Dangerous Beauty: The Role of Femme Fatale in Film Noir

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Zadar, 2023.

Izjava o akademskoj čestitosti

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Zadar, 23. veljače 2023.

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1. Introduction

Film noir is probably one of the most appreciated movie concepts from the period of classic Hollywood, and maybe even movie history in general. Its mastery involves otherwise totally incompatible elements that somehow work together perfectly to create a work of art which serves as a catalyst for people's emotions, just as art should be. As Tyrer claims, it creates "contradictions, exceptions and anomalies and is doomed, in the end, to incoherence" (54). Still, all the seemingly negative connotations that appear regarding the viewers' experience of *film noir* do not seem to prevent people from coming back to it and experiencing its confusion or disturbance.

The notion of a *femme fatale*, which is one of the key elements of many *noir* works, is the basis for this thesis. After an attempted clarification of the characteristics of this cycle, the following chapter will deal with the fatal women more thoroughly, going from its sources, characteristics, relevance and significance for the film industry. After that, the theory will be used to analyze three *film noir* classics in order to show its plausibility. The movies' general *noir* elements will be mentioned, but special emphasis will be put on the presence of *femme fatales*, and the impact it has on the movies' dynamics, both in terms of the plot, and its general understanding of male-female relations.

2. Film noir

As it was announced, the following chapters deal with the notion's classification within the cinematic universe, its history, crucial elements and their understanding on behalf of the movie audience. Historical circumstances of its appearance, as well as consideration of the previous film tradition are taken into account as well, creating ground for the analysis of *film noir*'s acceptance and comprehension.

2.1. Definition of film noir and its time frame(s)

As Krzysztof Antoniak (1) claims, "*film noir* is one of the best described phenomena in the history of cinema", and yet its definition is still rather debatable, since a lot of film critics and scholars dispute the existing definitions and offer their own. Therefore, to even introduce such a complex concept, an overview of attempts of describing it needs to be presented. The abovementioned author in his article "Film Noir: (Re) Constructing the Definition" offers a variety of attempts of classifying *film noir* as a genre, style (the two most commonly used), transgeneric phenomenon, even as a certain cycle of films. However, it seems that every one of them lacks at least one of the basic components needed for a certain classification to be valid.

For instance, maybe the most prominent proof against *film noir's* common classification as a genre is the fact that the very term was coined in 1946, which is a couple of years later than the first films listed as *noirs* were made. Its creator, French film critic Nino Frank, used it to refer to a series of American films made from 1941 to 1944, which, when compared to the industry's prevalent style at the time, showed some interestingly distinctive features rather new in Hollywood (Antoniak 7). Furthermore, a genre itself should not be limited in time, whereas films classified as *noirs* all refer to the 1940s and early 1950s.

When it comes to its classification as a specific style, as Antoniak sums it up, the problem arises with the importance given to narrative in films. In order to make that assertion compelling, one tends to disregard narration as an essential component without which "*film noir* loses a huge part of its identity" (Antoniak 8). All prominent *noir* stylistic features together with its narrative, or the plot, come together as a whole to form a *noir* film. Therefore, its classification as a style, same as genre, does not come up as valid.

The acclaimed film critic Paul Schrader also reflects on the sensibility of the topic arguing that *film noir* „is defined by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood" (2), rather than some common categories characteristic to film tradition. Certainly, when *film noir* is

mentioned, one usually associates it with impressions related to a certain mood, or the atmosphere surrounding the film's protagonists, rather than some specific category established in common film practice. Viewers usually sense tension, paranoia, fear, and similar negative feelings, which will be discussed in detail later.

The absolute majority of critics' theory regarding this phenomenon recognizes the visual style as a crucial component of *film noir*'s integrity and the most important connection among otherwise seemingly unrelated films (Place and Peterson 2). Basically, as Rebecca House explained, they "looked different" (9), which, of course, provoked public reaction upon appearing and caused a certain hype among viewers. Given these points, it seems that an exact definition of *film noir* is still not possible, but it can be agreed that the characteristics of films in the *film noir* corpus make an incredibly interesting and distinctive set of works of art.

As it was previously mentioned, first *film noirs* appeared in 1940s; it is *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) that is most commonly treated as the first of a kind.[1] Those were the times of great turbulences because of the global political situation where World War II had influence on almost every aspect of people's everyday lives, as well as the general social atmosphere, of course. One cannot escape the impression that literature regarding *film noir* sort of screams in primarily negative terms such as alienation, darkness, fear, claustrophobia, paranoia, violence, and similar. Why is that so? Because the world was broken, primarily by the war, and what could an individual feel besides fear with all the death and insecurity around them? Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that majority of the topics dealt with in the films are related to crime, violence, and an overall life pessimism.

The great importance of World War II for the appearance and development of *film noir* is emphasized in Schrader's division of the films into three broad phases; the first one, entitled

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[1] Some critics emphasize that *The Maltese Falcon* indeed has *film noir's* important characteristic elements such as the plot and characters, but at the same time it lacks extremely important visual recognisability typical of the *noir* style (Antoniak 3).

the wartime period, refers to the films made between 1941 and 1946 (5). Apart from the already mentioned debut *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), films such as *The Glass Key* (1942), *This Gun for Hire* (1942), *The Woman in the Window* (1944), as well the films which are to be analyzed in this thesis: *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), and *Gilda* (1946), also found their place in this group. The prominent distinctive feature of these films is their favoring of talk in relation to action in presenting the plot (Schrader 5).

Double Indemnity (1944), even though it was made in the middle of the first phase, serves as a kind of a bridge to the second one: the post-war *noir* phase, since it contains some elements more characteristic to the latter (Schrader 6). Representatives of this phase, which refers to the period between 1945 and 1949, are films such as *The House on the 92nd Street* (1945), *The Killers* (1946), *Kiss of Death* (1947), *Raw Deal* (1948), and *Thieves' Highway* (1949). These films are characterized by less romantic heroes and, as Schrader underlines, they "tended more toward the problems of crime in the streets, political corruption and police routine" (6). Moreover, House states that it was the end of war that propelled the *film noir* into "full bloom" (12).

The last specified *film noir* phase is not given a precise title, but, according to Schrader, it is determined by "psychotic action and suicidal impulse" (6). Films representing it are made between 1949 and 1953, and include titles such as *White Heat* (1949), *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1950), *On Dangerous Ground* (1951), and *The Big Heat* (1953). All the previously introduced and developed traits related to the style, plots, problems, and topics discussed in the films seem to reach their pinnacles in this period. That is why majority of film critics find them "most aesthetically and sociologically piercing" (Schrader 6).

2.2. Sources and prominent characteristics

The commonly encountered definition of *film noir* is the one written by Schrader, where he states that the very term "refers to those Hollywood films of the Forties and early Fifties which portrayed the world of dark, slick city streets, crime and corruption" (2). This definition sums up the essence of *noir* topics all connected to the sources of this so-called phenomenon. Together with the already mentioned war, one of the most important among them is certainly American hard-boiled writing tradition of the thirties and forties with authors such as Hemingway, Cain, Hammett, McCoy and others.

The one major element *noir* took from it is the presence of extreme fears, especially the ones "caused by the proliferation of crime" (Antoniak 3). It seems that emotions of people, who at the time were living aware of the war terrors taking place on the battlefields, started reflecting onto their everyday lives. Certainly, one cannot ignore the influence of philosophies pervading American society's mind at the beginning of the century (Marxism, Darwinism, Freudianism, existentialism), which also "challenged the integrity of the individual" (Porfirio 12). As they kept reading, listening and watching about crimes and evil, people started confronting it and becoming sort of obsessed with it. Hollywood wanted to take advantage of the new situation, and turned to those topics as well (Conard 12).

Building on abovementioned authors' works, themes pervading *film noirs* can be, as Raymond Durgnat sums up, divided into eleven categories, all of which deal with a certain crime, moral ambiguity, lack of trust in law enforcement, and/or individual's attempts of dealing with hard situations and negative feelings, resulting in their appearance among the viewers as well (1-2).[2] Schrader adds one more: "a passion for the past and present, but also a

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[2] The categories Durgnat constructed are: Middle-class murder, Crime as social criticism, Sexual pathology, Hostages to fortune, Policiers, Miscarriages of justice, Private eyes and adventurers, Blacks and reds, Gangsters, Psychopaths: Who's to blame?, and On the run (Durgnat 1 - 2).

fear of the future" (5). He even considers it to be the ultimate one, since it amounts to all the hardships a *film noir* hero deals with attempting to survive in a dark and corrupted world, as it was described earlier.

Ante Peterlić, like some other film critics, acknowledges an immensely important role of psychoanalysis in facilitating film noir's appearance. He states that it is responsible for shifting the films' focus to the hero's psyche, which eventually lead to film modernism (216). Ben Tyrer also reflects on the importance of psychoanalysis calling it the "key determinant of the noir universe" (13), and notices that popularization of the two concepts in America go hand in hand. After making an overview of literature concerning psychoanalysis and *noir*'s coexistence, he emphasizes the role it has in analyzing female characters of those films, more precisely the *femme fatales*, which will be discussed later.

Another important factor that needs to be mentioned while discussing *film noir*'s appearance and development is German influence on it, especially the German expressionist movement. According to Peterlić, it is an artistic movement that appeared at the beginning of the 20th century, and it is characterized by distortions of reality, but not to the extent that would interfere with our understanding of it (119). *Film noir*'s prominent shooting technique: *chiaroscuro*, as well as "unusual camera angles, diagonal composition of frames, and image deformation" all appear to originate from expressionism (Antoniak 4). Moreover, it is known that a lot of Hollywood film workers of the thirties and forties were of German and Austrian descent, which accounts for the characteristics of the movement entering *film noir's* artistry. As Porfirio puts it, "the atmosphere of fear and paranoia that pervades *film noir* was familiar enough terrain for those Germanic émigrés, given the precariousness of their existence in the war-ravaged Europe" (13). Therefore, it seems that the search for *film noir*'s core always comes back to war.

It was previously stated that style is the crucial element which basically defines *film noir*, and that it was something different from what American viewers were accustomed to. That detachment from film industry's former style is emphasized in Place and Peterson's phrasing when calling *noir's* photographic and directorial styles "anti-traditional" (2). According to them, continual spatial conflicts of light and dark characterize *film noir's* photography, while Schrader also asserts that both the actors and the film's setting are "often given equal lighting emphasis" (5).

Three types of light are commonly used on set; the key light, fill light, and backlight, and they all intertwine to accentuate the main character in a scene. However, the prominent *noir* characteristic is the prevalence of key light in relation to fill light, called "low-key lighting", which allows to create those dramatic black shadows that are so recognizable of the style (Place and Peterson 2). Except for hiding certain elements of mise en scène, it also serves as a symbolic tool for hiding the protagonist's true intentions or motivations (ibid). Furthermore, as Conard puts it, "it always seems to be night" (18), which makes sense since filmmakers wanted to create intimidating atmospheres that cause anxious feelings. They even shot "night-for-night" scenes almost exclusively, meaning that they filmed outdoor scenes at night indeed, which wasn't the case with filming before. It was more expensive and time consuming, but it did the trick of facilitating great visual contrasts seen on the screen (Place and Peterson 3).

Generally speaking, space in *film noir* is confining, claustrophobic, "actors are placed in awkward and unconventional positions" (Conard 18), as if the goal of the film is to confuse and disturb viewers so they lose sense of spatial orientation. Those unusual imbalances and irregularly placed characters within the frames appear to construct a world that is never balanced or secured. Schrader states that "compositional tension is preferred to physical action" (5) in presenting the plot, which adds to claims that viewers are required to "make order of the film" (Conley 7). For that matter, the way of presenting the plot in *film noirs* is of great

importance; there is no neat linear storytelling, narrative flashbacks and "the suggestiveness of the human voice without a speaker being shown" (Peterlić 198) are essential components of *noir's* artistry. Moreover, Franz Krutnik claims that there are several viewpoints trying to win predominance in presenting the plot in a *noir* film, and it is up to the viewer to deal with it while trying to make sense of it all (2).

The heroes of a *noir* film, as it was suggested earlier, seem to be "alienated men […], strangers in an unfriendly world" (House 17), victims of it, actually. Taking the film tradition until those times in consideration, it can be said that *film noir's* common portrayal of heroes at breaking points was a big step aside from it. When discussing *film noir's* recurring techniques, Schrader mentions its "love of romantic narration" (5) as an important characteristic of it, which leads us to one of the main reasons for the previously mentioned crises male heroes find themselves in - the *femme fatales* – the notion that will be dealt with in the following chapter.

3. *Femme Fatale*

As it was announced, this chapter deals with the notion of *femme fatale*, one of the terms most commonly encountered while reading about *film noir*. Since *film noir* movies depict dark and scary themes, there is no better character to use to enhance those negative circumstances than the one of a woman people have feared since the beginning of time. Hence its origin and historical significance are overviewed first, while the second part is devoted to the relevant *femme fatales* in *film noir's* corpus.

3.1. Why exactly a *femme fatale*?

According to Virginia Allen, the term *femme fatale* refers to a "woman who lures men into danger, destruction, and even death by means of her overwhelmingly seductive charms" (qtd. by Hales 5). Basically, it is a woman who is given attributes usually associated with men; ones that have to do with power, responsibility, and strength. Since history of humankind is, to

be honest, revolving around men and their doings mostly, the topic of a strong woman threatening their dominance is for sure one of the most intriguing. It is among the oldest motifs in mythology, religion, and art of any kind, and it stretches from ancient to modern times.[3]

Probably the oldest women characterized as *femme fatales* are Pandora and Eve, the first one known from Greek mythology, and the second one from Christian and Jewish religions. What binds them together is the fact that they are both known as the bearers of evil and suffering, each one for specific reasons (Bade 10). As Hesiod, the ancient Greek poet, writes about Pandora, she is the cause of all the trouble people have to deal with because of her opening of the box containing them, and therefore releasing them into the world.

Similarly, in Christian and Jewish religious scripts, Eve is the original sinner who got herself, the first man - Adam, and consequently all their descendants into trouble because she disobeyed God's will by eating from the forbidden tree. Jewish religious book Talmud recognises another *femme fatale*, and according to the text she was actually the first woman on earth - Lillith. Because of the fact that she was not created from a man, but from "filth and sediment" (Simkin 27), and that she did not want to submit to Adam, Lillith is believed to have become a demon, and could surely be called the "prototypical *femme fatale*" (ibid).

Among other Greek mythological *femme fatales*, the infamous Medusa certainly holds an important position; the woman who is believed to have serpents as strands of hair which turn men looking at her into stone. A similar concept can be seen in the character of Circe from the *Odyssey*; that is a woman turning men into swine. Roman history gives us the figure of Messalina, emperor Claudius' wife, who was supposedly so sexually insatiable that she would visit brothels on a regular basis because the emperor could not fulfil her needs, which is a delicate topic even today (Simkin 24).

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[3] Examples of *femme fatales* which are to be listed and discussed are chosen because of their general recognisability.

Another historical figure of a *femme fatale* would be the famous Egyptian queen Cleopatra, whose reign is portrayed in history and literature as abundant with scandals, mysteries, and coarse love affairs. Probably the most relevant of them is her relationship with the Roman emperor Mark Antony, because in that story she is depicted as a cunning seductress who seduced him in order to gain more power, while harming his influence and authority in the Roman Empire (Simkin 28). Another woman driven by wish for power was Lady Macbeth, a Shakespearean character also based on a historical persona, who controlled her husband to make him commit regicide, and who was constantly belittling his masculinity (Simkin 27).

The recurring motif of all these stories is the fact that men are generally presented as mere victims of female actions, the ones who have nothing to do with the actual acts, or as the perpetrators of malevolent deeds because of a woman controlling them. But, isn't that subversion of the old belief that only men are the ones powerful enough to make important decisions, act on them, and be responsible for them? Or could it be that it is just a clumsy attempt to justify men's wrongdoings?

There are some important factors which are not usually taken into consideration when portraying these women as culprits for the "evil deeds" they performed. Pandora, for instance, was not a naturally born woman; according to mythology she was created as a punishment for Prometheus' defiance to Zeus. Several gods participated in her creation, with each one of them giving her a part of her character traits. The one trait that made Pandora do what she did was given to her by Hermes. More precisely, he gave her a "knavish nature" (Simkin 25); curiosity that made existence of the mysterious box so tempting that she had to see what was in there. Therefore, the one thing she - a woman created by a man - is accused of is actually made and done by another man, which is quite ironic.

Furthermore, there is also a lack of logic in seeing Eve as the one willingly responsible for the downfall of humans. She did not want to bring destruction to herself or Adam, she was

tricked into thinking that eating from a forbidden tree would grand her wisdom, which she then wanted to share with her partner. Karen L. Edwards writes about Eve's portrayal in the Bible, and asserts that "thoughts, especially those of a woman, are rarely reported in the Old Testament" (39), but the writer chooses to tell us that she did ponder attentively before making the decision. Additionally, when they both faced God, Adam is the one who rejects all responsibility for what he has done and blames Eve, while she accepts it, which demonstrates his "emotional immaturity" (Edwards 43).

What appears to be the problem with these and other stories of guilts *femme fatales* seem to carry is the fact that we cannot understand the reasons for their "malevolent" deeds. Edwards considers it to be the fundamental feature of the *femme fatale* (38), something that makes her actions even more mysterious and fatal. Indeed, if we look at the dictionary's definition of a *femme fatale*, we notice that it gives no indication of her motivations.[4] What it does is describe her as an excessively beautiful woman who simply leads men to their disasters, while not mentioning men's blind pliability. Hence, it seems that *femme fatale*'s guilt and her most dangerous asset is simply her beauty.

Besides the written word, the abovementioned women and other *femme fatales* are very common motifs in visual arts as well. Patrick Bade notices a common trait in artistic portrayal of the central woman's look: her paleness, mysteriousness, the way she is "idol-like, full of perverse desires yet cold at heart" (9), and perceived by authors as "malignant, threatening, destructive and fascinating" (10). What is more thought-provoking, a great deal of paintings and depictions of a *femme fatale* contain elements suggesting some bestiality entitled to the woman. The most striking example would be mixing of female and animal body parts; more specifically women sexualized (breasts, hair) and animals' "dangerous" parts (claws, horns and

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[4] For reference, here is the definition from the Merriam-Webster dictionary: „a seductive woamn who lures men into dangerous or compromising situations; a woman who attracts men by an aura of charm and mistery".

similar). Those were chosen because of their "repulsive and predatory characteristics" (Bade 9), and the author is referring here to the both mentioned groups of motifs.

It is obvious that there is a certain fear of women existing in those portrayals, and it can undoubtedly be specified as a male fear of women, since art and literature of earlier history were made mostly by men. Except for art and literary theorists, psychologists also investigated this phenomenon, and tied its origin to "a primitive anxiety about menstruation" (Bade 10). Another source of that fear can be tracked back to the nineteenth century when the existence and transmission of a number of deadly diseases was tied to women because of the widespread prostitution, and it created the linked connotations of love and death (ibid).

But an even more relevant symbol contributing to this association would be the one advocated by Freud when he wrote about Medusa specifically - that she (with serpents as men's reproductive organs) is a symbol of "female genitals, and so embodied the male's castration anxiety" (Simkin 23). That could be the reason for the grotesque historical portrayal of the already mentioned Messalina, since her excessive libido seems to be her flaw. Taking this theory into consideration, it appears that men fear women negatively affecting and threatening their indisputably sexually based masculinity by the means of their overwhelmingly alluring beauty.

3.2. Getting closer to *film noir*'s *femme fatale*

If we go further in history, specifically the nineteenth century, it can be seen that *femme fatales* captivated European art and literature, whose grounds are said to produce its archetype (Mainon and Ursini 69). Many influential European writers and painters of the time, such as Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, Edvard Munch, and Aubrey Beardsley, used the motif of a dangerous woman regularly. M. A. Doane claims that the very existence of the fatal woman is an obvious evidence of the proportions of people's fears and anxieties considering the newly questioned awareness of sexual difference in the late nineteenth century (10).

It is important to mention that men were still the main creators of art in this period, since women were believed to "drain" creativity from men, that they were not even capable of such noble perceptions required for understanding art, and that they were harmful for it in general (Bade 7). This thinking went so far that some painters are reported to have avoided getting married because of the fear that they would not be able to create anymore (ibid). Moreover, according to Patrick Bade, the world-famous E. A. Poe declared once that "the death of a beautiful woman […] is the most poetic subject in the world" (11), by which he advocated for the period's common artistic portrayals of women suffering and dying. His rather bizarre fiction was also very often focused on a *femme fatale*.

Important political and societal changes were taking place in the nineteenth century, with the question of women's position in society being among the most controversial ones. The typical woman of the first half of the century was actually a victim of a fatal man; she was delicate, affectionate, sensitive, and "if she is fatal, it is to herself alone" (Bade 11). More notable changes started taking place in the last thirty years of the century with the rise of "the Women's movement", which heightened male's anxieties about them (Bade 24). The "new woman", or the liberated woman, was the antithesis of the former docile one who would indifferently accept everything imposed on her. People started to realize that male dominance was threatened, and the motif of a *femme fatale* became even more relevant.

Quite interesting is the fact that women's crimes, murders mostly, were very common at the time, and the Victorian society was eager to know everything about them (Simkin 35). Press covering the trials were dedicating a lot of attention to women's outfits and their demeanor towards male audience and public, as if women's looks and allure were of crucial importance for the results.[5] The extents of it and its impact on the culture once again

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[5] When talking about women's clothing, it is important to emphasize that the general change towards more comfortable and "show off" clothes was a thorn in the side of the nineteenth century's society. Women took off

demonstrate the almost unbelievable fear of danger or fatality a self-conscious woman was believed to carry.

All these circumstances extended to the twentieth century, with the world wars becoming vital for the recurrence of a *femme fatale*. Europe once again appeared to be the most fertile ground for its re-emergence, especially post World War I Germany, known as the Weimar Republic. The post-war time was, as always, a turbulent time when people reassessed their lifestyle, dealt with war experiences and traumas, and therefore changes in people's psyches were inevitable. The motif of a *femme fatale* of this period and culture is probably the most relevant for the one that marked Hollywood's *film noir* later (Hales 3). Among other clues, Weimar literature and art were abundant with presentations of fatal women aware of their sexuality, and the real-life fashion changes that included masculinization of women's outfits were found unpleasant and offensive by the public (Hales 5).

Like it was mentioned before, society's enthusiasm about crimes done by women was still present, and their criminality was tied to their more open sexuality. Moreover, there is a number of studies done at the time with aims of investigating the typically female biological aspects that could affect their criminality (such as menstruation, menopause and similar) (Hales 7). Crimes typically correlated with women - "witchcraft, prostitution, and infanticide" (Simkin 39) are also arguments for the supposed inevitable affiliation of their sexuality and criminality.

When making a review of popular press and influential papers of the Weimar period, Barbara Hales emphasizes the criminologist Erich Wulffen's assertion "that crime is a form of sexual release for women as a sexual impulse is redirected in the act of crime" (6). What is more appalling, in a paper with a similar topic, women are said to be guilty not only of their own crimes, but of the ones they "inspire" as well, since a lot of transgressions are carried out

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the crinolines and started wearing a lot more accessories with interesting motifs such as snakes, thorns, dead birds… Clothes were started to be made to accentuate the body shape and women's attractiveness (Bade 31).

because of them (Hales 7). Once again, the belief that a woman is the one behind "evil", even when the men are the ones executing it, can be seen.

As it was said earlier, the second World War and its aftermath also had an impact on the motif, and a lot of film critics consider that *film noir* in general was a "pessimistic cinematic response to volatile social and economic conditions of the decade immediately following World War II" (Bronfen 3). Furthermore, the *femme fatale* of those films is seen as the symbol of war catastrophes and "the chaos of the post-war period" (Hales 4). The reason for it are the already mentioned new economic circumstances where women were required to leave the jobs they took during the war and restore their housewife roles. Since their more visibly important social roles came out during the war, of course women started to expect to be appreciated more and become more independent, and it is therefore not a wonder that men found it troublesome. Hence Kragić, reflecting on Patalas and his analysis of female film characters, claims that "world war produced *femme fatale*" (10).

3.3 *Femme fatales* on screen

The motif of the cinematic *femme fatale* appears at the very beginning of the cinema history, and according to Mainon and Ursini those were the utmost truthful days for it, since then "her image was formed […] and her influence established" (17). The first actress taking roles of *femme fatales* was Theda Bara, who embodied all the characteristics of the archetype. Generally speaking, a *femme fatale* possesses extreme beauty, has dark hair, she is tall, recognizable for her extravagant behaviour and dressing, as well as for her very bold eroticism, and displaying a hint of something unknown, dangerous and forbidden (Kragić 6).

Theda Bara was perceived as extremely beautiful, exotic (her father was a French artist, and mother an Egyptian concubine), and her studio gave her an adequate name to heighten the mysticism surrounding her by making it an anagram of the phrase "Arab death" (Mainon and

Ursini 19). She was almost always dressed in provocative clothes, revealing a lot, and wore seductive jewelry. The term *vamp* was made to describe her specifically, and remained to signify forerunners of *noir*'s *femme fatales* (ibid.).[6]

Succeeding actresses famous as *femme fatales* continued bringing attractiveness and eroticism into the roles, with not many limitations. Indeed, there was a high level of freedom in making films in the early days of cinema, so studios capitalized on enchanting and seductive women portraying historical and mythical lethal ladies, as well as newly written ones. Some of the highly recognised actresses of the period, except the already mentioned Theda Bara, are Louise Glaum, Alla Nazimova, Nita Naldi, Bebe Daniels, Brigitte Helm, Greta Garbo, and Marlene Dietrich.

One of the most important names which also belongs on the list is Mae West, a New York actress often identified as the culprit for the Motion Picture Production Code from 1934 (Mainon and Ursini 109). Of course that it was not her, but the whole cinematic culture of the time, with its open display of the world's "ugliness", that led to the making of the Code. Controversial topics being presented in films were the cause of worry for the American public, and movie industry's constant growth posed a problem that needed to be addressed. Because of the rising public discontent state authorities had tried to control the film production to some extent earlier, but different civil and religious organisations had been putting serious pressure on the industry to do something specific concerning the issue (Vaughn 40).

Contentious themes of the films were the ones dealing with overt sexual freedom, horrid criminality, and violence in general. Of course, the American society, who liked to reaffirm its Christian foundations and values, was very vocal about the dangers luring from the screens, and beguiling their youth (Vaughn 63). Film critics required films "tied to traditional Judeo-

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[6] The term *vamp* usually signifies the same type as *femme fatale* in film literature, but this source mentions the vamp as the predecessor of the latter. Some sources refer to the pre-Code *femme fatales* as vamps, hence the possible confusion.

Christian ethics" (Vaughn 41), and promoting traditional social values. Therefore, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA) was formed in Hollywood in 1922, with the goal of quietening the public and assuring them that the industry itself would control its products (Vaughn 43).

The first president of the association is the one the Motion Picture Production Code is usually identified with - Will H. Hays. He was a politician inclined to film industry, and he often advocated for its positive values and its "potential for good" (ibid.). However, he and his office were not successful in providing enough strength and determination in enforcement of the rules established by the text of the Production Code written in 1930. According to it, all movie scripts had to be delivered to the committee for analysis and approval, so they were strongly censored and watered-down. The person who fit the role of the strict rules' executors perfectly was Joseph Breen, one of the people involved in its very arrangement (Vaughn 62). The abovementioned Mae West, due to her *femme fatale* reputation, was one of the Breen's major targets, which is why people associate her with the Code itself (Mainon and Ursini 109).

Even though Breen built a highly respectful and intimidating reputation which lasted until 1954, the faults in the Code were already seen by the 1940s. Major theatre groups breaking, America regaining its pre-World War II wealth, and people losing their blind religious convictions altogether led to the Code's relevance to fall apart (Vaughn 64). Following years showed its degradation from rules to simply recommendations, which allowed cinematic industry to restore its independence and to return to the formerly forbidden topics, characters, and motifs again. One of those is the *femme fatale*, but the one who was not covered or silenced at any cost.

The Hays Code did not erase *femme fatale* from the movies, but it made it more difficult for filmmakers to express her sensuality as openly as before, which of course does not mean that they never succeeded in doing it. Some of the most significant and recognisable *femme*

fatales were coined and grown in that period; Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity* (1944), Joan Crawford in *Mildred Pierce* (1945), and Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* (1946), which are to be analysed in detail later in the thesis.[7]

What ties these and all other *femme fatales* together is the concept of their irresistible beauty that transcends logic and responsibility, especially for men. Real life sources for interpretations of women as fatal are transferred onto the screen, so we come back to the historical records of sexually uninhibited, malicious women eager to do harm to men, but with no apparent reasoning behind it. Their capability for deception while hiding their true self and their intentions is what makes them so dangerous. As Doane claims, *femme fatale's* most essential, and clearly fatal trait "is the fact that she never really is what she seems to be" (9).

Moreover, war and post-war circumstances were responsible for people's anxieties flourishing, which was brought into the movie industry as well, with the dark scripts of *film noir* being the logical grounds for *femme fatale's* setting up. Even though there were some intentions of undermining the impact of the Weimar culture on American cinema, which was discussed earlier, Barbara Hales did the job of confirming it. She analysed synopses of 264 *film noir* movies, among which were the ones directed by German directors, and 66% of them include a *femme fatale* as an integral character (3). In comparison, the percent of movies including the motif made by non-German directors is only 14 (ibid).

Therefore, it is obvious that statements which reason the *femme fatale's* presence with fears originating from war are legitimate, since Germany was not only significant partaker in one, but two world wars. But it is not the case only with directors of German descent. Filmmakers of the period are said to pass their anxieties and insecurities onto the motif of a

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[7] These truly are mostly recognisable as *femme fatales*, but the accuracy of this belief is going to be questioned in the chapters dealing with the movies' analyses later.

fatal woman, who signifies the "fears surrounding the loss of stability and centrality of the self, the 'I', the ego" (Doane 10).

Consequences of war were ubiquitous, and turmoil in almost every aspect of general social consciousness was inevitable. Thus, changes in perception about sexuality in general, gender roles and marriage were developing as well, which is reflected in the cinema of the 1940s (Boozer 2). Women were expected to continue with their domestic duties after the war, and let men provide for their families again, which of course was not easily accomplished. Those "newly liberated" women, as it was said earlier, threatened male societal authority, since they craved financial independence and demanded more recognition. Therefore, *noir*'s *femme fatales* are the ones "who most directly assault socio-psychic conventions and thereby invoke the most tell-tale narrative dislocations" (Boozer 3).

What can also be seen as the problem of a *femme fatale* is the condemnation that "she produces nothing in a society which fetishizes production" (Doane 10). And really, majority of those women portrayed as fatal in literature and cinematography are childless, and living off their lovers' fortune most often, which they use for themselves exclusively. Even when they are presented as somewhat or fully independent women who earn their own money, their tendency to "not need a man" is seen as conceited, not as strong and praiseworthy. That supposed selfishness also adds to their "sins" against the long-established order in society they are allegedly trying to overthrow.

4. Case studies

If one is acquainted with the historical circumstances and characteristics of *film noir* movies (which were overviewed in the thesis up to this point), it is of no surprise that titles that are to be discussed are treated as representatives of a whole cinematic universe in itself. The following part of the thesis will examine film characteristics in question, with special emphasis

on the leading female characters. In the order they are studied in the paper those movies are *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), and *Gilda* (1946).

4.1. Double Indemnity – double everything?

Even if they didn't know a lot about the movie industry or, more specifically, classic Hollywood, an average moviegoer would at least know about the existence and influence of such an iconic classic as *Double Indemnity*. At least a film expert would hope so. Truly, this work of art is among the most recognisable and influential markers of its time that left a legacy worth talking about even today. From its literary source, through its acclaimed director and to the phenomenal *femme fatale* of Barbara Stanwyck, it seems that *Double Indemnity* surely has everything a *film noir* would need to stand out.

It all started with James M. Cain writing a novella about a gruesome murder, simply put. What was interesting about it is the fact that it resembled a bit too much a real-life crime that took place in 1927 in Queens, New York. A woman conspired with her lover to murder her husband in order to try to get money from his life insurance policy. They got caught very soon, and the public got crazy for content on the case, which the mass media kept encouraging daily. Cain was working as a writer for newspapers at the time and he was engaged in the circumstances of the incident (Pelizzon and West 16). Usually when film historians write about *Double Indemnity*, they tend to disregard the abovementioned case of Ruth Snyder, and focus on its literary source, that is Cain's work.

Even with Cain himself, as well as a number of critics, persistently denying that this event was the source of his story, it is clear that not only the main plot, but several key elements revealed by the popular press of the time worked their way through to his storytelling (Pelizzon and West 16). Thus, the written and filmed stories were made even more credible and scary at the same time, and provoked public interest. After all, as it was said earlier in the paper, of

course that people who were emerged in real life crimes and fear surrounding them at the time would find a movie with a similar concept rather intriguing. Also, there is a pretty woman capable of such monstrous deed purely for her own lust, which sounds pretty "fatal" and familiar, doesn't it?

In a couple of words, the storyline of *Double Indemnity* follows a confession of Walter Neff, an insurance agent, who conspires with Phyllis Dietrichson, a bored housewife, and makes a detailed plan of Mr. Dietrichson's murder. They manage to pull it off, but the problem arises when Neff's leery boss Keyes, in his own style of a supposedly ingenious investigator, starts getting a bit too close to the perpetrators. Phyllis and Walter's relationship also gets unsettling, as the couple deals with mistrust among themselves, as well as with suspicions of people around them. The drama ends with two of them shooting at each other, where Phyllis falls dead, and Walter stays on his feet long enough to narrate the story to the viewers.

As it was previously stated, the movie plot follows Cain's work, but because of the complexity and unnecessarily complicated characters' arcs, the movie's director Billy Wilder and screenwriter Raymond Chandler made some extensive changes. The most prominent ones are the lack of portrayal of Phyllis as a serial child-murderer, as she was imagined by Cain, and omission of Walter's death penalty ending. In his study, Dan Callahan touches on the topic and explains that, even though similar storylines were starting to find their way through to them, the public in 1936 would not be ready for such horrific ideas presented on screen (167). Along with that, the Code and its restrictions were a significant factor in filmmaking of the time.

However, Wilder and Chandler were adept in dealing with Breen's office, and they slyly got away with some usually inadequate implications shown in the film. What they did change in order to please the censorship is the discourse, or more specifically the movie dialogues. They did not do it just for the censors though; they agreed that Cain's dialogue was not appropriate for the screen, that it was not as good as it was in its written form (Schickel 20). In

Schickel's words, Cain "wrote a clean, muscular prose" (18), whereas Chandler, as an outsider in America and Hollywood, experienced the raw American speech as something "wild and strange" (18).

The duo implemented a number of jokes, usually one-liners, which spice the script up quite a bit, and serve as a tool for the creation of intense and suspenseful situations (Schickel 7). This can be clearly seen in the way Walter addresses Phyllis, especially at the beginning of the movie when they first encounter each other. The scene of her coming down the stairs wearing nothing but a towel would surely be there for the purpose of presenting her as a sexual object of desire, but Walter sneers when talking to her and mocks her. By all means, his remarks undermine Phyllis' appeal with viewers. Having this and similar scenes in mind, it is reasonable to ask yourself if Wilder is the one trying to blunt Phyllis' allure, as Callahan thinks. He considers this type of exchange between them to be an example of Wilder's poorly disguised misogyny (172).

Moreover, when talking about the movie discourse, it is important to mention the pervasiveness of Walter's retrospective voice-over narration, which is one of the key characteristics of *film noir* in general. As it was previously mentioned, Walter is the one retelling the story to the audience, so we actually experience everything through his point of view. It is true that he tries to use the formal and somewhat detached language style of an insurance agent, but could sentences such as "[…] I never knew that murder could smell like honeysuckle" (12:40 - 12:45) not be subjective and personal? How could we as viewers believe this narrator that what he sees is right, and whom he sees as evil is actually evil?

It seems that Walter is left, from the moment he met Phyllis, in an unenviable position where he is divided between her fatal radiance and Keyes' firm stability. This dualism can also be viewed as his struggle to choose between two contradictory forces: the law, represented by Keyes, and its violation for personal satisfaction, represented by Phyllis (Loyo 6). He chooses

the latter, and ends up being destroyed, just as men always do after involving with a *femme fatale* throughout the history of art. The man had to be punished, but not as severely as the woman in question. "We are both rotten", says Phyllis (1:38:30 - 1:38:32). Yet, upon choosing her, Walter chose his own suffering, while Phyllis could not get away from herself (Callahan 177). In line with that stream of thought, it is better that Wilder chose not to include Walter's death penalty scene in the final cut, as it fits better the general idea of female fatality.

If we come back to Keyes, it is important to mention that film critics usually consider him to be a friend or a father figure to Walter, but it would be quite interesting to consider their relationship a romantic one, as Callahan does. The fact that Keyes is often in a need of something to light up his cigar, and conveniently, Walter is always there to assist him with his flirtatious trick with a match,[8] is quite amusing. What is more, when starting his narration, Walter tells Keyes to "Hold tight to that cheap cigar of yours" (6:19 - 6:22). He could have used something else to mock him and insert his feigned dominance over Keyes, but this motif surely carries some significance to Walter. As Callahan would say, Wilder "knew his Freud" (172). Playing with phallic symbols by inserting them in Walter's relationships with both Phyllis and Keyes is something that made the romantic aspect of *Double Indemnity* double indeed.

However, if we focus on phallic symbols, it is undeniable that they are related to Phyllis the most, as they should be. *Femmes fatales* are always the ones carrying those with themselves as a sign of male castration they are performing. The greatest one is surely Phyllis' anklet seen first at her and Walter's first encounter. The scene captures its sight when showing Phyllis coming down the stairs, and follows its movements through the fence bars. Having her words that it was a gift from her husband in mind, we could easily look at it as a symbol of her "enslavement" or captivity of sort, especially if we look at it through the bars; be it the fence,

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[8] We see this six times in the film, basically everytime they share a scene, and it always looks like the two of them showing affection to each other.

cage or a prison cell ones. It could be a clever representation of a woman as something that needs to be captivated and held in control, especially if it is a woman capable of fighting for her own choices, as it is the case with "fatal" women in history. Whichever of the abovementioned symbols it is, Walter is captivated by it, and continues to carry its visual in his mind throughout the film. Phyllis knew what she was doing when she kept putting it in front of his face.[9]

Besides her anklet, there are more interesting details related to her looks that match the character type of Phyllis Dietrichson, as well as conform to the *film noir* style. She is almost always wearing light-reflecting jewellery on her hands (bracelets and rings), buttons, as well as shiny brooches on her chest, which all create interesting light patterns whenever she is moving. Let us not forget the aquarium in her reception room, by which all of their conversations at her home take place. Water and other light-reflecting surfaces are known to be liked by *film noir* directors for their help in creating dramatic and surreal visuals (Schrader 5).

Furthermore, the choice of colours Phyllis is wearing in each scene conforms the film's plot development. More precisely, when she first meets Walter, before the whole idea of the murder was born, she is dressed in something white (or really light).[10] Later, at their second encounter, we see her wearing a black skirt and a white shirt with a flower pattern (therefore, half in light, half in dark colour). Their conversation about the idea takes place at that meeting, and their quarrel makes it unsure if it is going to be fulfilled or not. Lastly, when we see Walter coming to their home for the third time, to make Mr. Dietrichson sign the insurance papers, Phyllis is all dressed in black, like a soon-to-be widow is witnessing her husband signing his death sentence.

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[9] This refers to their first meeting at Dietrichson's home when Phyllis was constantly standing up and sitting down opposite of Walter and crossing her legs in order to make him look at the anklet every time.

[10] Mind you, she did not even finish buttoning up her dress when she came down the stairs, seemingly teasing Walter's male imagination.

Interesting usage of light, which is one of the key elements in *film noir* editorial style, absolutely marks this film. Some of the most effective examples are tied to its *femme fatale* and are used to accentuate her wickedness. The scene at Dietrichson's home when she was coming up with the idea of the murder is quite ingenious. We see her walking up and down pondering, while her dramatic black shadow on the wall (the result of the low-key lighting) follows her movement, like it was symbolising the destructive power that came out of her and rose above her. Later we see that dramatic shadow behind Walter as well when he goes to his office to record his confession. It could be said to represent the corruption of spirit that infected him upon getting involved with a *femme fatale*.

The second brilliant example can be seen at Walter's apartment when the soon-to-be lovers talk about Phyllis' supposedly miserable prisoner's life at home. She is sitting on the sofa by the lamp which casts light on her, but with an interesting detail. More precisely, as she is talking about her husband being controlling, unbearable, and even violent, the light is falling only on her body below the neck. Her face stays in a shadow, a meaningful shadow that signifies the darkness and deceptiveness of Phyllis' words. Her words say one thing, but the face says something else.

The similar thing happens at the Dietrichsons' home at the moment of the lovers' final confrontation. Phyllis speaks of wanting to frame Nino for the murder, then shoots Walter, then does not seem to be able to finish him off and acts as she feels something for him. The confusion it provokes among the audience is in accordance with the theoretical claims that the *femme fatale* and her intentions can never be understood or believed, and that they are part of her evil nature. That is probably the main reason for our fear of her, as we do not know when she is honest, or why she does what she does, but we do know it is not good. Barbara Stanwyck conveyed this idea brilliantly in her performance, and for that reason Callahan addresses her as

an "actress who always makes sincerity seem a Byzantine concept. Now you see it, now you don't" (177).

Another resourceful usage of a phallic symbol can be seen in Phyllis and Walter's interaction upon their supposed first sexual encounter at his apartment. Of course that showing of something that explicit was forbidden, but we see the two of them on the couch; Walter is lying down smoking a cigar, while Phyllis is fixing her makeup. It should not be difficult to connect the dots. More specifically, Phyllis is using a lipstick, and when she looks at Walter clearly pondering about the issue, she abruptly closes the lid and stands up to put her coat on and leave. Phyllis is acting here as she used Walter for her pleasure, as well as for her bigger plan.

Having in mind the phallic symbolism of a lipstick, the fact that they had just had an intercourse, and Phyllis asking Walter to be her accomplice in a crime, we could see the forceful closing of the lipstick as a sign of Walter's castration done by her. Phyllis symbolically crashed his masculinity. She behaved then, and in the whole of their relationship, as a man, which is something a *femme fatale* does. Phyllis is, as Loyo also asserts, affiliated with traditionally male attributes; she is self-sufficient, active, resourceful, everything a society would condemn (16). She is a "misogynist stereotype and a symbol of rebellion" (Gemunden 18).

Walter's castration, or becoming a lesser man, could also be seen in his display with a cast at the very beginning of the movie. The imagery of his limping shadow moving towards the viewers surely is captivating and meaningful, and creates a dark overtone that lingers over the character throughout the whole movie. The very fact that he keeps getting closer to the camera creates an unsettling feeling that he is carrying the fatality that wounded him to us as viewers. It is not only Walter who got impaired because of meddling with Phyllis, the *femme fatale* is fatal to everybody around her, and she poses a threat to us and the whole society.

Therefore, she is the one who has to be "put down" because she tried to get away from her captivity and caused such a catastrophe.

Towards the end of the story Walter is trying to make amends by saving Nino Zachette (boyfriend of Mr. Dietrichson's daughter Lola) from entering the house and being accused of Phyllis' murder. He acts as their protector and urges Nino to call Lola and get back together with her. What is more, at the very end of his talking on the dictaphone, Walter tells Keyes to keep an eye on them; he wants to leave them in good hands. This character development is very logical, if we take the circumstances of the period in consideration. The societal norms in America had to be reaffirmed, and the man is the one who we are asked to sympathise with. The *femme fatale* is annihilated, and the man shows that it was her who brought up the worst in him, and now he has the chance to show his humanity, regardless of it being damaged. Still, Walter lost not only his masculinity, but he lost Keyes. Therefore - with *Double Indemnity*, Walter gets double love, double murder, and double loss.

4.2. Mildred Pierce, a *Femme Fatale* or Poor Mildred?

Another one of Hollywood's classics bringing us a "dark" story is surely Michael Curtiz' *Mildred Pierce* (1945). However, one should not expect "just" darkness from it; it is a wonderful compilation of all the possible lights and shadows a person's life could be coloured with. Still, because it is a woman's life in question, all of those seem to accentuate its misery, at least if the crew of *Mildred Pierce* is asked. Certainly, how could one even call a woman who blindly cared for her family, got cheated on by her husband, suffered a tragedy of her daughter's death, lost her rightful business, and got hurt even more by her own daughter seducing her second husband and killing him, while blaming her mother for the way she is? Poor would be the right word indeed. And fighting patriarchal society through all of that was not even mentioned.

The plot of *Mildred Pierce* comes from Cain's 1941 novel of the same name, just like *Double Indemnity*. However, as it was the case with the latter, a lot of things were changed before adapting the story in order to make it appropriate for the Code, and the public. The very motif of a murder does not exist in the novel, and it changed the story's whole genre. Now we have a complete story when it comes to the plot, divided into past melodramatic parts of Mildred's retelling of her life through flashbacks, and darker, *film noir* style present, which deals with the murder and its consequences (Robertson 2). Combined, they make a hybrid that leaves spectators feeling sorry for Mildred, but at the same time, condemning her life choices.

The movie was released in October 1945, just at the time soldiers were returning to the States after World War II. As it is well known, economic and societal changes were causing a great turmoil in the world at the time, and America seemed to be facing a problem it was not prepared for. In a nutshell, the problem was how to get women to go back to their housewives' roles after they sensed the taste of independence by working and providing for themselves during the war. According to a number of authors, *Mildred Pierce* is one of the tools in the workshop with a goal of convincing women to do the abovementioned.

Offering the audience a chance to see how tragic a life of a woman seeking independence looks like seems to be done for the purpose of giving them an emotionally stirring outlet after which they would come home convinced they should not try to change anything for the greater good (Sochen 7). Mildred's story is definitely the right one to achieve that. Yet, could she be named a *femme fatale*, as a *noir* movie would require? Her life path is certainly not the one a submissive woman dominated by tradition would lead, but has she got the dooming characteristics a fatal woman needs to have? This is a tricky question, since the obvious answer, fuelled with the viewers' immediate feelings of sympathy for Mildred would overshadow the idea, but looking at the movie closely we could find some clues that would lead us to the opposite answer.

In the first scene of Mildred's flashback we see her in a seemingly regular stay-at-home mom situation - cooking in the kitchen and welcoming her husband coming home from work. However, their very first interaction reveals that she is truly cooking, but for other people. She is earning money, doing the thing a man was supposed to do. From their quarrel we find out that the "marriage roles" in the Pierce family are not only swapped, but they also result in its collapse. Bert's (Mildred's husband) infidelity seems to get overmatched by Mildred's excessive care for their children as the reason for their separation; or we could say that it led to the infidelity in the first place.[11]

Anyhow, Mildred's determination not to deviate from her long-planned life goals for her children, no matter the fact that it causes her marriage to fall apart, appears to violate the traditional American family values, which is a crime its society does not forgive. *Femme fatales* are usually the ones ruining families, and we do not know why they do it, their unclear reasoning is what scares people. Mildred here had a reason for it, and she appeared to be convinced that she was doing the right thing. She wanted to please her daughter in everything. Her overprotective motherly instincts seem to guide her whole life, and cause situations in which she does look like a *femme fatale*. Her separation from Bert is definitely just the first one in the line.

After he leaves home, Mildred is left in a miserable situation concerning her financial status, and one evening, while rummaging through all the unpaid bills, her gaze falls on a gun that was hidden in a drawer. She takes it in her hands and stares at it, while a shadow appears on her face, as if it reveals something evil hidden in her, or foreshadows something evil that is bound to come out of it. This shadow play on a woman's face usually indicates those, and, within a *film noir* cinematic world, reasserts her as fatal. Mildred's quiet moment is interrupted

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[11] "Those kids home first in this house, before either one of us. Maybe that's right, maybe it's wrong, but that's the way it is", says Mildred (*Mildred Pierce* 24:07 - 24:14).

by the doorbell when her husband's ex business partner, Wally Fay, comes looking for Bert. After finding out that he wasn't home, Wally still enters the house and tries seducing Mildred, and we understand that he always does it.

Even though Mildred is constantly rejecting his attempts, she still lets him stay and even offers him a drink, as if she was only playing hard to get. Maybe she did it because she saw an opportunity of a way out of her unfortunate situation in Wally, so keeping him close as a backup would be clever. That is something a *femme fatale* would do. After all, Mildred did say: "You don't by any chance hear opportunity knocking, do you?" (29:47 - 29:50). She was referring to his seduction attempt, but it could also be associated with the fact that Wally came just in time of Mildred's great torment and *noir* style shot of her pondering something definitely not good. Maybe it was not knocking but a doorbell announcing his arrival, but it still stays as an early displayed link between Wally and the tragedy that is to come.

A *femme fatale*, by definition, uses men, and Mildred surely did use Wally, and on many occasions. After some hard time of looking for a job, working as a waitress and baking pies at home, Mildred got an idea of opening her own restaurant. She did all the necessary calculations and investigations by herself, but she knew she needed a man to settle the deal, in a way. A woman in 1940s America could do a lot of things on her own, but not everything. Mildred was clever enough to know that. Of course, Wally was there, and Mildred did not even ask him for help, but she rather informed him:" I'm going to open a restaurant […] and you're going to help me" (41:02 - 41:06). These words are rightfully chosen, because Mildred knew she had Wally ready to do whatever she asked.

Mildred does not seduce him explicitly or on purpose even, and Wally's hyper focus on her legs and her constant pulling down of her skirt as a result of it are there to remind us that Mildred is not a true *noir femme fatale*. A true one would not miss this chance, at least if she was not trying to find something even more lucrative. In this example, that something appeared

very soon. Wally and Mildred went and met Monte Beragon, who sold his property to Mildred for her restaurant. Of course, Monte falls for beautiful Mildred, and she gets one more man entering her doomed presence.

Another hilariously explicit example of Mildred extorting her male strength over Wally, and by representation over men in general, is a scene set in her newly opened restaurant. With the place being a huge success on the very first night, Mildred uses Wally again, this time getting him to help with the waitering and in the kitchen as well. She ties an apron around his waist, and mocks him by naming him "vice president in charge of the potatoes" (59:23). Even later, when Monte came to the restaurant, Mildred tells Wally to take her daughter Veda home, while she stays with Monte. She does not even hide their relationship from Wally, thus showing her absolute disregard of him as her potential lover. Wally was there just to serve her.

Mildred's messing around with Monte seemed to bring her a catastrophe of enormous proportions - her daughter Kay's death. A mother who was not there for her child, but having fun with her lover instead had to be punished by the law of family tradition, and by the law of the Code. However, it still did not stop her from continuing her path of destroying the "right values" by entering the business world. *Mildred*'s writers went even further with this supposed fantasy to demonstrate the whole spectrum of consequences that would come crashing on her head, as well as on others involved with her.

After some time of Monte and Veda using Mildred solely for financial purposes, Mildred parts ways with both of them, and returns again eager to get her spoiled daughter back. She even humiliates herself by asking Monte to marry her in order for her to get his acclaimed name, the one thing she could not get with her hard work as a woman, hoping it would lure Veda back home. It did the trick, but it also was the ultimate bearer of the upcoming tragedy. On the night of Veda's birthday, Mildred was detained in the office where she found out that Monte tricked her and drove her to bankruptcy. Mildred's close up showing her ominous face,

and her taking the gun we saw earlier definitely marked a transition in the filming style. This scene was shot in *noir* style exclusively, and the audience could sense that, without a doubt, a *noir* disaster was about to come (Cook 2).

Before discussing the upcoming chaos of the night of the murder, we shall say something about its perpetrator, who undeniably deserved a closer analysis - Veda. It is difficult to find any complimentary words for her, as she is from the beginning of the movie illustrated as a spoiled, arrogant, and conceited girl only looking for opportunities for improving her financial and social position. However, she rarely puts an effort in doing it herself, but she rather gets somebody else do it for her, primarily Mildred. Spoto writes about Veda and mentions the existence of something evil hidden in her, her "[…] cold, cruel, coarse desire to torture her mother, to humiliate her, above everything, to hurt her" (212). However, it was not really hidden, since almost everybody else except Mildred seemed to be aware of it.

Robertson calls Veda "a typical *noir femme fatale*" (8), and that claim is rather understandable. One could easily overlook it because the emphasis throughout the film is always on Mildred, since she is the main character. One would not expect a supporting character in a movie to be the notorious *femme fatale*, since she, within *noir*, ought to be one of the most prominent and key elements in the whole story presented. She actually is, but it is not given to us on the very surface of the movie. It is camouflaged for the purpose of creating dramatic effect for the revelation of the murderer. The audience is led to believe that Mildred or Bert are the culprits from the beginning, therefore, realising that Veda was the one leaves us appalled.

Small fragments of Veda showing her maliciousness can be seen throughout the whole movie. In the first flashback scene Veda is coming home from one of her many classes, greeting Mildred with formal and distant "good afternoon, mother" (26:17), and not cheerful "hello, mum" (26:15), as her sister Kay does. Likewise, all of her conversations with Mildred sound like she is speaking to somebody irrelevant, not to her own mother. Even when she declares

love to her, it sounds very unbelievable, and is obviously done just for the sake of getting something from her. Deceiving everybody and making people keen to go out of their way to please them is certainly a typical *femme fatale* feature.

An extraordinarily interesting detail related to the way Veda behaves with her mother can be seen in their conversation on the night Wally came by to their house, which was already mentioned. Having heard their conversation, Veda goes on to her mother about all the possibilities of a more luxurious life with Wally, and even expresses her opinion of a marriage without love to be non-problematic. After Mildred's claim that she would never be able to marry like that, Veda asks her "Why not?" (33:10). Mildred is left in total disbelief, while Veda's dark shadow, symbol of a *femme fatale*'s wickedness, appears on Mildred's body, and the background music makes a turn into a spookier and more chilling atmosphere. Upon seeing horror on Mildred's face, Veda quickly gets back into the role of a sweet child leaning on her mother's chest and sweetening her words.

Another obviously ominous situation regarding Veda's representation as a *femme fatale* has to do with her relationship with Ted Forrester, a young rich man. Unbeknownst to Mildred, and with Wally's help, Veda marries Ted, and declares she wants a divorce, but with a certain compensation. She even lies about being pregnant to get it, which Mildred finds out when Veda pleasingly kisses the check in her hands and laughs because of her successful fraud. Both the scenes of her lying for the money in the attorney's office, and satisfaction with her achieved goal at home present us a *femme fatale* dressed in black, with white (or very light) hat and a veil around her head, revealing her sly triumph. Still, not even that stopped Mildred from caring blindly for Veda, at least not for real.

Ida Corwin, Mildred's friend and business partner, is one of the people who recognise Veda's wickedness from the start. She even keeps warning both Mildred and Monte of that, and in a very witty way on many occasions. One of those is her remark addressed to Monte when

Ida tells him: "Don't look now, junior, but you're standing under a brick wall", to which confused Monte responds: "I don't get it", and Ida answers with: "You will, when it falls on you" (1:12:34 - 1:12:41). She metaphorically announced Monte's destiny, and gave us a definite sign of Veda's fatality, which both Monte and Mildred had yet to realize.

Besides these plot related proofs of Veda as a *femme fatale*, a look at her appearance also gives us some signs of it. Her almost all black outfit worn on the day she had a divorce and got the money from the Forresters was already mentioned; it added to the already dark atmosphere of the situation. Furthermore, the first time we see Veda is when the police comes to their home looking for Mildred to inform her about Monte's death. Veda is there in a white (or very light) robe, but, as she climbs the stairs leaving the scene, we can see a dark shadow following her, which is a clear and customary *noir* symbol of an ominous force related to a character. In addition, in almost every scene, she is wearing something shiny or light-reflecting, be it the jewellery, hair ornaments, or a cigarette case.

However, now that we got to the night of the murder, similar clues of Mildred being a *femme fatale* should not be excluded. Yes, she did not kill Monte, but a lot of things related to the event reveal Mildred in a whole new, dangerous light to us. After the murder being shown and the perpetrator being hidden, we see a car leaving the crime scene, and the next thing we know, Mildred is staggering, looking at the ocean, and seems to be contemplating suicide. Since it is raining, Mildred's face is covered in tiny drops shining because of the set reflectors, as well the police officer's flashlight. Moreover, shiny jewellery from beneath her coat can be partially seen, and the handbag in her hands reflects light as well. What is more, those reflections are seen on the police officer's face, and make an interesting pattern reminiscent of the one that fire from the fireplace was making on Monte's dead body. All of these add to our perception of Mildred as the murderer.

After moving on from there, she hears Wally knocking from the window calling her; or could we say that she hears an opportunity knocking? Those were the words she used in that first flashback when Wally interrupted her in the moment of despair. In this one, she recognised the opportunity, and decided to use it. Mildred went inside with Wally, and we see half of her face marked with that recognisable shadow indicating her ill intentions. The same shadow on her face can be seen later as well, as she misleads Wally: "maybe I find you irresistible" (07:28).

She brought him to the beach house by pretending to be willing to give him what he had always wanted. After saying that she would go change herself, Mildred hides behind the door leaning on the wall, and we see her reflection in the mirror. This image captures the duality ruling Mildred, as if it demonstrates her constant fight against the malevolent force hidden in her, which lasted all her life. Still, the following shot shows her face being lit very brightly, darkening everything around it. It seems that she was compelled to surrender to the force in that moment, and do what a *femme fatale* should do in a situation like this - blame an innocent man. Mildred leaves, and Wally soon realizes something is wrong. He roams around the house trying to find a way out, while his movements are being followed by his own dark shadow. Of course, after being involved with a *femme fatale*, Wally is tainted, and we cannot predict anything good coming his way.

At the police station, where all of this retelling takes place, we see a mother trying to save her daughter from her well-deserved punishment. Mildred even got to the point when she lied about herself being the killer, but it did not trick anybody. The police investigator reveals that he knew the truth all along, but he needed Mildred to tell him all the circumstances to paint the full picture. Mildred was the narrator the whole time, but a man, representative of the law, "comes to the rescue" and reveals the truth, therefore undermining ironically her voice, and reasserting the masculine ideology (Robertson 12).

Mildred, just like in the situation with Forresters, was feeling bad and guilty, while Veda seemed not to care, and accepted her arrest coldly and sarcastically. Mildred accepted her guilt for the tragedy at the very beginning of her flashback when she admitted she was wrong about divorcing Bert, and she regretted the four years it took her to realise that. After Veda is arrested and the police officer symbolically raises the blinds to let the light of a new dawn in, Mildred leaves his office and finds Bert waiting for her. The two of them walk together towards the light on the street, and we can assume that Mildred, after losing everything she fought for, will return to Bert and "the proper life". This turn of events sealed the rationale behind the idea that women should stay at home and take care for their families in order to raise whole and masculine men, and obedient and feminine women. The Pierce family had none of these, and that was the reason for the catastrophe its members caused.

Mildred may not have killed Monte, but she brought Veda, "the brick wall", to him. She raised Veda and catered her innate evil nature by ignoring all of the signs her whole life, and brought her "curse" on herself and everybody around them. Her overprotective and oblivious motherhood benefited only Veda and her disaster-bearing nature, and brought more victims of it. However, besides Monte, Mildred was punished most severely, and lost the most, including the daughter she kept on a pedestal. As it was said in the beginning of this analysis, Mildred committed crimes the society does not forgive. Its message to women that tinkering with "the male sphere" of life brings them disaster and shapes them into sinister *femme fatales* is clear. Therefore, the question whether to call Mildred poor or a *femme fatale* seems to gravitate to the latter.

4.3. Gilda, decent or not?

There is one more *film noir* classic highly recognisable and influential, especially in women's studies- Charles Vidor's *Gilda* (1946). This is another movie released at the time of America's great disorder brought by the end of war that waited for its soldiers to come back

and rush to the movies to see their goddess Rita Hayworth looking down on them from the screen. Her recognisable silhouette dressed in a body-hugging and sensual dress seemed to appear everywhere and invite people to come and see another headline *femme fatale* trying to conquer a man's world. However, as it is going to be elaborated further in the text, this movie's creators seemed to have something else in mind.

Unlike the two previously analysed films, *Gilda* is not based on a novel, let alone a hard-boiled one, but on a short story written by E. A. Ellington. Its script is a result of multiple writers at Columbia's studio trying to make a piece for Rita Hayworth explicitly, with Virginia Van Upp likely having the most credit for its completion. Even though it is commonly considered a *film noir*, several authors notice that the movie cannot be classified solely as one; it carries elements alluding to different genres. Having Hayworth as the leading role certainly makes her performative artistry a discerning element, which makes it, as Melvyn Stokes designates, "a Rita Hayworth movie" (38). Incorporating that into a dark melodrama story of the script makes *Gilda* unconventional and unique, and adds to the uncertainty surrounding its key elements and the general understanding of it.

As *film noirs* usually do, *Gilda* is considered to be a "film exploring the tensions between men and women" (Stokes 55), which is, in this case, rather interestingly put together. Because of its typical *noir* setting and atmosphere at the beginning of the movie, we can assume that the woman that is to appear later is going to be the *femme fatale*, and expect it to be revealed from the beginning of her appearance. However, while we watch it with those expectations established beforehand, we often overlook the great mixture of signs which the film's producers combined in order to stir things up a little when it comes to the motif. In other words, and to spoil the movie, Gilda is not a typical *femme fatale*, and it is claimed here that she cannot even be one. Those who are portrayed as "flirting" with the concept in this movie are actually men.

In the very first scene in which Gilda appears, her husband Ballin Mundson asks her if she is decent, and, as Stokes puts it, from that point the movie is concerned with figuring out the answer to the question (7). Up to that scene there is no word of Gilda, and the plot revolves around Ballin and Johnny's acquaintance and bonding, making them the centre of interest that gets pushed aside upon Gilda's introduction. Of course, as it is seen in many similar movies, the appearance of a beautiful woman cannot go unnoticed or underestimated, and it breaks down the seemingly perfect previous dynamic between the characters. Johnny's voiceover then starts to revolve around his hatred of Gilda, and his apparent jealousy because of Ballin.

Being a beautiful young dancer, a woman earning for herself, and then marrying a wealthy man make a perfect background for the well-known *femme fatale*. Gilda seems to be flirtatious, an adulteress, willing to do whatever she wants and provoke men around her regardless of possible consequences. Other characters in the movie are almost constantly asking where she is, and not knowing of her whereabouts, together with the lack of the movie's explanation of her past, create uncertainty in our perception of Gilda. Apart from those plot characteristics, it seems that every other cinematic and stylistic feature plays its part in presenting her as a fatal woman. The memorable first scene of Gilda on screen presents us a shot of her face and her glistening hair, making her capture our interest and admiration from the start. Her unconvincingly positive answer to Ballin's question about her decency, while lifting one shoulder strap and leaving the other one lowered, further convinces us of her intentional fatality.

Gilda is almost always dressed in shiny clothes, wears light reflecting accessories, her lips are fully shining because of the lip gloss, and as it was mentioned above - her hair, with the help of back lighting, seems to glisten nonstop. She is usually wearing body-hugging dresses, and they cleverly worked their way around Code's restrictions on female nudity, which can be seen in Gilda's strapless dresses revealing her collar bones. Gilda's close-ups therefore tease

imagination of the audience, since the movie frames often cut her upper body as lower as possible so not to show the clothes but her bare skin. Those "shining" elements go in hand with Rita Hayworth's established star image of a glamorous dancer and a diva (Stokes 38). Surely it facilitates her representation as a *femme fatale*, which is also encouraged by Johnny's voiceover constantly talking about her as she truly is one.

What is more, Gilda herself follows these instructions and behaves in a way that looks like she also wants everybody to think she is not decent. She tells her husband, and everybody else, that she is "not very good at zippers" (*Gilda* 1:40:46 – 1:40:49) and makes meaningful comments about her apparently well-known promiscuity, such as saying that if she "had been a ranch, they would've named [her] 'The Bar Nothing'" (41:25 – 41:27). From the moment she is introduced to her husband's casino business, Gilda seems to enjoy its extravagant lifestyle, dinners and dancing with men there, with the emphasis on always checking if Johnny sees her enjoying herself. Even after his warnings about her behaviour (seemingly because of Ballin), Gilda continues to play along to her game and tries hard to convince Johnny she wanders around with different men, and still she always comes back to him to take her home. That twisted game of "unfaithful loyalty" would confuse everybody.

One significant motif related to the topic is certainly her performance of a song called *Put the Blame on Mame*, which she did twice. The lyrics of the song sarcastically comment on the usual blaming of women for everything, from a Chicago fire to a snow storm in Manhattan. The first time we see her in the casino after an alleged outing with one of her supposed lovers, when she plays the guitar and sings to a casino's employer usually referred to as Uncle Pio. Gilda sings melancholically with a clearly sorrowful expression on her face, and stares into space. After Johnny, who was sleeping in the office upstairs, comes down, Gilda confesses to him that she is afraid of Ballin. That is one of the rare moments when we actually see "the real", frightened and tired Gilda trying to come out of her shell, in which she captured herself. After

Johnny's disdain, she quickly comes back to her sarcasm, provoking, and telling Johnny that she hates him, to which he answers by asking her "who's kidding who"[12] (55:50 – 55:53). His question represents the mystery puzzling the movie audience as well.

The second time Gilda performs the abovementioned song happens after Ballin's alleged death and her remarrying Johnny, which was everything except a happy marriage. Johnny, because of his strong belief in Gilda's indecency and his unbelievable loyalty to Ballin, imprisoned her and made sure she got no chance to continue her alleged love encounters. Gilda, of course, was extremely furious and hurt because of the situation, and she decided to provoke with her behaviour even more, so she came to the casino, got drunk, and performed in front of the guests. She was wearing a low cut strapless satin black dress and matching gloves, and as she was dancing sensually and seductively the dress seemed to barely stay in place. While looking at the camera, and apparently at us, the viewers, Gilda takes her glove, spins it, and tosses it into the audience, who start screaming that they want more. Gilda laughs drunkenly and expresses her willingness to go even further, but Johnny's man takes her off the stage in time.

This scene is probably the one mentioned the most in any commenting of the movie, and it surely demonstrates its core problematic. Gilda is presented as a typical dancer (and it was commonly just a nice way to label a prostitute) who used all her seducing powers to hypnotize the audience. The dance is often referred to as a striptease, even though she took off only her glove, but her significant looking at the camera while doing it left a strong impression on 1940s male audience returning from war (Leaming 123). All of her movements, staring at the camera, and the reflector following her accentuate Gilda's seductive charm and seem to be engaged in giving us "the final, irrefutable evidence of her promiscuity" (McLean 157).

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[12] Gilda had asked Johnny the same thing earlier after he, out of spite, told Gilda that he took care of her just to protect Ballin. The repetition of the motif adds to the question's relevance in terms of a greater understanding of the hidden emotions between Johnny and Gilda.

However, it is not as clear as it appears, since we know that the reason for her doing it is to spite Johnny and to get revenge on him. Apart from that, the lyrics of the song she is singing also suggest sarcasm or irony on Gilda's part. All in all, the scene leaves us unsure of Gilda's nature once more and adds to the ambiguity concerning her role within the story.

When at this ambiguity regarding the *femme fatale* of the movie, it is, maybe surprisingly, time to tell something more about Gilda's husband – Ballin Mundson. He is, in Stokes' words "a cold, vampiric figure feeding on the emotions of others" (37). Truly Ballin even looks like a vampire in the movie; he is tall, with fair skin and almost all black clothes, and with a cape in the scene when running from the police. Ballin uses his casino as a cover for his cartel business of tungsten trade, and has an egomaniacal wish to control the world. When he talks about it, we see him staring contentedly at his own portrait on the wall. What is more, he even declares to Gilda once that "hate is the only thing that has ever warmed [him]" (35:18 – 35:23). It is of no surprise then that Gilda fears him, as she tells Johnny.

Ballin is always positioned rather weirdly within the frame – we often see him from behind and not his whole body, but his back and shoulders usually. Together with it being all black, it looks like a great dark spot on the screen distorting the image of other characters present there, most often those being Johnny and Gilda. In the very first scene of three of them together, when Ballin introduces Gilda as his wife to Johnny, Ballin stands between the two, who talk over him. Later that evening, when the trio has their first dinner together at the casino, Johnny and Gilda are seated close to each other, while Ballin remains distant, both in physical and psychological sense. Moreover, as it was already said, he is wearing all black, while both Johnny and Gilda are dressed in light coloured clothes. Ballin always seems to stand between the two of them and as he brings the dark fatal energy, and a shadow, everywhere with him, as a *femme fatale* usually does.

What is also interesting to notice is that Ballin even behaves in a way that is usually associated with a fatal woman in a *noir* movie. Upon his meeting Johnny and saving him from a robber, Ballin tells him to leave, but at the same time gives him his card. Then he tells Johnny that he would not even fit in such a place, but instructs him to wear a tie. Later, when Johnny comes to his casino, Ballin again tells him to leave, but stays willing to accept Johnny's persuasion to keep him, while Ballin's shadow (so typical of the *noir* style) looms over Johnny the whole time. Therefore, it is clear that Ballin picked Johnny and decided to pull him into his world of darkness and crime and use him for his plans. This is a bit too reminiscent of the way a *femme fatale* is usually expected to behave within a *noir* world to go under the radar.

There are two characters in the movie who seem to understand everything from the start, and they regularly appear to make a meaningful comment about the situations the main trio finds itself in – detective Maurice Obregon and casino's employer Uncle Pio. We meet Obregon when Johnny comes to the casino for the first time and goes to the bathroom. He checks what he looks like in the mirror and wipes his clean nose, to which Obregon appears out of nowhere and tells him that "the spot in not on [his] nose yet" (04:28 – 04:32). Having in mind the previous comparison of Ballin with a dark spot on the screen, one could deduce that what Obregon meant by his comment is that Johnny was about to get "the spot" soon after that, when he decides to stick with Ballin. As with any *femme fatale*, upon getting into her range of influence, a person is stained and carries her dark fatality with them.

Furthermore, in one scene, after Johnny gets Gilda's note that she left the casino for some fun with a man, Obregon finds himself next to the furious Johnny and asks him if he lost something, probably alluding at Johnny's self-control. He seems to understand that Johnny was crazy about Gilda, and this is just one of the situations where he makes it known to him. Moreover, after another fight between Johnny and Gilda, Obregon comes to his office and notices his agitation and shaky hands, and tells him: "You're breaking up in little pieces right

in front of my eyes" (1:38:00 – 1:38:05). He makes it clear that he is aware that Johnny's unrest is not provoked by his own interrogation, but by Gilda. Finally, after witnessing Johnny's reaction to Gilda's performance, Obregon bluntly tells Johnny that his relationship with Gilda is "the most curious love-hate pattern [he's] ever had the privilege of witnessing (1:42:40 – 1:42:45).

When it comes to Uncle Pio, it would be no exaggeration if he was declared the all-knowing uncle of the movie. He truly tells the truth at his very first appearance, when he tells Johnny that "a worm's eye view is often the true one" (22:50 – 22:54), referring to himself crouching in front of him. Uncle Pio knew who among them was decent and who was not. Throughout the movie he calls Johnny a peasant, and Gilda the beautiful one, goddess, or the little one. He often scolds Johnny and predicts his destiny, such as when he brings him two masks for the carnival and asks him to choose. After Johnny asks him what he would suggest, Uncle Pio answers that no matter what he chose, he would start as a bull and end up as a clown. He clearly meant that after all his apparent power and strength Johnny would realise that he was fooled.

The similar thing was said to Johnny by Obregon as well after he came to inform him that Gilda was planning on leaving and going home. Obregon tells Johnny that Gilda was pretending to be indecent, and mocks him by calling him "a great audience" (1:44:35 – 1:44:39) for her act. It is probably not wrong to assume that, except for Uncle Pio and Obregon, Johnny was just a representative of all the viewers who were convinced that Gilda, as a beautiful woman in the centre of men's world was the evil one there. Johnny fought the battle of trying to hate Gilda and hide his true emotions for her for too long, and he could not do it anymore.

The last scene of the movie offers a final revelation of everybody's true nature. We see Gilda sitting at the bar, and Uncle Pio tells her that "all bad things end up lonely" (1:45:38 - :1:45:41). It is in that moment we see Johnny walking in and begging Gilda to take him with

her. It seems that he even wanted to apologize, but Gilda interrupts him by saying that they both were bad and that she also cannot wait to finally leave with him. The much-awaited moment gets interrupted by them noticing Ballin's presence, who comes out of his office and goes down the stairs, followed by the so significant black shadow following his steps. Ballin declares his intention of killing them both, but Uncle Pio appears in the right place at the right time, and kills him instead. The "worm", that is the short Uncle Pio dressed in white, judged that the "vampire", the tall Ballin in a black suit, could not get what he wanted and ruin the lives of the two redeemable people in front of him. Could a scene be more classic in terms of presenting the eternal fight between the good and the bad?

Ballin, as a bearer of dark fatality in the movie, had to be punished, while Johnny and Gilda, as a young married couple, are redeemable and are finally free to go away from the corrupted setting of the casino to make a seemingly perfect traditional American family. Even Gilda's clothes at the moment are in high contrast with the clothes she wore for the majority of the movie; she is now "curiously unsensual, […] dressed in a traveling suit, she has lost her allure" (Dick 7). Therefore, if we go back to the question posed by Ballin that was said to permeate the movie, we can come to the conclusion that Gilda, even though she played a bit and tried to deceit everybody, was decent indeed.

5. Conclusion

This thesis gives an overview of a highly notable and memorable part of the movie industry- *film noir*. After stating that it is an exceptionally appealing concept because of its apparent incomprehension and its nature of blending seemingly incompatible elements, the work attempts to interpret those in order to justify its kudos. Attention is given to *film noir*'s problematic definition, its time frame, historical sources and characteristics first, and it is followed by a closer examination of one of its fundamental components – the image of a *femme fatale*. Likewise, its explanation, historical circumstances and relevance, with special emphasis on the post-war period that affected the American cinema, are presented further. The thesis then moves to case studies, putting the abovementioned theoretical points into practice by analysing three *film noir* movies – *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), and *Gilda* (1946).

It has been confirmed that Barbara Stanwyck as Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* rightfully holds the title of the ultimate *femme fatale*. She embodies all the attributes given to a fatal woman, and brings catastrophe into lives of men around her, after which she ends up obliterated and therefore serves its cinematic purpose of being a warning of such women to the audience. Joan Crawford as Mildred in *Mildred Pierce*, on the other hand, is not such a dark lady as Phyllis, as she is said to be whirling around the notion, but not getting into its core. She surely does share a number of characteristics with the infamous "spider women", but she lacks the complete absence of light within her dark fatality. However, exactly that typical feature comes with her anyways, being carried by her daughter Veda, which enables Mildred to come out of the situation alive and get a second chance at creating and leading a proper family life. Lastly, it has been explained that Gilda, from the movie of the same name, despite everybody's attempts of presenting her as such, is not a *femme fatale*. Thanks to that, she is given a happy ending in the form of marriage and freedom with the man she loves.

These individual instances lead us to the general conclusion that a *femme fatale* is an inevitable part of a successful *film noir* movie, as she stands as the main initiator of decisive life events which show the characters' true nature. She definitely challenges positions of every other person around her, and her presence and/or absence controls dynamics of a certain setting. Also, in line with the instructive aspect of cinema, representations of different outcomes of female lifestyles serve as a reference book for the movie audience. Therefore, the role of a *femme fatale* in *film noir* is much greater and comprehensive than simply being the antagonist a hero needs to have in order to be a hero in the first place. After all, to use a cheesy saying: what would we do without women (even the bad ones)?

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Films

Double Indemnity. Directed by Billy Wilder, Paramount Pictures, 1944.

Mildred Pierce. Directed by Michael Curtiz, Warner Bros., 1945.

Gilda. Directed by Charles Vidor, Columbia Pictures, 1946.

6. DANGEROUS BEAUTY: THE ROLE OF *FEMME FATALE* IN *FILM NOIR*: Summary and key words

Because of their thought-provoking nature and intricate impressions they make on the audience, *film noir* movies are among the most recognizable and honored Hollywood's products. *Femmes fatales*, so important in negotiating the messages *film noirs* carry within themselves, are at the center of this master's thesis. After an explanation of the motif, the attention is given to individual instances of acclaimed fatal women in *film noir* classics *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), and *Gilda* (1946). However, the analyses are dedicated to the examination of the plausibility of their classifications as *femmes fatales*, together with an inspection of the effect their presence and/or absence have on the movie integrity in general.

KEY WORDS: *film noir*, *femme fatale*, *Double Indemnity*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Gilda*

7. OPASNA LJEPOTA: ULOGA *FEMME FATALE* U *FILM NOIRU*:

Sažetak i ključne riječi

Zbog svoje intrigantne prirode koja navodi na raznišljanje i složenih dojmova koje ostavljaju na publiku, *filmovi noir* su među najprepoznatljivijim i najcjenjenijim proizvodima Hollywooda. *Femmes fatales*, koje su jako važne u prenošenju poruka koje klasici *film noira* nose sa sobom, u središtu su ovog diplomskog rada. Nakon objašnjenja motiva pažnja je pridana pojedinačnim primjerima hvaljenih fatalnih žena u klasicima *film noira Dvostruka odšteta* (1944), *Mildred Pierce* (1945) i *Gilda* (1946). Međutim, analize su posvećene preispitivanju uvjerljivosti njihove klasifikacije kao *femme fatales* uopće, skupa s ispitivanjem učinka koji njihova prisutnost ili odsutnost imaju na cjelovitost filmova.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: *film noir*, *femme fatale*, *Dvostruka odšteta*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Gilda*