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The Visceral Image of Film Noir

by

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION

I propose in this study to examine how the image in film noir may be more relevant and of greater significance than the narrative. Film noir is significant in its divergence from the classical Hollywood narrative film and in its combination of an interplay of polarities-- light and shadow, truth and distortion, order and chaos, fantasy and reality--things are not as they seem, uncertainty replaces truth, and expectation is heightened. Through the physicality of the image the audience is engaged on a deeper, more intimate and more visceral level-- they are riveted by the image. The various techniques used--chiaroscuro lighting, rich black shadows, the use of space within the frame--create unexpected images with subtle, disturbing emotional undercurrents playing tricks on perceptions and resulting in the embodiment of deeper, instinctual forces.

After the second world war, the term film noir was coined by French film critics to describe many American films that had been made during the war. They were struck by the dark mood and tone of the films, that were linked thematically to crime novels published in the thirties and forties. Many American critics saw it as a particular style, a form of expressionism. Film noir could be described as a crime film, with corrupt characters, generally in a middle class, urban setting. Its mood and tone is one of fatalism and paranoia, often created and emphasised by its dramatic lighting and shadowplay. Film noir has consistently reappeared time after time in cinema and is not restricted to a particular period. It resists conforming to the label of a genre often crossing genres, e.g. the black comedy, and this, I believe, is due to the strength of the imagery.

Chapter one traces the influence of German expressionist films and the American films of the twenties examining specifically, THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI (Weine, 1919, GDR) and SUNRISE(Murnau, 1927, US), on the development of the noir look. It also studies the origins of the classical narrative film and how film noir diverges from them.

The particular look of film noir is the focus in chapter two, and the techniques used to create the image, particular that of the femme fatale.

Chapter three concentrates on the visceral image, what essentially defines it and, how the image is considered in film theory. An analysis of the origins of film theory is also carried out. Throughout the study I hope to illustrate the depth and vitality of the image, and its ability to move and arouse the spectator.

CHAPTER ONE

"A LANGUAGE FAR MORE COMPLEX THAN WORDS"

(Hall, Visions of Light, 1992)

After seeing THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI (Weine, 1919, GDR)Carl Sandburg stated it had the power "to affect audiences just as a sea voyage affects a shipload of passengers, some have to leave the top deck unable to stand the sight or smell of the sea. Others take the air and spray, the salt and chill and call the trip an exhilaration...." (Sandburg, 52, 1996). Exhilarating is without doubt an apt term for Weine's film. SUNRISE (Murnau, 1927, US) opened to rave reviews in America seven years after THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGIARI. It received Oscars for Best Actress, Cinematography, and Artistic Quality of Production 1927-28. Just as Weines' film stood out in 1920, "Sunrise" epitomised American film making of the time, both having a distinctly expressionist edge that continues to be very influential. One of the celebrated feats of SUNRISE is its fusion of American and European aspirations, exemplified in the blend of expressionism with the impressionists touch, succeeds in creating one of the great aesthetic achievements in cinema. (Rayns, 93, 1975) Both films were technically silent in that there was no spoken dialogue, allowing the imagery to command.

The visual impact of both films was tremendous. CALIGARI deviated from naturalistic or realistic film--making with it's garish lighting and stylised decor, it captured the mood, tone and look of German expressionism. Hermann Warm in his essay "Gegen die Caligiari Legenden" describes the images as being "like visionary nightmares", as no real structural elements could be recognised. Instead, eccentric painting corresponding to the subject dominated the screen." (Neumann, 51, 1996)

The expressionist style illuminates the terror within the story narrated by Francis. In the narration, he recounts how Jane, previously the object of his and his friends desire, developed her trance like condition. This condition came about through her experiences with the side show exhibitionist Caligiari and his show piece the somnambulist Cesare who is able to predict the future.

The setting for the actions is a small country fair. The town, the fair, and the interiors are portrayed with exaggerated perspective, extreme of contrasts of light and shadow, thus creating an overall semblance of distortion. (See figures 1 and 2.) The only naturalistic element is the costume of most of the characters apart from Caligiari, Cesare and that of Jane, who appears caught between realism and expressionism . Francis' credibility as a narrator is dubious, as by the end of the film he is revealed to be an inmate of the mental asylum where Caligiari is the director. The film is rife with contradictions, that are supported by the juxtaposition of the stylised settings and the realistic appearance of the majority of the characters. The spectator is presented with at least two view points: Francis is mad, therefore not credible or he is sane and a reliable source as he appears throughout the film. (White, 455, 1990) The spectator is unable to identify were the truth lies so the immediate response is to the image. As Tucholsky notes the power of the imagery is conveyed in the shadow play: "a murder becomes visible - as a play of shadows on a grey wall and shows once again how something imagined is more horrible than anything shown." (Neumann, 52, 1996)

Expressionism as described by Paul Coates is "reality permeated and sometimes-utterly enveloped--by fantasy...the focus upon the individual seems to ultimately

Figure 1: Scene from THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI

Figure 2: Scene from THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI

render it anti-- narrative." (1991, 156) Expressionist art was part of a move toward modernism[1] in culture and art, that occurred at the beginning of the century. Surrealism, Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism and Constructivism, were reactions against traditional artistic methods and styles. The conventional was attacked: realism, order, unity, balance and harmony, were replaced with disunity and disorder. The world was portrayed in a more subjective way than previously, when the dominant way of representation was to objectify. The revolution in the art world was part of, and a response to larger political and social changes ; the rise of industrial capitalism, the mass movement of people from rural to urban areas and rapid growth of cities, all produced a new class of city workers whose interests were often in conflict with those of the dominant middle class. Those involved in the arts and culture were extremely sensitive to the chaotic unstable world where their work became in one sense a commodity, subject to the rigours of an irrational market. Modernists are concerned with mainly artistic issues while the avant-garde[2] blend social change and political alliance into its art. Although expressionism is considered avant-garde, the elements which influenced CALIGARI and many other German films were, in general the least political and avant-garde. (Budd, 13, 1990) Erich Pommer, head of DECLA the production company that made CALIGARI explained how the distinctive style of German films could, in part be attributed to the German film industry's need to make money and compete with Hollywood. As it was post

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[1] Modernism, is represented in imaginative creations, constructions, and compositions to often the point of distortion of humanity and reality. It reflects the decline of religious and liberal certainties.

[2]Avant Garde, is a group, especially those in the arts considered to be more advanced than their contemporaries due to experiment, and innovation in technique, form etc..

world war 1 it would not imitate Hollywood, but instead developed a new and different style.

A review in 1921 suggested, that the films principal weak point was the "contrast between the strict impressionistic nature of the setting and the stern realistic nature of the human actors on the screen destroys the dramatic unity of each individual scene laid before our eyes.." (Budd, 38,1990) It has a fundamentally conventional narrative that is in conflict with the expressionist imagery. It could be suggested that although the unity is destroyed, the film corresponds to the "cinema of attractions" as described by Tom Gunning. It displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator. This "attraction" was established in the early cinema of the century, when the dominant element of cinema was not the narrative but the creation of a spectacle. The first spectators of cinema were satisfied by films, that engaged them through a "marked encounter, a direct stimulus, a succession of shocks". (Gunning,124,1994) The pioneers of film had to be showmen/exhibitonists, for their audience were accustomed to viewing experiences that fundamentally were driven by a form of curiosity, that had developed through watching freak shows, vaudeville theatre. Vaudeville is especially relevant, in the earliest days of film shorts appeared within the vaudeville show, often showing exotic locations, images of the unusual which were actualities. It was exhibitionist cinema. Early cinema adopted parks, fairgrounds and theatres as the exhibition areas.

CALIGARI's narrative ruptures itself leaving the audience confused, bewildered and responding to the imagery. From the artificiality of the scenario to Caligiari's

glances towards the audience, it has an illusory power. This power is similar to that described by Dai Vaughan in reference to the Lumiere Bros. exhibition of one minute scenes in Paris Dec. 1895. L'ARRIVEE DUN TRAIN shows a scene of a train pulling into a station whose particular combinations of a visual signals had no previous existence other than signifying a real train pulling into a station it was an actuality. It was not subject to any narrative structure. Essentially the audience respond to the expressionist signals in CALIGARI, due to the confusing nature of its narrative.

SUNRISE was scripted by Carl Mayer, who had also written THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI. Its cinematography was by Charles Rosher and Karl Strauss. Rosher and Strauss were influenced by Mayer and his expressionistic vision. The film has been described as a

> "Watershed startling in every aspect, in its design and use of expressionist lighting techniques. Character is revealed in "Sunrise" through a lot of complicated lighting changes, dramatic lighting sources that were very new and fresh in American films." (Bailey, Vision of Light, 1992)

Rosher described Mayer as being obsessed with capturing light and its movement; dim light, flooded light in both country and city scenes. The visual imagery is more subtle than that of Caligiari but it is as effective. The physical appearance of everything was considered the facial and gestural qualities of the characters and the effect of the background light of shadow. In the restaurant scene when the couple grasp each other, they are oblivious to everything, the background moves from being realistic to surrealistic; - the other diners become a misty subdued glow

where figures seem to dance. (See figures 3 and 4) Rodney Farnsworth described each scene as contriving to have a mood of its own.

The action in SUNRISE moves from the country to the city, it is the story of a city woman who has an affair a young married farmer, she tries to persuade him to kill his wife and live with her. He fails to go through with his plan, his wife impulsively boards a tram to the city, he follows her and they are reunited, as they return to the country their boat capsizes, he believes he has lost her but she is rescued. The imagery used, shows the fear that paralyses the couple when they move from there natural country environment to the bright lights of the city as they find the way back to each other. It has a neurotic paranoid edge and mood that culminates in film noir. It has a number of motifs that prefigures those in noir including the city vamp an antecedent of the femme fatale, the use of urban and rural and night and day as metaphors. Murnau conveys the hero's deranged and anguished mental state through his attraction for and apprehension of the city, contrasted with the safe haven that the rural environment represents. Its use of this imagery in film noir metaphorically will be further discussed in chapter 2.

Both SUNRISE and CALIGARI were silent[3], which is significant as it meant the camera was free to move fluidly as there was no need for microphones. The camera was completely unrestricted, it was not limited or dictated to by the demands of sound. Dialogue was observed through the use of inter titles, everything was told

[3] Silent in that there was no spoken dialogue although silent films usually had some form of musical accompaniment;" mood music basically, making the images more atmospheric, intensifying the emotional impact....providing a sense of complicity" (King, 31, 1996)

Figure 3: Scene from SUNRISE

Figure 4: Scene from SUNRISE

visually. Cinematography defines the look, style and language of a film, it has the power to animate and vitalise. The silent films of the twenties are considered to represent a golden age for camera man and cinematographers as the camera was "unencumbered by all the devices that accompany verbal dialogue storytelling". (Bailey, Visions of Light, 1992)

Paul Coates calls sound a "tyrant" that invades an area where silent film had reached depths of material, beyond that of linguistic rationalisation. (Coates, 18, 1991) Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) a character in SUNSET BOULEVARD (Wilder, 1950, US)--a story of a former screen icon of the silent period trying to regain her past glory--succintly distinguishes between the silent and the talking picture: "We didn't need dialogue. We had faces". The films of the silent era often have a visual edge, that goes beyond the narrative. The images could be taken out of the context of the narrative, yet remaining powerful in their own right. They were not dominated by the narrative. There remains in SUNRISE and THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI a conflict between the "desire to display and the desire to tell a story". (Gunning, 123, 1994)

With the advent of sound, the classical Hollywood film came into its own, although strictly speaking the classical narrative film is generally accepted to have been basically formed by 1915, prior to that is considered the "primitive" period. Sound brought with it realism, that ultimately detracted from the image. The narrative asserted dominance while the image was subordinated. The "primitive" period began with the commercial origins of cinema i.e. as a vaudeville attraction, the appeal of films of this time was in part as Gunning notes, their sheer novelty of them.

The non-fiction film dominated, the audience was drawn by innovative moving photography of Lumiere and Melies. The American narrative film developed from around 1909 onwards, through the combination of the vaudeville, creating a series of visual attractions, drawing on parts of the fiction novel and of popular legitimate theatre, aligned with specific cinematic devices, close ups ,the long shot, editing etc. Cinema developed the aim to function as a storytelling medium. The urge to recreate reality was strong and sound enhances realism. Yet this realism is contradictory for the whole notion of cinema and film making is artificial. The realism of the Hollywood classical narrative film has been attributed to Hollywoods use of a general narrative procedure in which a series of events are constructed as consequential, where the spectator views the cause and effect through consecutive sequences thus creating a logical sequence of meaning. (Ellis, 76, 1989) This use of the procedure generally, meant that the audience could familiarise themselves with the system.

Hollywood classics were not all the same; in order to attract an audience there had to be variety, this led to the development of genres. The classic detective, heterosexual love story, the western and comedy/drama, through each of these genres ran identifiable conventions: the visual imagery, the plot, the characters and the setting. A fantastical world was created in which the industry could predict the audiences expectation and the spectator could identify certain points of reference, thus allowing themselves to become emeshed in the film.

> the spectator ... has of the necessity to allow him--or herself to be subjected to a process of multiple (and fluctuating) subjective positioning--identifying, for example, with different positions of desire structured through the narrative,

with the goals of specific characters and with the viewpoint of the camera or the authorial voice". (Krutnik, 6-7 1991)

This conveys the orderliness of the classical Hollywood film. The risk involved with classical mainstream Hollywood is minimal the sequence of events generally followed a set procedure, so that even when a disruption occurs it is addressed and brought back into line. (Krutnik, 7, 1991)

Film noir contradicts this on many levels. It reintroduces the chaos that sound initially seemed to harness, time and the truth becomes confused. The voice over adds another dimension to the narrative. In the noir world nothing is ever as it seems. It combines paranoid angst, sleepness nights, dark shadows and femme fatales. The visual style of film noir in many ways defines it. The inability among theorists to decide what film noir actually is proves how many different levels it works on, it is a slippery term that has been variously described as: a mood, a tone, a movement, or a genre. It has, in my opinion, such a strong a visual image that it is essential to consider the visuals as being as important, if not more so than the narrative. Krutnik questions the validity of such a position stating that "descriptive accounts of the noir style tend to be highly generalized--highlighting sets of features which are by no means specific to film noir...the noir style tends to be more a disparate series of stylistic markings which can be seen as noir when they occur in conjunction with sets of narrative and thematic conventions and narrational process." (Krutnik, 19, 1991) He supports this by noting that the compositional imbalance, chiaroscuro lighting, the night for night shots, the features identified by Schrader are shared by many genres and eras.

Although the visuals are used to enhance and increase drama within the narrative when the narrative is running out of control, the imagery takes on a greater dimension, which the audience responds to. Film theorists develop a barely contained panic at the possibility of the presence of evocative visual forms. (Shaviro, 13.5, 1993) This is reitarated by the fact that narrative has been over theorised to the detriment of the image in film theory. This will be discussed in chapter 3.

One cannot disregard film noirs roots in the pulp fiction and the hard boiled crime novels of the 20s and 30s, which are relevant and important. It is the visual connections in film as a visual medium and their contribution to the images in film noir that I hope to have illustrated.

Though the conflict between the image and the narrative occurs to some extent, across all the various genres, due to the expressionistic nature of much of film noir, the image reaches certain high points. Coates description of the narrative as being a "process of mediation between opposites, then expressionism's focus upon the isolated individual may seem to render it antinarrative." (1991, 156) Expressionist art reached a high point within painting, for there it remains frozen in time in a visual nightmare with no intrusion by a narrative aspect. The narrative shows expressionism, as being a hostile relationship between the ego and alter-ego. This same representation occurs time and again in film noir, especially with regard to femme fatale, which will be discussed later. In the following chapter I will discuss the distinctive visual look of film noir.

CHAPTER TWO

"A DENSE AND RAREFIED VISUAL VOCABULARY"

(Deviau, Visions of Light, 1992)

Described as having a "primal simplicity", (Hall, Visions of Light, 1992) the visual look of film noir is a hybrid of impressionist, expressionist and realist imagery. Obscure figures emerge from shadows and retreat into darkness. The noir world comes to life at night. Whether the film is situated in a city, a small town, on the road, its initial appearance of calm normality, is blown away in an instant and is replaced by claustrophobic paranoid air. The shadows cast during daylight suggest an uneasiness, that is rendered voluminous by the darkness of night . The logical and ordered reasoning of most classic narrative Hollywood films cannot be applied to film noir. Points of reference within its narrative become obscure becoming overpowered by the visual image, events are often not constructed as consequential or coherently. The spectator is frequently bewildered by events, rationality does not exist in film noir, or if it does, it is weakened and becomes inverted. The male position in particular, is frequently weakened within the film, the voice over is an attempt to reassert his position. It also deviated from the classical narrative film in the cinematography, its use of lighting and framing techniques which it manipulated for its own means. Classical Hollywood was using high key lighting dominantly; which illuminates all of the aspects of the frame, while balancing the light with a fill light, that diffused the harsh light of the key light to create a balanced realistic attractive effect, while differentiating between the character and the background with out using to much contrast, the Hollywood impression of reality.

Noir films used predominantly low key lighting with little diffusion from the fill-light to the key light, thus creating areas of great contrast, through startling light and rich dark shadows. The character on whom the light is focused is exposed through the shifts and nuances of light changes. John Alton, a highly influential cinematographer, claimed he could see more in the dark than he could in colour. He has been described as pushing film noir to its most exciting visual extremes. (McCarthy, 9, 1995)

Alton said of the characters in the film T-MEN (Mann, 1945, America), they were "people not afraid of the dark". (Alton, Visions of Light, 1992) In one particular scene from the film, on which Alton was cinematographer, the victim is trapped in the steam room, the powerlessness of the situation overcoming him is shown by rising steam, and the extreme black of the silhouette frantically moving around the room. As Tucholsky had said of the ominous shadows in CALIGARI suggesting a presence can often be more terrifying than what is actually shown this is one of the most fearful effective aspects of film noir. The same horror is suggested by the ominous shadows on the walls of the swimming pool in CAT PEOPLE (Tourneur, 1942, US), and the play of reflective lights on the water. (See Figures 5 and 6) The sense of tension of an unseen and threatening presence, speaks equally as loudly as the protagonist's screams. In doing so it creates a psychological horror as opposed to physical.

In SUNSET BOULEVARD, the chief female character Norma Desmond an ageing femme fatale, but fatal nevertheless is first shown through shades of blinds, she

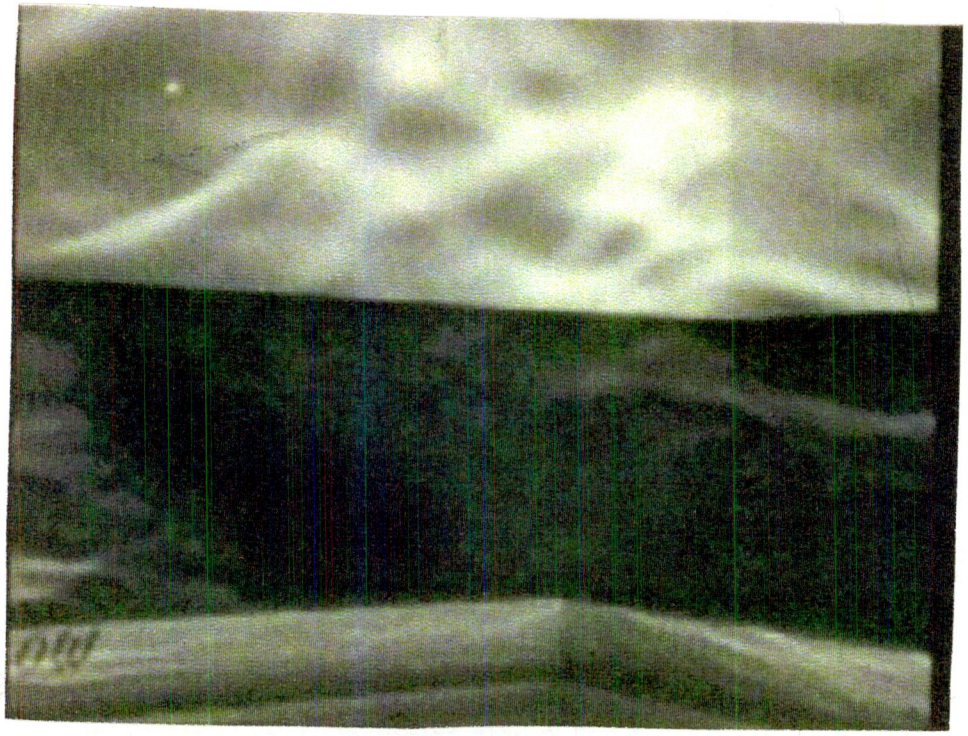

Figure 5: a scene from CAT PEOPLE

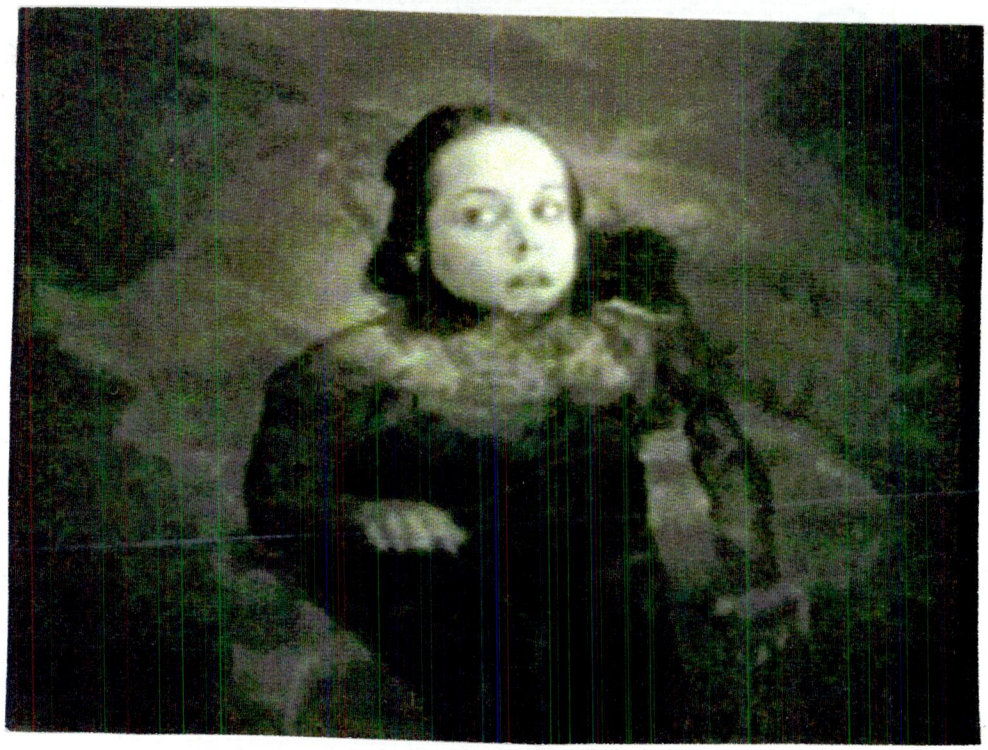

Figure 6: a scene from CAT PEOPLE

emerges from darkness, with a starkly contrasting face. (See Figure 7) John F. Setz was the cinematographer. He lit Gloria Swanson in a theatrical fashion: starkly bright and garish, particularly in close up shots and as the film proceeds her gestures and appearance become more and more theatrical, reminiscent of the silent screen siren she once was, and is trying to recapture. (See Figure 8) Betty, Norma's rival for Joes love, is lit in a much more realistic fashion without stark contrasts and with diffused light. Joe and Betty fitted the ideal of the normal attractive Hollywood couple. While with Norma, Joe plays the role of the kept man, this is an unusual portrayal of a relationship by Hollywood standards of the time . The film has many autobiographical aspects, Gloria Swanson's career as Norma Desmond's career declined shortly after the advent of sound. Eric Smoodin said the film held "a reflecting glass to the industry", it portrayed the ruthless cruelty of Hollywood and parodied the industry's fickle attitude to image, particularly the acceptable images of women, through Norma's attempts to rejuvenate herself by having plastic surgery and Betty underlines this fickleness by the fact she had a nose job.

When the Classic Hollywood screen sirens, were photographed they were portrayed in an extremely complimentary attractive fashion, they were lit in a diffused gauzy frame creating an air of femininity, the cinematographer was always intent on showing the actress at her best. The noir heroine /femme fatale was not enveloped in softness and diffusion, she was exposed as having a tough, harsh sometimes aggressive cold beauty, whose attributes leant more toward seduction than one who was waiting to be wooed. The eponymously named protagonist of GILDA (Vidor,1946, US), is a seductive femme fatale who is an articulation of many male fears and anxieties. She has a seductive beauty and mystique that threatens to upset

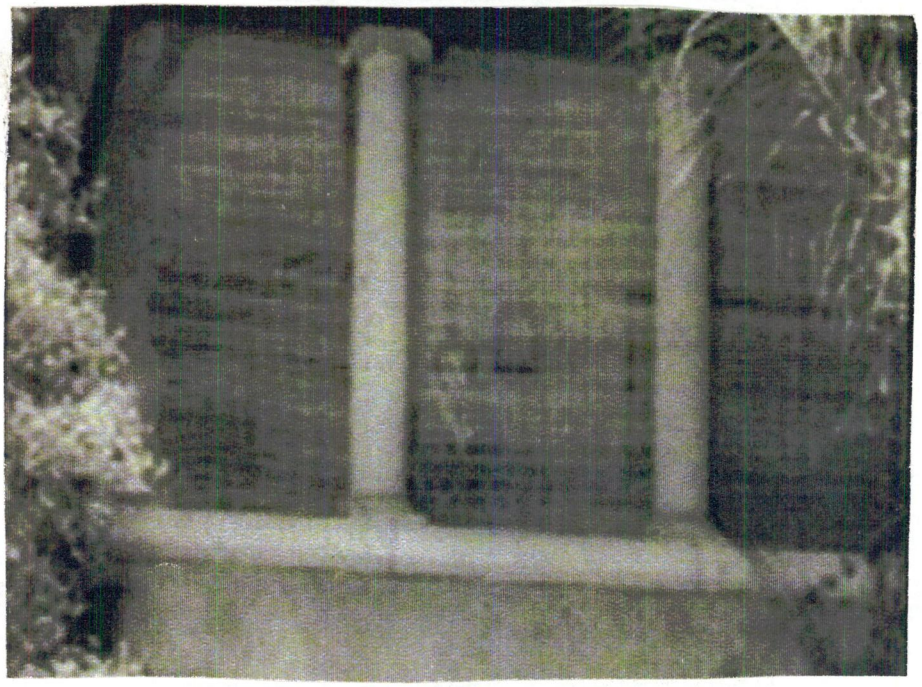

Figure 7: a scene from SUNSET BOULEVARD

Figure 8: a scene from SUNSET BOULEVARD

the equilibrium of the male dominated world. Johnny, her former lover, aptly observes "it looks like one thing and then right in front of your eyes, it becomes another thing." Gilda is photographed in a number of interesting ways, the frame prior to the first image of her was empty, in the first shot of her the camera moves upwards following her as she tosses her hair back violently, she seems to rise into it, occupying its space, it introduces her as a major character. She sings her signature song "Put the Blame on Mame" a song which attributes many of lifes various calamities to women, twice in the film, in very different ways. (Doane, 104, 1991) In the following chapter I discuss how the female voice is often silenced. The mood and tone, how she is lit, changes on each occasion, in the first there are close ups of her in soft focus alternated with medium shots of her and Uncle Pio. The second sequence is more public and takes the form of a striptease although she removes only a glove and necklace, there is greater contrast in the lighting she appears much brighter and garish. She essentially portrays a seductive sensuousness, although without the unwavering hardness of a femme fatale like Phylis Dietrichson of DOUBLE INDEMNITY (Wilder, 1947, America)

Barbara Stanwyck as Phylis Dietrichson is the archetypal femme fatale. She is a cold, calculating, beautiful, fatal woman, driven by her own relentless greed, those who come in contact with her never remain unscathed, particularly men duped by her beauty and assumed innocence. Her image is cool and statuesque. When Walter Neff(Fred McMurray) enters her house it is a bright sunny day, and the smell of honeysuckle is in the air, she first appears at the top of the stairs wrapped in a white towel, lit naturally, this shot is shown from Walters point of view. (See Figure 9) As the film develops, her shadow enters the frame until eventually becoming the

Figure 9: a scene from DOUBLE INDEMNITY

dominant element: the sequence in the house as she is sitting in darkness waiting to murder Walter.

Thomas Docherty describes the

> lighting in noir films through its dependence upon having a body between the source of light and the surface upon which a shadow is projected, stressing the three-dimensiality of the narrative space of the film. (Docherty, 22, 1996) it emphasises the physicality of the image. The noir cinematographers varied their use of light as much as possible. The lighting has been described as "anti-traditional", in classical Hollywood the key-light often remained high and to one side of the camera in order to abet in maintaining as realistic an image as possible. In noir the key light moved around thus creating unnatural shadows, textures and tensions. Unusual light sources were often used, for instance in THE BIG COMBO (1955, US)the final shot is lit by a single light source, a searchlight against which a gunfight if taking place and finally just two silhouettes walk into a grey dawn. Many of the night scenes in film noir, were filmed during actual night using an artificial light for contrast. While Hollywood filmed nightscenes during daytime by placing a filter over the cameras lens, to create the illusion of night by restricting the light into the frame. Shooting during daytime, gave a grey darkness as opposed to the rich black skies of film noir. In Robert Aldrich's KISS ME DEADLY (1955 US), the chief female protagonist emerges running from the dark shadows of night, she is lit dramatically by the bright headlights of an oncoming car. The lighting is isolated, coming from one source and is expressionist in style.

It is this expressionist style, the striking opposites of light and dark, and the dominating space they occupy within the frame that makes film noir distinctive. Darkness in some cases often monopolises the whole screen. Noir is the city at night, it haunts the foreboding places, portending blackness and delirium for all caught in its grasp. In DETOUR, (Tourneour, 1946, US) its chief protagonist become the victim of fate, the film progresses from day to night, night becomes a living nightmare, he becomes trapped by incidents beyond his control: the death of the driver, to the death of the female hitchhiker, much of what occurs in film noir is beyond reason or rationale. DETOUR contains one of the most effective uses of the camera to portray the angst ridden state of the hero's mind,. In the sequence shot in the motel bedroom, after his discovery of the dead women, the camera moves haphazardly around the room moving in and out of focus, thus reflecting the protagonist as the wronged man, as described by Krutnik. He is a victim, his masculinity is undermined as he is not in control of the situation.

Film noir did not end with the advent of Technicolour. During the forties and fifties, both colour and black and white films were being shot. Technicolour was a three strip technique that produced all the colours, while previously for colour a two strip had been used, which did not show the colour blue. Colour was usually used for period dramas and musicals. In 1945 LEAVE HER TO HEAVEN (Stahl, US) was made in Technicolour. It was the first film noir in colour. Technicolour gave another dimension to the visual style of film noir - it added surrealism, and a "flamboyance" that was "only effective if the magic was carried by vision". (Scorcese) The colour element of noir added vividness to the physicality of the image. In LEAVE HER TO HEAVEN, before Gene Tierney's character throws

herself down the stairs in an attempt to kill her unborn child, the camera focuses on her face her lips are bright red and her eyes are piercing, it then moves to a shot of her feet, one foot in a shoe and the other with brightly painted nails is revealed, the end of her blue night-dress is at the top of the frame, the shot is very sensual and tactile. (See Figure 10)

The shadows did not fade with colour. This is shown from LEAVE HER TO HEAVEN through to VERTIGO, TAXI DRIVER, KILL ME AGAIN, BLUE VELVET, and recently with THE LAST SEDUCTION and SEVEN, to name but a few. TAXI DRIVER', a seventies noir relocates the noir elements. The script -writer Paul Schrader, describes Travis' psyche as combination of hero and anti-hero played by as "a dark shadow amongst darker shadows, a lone wolf drifting in and out of New York city life".(Schrader, 9, 1982). New York at night, is portrayed as seedy and threatening, steam rising from the sewers and images of multicoloured neon lights appear and disappear in the night sky.

The vivid colour and imagery used in David Lynch's 'BLUE VELVET (1985, US) creates and image of small town (s)Lumberton; but just below the surface of this Norman Rockwell vision of the American Dream are suppressed emotional desires and violent perversity, which are metaphorically suggested by the close up image of the ants crawling on the severed ear. The imagery of the opening sequence - the flowers, red and yellow and the white picket fence against the blue sky, is tainted by its own sense of artificiality, its colour appears supersaturated and surreal, as a parody of the American Dream. The sense of claustrophobic paranoia and tension is conveyed by the appearance of Dorothy's apartment, in its darkness and dullness. In

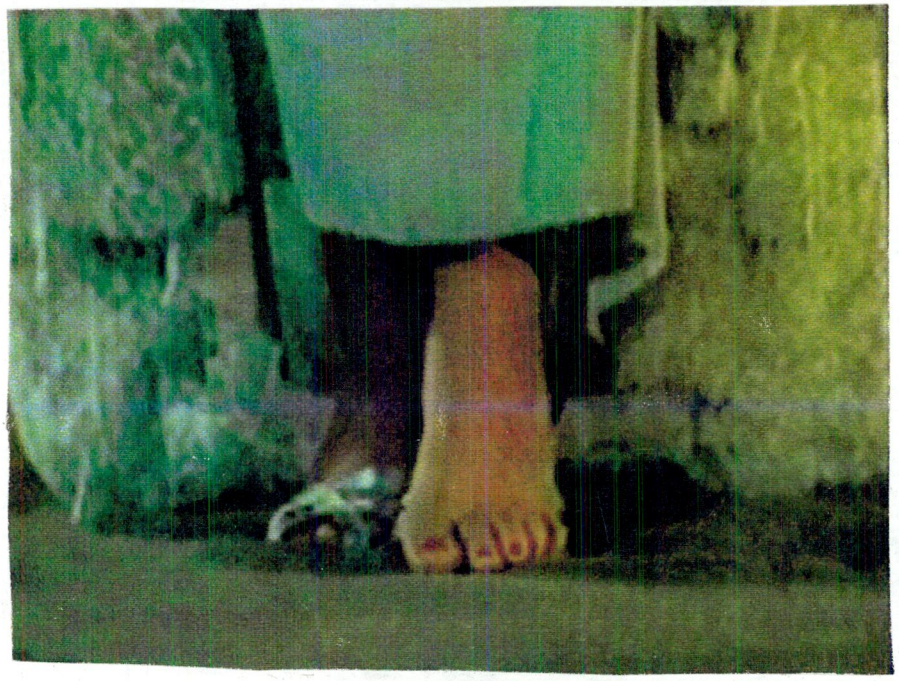

Figure 10: a scene from LEAVE HER TO HEAVEN

the scene where Jeffrey is trapped in the wardrobe, with shadows from the doors falling on his face, as he watches Frank abuse Dorothy , the femme fatale in what appears as incestuous as Frank repeats the line "Baby wants to fuck" The imagery used to convey the oedipal nature of the abusive relationship , the blue velvet cord (umbilical cord) piece of material, and the mask are as equally disturbing as Franks abusive dialogue.

THE LAST SEDUCTION (Stahl, 1993, US) is focused on the femme fatale the power hungry Brigid. The imagery does not have the supersaturated and intensive colour as that in BLUE VELVET, the colour is quite stark and monotone particularly Brigid who is always dressed in black, white or grey. She surrounds herself with minimal colour this is evident in the house she rents. The scenes shot at night, bring her disturbed side to light, sexuality and greed are the driving forces behind her character. The stark use of colour emphasises her as the focus.(See Figure 11)

The mise en scene: the balanced composition of objects and characters within the frame, is often disrupted and unbalanced in film noir. In SUNSET BOULEVARD, Norma lies surrounded by her photographs of former glory, the objects and the character are in focus leaving the spectator confused where to direct their look. Doors, windows, and shadows often separate the character from the rest of the world and from their emotions. By using a great depth of field the cinematographer could show "how the interaction between man and the outside forces is always visable." (Place/Peterson, 30-32, 1974) In CHINATOWN (Polanski, 1974, US) the audience repeatedly look over Jakes shoulder, which is usually in the right side of

Figure 11: a scene from THE LAST SEDUCTION

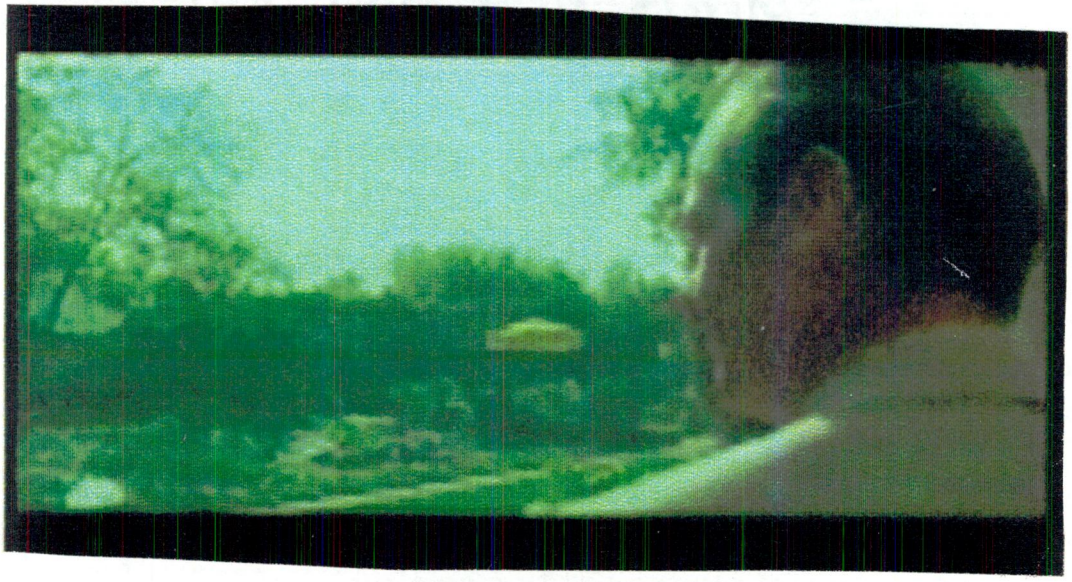

Figure 12: a scene from CHINATOWN

the frame, to view the rest of the image. (See Figure 12) Jake is a flawed character caught in a world beyond his control. The film noir male is generally a flawed character, who lacks substance. Leighton Grist wrote of CHINATOWN that "although it lacks formal experimentation, it is realist if more stylised in approach it nonetheless continues the deconstruction of generic cinema" (Grist, 267-284, 1992) CHINATOWN, is considered a central film in this generic deconstruction.

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Women in film noir are often shown in portraits or photographs as these are two dimensional images of safe powerless feminine sexuality. They, usually become later in the film, a mock reminder of what the real woman becomes, i.e. Brigids wedding photo in THE LAST SEDUCTION is shown in two images; in one it is framed and in the later it is broken.

The visual vocabulary of film noir it's contrasting lighting uses of framing devices, draw the spectator into its world and render the film more visceral, more complete, . In the following chapter I intend to discuss the viscerality of the image, how the techniques and devices discussed here and the images they have created are in some situations, more instilled with sensuousness and wholeness than the narrative. Alot of the imagery in noir has a sense of volume that the audience responds to, this has been created out of its particular look.

CHAPTER THREE

The power and depth of many images in film noir can be intense and great. The effect created by the unusual lighting, framing and camera techniques as discussed in the previous chapter often has a sense of volume that tends to be disregarded by many theorists. Much of film theory is written with the main emphasis on the narrative. Through binding cinema in a theoretical and scientific discourse, film theory has distanced itself from the actual visceral experience of cinema. Many, although not all ignore the audiences instinctive response to the image. Benjamin described the image as assaulting the spectator, as the movement of the image is relentless.

> The audience is often dispositioned and dispossessed by the films incessant modulations of visibility no less than by its concise articulation of action and movement. (Shaviro, 8.9, 1995)

Its ultimate aim appears to be, to objectify the experience in order to analyse its structures and place it within a context. This urge to create distance and objectify the film and the viewing process is contradictory due to the whole nature of cinema and film. The spectator, whether theorist or not, is involved in the experience of the film there is no time for reflection during this experience. It is difficult if not impossible to passively watch films, and not react or experience an emotion, whether it be disgust, excitement or even boredom. It is often the image more than the narrative that illicits this response. It is self-defeating to write film theory that separates itself "from the bodily agitation's, the movements of fascination, the reactions of attraction and repulsion...." (Shaviro 9.1 '93)

In order to understand the importance of the image, and how and why it tends to be underrated, it is necessary to trace briefly the origins of film theory. Where it has developed from and why much of theory has emanated through the narrative. It has been suggested that cinema formed an inferiority complex due its status as the youngest of the arts and this is a fundamental reason for the existence of film theory. Many strived to give it an academic status, thus raising its respectability as an art.

Writings on film have explored many levels, many aspects of which are confusing and are in conflict. Tension exists between realism and expressionism, image and narrative. James Monaco defined film theory in simple terms as the opposition between form and function, or between what we see and what we experience. Semiology is the science of signs, also including linguistics as an element, it was originally developed by Ferdinand Saussure at the university of Geneva.. The relation between semiotics and film has been developed by many theorists, they propose that cinema has its own language. Psychoanalysis, particularly Freud's and Lacans writings on this subject have also been highly influential on film theory.

Sergei Eisenstein is one of the earliest and is still one of the foremost influences on film theorists, he analysed cinema through using film terminology. Theory that focused on the film as different elements, breaking down these elements was termed "close-up"theory,in addition there was "medium shot" that concentrated on the human scale of the film and "long shot" , the depth below the surface of the film. Eisenstein also developed the concept of the "montage of attractions",[1] this is a

[1]Montage is an editing process where by scenes can be cut at the will of the director, who is in the position of power as he can choose the construction of sequences.

constructed system of attractions that occurs during the editing process. This system of editing created a new reality rather than simply supporting the narrative, this is very much a hallmark of expressionist cinema. Andre Bazin, a theorist who voiced many of his ideas through the magazine Cahiers du Cinema, believed film should be reflective of the real world. Bazin considered montage a wilful intrusion by the director. Christian Metz, similarly to Bazin was pro-realist, both contributed immensly to the development of theory, in particular Metz's "The Language and Cinema" (1971) and the text "The Imaginary Signifier".

Siegfried Kracaur and Rudolph Arnheim, wrote from these different perspectives. Arnheim concluded that the differences between reality and cinema, were not limitations, but had artistic content and form due to the manipulation by the film maker of the material. While Kracaur suggested that the differences restricted the aesthetics of cinema, and as a realist, he believed that the camera's essential objective was to reproduce reality, and this should be the aim of the film maker. The narrative film was favoured by the realists as it had a purpose and did not exist purely as an esthetic object. The mise en scene was also preferred, as it took place in the natural process of filming, not as a wilful intrusion afterwards like montage.

Semiology's role in film theory has changed and developed, from initially concentrating on the making of the film to the perception of it. The psychology of film perception has become an important aspect of theory, especially the use of Freudian theory and psychoanalytic theory. The problems with the use of semiology and psychoanalysis in film theory is their rigidness, and suspicious detachment from the pleasure, the allure of the experience and afterthoughts that cannot be explained

through analytic logic. Metz described his theory as "an attempt to disengage the cinema object and to win it for the symbolic" (Metz '71). The attempts by theorists to disengage themselves, has meant quite often they have become so entrenched in their distant dogmatic theorising, quite often they have lost sight of the essence of cinema, the pleasure involved. Laura Mulvey called for the "destruction" of this pleasure and for "passionate detachment" from it.

Steven Shaviro urges for a dramatic move away from the semiotic/psychoanalytic direction of film theory and to think "otherwise" about film and culture. He suggests "that semiotic and psychoanalytic film theory is largely a phobic construct." (1993, 15.6)

The image is considered by many theorists to be fundamentally characterised by its *lack*. This concept has its basis in Freudian psychoanalysis. Many theorists, view the image as lacking substance, primarily being impotent and incapable of expression outside of itself. Shaviro uses Silvermans summary of this arguement;

> Film theory has been haunted...by the spector of a loss or absence at the center of cinematic production, a loss which both threatens and secures the viewing subject. (1993, 16.7)

The image can be compared to the female, who as a young girl, identified her absence of a penis , Freud claimed that once the female has seen it and knows she is without it, she desires it and is haunted by its absence and her lack, phallocentric logic, as the image is haunted by its lost object. Contra to this outlook, I agree with Shaviro's view of the image as a visual and visceral form, as it is frequently in film noir. Images resist rationalisation as they have a fleeting, uncontrollable nature, that

have the power to affect and unnerve the spectator groundlessly. It is similar to the "attractions" described by Gunning, they "directly solicit spectator attention, inciting visual curiousity and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle". (Gunning 49, '90) The image is visceral due to its tactile quality and it ellicits and stimulates emotions and physical sensations. Benjamin stated the cinematic experience "hits the spectator like a bullet...No sooner has (the spectator's)eye grasped a scene than it has already changed. It cannot be arrested."(1969,238) The body genres were defined by Linda Williams: porn which stimulates sexual sensation, horror stimulates fear,and melodrama stimulates tears and sadness.

The viscerality of the image is heightened through the use of space, the placement of characters, objects, shadows and light, thus creating volume. DOUBLE INDEMNITY is a story of a womans greed, she wants her husband dead and she uses her physical appeal to seduce an insuranceman into helping her murder him. The sequence in DOUBLE INDEMNITY where Walter strangles Dietrichson is significant in this sense, the camera moves from Walter crouching behind the car seat in darkness to Phylis, who is driving , it focuses on Phylis' face which jerks in sync with her husbands screams as he is being strangled. Although the actual physical murder is not shown, the spectators sense of the violence of the act is increased by the close- up shot of Phylis' facial expression. The close- up of the womans face recurs throughout theory relating to the image, " the face becomes a text, a space which must be read ...(it) is what belongs to the other.." (Stewart 125, '84)

The image vitalises the violent and erotic undertones of the narrative. The spectator becomes seduced by the thrill of the act. Film noir has been described by Thomas

Docherty as having a "specific visual determination in the quality of its lighting which draws attention first and foremost to the visual field ...it is characterised by the sensuality of the voluminous figure"(Docherty, 22/23, '96). The first scene where Walter encounters Phylis, she is standing at the top of the stairs wrapped only in a bath towel, he tells her that she is not "fully covered" by her present insurance policy this reinforces Phylis as an erotic image through the dialogue.

The placement of shadows, is integral in the imagery of film noir, they create a sense of volume, the sequence used by Docherty to illustrate this is where Phylis first sees the possibility of murdering her husband, Phylis walks towards the fire place, the camera follows her leaving Walter out of the shot, although his voice is still audible, she paces back and forth casting shadows, empasizing her physicality and erotic sensuality. (See Figure 13) Walters reference to the "honey of an anklet" that she is wearing, reinforces this sensuous image, his focus is on her legs and this becomes the focal point of the camera.

The presence of the physical character and their shadow within the frame contributes volume for it suggests more than a two dimensional character, it "doubles" the space of the character in the frame. Mirrors and photographs have a similar effect. In THE LAST SEDUCTION the scene in the toilet, where Bridget is looking in the mirror and she tells Mike "don't fuck with my image",projects an image of her alter-ego.(See Figure 14) The importance of space and light in creating the image is fundamental,--the sequence where Bridget is talking to Clay on the phone in a completely empty room, the camera focuses on her, the colour in the shot is completely muted and the light is bright, it appears to heighten and emphasise her

Figure 13: Scene from DOUBLE INDEMNITY

Figure 14: Scene from THE LAST SEDUCTION

physicality. As the alter-ego of the character comes to the fore, the shadows often become darker until they completely engulf the character. A similar play of light and shade is shown in the final scene in DOUBLE INDEMNITY.

Images of sexual power, greed for money and violence are intertwined in THE LAST SEDUCTION. Bridget is more obvious in her sexual overtures than Phylis, her first words to Mike in the bar are "fuck off", this sets the tone for their relationship. The seduction that takes place is not a traditional one where the man is in control. Bridget is in complete control, taking on the dominant sexual role, she reduces Mike to merely being her sexual object, her"designated fuck".

Bridget embodies the character of the image,"Images have an excessive capacity to seduce and mislead to affect the spectator unwarrantedly," (Shaviro, 16.7, '93) while Mike represents the spectator.At a certain level it could be argued that the relationships of the characters represents a metaphor for image and the narrative or the film and the audience.

"The Last Seduction" is visually fascinating in its manipulation of the preconceived images and perceptions of small town/middle America and the "big city". The town of Beston typifies many of the elements of the small towns of film noir. Its daylight image is of a convivial environment where Bridget is out of place, she is so obviously agitated that she returns to the solace of her car, detaching herself from the environment. Her reluctance to settle in the town reinforces this sense of her discomfort. Even during nighttime, the natural refuge of film noir characters, she remains in complete disdain of the environment, although like many femme fatales,

this is when she asserts control. It is similar to tension during the scenes set in the supermarket in DOUBLE INDEMNITY, where Phylis and Walter meet and plot the murder on neutral ground, this incursion of a normal suburban location, is disturbing. (See Figure 15)

Bridget manipulates men sexually, playing on the male urge to protect the supposedly weaker woman, she assumes a masquerade often acting out their preconceptions of how a woman should act, the vulnerable role of the beaten wife. When talking to the detective, of her supposed attacker, which the detective describes as like those portrayed in the movies, she replies " yes, motherfucker this, mother fucker that." playing on their the fear of other races, their "brainless countrified morality." She is a threat because of her masquerade, if she can assume a mask she can also remove it, thus rendering the male position unstable.

"Total fucking bitch"

The ability of the femme fatale to adapt many roles and project many images is perhaps her most striking characteristic, she is an unknown threat, unpredictable, embodying truth and deceit simultaneously. She is attacked by theorists in a comparable way to the image,both being associated with space and are considered impedences to the narrative. Jacques Lacan described the image as a trap; "in this matter of the visible, everything is a trap..." (Lacan, 93, 1979). The words trap, allure, seduce and vapid, are repeatedly used in relation to the role of women in film. The role of women in classical hollywood cinema was usually of a passive nature,

Figure 15: Scene from DOUBLE INDEMNITY

they were the bearer of the look, existing as a representation of femininity and the object of the male gaze. Laura Mulvey notes that

> the presence of the woman is an indispensible element of the spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a storyline ...this alien presence has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative. (1985, 812)

In the classic narrative film the spectator usually viewed the film through the main male protagnist's eyes, thus the spectator automatically adopts the masculine position that of voyeurism since it is the female protaganist that is the object and the male, the subject. Diegetically fixed sound, is another area where the female character is often subordinated. It has been analysed by Kaja Silvermann into three categories;firstly, when speaking the truth the female speaks on the male command, secondly, if they are speaking freely it is most likely to be in the recessed area of the diegesis , for example Gilda's rendition of "Don't Blame it on Mame" which Johnny believes he is hearing in his dreams, and thirdly ,pure sound in the sense of no coherent content, when Dorothy sings in BLUE VELVET, in certain scenes it is reduced to a murmer.

Although many film noirs are narrated from the main male characters point of view, (particularly the use of the voice over, which I will discuss further on), the femme fatale succeeds in disrupting the narrative as she is often both the object and the subject, the signifier and the signified. For instance, Bridget is the main protaganist, and the narrative is told from her view-point, while this could be attributed to the recently realised respectability for the female spectator and the so called womens

film. The femme fatale of film noir throughout its history has disturbed the male gaze and position of control. Gene Tierney's character's intensive stare at the main male character who she encounters on a train at the beginning of LEAVE HER HEAVEN, Phylis looking down on Walter from the top of the staircase,(DOUBLE INDEMNITY)and Norma Desmonds numerous photographs (SUNSET BOULEVARD)

Considering the nature of the narrative, and the status of the female character within the narrative, when the female character of early film noir disrupted the narrrative and therefore the male gaze , she is eventually punished. The main male character is also punished as he has allowed himself to be seduced by the appearance of the image, but while the femme fatale is rarely given any opportunity for redemption the man often is. One purpose of the voiceover p is to act as a form of confession for example Walters voice over/confession to Marty.(DOUBLE INDEMNITY) The voice over when compared to the dialogue within the film often subverts the male position. In SUNSET BOULEVARD when Joe first moves into the room above the garage, as the narrater he assumes control of the situation,"I dropped the hook and she snapped at it", but Max undermines this view by saying " I made your bed earlier this afternoon."As narrator he is in the audiences view the voice of truth, Joe is therefore not as in control as he leads the audience to believe. This is a form of questioning male authority and notions of truth. Post modernists such as Lyotard, Jameson and Baudrillard questioned the notion of truth, and the origins of truth, the voice of God etc.

Yet, with the progression of time, many of the present day femme fatales no longer suffer retribution, Bridget one of the strongest in the new mould of femme fatales succeeds in escaping, remaining voluminous, fascinating, and mystifying. An explanation for the cessation of punishment for their sins is due to their male counterparts, while the females have become more relentless and clever in their ruthlessness, the men have become weaker, as Ruby Rich termed them "dumb lugs." (Sight and Sound, Nov. 1995)

The self concious theorising of psychoanalytic film theory on the image is due to "its projection of its phobia towards images back upon the images themselves." (Shaviro 24.5, 93)

The femme fatale and the image are essentially bound to together, both ellicit sensations, in effect they often display the uderlying depth of film noir,that erupts every so often across the screen, denying the narrative control, threatening "to dislodge all the comfortable stabilities of meaning." (Shaviro, 32.3, 93) Where as in classical narration were the spectator is encouraged to identify a clear sense of time and place.The narration in film noir negates this, its direction often has intrusive and uncoherent aims that resist conventional methods of spectatorship, thus in essence leaving the spectator relying upon instinctive response. Often beyond the overt control of the gaze, the spectator is rendered subject to the image.

CONCLUSION

In this study I have explored the image in film noir, its physicality and potency. The image is often underrated, considered by many theorists a vapid entity, I believe it has the power to stimulate and arouse, beyond the dimensions of the narrative. Film noir often has a visual and tactile richness especially in its use of light and shade. I have illustrated the visual roots of noir through to its visceral image, in comparing the image and the narrative, I have found that in noir the image is often equally if not more powerful than the narrative.

> Cinema invites me, or forces me, to stay within the orbit of the senses. I am confronted and assaulted by a flux of sensations that I can neither attach to physical presences nor translate into systemized abstractions. I am violently, viscerally affected by this image...(Shaviro, 32.3, 1993)

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