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neo-noir

- exploding the myth of the nuclear family

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contents

A new noir

"One of the defining characteristics of film noir is to be found in it's treatment of the family and family relations."[1] Film noir proves as vital a mode of criticism of American culture today, as it did in its heyday in the 40s and 50s. What I am speaking of is not noir in its purest form, what we are now presented with is, neo-noir; a new noir for a new era, this version of noir is a fusion of classic noir and elements of other styles and genres.

Noir has not suddenly returned, its appearance is more than a signal of some nostalgic revival. Noir has rather been creeping up on us, in fact it never went away. It manifests itself in the detective films of the 70s, in *The Long Goodbye* (Altman, 1973), *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974), and in *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976) - where Noir mingles with the western and horror genres. In the 80s we are presented with the 'erotic thriller' - *Black Widow* (Rafaelson, 1987), with loose remakes - *Body Heat* (Kasdan,1981) as a remake of *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944) and later remade as *The Last Seduction,* with *Bladerunner* (Scott, 1986) - a science fiction film with noir sensibilities and a lot to say about contemporary America. In the 90s films from *Romeo is Bleeding* (Medek,1992), to *Devil in a Blue Dress* (Franklin,1995) betray more than an inflection of the noir style.

The very essence of what film noir is, is not clearly defined, with critics unable to agree on whether the films which bear the label of noir constitute a real genre or rather a style. Schrader provides the seminal discussion on the subject, defining noir in terms of a style rather than a genre, his *Notes on Film Noir* published in the 70s proved inspirational for film critics and filmmakers alike.* The problem is naturally complicated in neo-noir, with its broken down parameters, everything from *The Usual Suspects* (Singer, 1995) to *Ruby* (Mackenzie, 1992) can be seen to fall into the category of neo-noir.

What is certain is that film noir is a retrospective tag, a term coined by French critics in the late 40s, which applied to a group of films which came out of American cinema in the 40s but due to the restrictions of war, were not seen in France until after the war and then seen all at once, making it easier to identify them as a body of work. "Whether it is a genre, a cycle of films, a tendency or a movement, film noir has been extraordinarily successful as a term."[2]
"Neo-noir of the 90s looks to the psychotic years of late

1 Harvey, in Kaplan (ed), 1978, 23

2 Copjec, *1993*, 121

*Schrader, *Notes on Film Noir,* in Grant (ed), 1995.

intro — a new noir

noir (already tinged with parody and subversion) for it's inspiration"[3] The films in question are *Gun Crazy* (Lewis 49), *Kiss Me Deadly* (Aldrich 55), T*he Big Combo* (Lewis 55), *Touch of Evil* (Welles 58). "Neo-noir picks up on the irrational universe embedded in these demonic narratives as fertile ground for the postmodern cultivation of our own fin-de-siècle nightmares."[4]

For the purpose of this debate, to qualify for inclusion in the neo noir category a film must do more than allude to the noir sensibilities, a film must owe a debt to noir in more than superficial aspects. There are countless films which weave elements of noir together, evoking nostalgia through the use of pastiche* eg. *Body Heat* and *Devil in a Blue Dress.* The films which concern me and this discussion are those manifestations of the noir type - albeit in altered formats: permutations and combinations of the noir corpus - which seek to exploit the clichéd aspects of noir, using the genre as a springboard for ideological debate on the hierarchical structures of American society.

What interests me about these neo-noirs is what they have to say about the nuclear family, and how they view its position in the social order. Neo-noir, like film noir before it, is very much a product of its society, a product of social corruption, crime and the disintegration of family values. Traditional happy endings in other genres function to transform lovers into fathers and mothers and thus into families.

> This magic circle of transformation is broken in film noir which, in presenting family relations as broken, perverted, peripheral or impossible founds itself upon the absence of the family. [5]

Among the works which I will be citing in the course of my discussion are, *Blue Velvet (Lynch,1986), The Last Seduction (Dahl, 1993),* and *Seven (Fincher, 1995).* All are neo-noirs if not entirely in style and in content then in varying degrees of either or both.

At first glance it would appear that little would connect these films and certainly not the family for there are no nuclear families present in either *The Last Seduction* or *Seven,* it is the very absence family that concerns me in these instances. What proves fascinating to me is not just the marked absence of family within the noir corpus, but also the occasions when the family is present and sometimes more than present as in *Blue Velvet;* for when the

3 Rich, 1995, 8

4 ibid.

5 Harvey, in Kaplan (ed), 1978, p.25

* Jameson, *Postmodernism and Consumer Society,* in Foster (ed), 1983.
Briefly it must be explained that both "parody and pastiche involve the mimicry of other styles and particularly of the mannerisms and stylistics twitches of other styles."(113) The distinction of parody is that it has an agenda, by way of reference or imitation, exploiting "the uniqueness of these styles"(ibid.) and seizing on "their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities,"(ibid.) what is produced is an imitation which seeks to mocks the original. "The general effect of parody is - whether in sympathy or with malice, to cast ridicule on the private nature of these stylistic mannerisms," (ibid.). Any reference to parody, in the context of this discussion must be understood to imply a political rather than comical agenda.

family is placed at the centre of the film, then neo-noir is at its most revealing - dissecting, demystifying and exposing the contradictions in the American social order.

chapter 1

Reagan and apple pie

- EXAMINING THE IDEOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF THE FAMILY IN RECENT AMERICAN FILM AND SOCIETY

The family functions as "one of the ideological cornerstones of Western industrial society."[1] It is no longer adequate to see the family in terms of a unit of parents and children, without recognising the larger ramifications this unit has for the social order. This chapter will place the family in the context of its ideological function in film and society.

Sylvia Harvey in her essay, *Woman's place: the absent family of film noir* discusses the ideological positioning of the family; it is interesting to note that her revelations about film and society in the 40s and 50s prove as relevant a source of reference in the 90s.

The family is a social institution in so many so-called 'non political' American films, and as such it can be seen as fulfilling a "crucial function in inserting within the film narrative the established values of competitive, repressive and hierarchical relationships."[2]

Capitalism in structure and in ideology is hierarchical, it thus acts to mirror patriarchal family structures and vice versa. Capitalist corporate America thrives on the same patterns of dominance and submission that shape the family, a questioning of family positions must be followed by a questioning of hierarchical positions in capitalist society. Love of family equals love of father, father being ruler, love of ruler equates with love of country, these concepts are intertwined.[3] Therefore to undermine the hegemonic structure of familial relations can be perceived as an attack on patriotic values. The family acts as a support for an unstable society, it is at times of crisis that the family becomes a major issue, at such times it is promoted as a model of socialisation and held up as the key to all society's ills. The onus is placed firmly on the family to affect a cure. America has had its share of crises and American film has been there for half of its history recording the effects on society. Film has the potential to become a vital mode of criticism of American culture, however it is a potential not realised in mainstream film, and there is no indication that this position will change. *Film noir* in a subversive role, dared to criticise the central role of the family in the social structures of the 40s and 50s, as does neo-noir today.

Films from the 40s onwards would have us question the stability of the nuclear family and of our middle-class comforts, both are privileges that must be defended as they are continually tested. The test is not merely one of the strength of the family unit but also of the strength of the male member

1 Harvey, in Kaplan (ed), 1978, 24

2 ibid., 23

3 ibid., 24

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whose role it is to defend it, while proving himself capable of the task. What was a concern in the 50s developed into a crisis by the 70s.

A shudder went through the dominant ideology during the 60s and 70s, beginning with the assassination of Kennedy and ending with the liberation of Vietnam in the late 70s.

> For a society unused to internal failures and external losses, unable and unwilling to analyse events historically, politically, economically, rationally, the result was a mixture of anger, guilt, and frustrated aggressiveness. In film, images and narratives of despair and impotence alternated or were combined with violent outbursts against self and others. 4

During the 70s, in response to feelings of social impotence, the protagonist in film was a man diminished physically, emotionally, and politically. *The Conversation* (Coppola,1974), *Chinatown*, *Taxi Driver*, contain prime examples of what can be termed an ineffectual hero, as imperfect and as incoherent as the society which fostered him. "The character's fall is accompanied by a questioning of the viewer's own position of safety outside the narrative, in the world."5 Noir speaks as much to a crisis of masculinity as to a political crisis. The crisis of masculinity of the 70s is displayed throughout the films of the era, from *Taxi Driver*, to *Chinatown*, to *Night Moves (Penn,1975)*, and beyond.

If the 70s in America can be summed up as a decade of masculine crisis, then the 80s must be noted as an era obsessed with the restoration of the father and the family. The restoration of the father comes as an antidote to the preceding decade, "a decade of feminism and 'liberation'."6 Robin Wood provides us with the seminal work on this subject, Papering the Cracks: *Fantasy and Ideology in the Reagan Era* following Andrew Britton's *Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment*. He qualifies the father's role thus,

> the father must here be understood in all senses, symbolic, literal, potential ...
> The young heterosexual male, father of the future, whose eventual union with the 'good women' has always formed the archetypal happy ending of the American film, [acts as] guarantee of the perpetuation of the nuclear family and social stability. 7

American film has always fulfilled the role of constructing images through which ideological energy was channelled. With "narrative images of home and safety, of protecting fathers and securing families," 8 filmmakers were able to supply the coherence that the general discourse lacked. The virtues of the family and the need to keep it central to soci-

4 Kolker, 1988, 240

5 Ibid., 242

6 Wood, in Belton (ed.), 1996, 213

7 Ibid.

8 Kolker, 1988, 301

9 Kolker, 1988, 245

10 Ibid., 245

11 Quant, 1984, 128

12 Kolker, 1988, 286

ety was a position that conservative film upheld. 80s America (in a political and economic parallel with 80s Britain under Thatcherism), is marked by the phenomenon of Reaganism, and the resultant glorification of consumer capitalist culture. In the 80s the national audience "was ready to become subject to a discourse of security, power, and self-righteousness,"9 and so we enter an era of neo-conservatism, with Reagan's promise of

> a free-enterprise utopia where every one (of the appropriate gender, politics, and colour) might do what he wished and thrive with no interference; his implicit offering of himself as paternal guide into this utopia, made him an ideological magnet and a hegemonic force, equalled (in a rather different political context) only by Roosevelt in the 30s and 40s.
> 10

The Reagan administration which spanned the greater part of the decade, instigated economic reforms which led to levels of unemployment the likes of which hadn't been experienced since the Great Depression. One consequence was the emergence of a subculture of homelessness. The irony is pointed. The Reagan administration was built upon the ideal of the home, and the nuclear family was central to his vision of an America that would embody the innocence of bygone eras.

The growing income gap and resultant class division of rich and poor ensured that for the many the realisation of the American dream was slipping further away and for the growing lower class it was certainly out of reach. It would seem as if America's president was a man

> not only embedded, but ... deeply committed to all the crack brained fantasies and empty rhetoric peddled by Hollywood ever since it became the centre of America's popular culture.
> 11

The mere idea that Reagan could succeed in getting re-elected speaks for the "American public's obsession with image and personality." 12 It can obviously be interpreted as a cry for reassurance in the familiar, in Reagan's promise that the solutions for the future could be found in the workings of the past.

Hit by Reagan's economic reforms, film production in the 80s suffered cutbacks. With the industry in a cautious state after the phenomenal flop, both critically and more relevantly economically, of the heavily invested *Heaven's Gate* (Cimino,1980), studios looked for highly marketable ventures with an assured audience base. Remakes and sequels

abounded, (the *Indiana Jones* trilogy, The *Rocky* films, and with that film in the 80s began to feed on its own mythology.

Little has changed in the 90s, as regards the Reagan phenomenon. It would seem as if 80s' conservatism still has a hold on American culture in the 90s. Spectacle is just as popular, witness the success of special effects vehicles like *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1993) and *Independence Day* (Emmerick,1996). Popular television serials of 50s and 60s make their way onto the big screen, *Mission Impossible, The Saint, The Fugitive, The Adams Family,* the nostalgia trip goes on. What is of concern is the difficulty in producing work that is not mainstream. When the conventional sells and does not offend, when pure spectacle guarantees audiences, and thus a profit, risks are not taken. There are naturally exceptions, most recently *Fargo* (Cohen,1996), a triumph for the Cohen Brothers. One must remember that America is merely twice as old as film itself. Film is effectively the nation's folklore, it is America's choice of narrative. That is not to deny the position of film as fiction, while Hollywood reiterates its stance as the factory of dreams, it is through its popular culture of film and TV that America projects its self image, and thus an oppositional work, a critical portrayal of society's structure would be seen as negative propaganda. Hollywood is as much an institution of American culture as is the church or indeed the family, and like all the other institutions of that culture its structure is hierarchically based. Presenting us with ideals and aspirations, American film constructs and supports the ideologies of a culture. An artifice, film projects celluloid personifications of the American dream.

Reagan was all too aware of the power of celluloid imagery, his success was founded on it. Stephen Spielberg, as a director seems to have preempted Reaganism, his films from the 70s onwards operate to prove the validity of, and to recuperate any losses to, the domestic space. *Jaws* (1975) pitting a family against a shark, sees the father emerge to protect his family aided by his scientist and shark-fighter buddies, in what turns out to be a tale of male bonding and a salute to 'Mr. Middle America'. The films which follow for Spielberg and continue to this day are narratives of male strength. *The Color Purple* (Spielberg, 1985) for example, can not allow itself to be the narrative of female strength and power, that Alice Walker's book was. Instead Spielberg

13 kolker, 1988 286

14 ibid., 300

15 Wood, in Belton (ed), 1996, 200

16 Ibid.

17 Hampton, 1995, 41

enacts an ending which diffuses that strength and incorporates the male figure back into the narrative.
Spielberg would have us believe that the traumas of the 70s are not insurmountable, indeed if we are to believe this director of fantasies, then order can be restored by "ordinary heroism, supported by domestic desires." 13
Spielberg exemplifies Reagan's assertion that simple ways are best, the casualty in this equation is individuality.

> The conservative concept of the family annuls individuality and the various images of family are used to purchase emotion at the expense of analysing alternatives. Spielberg turns desire into a commodity, utopia into the mundane and the politics of relationships into a spectacle that confirms power and hierarchy. 14

Spielberg's *E.T.* (1982) at the onset "quite vividly depicts the oppressiveness of life in the nuclear family: incessant bickering, mean-mindedness, one-upmanship" 15 it is a family disrupted by the absence of the father figure. Yet in the end Spielberg reasserts "the 'essential' goodness of family life in the face of all the evidence he provides himself,"16 in an ending which surreptitiously reconstructs the image of the nuclear family. Spielberg is not ignorant of the problems, what is far worse and indeed proves his work to be reflective of the 80s discourse of naivete, is that he can enact a closure that denies the contradictions of imposing a happy ending.

If Spielberg embodies the spirit of Reaganite conservatism, then Lynch must be seen to be not merely oppositional but down right subversive. As will be revealed, Lynch too finds influences in Reaganism. Like Spielberg he "draws on stock figures and configurations that we can read immediately." But where "Spielberg plays them straight,"17 Lynch exploits their potential for parody, with narratives that are shot through with **a satirical impulse.**

There have always been those films which manage to swim against the stream of assent, providing potential arenas for criticism. Neo-noir in its most productive mutation from classic noir, is a expression of disenchantment with social systems, a disavowal of their structures. Acting as a voice from the left, neo noir is at its most subversive when it is in the hands of immigrants, women, blacks and gays; society's alien others. In their hands noir becomes an oppositional mode of expression, acting as a comment on and criticism of the nuclear family and the hegemonic social constructs,

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18 Kolker, 1988, 81

19 Harvey, in Kaplan (ed), 1978, 24

20 Kolker, 1988, 302

that shape American society.
Neo-noir in the 90s as the instigator of debate on family positions, is not alone of course, but those films that have proved most effective in stimulating a discourse of disenchantment, are often films from the fringes, made by, and in the case of the horror genre, for the margins of society. When film noir started out these dark moody films were relegated to the status of B-movies. The horror genre shares the same lowly position. It is precisely because it is not taken too seriously that the genre is free to address issues that don't arise in commercial mainstream cinema. The horror genre has often managed to place the family at the centre of its concerns, and in a threatened position, providing the male protagonist with the duty of neutralising the threat to the family and restoring order, a task he is quite often not up to.

The Shining (Kubrick,1980) is as subversive as a genre movie can get, proving to be "an examination of the family, in this instance a discovery of the madness of the patriarchal domestic unit and a prophesy of its collapse." 18 The film's resolution, in a departure from the norm, necessitates the destruction of the father figure, the threatening force, making it impossible to restore order to the family unit which, rather than being reinstated is destroyed.

The family has been institutionalised in our culture, placed in the same position as the church, and state. Family with its patriarchal structure proves "a legitimating mode or metaphor for a hierarchical and authoritarian society."19

To summarise the family unit has surpassed its function as an arena of development, taking on greater symbolism in this
consumer capitalist culture, held up as an example of the proper order of things. A reference point for a culture. Having become a commodity, the family is:

> fetishized, sentimentalised, and gutted of substance in political discourse, sold in television and film as something viewers must desire, that they might in fact be able to own if they purchase its images and cultivate them with their own financial and moral capital. The family is no longer a refuge, but a command and a judgement - a law of the patriarch. 20

chapter 2 *Blue Velvet*

- THE DOMESTIFICATION OF NOIR AND THE PERVERSION OF THE FAMILY

Whereas film noir is characterised by the absence of family in its narrative structure, when Lynch employs its stylistic and narrative qualities in *Blue Velvet,* he centres his version of *noir* on domestic relations, putting the family under the microscope, with disturbing results. Lynch approaches the family with cynicism, tearing asunder any notions we may have of small town harmony and the inviolability of domestic bliss.

Family relations are something of a preoccupation for Lynch. The fears and anxieties surrounding the nuclear family manifested themselves early on in Lynch's films. The family unit is called into question in all of his self-penned work, *The Grandmother* (1970), *Eraserhead* (1976), and *Blue Velvet* (1986).

The themes of estrangement, procreation anxiety and disease, the main themes of *the Grandmother,* are explored in *Eraserhead* in what proves to be a more direct expression of the negative aspects of familial groupings. The *Grandmother* depicts a boy's isolation, childhood estrangement, and the damaging effects of a repressive family unit. The boy's development is stifled by his parents' apathy. He plants a seed in his bed, waters and watches it develop. Nurturing the seed, the fruit it bears nurtures him back, giving birth to his 'grandmother' who provides him with the nurturing he couldn't get from his parents.

Eraserhead's family unit is not merely repressive, but all consuming. It is the locus of sexual paranoia and of fear of intimacy. Parenthood is a duty enforced upon Henry, he is the assumed father of Mary's 'child'. Living up to his social responsibility, he moves mother and 'infant' into his one-roomed apartment. This family unit moves beyond the dysfunctional, the 'infant' is an ailing monstrosity, demobilised and for Henry demobilising. He is left on his own to cope. Mary can't bear the wailing infant, not even for one night. Henry is trapped by its cries, forced to remain in the claustrophobic confines of a one-roomed apartment. Through the eyes of Lynch, the duties of parenting unfold to reveal the restrictive nature of the nuclear family. This domestic unit is the source of unimaginable horrors. When Henry is in the end driven to violence, piercing the baby's putrid form with a scissors, he finds himself under attack from the 'infant' as it grows in size and ferocity.

Procreation is the source of horror, Henry watches as

1 Alexander, 1993, 114

2 Ibid., 115

3 Magid, 1986, 61

umbilical chords appear on stage, only to see them crushed under the feet of the 'woman from behind the radiator'. They appear in the bed which he shares with a distressed Mary, a reminder, a physical personification of the horror that unfolded from their intimacy, intimacy between these partners is out of the question.

Wild at Heart (1990) has Lynch move from a dysfunctional portrait of the family to a positively destructive one. The mother figure is the Wicked Witch of the West. (Connotations of the *Wizard of Oz (Fleming, 1939),* and western capitalism are intentional). Marietta's love is aggressive and destructive. She has the father killed, and obsessively controls the daughter trying to remove Sailor from the equation when he refuses to succumb to her advances. She is demonic, her love is obsessive and ultimately destructive. The film is a tale of fiery relations between the sexes. Fire is the tool employed by Marietta to dispose of her husband. In terms of Sailor and Lula's relationship, fire is a uniting force, reflecting their fiery passion; when they make love their passion dissolves into "a blazing image, either from a cigarette lighter, a match or the memory that ties them both."1 Of Sailor and Lula's relationship Lynch has said "they treated each other with respect, they were in love, they were equal in the relationship" calling theirs, "a modern romance."2 In truth their relationship is imbued with stereotypical gendering that is anything but modern. Sailor's violent image is counterpoised by Lula who is defined as sexual object. The imposed happy ending involves the uniting of Sailor, Lula, and their child, all together for the first time, a happy family and a happy ending?

It is Lynch's obsession with the family, recognising the fallacy of its myth, decoding and ultimately destroying that myth, which distinguishes his particular mutation of the noir corpus, a fusion of former elements and energies.

It is a disruption of family units, both natural and unnatural that sets *Blue Velvet*'s narrative in motion. It is Jeffery's chance discovery of a severed ear, which activates the corrosion of the safe boundaries between his world and the sordid underworld "lurking just beneath the cheery facade of Lumberton."3 His curious discovery proves the catalyst for his descent, both physically and psychologically, into the darkest elements of society and the anti-social.

chapter 2 *Blue Velvet*

The opening sequence to *Blue Velvet* is probably one of Lynch's finest achievements. Within the first five minutes of the film we have been exposed to the surreal nature of apple-pie America. The grass has never been so green, the picket fences never so white, the tulips never so radiant, the perfection is unsettling. It is all too immaculate. The perfection of the images is dazzling, they are the visual personifications of the American dream, a dream that proves to have an unstable foundation.

Before you are allowed to get too secure, Lynch reminds us that he is a man obsessed with the trappings of American iconography: nuclear families, good neighbours, picket fences, mom's apple pie, his is a vision that reaches beyond the facade. He views the centrality of the nuclear family and the American dream it embodies as a myth, and one that is tainted. Stripping away the artifice which masks the problems behind those picket fences, Lynch exposes hidden elements. Lynch finds the family fascinating. In his peculiar vision the family is claustrophobic, constraining, the locus of fear and punishment. Small-town America provides a squeaky clean facade that obscures troubled familial relations.

Jeffery is immediately set up as the all-American boy, his family life is at once established as ideal, a safe family environment straight out of a Norman Rockwell painting, his father waters the glowing green lawn as mother watches TV - she's watching a film noir, in contrast to the gritty images on the screen she appears idyllic, serene, content in her domestic setting. Such images of violence as appear on screen are only fiction to her, they have no basis in reality, no relevance to her experience of small-town life.

Jeffery plays detective in a mystery involving kidnapping, extortion, corruption and is witness to scenes of perverse and violent behaviour, of brutality and sado-masochistic role-plays. One critic remarks that it is as if "a Hardy boy has wandered into a scenario devised by the Marquis de Sade." 4

Jeffery's curiosity leads him to the apartment of Dorothy Valens.

Dorothy's husband and son have been kidnapped, she is being blackmailed by Frank, the inexplicable demon of this tale, into performing sexual rituals. Jeffery having broken into Dorothy's apartment, and hidden in her wardrobe, is voyeur to these rituals. Discovered in his hiding place,

4 Pfeil, in Copjec (ed), 1990,230

Jeffery himself is subjected to Dorothy's sexual games, reduced to the status of plaything for Dorothy's pleasure. Jeffery finds himself implicated in an oedipal triangle between Dorothy and Frank. Once he has encountered Frank face to face, Jeffery penetrates the darker elements of Lumberton's underworld, taken on a 'joyride' in the process of which he himself suffers Frank's brutality and encounters Frank's curious acquaintances. The scene in 'Ben's place' is a memorable one not least for Ben's eerie rendition of 'candy coloured clown' mimed menacingly into a lamp. Jeffery goes on to survive his encounter with Frank and affect his eventual destruction, though, it should be noted that it is more by chance than by any received notion of detection that Frank's demise comes about.

In *Blue Velvet* we have as always in noir, whether classic film noir or neo-noir two ways of representing women: as docile domestic creatures, or as undomesticated erotic women. Noir's iconography is translated into colour and appropriated by neo-noir. In *Blue Velvet* chiaroscuro lighting is applied to sumptuously dark interiors. The dark interior shots of Dorothy's apartment are juxtaposed against Jeffery's supersaturated front lawn and then bright cosy interiors of his and Sandy's homes. The stylistics of noir prove vital in pitting Sandy, the bland blonde, against the dark exotic Dorothy. Sandy is dressed in pastels and florals emphasising her femininity., hers is a brand of femininity which divorces itself from either strength or sexuality. Laura Dern's Sandy is the antithesis of Lula, the character she played in *Wild at Heart.* Viewed in daylight in and around homes, schools and churches, she is a symbol of institutionalised gender roles. Her emergence from out of the darkness like a femme fatale is not just deceptive but comical. Her function in the film is to counterpoise the real femme fatale: Dorothy Valens.

Isabella Rossellini's Dorothy is the epitome of the femme fatale in aspect, in accent, and in attitude. Viewed always dressing, undressing, or being undressed, her body is consciously on show, signposting her as the subject of the voyeuristic gaze. Inhabiting the darkness, she is cast in light and shadow, her entrance is that of the femme fatale of *Eraserhead,* 'the beautiful girl across the hall'; through a door set ajar her half lit painted face is made visible. She is a nightclub singer, and a mother; sexuality in neo-noir has fused the erotic with the nurturing, it is an equation not at all new in psychology: Freud insists on bringing

5 Creed, 1988,

sexual arousal and the origins of sexual difference right back to the mother and child, and back further to the scene of birth. It is a juxtaposition that mainstream film and indeed, the 'subversive' neo-noir has difficulty reconciling itself to. Dorothy has been denied her domestic status by Frank, who has removed her family from the equation, enabling him to use them as leverage, but also to free her from the domestic sphere, one in which she is deeroticised. Although the family has been established as the only legitimate sphere for the fulfilment of sexual desires, it is, all the same, restrictive, perversely concealing sexuality as it legitimises it.

Lynch's neo-noir is true to classic noir in its degradation of woman. Film noir as much as it projects images of female strength, manages to undermine that strength, proving it to be negative, misguided; the net result is that a woman's strength is diminished if not entirely retracted. Woman are punished for deviant sexual behaviour, as is Dorothy. Without the constraints of the domestic situation Frank is free to enjoy and indulge in Dorothy's eroticism. He is her new farther figure her husband and son in an oedipal role play. It is a role play in which Dorothy is apparently forced to perform. But it would appear that Dorothy is the one in true control here. Despite Frank's force

> it becomes clear that she enjoys the violence - a smile of satisfaction spreads across her lips... all pleasure generated in the scene is recorded on the face of woman - it is as if a man's face is not allowed to signify sexual pleasure, only power and aggression. 5

Blue Velvet marks an innocent's education in the darker human impulses, and with it our own education in the dark side of humanity, the hidden side to family life, a teenager's nightmare projection of the dangers of adult experience: everyone is either a criminal or a victim, sex is sordid and full of complications, desire is dangerous, the solution of every mystery is the revelation of an unimaginable perversion.

Neo-noir brings its sordid world into the home, into Jeffery's home; his bruised face proves a disturbing sight at the breakfast table. Dorothy's bruised and battered figure is strikingly juxtaposed against his picket-fenced front lawn. Dorothy's naked body seems so alien in the context of the domestic setting of Sandy's home. The home acts as a shield, both to keep the bad out and to fence troubles in.

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6 Hampton, 1993, 38

7 Pfeil, in Copjec (ed), 1990, 231

8 Hampton, 1993, 38

Settings are vital in this film, the contrast between the homes of these two women is pointed, Sandy's safe environment where mother or father is always close at hand, to protect, watch over, in this case to console. Dorothy's apartment is marked with an air of fear and anticipation, further down the line we have the claustrophobic confines of the car, and the out right seediness of Ben's place. The secure domiciles of Jeffery and Sandy exist alongside and in denial of dislocated, hauntingly empty places like the wastelands, night clubs, and seedy apartments.

This is a tale of ineffectual fathers; Jeffery's invalid father, Dorothy's symbolically castrated husband, Sandy's father who fails in his attempt to conceals all that he knows from his naive wife and child. Frank is the father and the child in an oedipal role play, exposing Dorothy to the dark world he inhabits, sparing her nothing. Dorothy has taken over as guardian of her husband and child, she controls their fate, Jeffery has taken over for his father and in the oedipal triangle formed with Frank and Dorothy, he has taken over from Don and in the end Frank.

Families are impossibly idealised: the oedipal family of Frank, Dorothy and Jeffery, is the source of jealousy, violence and degradation. In *Blue Velvet*, what is made clear is that we know nothing of what goes on in family units, that is what makes the film so unsettling. *Blue Velvet* is a tale of fathers and mothers, sexual role play and transgression, set in the quintessential American small town.

Lynch's Lumberton is a "heartfelt, perverse monument to the Reagan Era's back-to-the-futurism, a period that has outlasted the false endings of 1988 and 1992, and shows no sign of abating."6

"Postmodern cultural texts .. echo and reproduce tensions and contradictions" that define a period in time, in *Blue Velvet*'s case the era in question is America of the 80s. 7 We have already addressed the ramifications of the Reaganite era of politics on 80s America. Without merely reiterating what has been said, it is vital to position Lynch's relationship to the Reagan phenomenon. Lynch shares with Reagan an obsession for "the same myth of small-town, cherry-pie America." Their visions intersect: "a story book picture of glowing nuclear families and abiding values, a shared trance of innocence."8

chapter 2 *Blue Velvet*

9 Hampton, 1993, 39

> Reagan's presidency made myth into a continuous loop, a movie composed of nothing but flashbacks; Lynch works in those gaps where the celluloid splices don't hold. 9

The ending sees Frank destroyed and Dorothy back in her 'rightful' position as mother, her sexuality is neutralised. It unites Jeffery and Sandy, the good couple, they gather with their family in the back lawn of Jeffery's home. It is the American dream, stability is restored, the robins which figured in Sandy's dream of utopia, have arrived, one sits on the window sill as Jeffery, Sandy and Aunt Barbara look on. So far it is an ending Reagan would be proud of. But the robin is a fake, as false as the idyllic ending. The bug in the beak of the robin brings us back to the implication of the opening scene; that evil lurks beneath the idyllic, Jeffery has had his eyes opened, he is acutely aware of the horrors that his small town life masks. He can only take part in this dream if he chooses to ignore the horrors that he has uncovered. The undeniable truth is that in the end whatever innocence he had is lost forever.

chapter 3

Angels and Whores

- FEMME FATALES AND OTHER WOMEN IN NEO-NOIR

"Women are defined in relation to men, and the centrality of sexuality in this definition is a key to understanding the position of women in our culture." [1]

What Janey Place doesn't acknowledge is that the converse is also true. Men as much as women are defined by their sexual relations, they are as bound by their roles, as women are, by their function in society as husbands, fathers and providers. Men need women to act out certain roles in order that they can act out their own roles. Men identify themselves in relation to women as providers, as support, as essential to women's survival. The question, to be addressed is, if women can survive without men, can men survive without the dependence of women?

This chapter addresses the relationship between men and women and the family in neo-noir. In addressing the issue it will focus on Dahl's *Last Seduction* which

> redeems the 'erotic thriller' not so much in the explicitness of the sex scenes but in its revamping of the classic noir theme of the woman who uses all her sexual powers and any other psychological advantage to bend weaker-willed men to her avaricious purpose. [2]

Film noir has always been more than conscious of the ambiguities of the sexual codes of our society. Noir has been documenting society's concerns regarding shifting gender stratification since the 40s. Whereas, in most conservative mainstream film, successful romantic love leads in the inevitable direction of marriage and family, film noir, by contrast, "is structured around the destruction or absence of romantic love and the family."[3]

There is an obvious and well documented relation between postwar gender regulation and film noir's expression of male fear and female treachery. Male fear is a fear of the decoding and destruction of the myth of the dependant female and the dependable male, and it is this fear that film noir in general, and now neo noir in particular, is obsessed with. Noir is preoccupied with restoring the family, placing deviant females back within their safe domestic confines.

Noir has a specific agenda; to reinstate order in society at large by reinstating the family. To accomplish this the deviant woman must be destroyed or placed back in the domestic sphere.

Noir affords women two extremes of stratification, two poles of female archetypes: the angel and the whore, the nurturing wife/mother and the femme fatale. The femme fatale is

1 Harvey, in Kaplan (ed), 1978, 23

2 Newman, 1993, 44

3 Harvey, cit., 25

chapter 3 Angels and whores

everything that the mother isn't, she is independent and ambitious, using her sexuality to get what she wants. By virtue of being the antithesis to the mother, the femme fatale can be seen as a threat to the family; she is out to bring a good man down, or at the very least, she won't accept her designated place in the 'natural order' of things, as subordinate partner, wife and/or mother. "Defined by their sexuality, which is presented as desirable but dangerous, the women function as an obstacle to the male quest."[4] A theme as old as Eve, the idea of the lethal seductress facilitates society's anxieties. Women are defined by their sexuality, which the femme fatale is permitted access to, to the virgin/mother access is denied. That men are not categorised in such a manner "is indicative of the phallocentric cultural viewpoint."[5]

At the other end of the spectrum the other type of women in film noir is the one who does not command our attention, the antithesis of the femme fatale, her alter ego. She is the nurturing woman, the redeemer, a bland asexual maternal figure. Her function is a salvatory one, offering the possibility of integration for the alienated man, since hers is a "stable world of secure values, roles and identities."[6] The metaphor for a stable society, the nuclear family can be seen to be a homage to ideal social structures. While both types of women may move from one pole to another, it would be impossible to maintain both positions at once. Noir is haunted by and haunting for the inconsistencies and impossibilities of the dichotomy.

The violent retribution enacted upon femme fatales bears witness to "man's desire to control and punish the object of desire" who has undermined his masculinity by arousing "his passive desires"[7] , this hypothesis is taken up at the expense of patriarchal ideology. I don't believe one can remove patriarchical constructs from the equation.

Dahl's *The Last Seduction* will facilitate the updating of the debate on the depiction of women in noir, as a remake of *Body Heat* which in turn is a remake of *Double Indemnity*, *The Last Seduction* offers a measure of the situation of the femme fatale in neo-noir in the 90s.

Presenting us, as it does with an intriguing female protagonist, in the form of Bridget (Linda Fiorentino), *The Last Seduction* gives a new slant on noir's obligatory deviant female. But where *Double Indemnity* punished its femme fatale for her transgressions and reinstated the natural superiority of hierarchical constructs, ending with a scene of male bonding, Dahl's noir lets its femme fatale get away with it.

4 Kaplan, 1978, 2-3

5 Place, in Kaplan (ed), 1978, 35

6 Ibid.

7 Hirsch, 1981, 125.

Body Heat would seem to do the same, but in actuality the film offers nothing new. It uses the conventions of noir in a nostalgic manner, weaving noir elements together without a political agenda, without sarcastic inflection. Placing its characters in a timeless America, makes it difficult to reconcile its characters and their actions with modern day America.

Matty's escape is somewhat less convincing than Bridget's. Despite it, we are left feeling that there exists some ambiguity as to the success of her crime. It is as if we are asked to believe that having gotten away with her crime she still could not be happy, the closing scene insists on placing her in the company of a new man and leaves us to ponder how free she truly is.

Bridget's motive is clear cut, it is one of greed, the film's resolution leaving her satisfied with her accomplishments. Bridget truly gets away with her crimes. The deviant female goes unpunished.

Bridget is the epitome of the femme fatale. Fiorentino in aspect is a throw-back to the femme fatales of the 40s with her Bacall-like looks. Dressed in black and white - she is a walking metaphor for the noir world; a cosmos of good and evil, of light and dark. Janey Place establishes the iconography of the femme fatale

> her long hair, cigarette smoke (as a cue for immorality), a habitat of darkness, and a domination of composition, camera movement and lighting which seems to pull the camera (and the hero's gaze with our own) irresistibly with them as they move. 8

Bridget is a women who is not reliant on men, in fact she has very little to do with them. She has removed herself from her marriage, abandoning her role as wife and therefore potential mother. Women in cinema must be understood as wives and mothers, if they are not already mothers then they have the potential to be. Fiorentino's Bridget falls into the category of the deviant woman, the one who refuses to be defined as a domestic creature. Bridget has run out on her husband, whom she has double-crossed in a drug deal, a crime she conceived of and he carried out. In her new relationship, a rather one sided affair with a local of Beston (the one-horse town that she stumbled upon and is hiding out in), her motives are clearly defined, her interest is in physical gratification. As she puts it, (weighing up his assets) she's looking for "a certain horse-like quality".

Their horse conversation recalls the infamous horse racing conversation between Bogart and Bacall in *The Big Sleep*,

8 Place, in Kaplan (ed), 1978, 35

(Hawks, 1946) where, because the production code mitigated against blatant sexual references, sexual overtones are all pervasive. *In The Last Seduction* sex and sexuality are treated in an upfront manner, despite the fact that the production code has been obsolete for years, it is still unusual to hear an open discussion of sex on screen, or rather one from a woman's point of view. Bridget is permitted to openly discuss her sexual desires. It is not just the freedom with which she speaks that is unique, but the fact that she can get away with saying it.

This is not merely a case of role reversal, at least it is not of the kind that we see in Thelma and Louise (Scott,1991) where a 'male' genre is given female protagonists who quite simply take on male attributes, acting out what is little more than male fantasy.

Bridget is the realisation of male fears, she is everything noir in the 40s tried so hard to eradicate. She is smart, ruthlessly ambitious, and worst of all independent.
Independence is the problem here. The primary crime of the liberated women is in refusing to adhere to such definitions and this is interpreted as "an attack on men's very existence." 9

Women in noir have always managed to "derive power, not weakness from their sexuality." 10 Bridget's sexuality is her ultimate weapon. She doesn't have to take up arms, she uses her body, and her wits. Her sexual transgressions go unpunished, but someone must pay the price, in neo-noir that would seem to be the lot of the men.
In this noir of the 90s, it is the men who are punished for their transgressive sexual behaviour. Bridget uses her feminine strengths, and turns the trappings of femininity against men; she bakes cookies and dons an apron in a comical effort to rid herself of the detective who is spying on her, later to rid herself of his nuisance she has the police arrest him, claiming that he had flashed his "do-da" (as she so delicately puts it) at a child. Bridget has the capacity to act as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, her sweetness act verges on the comical, but it is saved by Fiorentino's underlying air of contempt. It is a convincing portrayal that leaves the viewer believing with Bridget that "the fools she dupes are not worth the effort of a really convincing imposture." 11
The perceived notions of feminine weakness are turned around to work to her advantage. She insists on declaring that she is a battered wife, then goes on to profess her ambition to rid the world of philandering husbands, (or at least select regions of the States, for profit of course).

9 Place, in Kaplan (ed), 1978, 44

10 Ibid., 35

11 Newman, 1995, 44

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12 Rich, 1995, 9

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 10

15 Jeffords, in Collins (ed), 1993, 197

Bridget's sexual games prove most effective when turned on Mike. Mike in contrast to Bridget appears week and naive, he is susceptible to anything she cares to tell him. Bridget has promised to take Mike away from his small town existence, so that they can build a life for themselves in New York. Her condition is that Mike proves to her that theirs is a 'relationship of equals' - Bridget's term, her definition of which, involves Mike committing a murder because she apparently has. He is under the impression that he is doing away with a wife beating, wife cheating husband.

Mike is too easily duped. He is of the sort of man that B. Ruby Rich refers to as a "dumb lug". 12 Rich provides a cynical approach to the new 90s man. Rich analyses the strange environment of postmodern America, a society where knowledge is akin to elitism, where dumb is good, exemplified in the Forest Gump (Zemekis, 1995) phenomenon, Bevis and Butthead and Dumb and Dumber (Farrelly, 1994). Within this atmosphere Rich reveals that men "are patsies just like they were in the old days of noir, but now they're ennobled by their idiocy, with the women in turn demonised by their intelligence" 13 These dumb lugs are "accorded a morality denied to the women." 14 Any society that promotes ignorance is in a dangerous state.

Examining film in the 90s it would appear that there is a conscious effort to portray men as having undergone their own transformation. Susan Jeffords recognises the trend in mainstream films in 91 listing: *City Slickers* (Underwood), *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (Cameron) and *Regarding Henry* (Nichols). Where

> the hard-boiled male action heroes of the 80s have given way to a kinder, gentler U.S. manhood, one that is sensitive, generous, caring and perhaps most importantly capable of change. 15

It would appear that conservative film in response to the threat of women in the workplace and in society at larger is suggesting that men can do the job of mother as well as that of father, the *Kramer vs Kramer* (Benton, 1979) syndrome emerges in the 90s with proving that they can do the job of father and mother. In neo-noir, men are are not allowed the liberty to indulge in ideas of fatherhood. Mike is punished for aspiring to fill the roles that his mainstream counterparts in the 90s are filling. His desire is to be set free from his small town confines, seeing Bridget as his way out. His aspiration is to settle down, wanting more out of their relationship than sex, he insists on wanting to talk. Such aspirations are taken as signs of weakness by Bridget. He is defined by Bridget as her "designated fuck," quite simply, he is useful to have around.

It is Mike's sexuality that is turned against him in the end, his secret past comes to haunt him; his marriage to a transvestite, an impulsive affair, which he chalks up to bad judgement. His is a past marked by sexual ambiguity. In the end his 'rape' of Bridget seals his fate, his transgressive sexuality once again turned against him by Bridget. By the end of *The Last Seduction,* Bridget has disposed of her husband and her lover, and claimed all the money for herself. The final scenes see Mike languishing in jail, unable to prove his innocence, as Bridget, having removed all evidence of her activities, rides off into the sunset.

The problems of marriage, spousal abuse, infidelity, are drawn on by Bridget, she plays on society's concerns about transgressive sexual behaviour, homosexuality, cross dressing, rape, indecent exposure and even general sexual harassment.

"Film noir is hardly 'progressive,' ... it does not present us with role models who defy their fate and triumph over it."[16] Such may be true of classic noir, but in neo-noir Bridget defies the odds and her fate, she gets away with her crime, she succeeds, where her 40s counterparts failed, in proving her independence. But noir in the 90s can not be called progressive, Bridget may have gotten away with it but she is certainly not a role model. Neo-noir, it would seem can find no role models, no heroes. Alas, although a captivating character, Bridget is hardly someone we can identify with. This femme fatales' display of power is depraved and motivated solely by greed. Bridget may succeed but at what cost? Hollywood demands even still that she must pay a price, Bridget's price is her humanity. Despite her wit and charm she is, by her own admission, 'a self-serving bitch.'

Examining the femme fatale in relation to the family, it would appear that she is the mother that never was, the deviant housewife, the undomesticated creature. She may have escaped the kitchen but it would seem as if a woman's place is destined always to be in the wrong.

16 Place, in Kaplan (ed), 1978, 35

conclusion

Pre-millennium tension

- A HAPPY ENDING FOR THE NUCLEAR FAMILY ?

1 Brown, 1996, 44

2 Wrathall, 1995, 50

3 Brown, 1996, 45

4 Taubin, 1995, 23

5 Ibid.

6 Wrathall, 1995, 50

As society disintegrates noir flourishes. Neo-noir in the 90s, has much to contend with, reflecting the same fears and anxieties that noir did before it, but in a more desperate climate where these fears have intensified. Fears of crime, of social disintegration, suspicions of corruption and betrayal, anxieties of shifting gender roles, such are the concerns of neo-noir and to add to these: the paranoia that is the by-product of an approaching millennium.

The neo-noir city has never been so desolate, the noir detective never so helpless as in David Fincher's bleak *Seven*. The film plays on pre-millennium tensions, reflecting the fatalistic atmosphere, transforming local anxieties into universal concerns and finds itself unable to arrive at any solutions.

Fincher has created in *Seven* "the ultimate urban nightmare," pitting two detectives, Sommerset and Mills, against a biblically inspired serial killer, who is out to punish the perpetrators of the seven deadly sins in a manner fitting their transgression.1 This neo-noir setting is "a nameless warren of damp corridors, subterranean sex joints and dilapidated tenements.,"2 "a temporally ambiguous netherland in which noir really means black and all the grim shades of gray that surround it."3 Fincher "brings forth an acrid vision of post-industrial decay - all dank greens and browns, the light filtered through pelting rain and smog so yellow you can taste it."4 *Seven* sets itself up as a prophecy of social collapse, projecting images of destruction and disintegration, tackling universal themes of entropy, of the physical and moral decay of a city and its inhabitants. As the corpses pile up, a question is raised by the seemingly insignificant character of Mills' wife Tracy. Her concern for her unborn child finds her questioning the ethics of bringing a child into the urban chaos that surrounds her. Tracy's character is an angel out of place in this era: a dutiful wife, a school teacher, an expectant mother, she holds the hope for the future, but proves to be all too pure for this noir world. Tracy is "a saint of domesticity right out of of John Ford. Though she hates and fears the city, she stands by her man."5 In this modern climate where there's a deadly sin on every street corner the family hasn't got a chance. The closure of *Seven* sees the family destroyed before it even got started. The film's astoundingly bleak ending "brilliantly subverts the ingrained Hollywood cliché."6
A happy ending can form no part of this closure.

7 Wrathall, 1995, 50

8 Taubin, 1995, 23

9 Ibid.

Seven is laden with symbolism. The emergence, now, of a parable of deadly sins would seem to coincide with the present conservative climate, but any idea that *Seven* jumps on the conservative band wagon in its preaching of moral decay, with its biblical references and themes of sins and redemption, would be misguided. The avenging angel here is the villain. Religious fundamentalism is just another symptom not the solution (a comment perhaps, on recent extreme examples of religious fundamentalism, on events such as those at Waco). The seven deadly sins can easily be read as the personifications of consumer capitalist culture, of the excesses of the 80s that have spilled over into the 90s. It would seem that there is little hope of redemption, it is too late to repent. In *Seven*

> man is corrupt, and cities are cesspools of contagion, spreading sin faster than TB. Forget the inequities of class and race, we're all sinners, and urban blight is the Lord's décor for the gates of hell. 7

This film is a fight between good and evil, but there is no contest. Morgan Freeman's worldweary detective Sommerset, is a man "with a humanist understanding of history,"8 who "knows he's no match for the evil that's taking over. All he can do is stand by, grave and powerless. A witness rather than an action hero, he's our point of identification."9 *Seven* presents a pessimistic vision of the future for the family within a society rank with corruption and evil. *Seven* tackles the theme of good and evil, and loses. It is a futile fight. Man's inability to control his fate spreads out into a tale of society out of control. If the family is no longer the marker for a society, what alternative is left in it's place? Neo-noir would seem to suggest that society is descending into chaos.

Film reflects society, noir in particular reflects society's concerns. It is subversive in the sense that it says what is either unpleasant or unpopular to say. *Blue Velvet* says that the American dream is flawed, that happy families aren't necessarily that happy, that evil permeates the surface of small town America.
Such ideas are not all that new, but what is new is the ability to express such ideas in the arena of popular entertainment. For Lynch neo-noir is a tool of expression, to Dahl it is the femme fatale that fascinates, and the ambiguities of gender regulation that she embodies. *Seven* looks to the

noir world, for visual and thematic inspiration, seeing family as an inevitable casualty of social disintegration, having constructed in *Seven* the ultimate fin-de-siécle nightmare there can be no happy ending.

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