

# Beyond backlash: the femme fatale in contemporary American cinema.

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**Title:** Beyond backlash : the femme fatale in contemporary American cinema

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**Abstract:** This thesis is the first comparative reading of the femme fatale in contemporary American cinema, and makes a significant contribution to a field that has previously limited its focus to film noir of the 1940s and the neo noirs of the 1980s and 1990s. To date, critical examinations of the femme fatale figure in contemporary cinema have centred on issues of post-second wave backlash, and on a very narrow range of films, most notably Fatal Attraction (1987), Basic Instinct (1992), Disclosure (1994), and The Last Seduction (1994), (Kate Stables, 1998; Yvonne Tasker, 1998; Helen Hanson, 2007). This project builds upon this work by taking a thematic approach which allows for a reading of a

wider range of film texts which have not yet received much critical investigation in terms of the deadly beautiful woman. Through looking at films from period drama, teen cinema, neo-noir and science fiction film, I consider the implications that the resurgence of this provocative figure across a multitude of cinematic genres has for our understanding of contemporary cultural anxiety about women, and argue that a renewed examination of the femme fatale opens up new avenues of discourse between theorisations of cinematic archetypes and feminist theory. This thesis furthers the work of Mary Ann Doane (1991), E. Ann Kaplan (rev. ed. 1998), and Julie Grossman (2009) which sought to interrogate and question the implications of American cinema's fascination with the femme fatale in noir texts, by investigating the ways in which the figure brings into focus questions of sexual agency, femininity and power outside of those generic parameters. Significantly I consider how the widening of the critical lens through which the femme fatale is viewed allows new patterns, tensions and anxieties to be traced across a variety of popular genres and modes of production from the Hollywood blockbuster to smaller independent films, to chart thematic tendencies, such as the bisexual femme fatale, the hybrid femme fatale, and the dead femme fatale. In particular, I provide a unique critical assessment of the position of the femme fatale figure in contemporary cinema, and in doing so interrogate the idea of the femme fatale's sexual mystery, and the myriad ways in which this trait foregrounds issues about sexual fidelity and safety, and both encourages and critiques a

patriarchal sense of entitlement to complete knowledge about women's bodies, intentions and desires. In addressing the ways in which the femme fatale figure operates across cinematic genres and themes in ways which reveal the limits of femme fatale criticism as it currently stands, this study identifies the femme fatale's ability to move across and between genres, in ways which complicate and disrupt contemporary understandings of femininity and film. By exploring the occurrence of femme fatale figures in films not exclusively concerned with anxiety deriving from the increased economic opportunities for women following second wave feminism, this study offers ways of viewing the beautiful duplicitous woman which move beyond backlash. The thesis is comprised of four chapters. The first is an account of the femme fatale in the retro noir film, and interrogates the tensions between the nostalgic impulses of the retro noir genre and the more complex gender politics centred on the films' representation of the femme fatale figure. In the second I consider the new teen femme fatale films as both teen updates of the 'mature' femme fatale narrative in the burgeoning genre of teen cinema, and as more complex explorations of contemporary anxieties about young femininity. The third chapter interrogates the significance of the frequent cross-genre pairings of female bisexuality with the femme fatale figure, and considers the potential of such figures for feminist meaning beyond patriarchal pornographic fantasy. Finally, chapter four engages with science fiction cinema, and specifically with the figure of the femme fatale whose body is not entirely human, and

considers its ramifications for feminist theorisations of the body, agency and femininity.

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