at films which employ complex fragmented narratives and visual aesthetics to further subvert the notions of monosexuality. By analysing the femme fatale's sexual conduct in films such as *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010) and *Femme Fatale* (Brian De Palma, 2002), Farrimond suggests that visual and narrative fragmentation dilutes and contaminates her presence in relation to the male gaze.

'Part IV: Monstrosity' studies, arguably for the first time in film and feminist criticism, the figure of the femme fatale in science fiction films. Chapter Seven, 'Bodies of Evidence: Possession, Science and the Separation of Power', looks at the various types of femme fatales found in science fiction, and how they are invoked when the female body is combined with alien, animal, or technology to become a source of threat and sexuality in films like *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) and *Men in Black II* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 2002). Farrimond details through examples of 'the monstrous body', 'the leaky body', and 'the possessed body' that the unnaturality the femme fatale's body presents is a powerful agent which is oppositional to her feminine sexuality. Lastly, in Chapter Eight, 'Bodies without Origins: Beyond the Myth of the Original Woman', explores the possibilities of subversion and problematisation the femme fatale in science fiction films presents to patriarchy and its structures, in films such as *Alien Resurrection* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997) and *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2015).

The figure of the femme fatale has been long contested in feminist film criticism, yet the discussion surrounding her has consistently remained within the strictures of Film Noir. Farrimond's *The Contemporary Femme Fatale* recognises the femme fatale as a female presence in film that traverses decades and genres, thus liberating her from an ossified attachment to her noir origins. By providing postfeminist analysis of femme fatales in American cinema from the past twenty-five years, Farrimond offers a new critical discourse to the figure of the femme fatale, establishing her as a feminist image in her own right.