REJECTED WOMEN IN FILM NOIR

By

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To my mother and father, Elaine and Thomas Kelley
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My dissertation, *Rejected Women in Film Noir*, brings an innovative approach to a well-studied cycle of films in terms of character type and methodology by concentrating on a female character frequently pictured, but rarely discussed, which I am calling the “rejected woman.” Rejected women characters include: the faithful and taken-for-granted “girl Friday,” the “B” girl (Noir code for fallen woman) fettered to a bar stool, who is used and discarded by the Noir hero, and the lonely spinster, who has a dull, unglamorous job like bookkeeper or telephone operator. She desires (positive) attention from the noir hero, yet only receives it in a negative form, culminating in either active or passive rejection through dismissal or indifference. This story line of rejection is mirrored in the physical and psychological pain she often endures.

This narrative based “rejection” echoes the formal “rejection” of the character in the *mise-en-scène*. It relegates her to the background of shots. Frames chop off body parts or objects entangle and entrap her. She often leaves the film in a “rejected” way in that her last appearance on screen is non-eventful. She walks into a darkened abyss, strolls unceremoniously out of frame, or fades out of a frame like a ghost. Reflecting her rejection both discursively and formally within the film’s diegesis, she has been
“rejected” by film scholarship, which has not seen fit to isolate her as a character type or study her sufficiently. My dissertation corrects this oversight. When Film Noir texts highlight women’s stories, they usually concern the sexually alluring femme fatale or her foil, the fresh-faced pretty virginal home girl. Film scholars have told the femme fatale’s and the home girl’s story often and well. They have, however, overlooked the Rejected Woman of Film Noir.

My methodology begins with close filmic readings and broadens to consider a number of ideological questions. I try to avoid a priori applications of ideological assumptions, and instead conduct detailed examinations of filmic textuality. I primarily utilize psychoanalytical film theory anchored in two of Jacques Lacan’s texts: “The Mirror Stage” essay (1949), and The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis (Seminar XI) (1964). A profound misunderstanding surrounding the term “the gaze” has caused confusion in derision in film theory discourse. I recommend that we consider Laura Mulvey’s application of Lacan’s “Mirror Stage” essay be called “Look Theory,” and Jacqueline Rose’s, Joan Copjec’s and Todd McGowan’s application of Lacan’s Seminar XI lectures be called “Gaze Theory.” After describing the reasons why this split is needed, as well as glossing the major points of each of these scholars’ approaches to Lacan’s work, I demonstrate how productive both “Look” theory and “Gaze” theory are in examining film generally and Rejected Women of Film Noir specifically.

Some feminist scholars believe Mulvey’s “prescriptive” approach to film studies is outmoded. In a society still sick with sexism, however, we still need Mulvey’s prescription. Feminist film theory needs to re-visit critical theoretical feminism and reinvestment in the insights of its pioneers. By reading the rejected woman through
Mulvey’s ground-breaking essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” I show how the rejected woman exists as a paradoxical locus of power. She is antinomic; simultaneously encompassing pain and pleasure, visibility and invisibility, movement and immobility, text and writing instrument. For example, Gaye Dawn in *Key Largo* appears metaphorically invisible to film’s male characters (I bend Mulvey’s language, arguing that rejected women connote a “to-(not)-be-looked-at-ness”). Her invisibility grants her power unavailable to other characters, yet she uses this power solely for the benefit of the Noir hero. Because *Key Largo*’s male character do not pay attention to her, like they do the home girl Nora, Gaye “becomes” invisible, and therefore, she can approach Rocco, steal his gun, and give it to Frank, which he will use to save his life. Despite risking her life, Gaye gains nothing from this act. She uses the power endowed by her invisibility solely to edify Frank.

Using Lacan’s “Gaze” theory, I study the way the rejected woman both embodies the gaze and how objects in the film gaze at her. I argue that these gazes register as moments of escape, daydreaming and fantasy (Lacan’s Imaginary register) as well as moments of pain, trauma and fascination (Lacan’s Real register). Historically, she functions as the gaze because she reminds us collectively of traumas we may not wish to acknowledge consciously, such as racism and the invention and use of the atomic bomb. Objects in the diegesis gaze at her and tell the stories of her personal traumas (rape, prostitution, and death by horrible physical pain) as well as signify her attempts to create a world where fantasy and imagination provide a respite from her dull, dreary life and help her cope with the rejection she faces, most notably from the Noir hero. For instance, the gaze of an oyster-shaped fountain and a hamburger patty signify the rape
and impregnation of Norah in *The Blue Gardenia*, and the gaze of a fifteen year-old-magazine functions as a refuge of fantasy for Velda (*Kiss Me Deadly*) who must sell her body for her pimp-like boss, Mike Hammer. In addition, I use Lacan’s theory of the gaze as mimicry to explain how Yvonne (*Casablanca*) operates as the gaze in her role as a “travesty” of home girl Ilse.

Because my project involves close and detailed readings of specific filmic scenes, it focuses on a small selection of Film Noirs: *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston 1941), *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz 1942), *Key Largo* (John Huston 1948), *Criss Cross* (Robert Siodmak 1949), *The Big Heat* (Fritz Lang 1953) and *The Blue Gardenia* (Fritz Lang 1953), and *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955). I chose films using two criteria: 1) films that particularly are “rejection woman heavy,” meaning they contained several examples of this figure, and 2) films that covered the fifteen-year time frame of the Film Noir cycle: 1941–1955. I also include some outliers, focusing on them as precedents that prefigure the Rejected Woman character type, such as *Pépé Le Moko* (Julien Duvivier 1937) *The Letter* (William Wyler 1940), and *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles 1941).
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: REJECTED WOMEN IN FILM NOIR

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive female.

—Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”

[In the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture.

—Jacques Lacan, Seminar XI

Still, my experience is that most texts, like most lives, are underread, not overread.

—Stanley Cavell, Pursuits of Happiness

Nurse One” in Citizen Kane: Characteristics and Prototype of Rejected Women in Film Noir

Within earshot, Jedediah Leland says to newspaper reporter Thompson: “You know when I was a young man there used to be an impression around that nurses were pretty. Well it was no truer then than it is today.” The camera captures Nurse One’s expression upon hearing these words—a mixture of anger, sadness, and acceptance [Fig 1-1]. “I’ll take your arm Mr. Leland,” she says. Her face remains in shadow as Leland implores Thompson to smuggle in cigars on his next visit, suggesting ways Thompson can camouflage them. She exchanges a look of disgust with another nurse, which reflects not only her annoyance with her recalcitrant charge, but also the lingering pain of his cutting remarks about her physical appearance. The nurses then lead Leland into the blackened background, an abyss from which none of them resurfaces again. In Citizen Kane (Orson Welles 1941), Nurse One,¹ as she inhabits, embodies and is treated in this short scene, encapsulates the character type I am calling The Rejected

¹ Although two nurses are present, the focus of my comments is “Nurse One” [Edith Evason] and not Nurse Two [Coy Danz] because Nurse One is the more prominent figure in this scene.
Woman in Film Noir. In a fitting coincidence, Edith Evanson, whose performance as Selma Parker in Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat* (1953) figures prominently in this project, plays Nurse One in this small, uncredited role. *Citizen Kane* serves as a pre-cursor of Film Noir, and Nurse One functions as a pre-cursor or proto-type of the Rejected Woman in Film Noir who will occupy the Film Noirs to come over the preceding seventeen years (1941-1958). Despite the ubiquity of rejected woman figure throughout the Film Noir cycle, scholars have not identified it, nor discussed how and why it informs Film Noir. By closely analyzing scenes of rejected women characters, and filtering them through the critical lens of psychoanalytical film theory, I demonstrate why rejected women matter to film theory, how they help us understand the cultural, social and political situation of mid-century women, and how their existence echoes and haunts contemporary society.

If pressed to pick one word that best characterizes the Rejected Woman of Film Noir, I would choose the word *pain*, because she suffers terrible physical and/or psychological pain. The word pain, however, feels inaccurate, because encircled in horrific moments of suffering, the rejected woman simultaneously experiences pleasure. Out of her pain, she siphons strength, which endows her with power, and she finds pleasure in this power. For example, the rejected woman is marked by an invisibility that only is rivaled in Film Noir by the marked absence of people of color, another issue I will discuss in this project. Film Noir renders her invisible, in that characters in the diegesis

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2 Although not every scholar agrees *Citizen Kane* would fall under the many rubrics that define Film Noir, the film, at the very least, falls within the established period of the cycle and bears a family resemblance to Film Noir with its stylistic similarities, flashback-heavy narrative, and underpinning of corruption. For example, J. P. Telotte writes: many critics see *Citizen Kane* as a seminal influence on the film noir. Its shadowy images, unbalanced compositions, and strange camera angles clearly prefigures much of the form's visual style* (74).
do not notice her, yet she uses this invisibility to accomplish extraordinary tasks that the
demme fatale, home girl, and noir hero cannot. She also finds pleasure in her superior
intelligence, which also goes unnoticed and unappreciated. Despite her rejection from
the noir hero, she finds comfort through unconventional social channels or through a re-
connection to her nationalist pride. Furthermore, her own experiences of rejection give
her the empathy necessary to soothe the pain of others, and she takes pleasure in her
ability to help. In all of these ways, her rejections, and the pain they cause,
simultaneously injure and edify her.

Film Noirs reject, discard and ignore her both formally and discursively. In
relation to the former, she often inhabits the margins of the frame, relegated to corners,
backgrounds, or if foregrounded, lost in a sea of deep-focus busyness, or shallow focus
blurriness. Many times, she exits films by walking unceremoniously out of the frame, or
the frame chops her off in order that the camera may follow the noir hero. Physical
props, like the telephone, entrap, bind and confine her body. For example, *Citizen Kane*
formally “rejects” Nurse One in several ways. First, the film’s top frame decapitates her
for the first ten seconds she is on-screen. Second, in the full ninety seconds she
remains on-screen, her face never emerges from the shadows. At one point, a dark
shadow slices across her neck, allowing her body’s illumination, but denying her face
the same enhancement. Although her body stands center-screen, this usual position of
prominence is undercut by shadows and by her juxtaposition with the large figure of
Leland, whose size dwarfs her, and whose eccentric outfit, in particular, his white visor
and white rope belt, draws the eye of the spectator [Fig 1-1]. The *mise-en-scène* coaxes
us to look at Leland. We must be careful and persistent readers in order to take in the
figure of Nurse One and then realize how the film’s composition discards or rejects her. In her opening shot, she emerges from an abyss of darkness, signifying her place of nothingness in the film. She has, however, some pleasure encircled in her pain. She will drag Leland with her into this abyss at the end of the scene, and we can be certain Leland will never see a cigar. Through these two small acts, one formal, one (imagined) discursive, she finds and capitalizes on the little agency the film grants her.

Discursively, the Rejected Woman in Film Noir possesses distinct characteristics, such as her physical appearance, her narrative position in the film, her vocation, and her relationships with other characters. Rejected woman character types include the faithful, indispensable, taken-for-granted “girl Friday,” the “B” girl (noir code for fallen woman) fettered to a bar stool, who is mistreated and/or sexually used and discarded by the noir hero, and the lonely love-starved “spinster,” who often sacrifices her won best interests to help the noir hero. The rejected woman often works in difficult, dull, or unglamorous professions, such as switch board operators, bookkeepers, nightclub hostesses, and secretaries. She usually loves and/or is strongly sexually attracted to the noir hero, who does not reciprocate her feelings. At times, she doubles as a travesty or an inferior copy of the femme fatale or home girl. Nurse One evinces many of these features. First, Nurse One’s brief performance epitomizes the notion that Film Noirs often neglect the rejected woman in relation to screen time given other characters. Second, she performs an unglamorous, dull and thankless job, in this case, nurse to an intractable, unappreciative, and insulting patient. Third, because the rejected woman does not possess the classic Hollywood attractiveness found in most women on the screen, the film suggests she is less valued, a situation she resigns herself to, despite
the pain it may cause. We see the emotional complexity portrayed on Nurse One’s face when she hears Leland’s insulting joke that she is not “pretty.” Fourth, she usually is enamored with a leading male character, yet her character either is metaphorically neutered in that her sexual desire is foreclosed (as is often the case of non-white males in Film Noir, which I will also discuss), or these male characters prey upon her feelings in order to use her and then discard her. Even though no evidence of this attraction exists between Leland and Nurse One, I would argue that the utter contempt she shows toward him functions as a kind of inverse of romantic attention. In regard to *Citizen Kane*, this argument is bolstered further because Evanson emerges out of the visual screen space that, only seconds earlier, Kane had occupied. The triangular overlapping shot shows Kane busily typing away that visually signifies the end of Leland’s flashback, as Nurse One emerges from this same location [Fig 1-2]. Leland has a love/hate relationship with Kane, and Kane’s occupying the same space as Nurse One places her as a visual correlative for him.

**Female Character Types in Film Noir**

In my analysis, I characterize three major female characters figures in Film Noir: the rejected woman, the femme fatale and the virginal home girl. Many film scholars have defined and analyzed the femme fatale and the home girl. Classic illustrations include of Film Noir femme fatales include Phyllis Dietrichsen in *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder 1944) and Kathy Moffat in *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur 1947). Classic home girl characters types include Ann in *Out of the Past* and Nora in *Key Largo* (John Huston 1948). Because definitions of “femme fatale” and “home girl” can differ, I provide my definitions of these two characters in relation to the rejected woman character, and I compare my categorizations with those of another feminist scholar, Jans Wager, who
also examines female character types in Film Noir. I find Wager’s work interesting and informative, although, we differ on our naming, categorizing, and analyzing these female figures.

I see the femme fatale functions as a kind of evil twin of the virginal home girl, who does not have to be a virgin literally. The noir hero’s attraction to the femme fatale pushes him toward destruction; his attraction to the home girl pushes him toward marriage, and/or societal stability. His attraction to the femme fatale is the more powerful pull of the two. Whereas the femme fatale and the home girl form a pair, the rejected woman stands outside this paradigm of (heterosexual) longing in Film Noir. The femme fatale, through her irresistible sex appeal, causes the noir hero to “lose his head,” a metaphor for castration, because she enchants and captivates him to the point that he can no longer think clearly—if he cannot think, he risks becoming “body” instead of “mind,” which feminizes or castrates him. In Pépé Le Moko (Julien Duvivier 1937), the eponymous hero tells police inspector Slimane that the women in his life will not get control of him because he gives them his body, but he keeps his head for himself.

Even though the home girl does not possess the wild, animal-like sexuality of the femme fatale, she is also sexually alluring to the Noir hero. Unlike the femme fatale, the Noir hero can control or tame her. He usually does not lose his head around her, however. In fact the opposite usually occurs, in that her stabilizing presence causes him to think more clearly. For instance, in Casablanca (Michael Curtiz 1942), Rick initially loses his head over home girl Ilsa.³ He sits in his room over his bar, overcome by

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³ Ilsa qualifies as a home girl because she represents the goodness and purity of a woman who supports her man. Although Ilsa resembles the femme fatale because she uses her sexuality to ensnare him (One could make an argument that he gives Lazlo the letters of transit only after Ilsa sleeps with him), Ilsa’s “purity” is so strong that it trumps any femme fatale qualifications. Also, Ilsa does not prove deadly to
emotions, which he drowns with liquor. He tries to change this emotional pain into the physical by pounding the table. At the end of the film, however, he realizes that Ilsa loves him, and he has essentially tamed her, he regains his power to think and does the thinking for the three of them (him, Ilsa and Lazlo), thereby establishing his position as hero. At the end of the story, Ilsa becomes a passive object of exchange between Rick and Lazlo. Rick essentially gives her over to Lazlo, like a father giving away his daughter at a wedding. Rick’s regaining the ability to “think,” the film implies, makes it possible for Lazlo to continue his work fighting Nazism. Rick’s regaining his mind, confronting and beating the castration threat, ultimately saves the world. In every Film Noir discussed in this project, the femme fatale who stirs up the lust of the male characters receives punishment. In *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston 1941), Sam Spade turns Brigid O’Shaughnessy over to the police., in *Criss Cross* (Robert Siodmak 1949), Slim Dundee shoots his wife Anna, and Vince Stone scalds Debby Marsh’s face with hot coffee (*The Big Heat*).

Rejected woman characters usually do not produce lustful feelings in the noir hero, despite their intentions to do so. The text neuters her desire because she possesses neither the standardized physical features valorized by the patriarchy, nor the charisma of the femme fatale and home girl. Occasionally however, if a Rejected Woman of Film Noir happens to produce any arousal in the noir hero, she faces punishment. For example if rejected women characters stir up feels of lust, especially if

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Rick, or anyone else. A formal hint that she is a home girl exists in her appearing outside in the sunshine (in the shopping scene). The home girl often is pictured outside and in sunlight. Norman Holland writes about his experience watching Ingrid Bergman. His comment also place her in the category of the home girl: “In my Casablanca, Ingrid Bergman’s Ilsa wears white, bridal innocence into Rick’s equivocal café like an aura. . . . She wears the kind of dressy white street clothes the girls I knew in the 40’s and 50’s would have worn for a date on a summer day. . . . She even wears . . . a sunshade hat with gloves, no less. (26).
these feelings distract the Noir heroes from the work, they face harsh punishment. For example, rejected women Norah (The Blue Gardenia Fritz Lang 1953), Debby\(^4\) (The Big Heat) and Velda (Kiss Me Deadly Robert Aldrich 1955), experience extreme acts of violence. Velda is kidnapped and will (almost certainly) die from nuclear-related burning, Debby is burned, and Norah is raped by Prebble.

In her two books, Dangerous Dames and the subsequent Dames in the Driver’s Seat, Wager discusses how she categorizes and analyzes female characters of Film Noir. While I define the three main women character roles into femme fatale, home girl and rejected woman, she places the women of Film Noir into two categories: femme fatale and femme attrapée. Wager explains the femme attrapée resembles the “woman as redeemer” or “nurturing woman” characters that Janey Place identifies as the “opposite female archetype” to the femme fatale: “She gives love, understanding (or at least forgiveness), asks very little in return . . . and is visually passive and static” (Place 60). Wager takes this archetype as the basis for the femme attrapée, or woman trapped, who buys into patriarchal ideals and is trapped not only by the patriarchy but also by her own (whether conscious or unconscious) acceptance of it (“Dangerous” 15). According to Wager’s definition, the virginal home girl character is a femme attrapée. For Wager, the iconic example of a femme attrapée is Ruby from Gun Crazy (Joseph H. Lewis 1950). Ann in Out of the Past or Nora in Key Largo also fit Wager’s femme attrapée character. These women totally accept their place in the patriarchal structure without questioning it and are ultimately rewarded by the text for their acquiescence.

\(^4\) Although Dave harshly rebuffs Debby’s advances in his hotel room, the subtext of the scene can be read to suggest he has lustful feelings for her (his nervous thrusting of his hand into his pocket as he stands over Debby on the bed, for example).
Ann ends up with the local police sheriff who loves her, while her counterpart femme fatale, Kathy Moffatt dies in a hail of bullets. Nora gets her happy ending with Frank, while her counterpart, the rejected woman Gaye Dawn slinks out of the text into obscurity. Wager’s system does not have an identifiable descriptive name for characters like Gaye Dawn, Effie Perrine, or Selma Parker, who all fall into my definition of rejected women. Wager would probably classify some of my rejected woman characters as femme attrapées, such as the women operators in *The Blue Gardenia*.

Wager also redefines the classic femme fatale character. First of all, she defines a femme fatale as a character who is “often deadly to male characters, but her actions almost always prove fatal to her as well” (“Dangerous” 15). Wager’s definition focuses on how the femme fatale’s actions affect her, in contrast to my definition, which focuses on how the femme fatale’s actions affect the noir hero. For instance, for Wager, Debby Marsh and Velda Wickman function as femme fatales because their actions ultimately endanger themselves. Neither of these characters fits my definition of a femme fatale because Debby and Velda are not sexually irresistible or deadly to noir heroes Dave Bannion and Mike Hammer respectively. Under my rubric, Debby and Velda are rejected women. Wager’s goal is to create definitions for female characters not dependent on their relationships to male characters. Her definition of the femme fatale, for example, focuses on her own status and agency independent of her relationship with the noir hero. Although I applaud this effort, the patriarchal structure and the power of the active male gaze that Mulvey delineates, make it impossible to define these figures independent of the male characters.
I am hesitant to accept Wager’s belief that any agency acquired by women characters is positive, even if that agency leads to her destruction. For example, Wager argues that *Kiss Me Deadly*’s femme fatales (Wager puts the three major female characters, Christina, Velda, and Gabrielle in this category because they fit her “deadly to themselves” definition) “look, not distractedly through a haze of cigarette smoke, but with intelligence and curiosity directly at what the male protagonist cannot decipher . . . . in *Kiss Me Deadly* at least she [the femme fatale Gabrielle] gets to open the box” (“Dames” 71). Wager’s believes that any agency, even if it means nothing but pain, suffering, death, and destruction to herself and everyone else, trumps having no agency at all. This idea strikes me as profoundly sad in that it speaks to how little agency women actually have in the patriarchy. It shows that their sources of power are so scarce that any power they obtain and use is then positive. Mike Hammer, for all his odiousness, is compassionate enough about humanity to *close the box* when he had the chance to open it. Gabrielle’s unbridled opening of the box does not signify agency, but a pernicious type of entrapment that only finds an outlet in causing misery for others. Despite this difference in outlook and codification of female figures, Wager and I seem to be concerned with many of the same issues, primarily how women circulate and are represented in Film Noir. The major difference between my approach and hers is that I define the female characters of Film Noir in relation to the male characters. This might lead Wager to define me as a femme attrapée (!), but I think we have to take Film Noir as we find it. It is a man’s world—not only in terms of its male controlled production (male directors and male screenwriters), but also in terms of its androcentric diegesis. The only womanly aspect of Film Noir is that women play the female roles. Western
society in the post-World War Two period was androcentric and continues to be in contemporary society.

What is Film Noir? Why Does It Produce Rejected Women Character Types?

Film Noir remains difficult to categorize, and entire series of books have attempted to explain what makes a Film Noir in relation to its discursive elements (investigation/mystery murder stories occurring in metropolitan areas and convoluted plots told out of chronological order) or its stylistic elements (heavy use of shadows, extreme close-ups, and physical compositions that chop up human bodies and make them look small and insignificant). Scholars argue whether Film Noir is a genre, movement or cycle, or whether it exists at all. Usually in scholarly works involving Film Noir, the author dutifully repeats the on-going battles concerning “What is Film Noir?” among the canonical principal players. I am not going to repeat that move, as you can find it in almost every book written about Film Noir. I do not mean to signify that these debates are not useful (they are), and that they have not enhanced Film Noir scholarship (they have), but they have already been done often and well. Instead, I will highlight three major ideas concerning Film Noir that have not been discussed with such frequency as other topics: 1) Film Noir is a cycle, 2) Film Noir exists as a legitimate way to group films, and 3) in relation to American history, Film Noir represents “July Fifth.” All three of these concepts relate to Rejected Women in Film Noir.

Film Noir is a Cycle

In Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity, Edward Dimendberg proposes a superior description and definition of Film Noir:

Until recently, film noir scholarship remained trapped in a quagmire of attempts to define its object of study. In what now appear as dryly academic (if not quasi-theological) debates, scholars argued whether film noir was a
genre, a tone, a mood, a style, or a moment in film history. Yet space
cannot be comfortably assimilated to any of these categories and suggests
both their limitations and the possibility of a new optic through which to
approach film noir. In this study I refer to the film noir cycle, a locution first
introduced by Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton, and by which I
understand a historically circumscribed group of films sharing common
industrial practices, stylistic features, narrative consistencies, and spatial
representations. (11)

Dimendberg acknowledges Film Noir’s slippery resistance to codification and its
ability to be several, perhaps even contradicting elements at once. Dimendberg’s overall
project involves correcting a blind spot he noticed in Film Noir scholarship, namely the
lack of attention to space, specifically city spaces. He cites James Naremore’s More
Than Night as the “most judicious and scholarly overview of film noir published to date”
(n 14, 263).⁵ Naremore, like Dimendberg, comments on the difficulty in defining this
enigmatic collection of films:

Unfortunately, nothing links together all the things described as noir—not
the theme of crime, not a cinematographic technique, not even a resistance
of Aristotelian narratives or happy endings. Little wonder that no writer has
been able to find the category’s necessary and sufficient characteristics and
that many generalizations in the critical literature are open to question.” (10)

Dimendberg’s definition indicates a circling back to one of the first attempts to
conceptualize and categorize Film Noir, Raymond Borde’s and Étienne Chaumeton’s
1955 book Panorama du Film Noir Américain. Dimendberg’s way of looking at Film Noir
as a cycle, that encompasses history, style, tone, and theme represents one of the best
ways of trying to capture and name, what, as Naremore points out, is difficult and
perhaps impossible. Although battles over “What is Film Noir?” will continue,
Dimendberg’s use of the term Film Noir cycle captures, as best one can, the nature of

⁵ In this same note, Dimendberg lists all the essential scholarly texts written on Film Noir that argue its
codifications and definitions, which is accurate and helpful.
Film Noir. I would make clear one condition implied in Dimendberg’s definition: the Film Noir cycle also is predicated upon the idea that these films were unaware of belonging to this cycle, because of its a-posteriori construction. Of course, we can make allowances for late Noirs, like Aldrich’s *Kiss Me Deadly*, which Paul Schrader notes is “painfully self-aware” (12).

I also define the boundaries of this cycle as beginning in 1941 and ending, for the most part in 1955. This time frame corresponds with the one presented in Schrader’s landmark essay, “Notes of Noir.” He divides Film Noir chronologically into three categories: the wartime, post war realistic, and psychotic action and suicidal impulse periods (12). Schrader also defines Film Noir as a style, and argues that American critics fail to see this fact because they are accustomed to categorizing films by themes (13). Schrader’s view of Film Noir as a style seems more limiting that the more inclusive cycle Dimendberg proposes. Dimendberg’s project heavily invests in the way urban spaces play out in Film Noir, and his reading of Film Noirs as centripetal until 1949 and centrifugal post 1949 insightfully speaks to American fears about the population and commercial density in relation to atomic bomb threats. Although I agree that the city is an important component of Film Noirs, I would argue they can be set outside of the city, on the condition that they refer to city space as an elemental part of their discourse. For instance, John Huston’s *Key Largo* occurs on the eponymous island, yet it refers continuously to the gangsters being integral to the city. At one point, Mr. Temple even calls Johnny Rocco “city filth.” Also a group of gangsters led by Rocco’s acquaintance Ziggy travel to Key Largo from Miami. Dimendberg also chronicles the equation of the
city with the feminine. Perhaps Dimendberg’s neglected city equates on some level with the Rejected Woman of Film Noir—both have been ignored by Film Noir scholarship, and both bear the scars of this neglect.

Naremore discusses how the French conceptualization of Film Noir relates to their own nostalgia to a pre-war cinema of national identity that echoes in post-World War II American films (15). Film Noir seems forever fettered to the notion of nostalgia for the past, pain, and loss. The rejected woman too seems tied to these factors, particularly pain and loss, and occasionally nostalgia for her own lost past. For example, Gaye Dawn in Key Largo longingly talks about her past days as a performer: “My gowns were gorgeous. Always low-cut; very décolleté. . . . And I wouldn’t have any intro; they’d play the music in the dark, the spot would come on, and there I’d be.” Naremore finds Film Noir paradoxical because it “is both an important cinematic legacy and an idea we have projected onto the past” (11). We see this paradox in the rejected woman character. For instance, Kiss Me Deadly’s rejected woman Velda flips through a fifteen-year-old magazine, partially because she wishes to return to the past in order to forget her present situation, in which she prostitutes herself in order to please her boss and (sometimes) boyfriend, Mike.

Film Noir Exists

If, as Dimendberg notes, the discussion of what constitutes Film Noir borders on the “quasi theological,” Marc Vernet reigns supreme as Film Noir’s resident atheist.

Vernet represents a modern-day Penelope, daily tugging at the threads that hold

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6 See Dimendberg’s discussion on Weegee’s book The Naked City and how Weegee’s editor McCleery compares New York City to Weegee’s bride: “Loving the City, Weegee has been able to live with her in utmost intimacy. . . . Even in slumber he is responsive to her. . . . In sickness and in health he will take his camera and ride off in search of new evidence that his city, even in her most drunken and disorderly and pathetic moments, is beautiful” [qtd. in Dimendberg 53-54].
together the garment that is Film Noir; he keeps unraveling until finally, in his view, Film Noir disappears. Of course unlike Odysseus’ stoic wife, he does no re-weaving at night: “film noir has no clothes. . . . the classical list of criteria defining film noir is totally heterogeneous and without any foundation but a rhetorical one” (Vernet 2). He further concludes:

As an object or corpus of films, film noir does not belong to the history of cinema; it belongs as a notion to the history of film criticism or, if one prefers, to the history of those who wanted to love the American cinema even in its middling production and to form an image of it. Film noir is a collector’s idea that, for a moment, can only be found in books. (26)

Vernet claims that only the rare Film Noir scholar or critic has the courage to reveal this secret.7 Along with his dismissal of the Film Noir “genre” as a whole, Vernet wants to undo the work of his French predecessors, the “inventors” of Film Noir who discovered and named it, in a sort of Bloomian “kill the father” maneuver.8 Vernet’s essay, however, perhaps undoes itself: by trying so hard to prove Film Noir does not exist, he only makes its existence that much more in evidence. Two points made by Vernet cement the validity and existence of Film Noir. First, he observes: “Paradoxically, film noir is loved for representing a past that it in fact occults, a past that the enthusiast hardly knows, if at all” (25). All art represents a past that we in the present cannot know; a past the work of art itself occults. For example, consider Woody Allen’s party scene at Tony Lacey’s house in Annie Hall (1978). The director tries to capture the late

7 Vernet lists Paul Schrader as one such scholar, referring to Schrader’s “Notes on Noir.” Vernet reads “Notes on Noir” as supporting his thesis that Noir does not exist, yet Schrader’s essay goes to great lengths to argue for the existence of Film Noir as a style and not a genre. Schrader claims American critics are too quick to valorize themes over style, and that because of this prejudice, American critics misunderstand Film Noir. Schrader does not, at least in my reading of his essay, in any imaginable way, denies that Film Noir exists.

8 Harold Bloom’s Anxiety of Influence proposes the thesis that male authors, try metaphorically to kill their literary fathers by disproving their theories or denigrating their ideas in an effort to promote their own. He bases this thesis on the Freudian Oedipal complex.
1970s "me"-decade narcissism of southern California. No viewer, however, can assume this moment stands in for this time period. Or, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* invokes a past of the roaring 1920s with gin-soaked parties and flappers dancing the Charleston. No reader in the present can “know” the 1920s through this book. Instead, we experience the shinier, simpler, and more easily codified version of history that Fitzgerald presents. The ultimate irony of Fitzgerald’s novel is Gatsby’s telling Nick Carraway: “Can’t repeat the past? Of course you can!” (116). The novel teaches the reader that the past not only cannot be repeated; it never can be adequately remembered or recovered. In relation to Film Noir, Schrader notes that it “creates a mood of ‘temps perdu’ an irretrievable past” (11)

Vivian Sobchack also finds Vernet’s indictment of Film Noir “harsh,” arguing: “And yet if film noir is shown to have no clothes, its body remains—even for Vernet. There are, after all, ‘the films themselves’—and, even for Vernet, the perception of at least a minimally sufficient historical coalescence (if not coherence) to suggest that there is, indeed, a ‘there’ there” (136). Vernet draws the attention of feminist scholars like Sobchack because his attack on Film Noir is partially based on an attack of feminist film scholarship. Film Noir is an “imaginary enclosure” that becomes “a venerable concept for feminists and historians, and in which the resulting critical work ends up occulting the films themselves and their production” (Vernet 26). Vernet’s singling out “feminists” suggests feminist Film Noir scholarship relies on this invented category of film in order to advance a political platform. Vernet’s “rejection” of Film Noir, and his attempt to tie this rejection to the study of feminism puts Film Noir into the position of the Rejected Woman—Film Noir becomes a thing that the dominant male of the
patriarchal society does not know quite how to deal with—a thing that makes “him” uncomfortable, so in response, “he” destroys it, rejects it, or ignores it.

By denying, or occulting the rejected woman, one avoids having to deal with what she represents. Her status as the less than beautiful woman reminds women of the power of the patriarchy in relation to feminine beauty. Beauty (and the “power” that comes with it) remains evanescent and evaporates with age. Western culture teaches women that becoming or remaining beautiful will give them power. The rejected woman character lacks this standardized physical beauty. In some cases, she had it once, but lost it through the act of physical violence (Debby Marsh in *The Big Heat*) or through abuse of drinking or the process of aging (Gaye Dawn) or perhaps she never had it to begin with (Selma Parker in *The Big Heat*). These Rejected Women do not have access to the type of power distributed and recognized in patriarchal societies. Because they lack this power, they are punished, rejected, and subjected to dull, dreary lives, yet, they do manage to find ways to undermine the system by acquiring power in the limited ways available to them. For example, think about the way Fritz Lang depicts the cramped, sparse and dreary living space of the three telephone operators in *The Blue Gardenia* (1953). Could we imagine this same space being shared by beautiful and glamorous femme fatales, such as Kathy Moffat (*Out of the Past*), Anna Dundee (*Criss Cross*) and Phyllis Dietrichsen (*Double Indemnity*)? Despite their dreary surroundings, the women of *The Blue Gardenia* make themselves a home, a safe haven where they support and care for each other in a world that reminds them repeatedly of their rejected status. Why is the Rejected Woman in Film Noir ignored and or discarded with impunity? Historically, she seems to embody many of the fears usually associated with Film Noir
angst. The Rejected Woman is dismissed because in her very existence, she serves as a reminder to the patriarchy of its own unfair power structures. Her kindness and self-sacrifice create a sort of collective Noir guilt that manifests in its dismissing her or often hurting her. This attitude plays out in a similar dynamic with Film Noir’s depiction of non-white males, who, I will argue, occupy the same position as the white rejected woman in Film Noir.

Film Noir is July Fifth

Imagine an historical metaphor which casts World War II’s end, the accompanying euphoria of the victorious Allies, and the succeeding economic boom exists as the American July fourth holiday. This time of excessive and intoxicating joy and celebration is encapsulated by Eistenstadt’s iconic newspaper photograph of a sailor grabbing a random nurse and passionately kissing her [Fig 1-3]. Film Noir, then, represents July fifth, the day of the “hangover,” the day of cleaning up after the party, and the day of remembering and accounting for the excesses made the previous day. On the day of the hangover, we often are sick physically and emotionally. We are angry with ourselves for self-inducing our own physical pain, and wondering if what we did and how we behaved were somehow less than honorable at best, and dangerous, self-destructive and cruel at worst. If World War II represents the “fireworks” set off in Fourth of July celebrations, the post-war era of Film Noir becomes the hangover, when the United States is forced to take a look at the damage done and deal with the “fallout” of its actions, a term that takes on a particular malevolence in relation to the atomic bomb.

Arnold Weinstein created this analogy of July Fourth versus July Fifth in his discussion about The Great Gatsby. Weinstein argues that The Great Gatsby is a “July Fifth” and “hangover” text. I borrow his analogy, because I think it also applies to Film Noir as a “hangover” cycle of texts after the World War II “party.”
If Eisenstadt's photograph signifies spontaneous, intoxicating romance of the July fourth, then the picture of July fifth romance could be Velda and Mike in *Kiss Me Deadly*. In one shot, [Fig 1-4] Velda kisses Mike, but he is totally engrossed in his work; his investigation of the “great whatsit,” the atomic bomb. Mike’s lack of interest reflects the post-war malaise, the hangover from too much celebration. To make this shot even more disturbing (and less romantic, if that is even possible), Velda has a trail of spit that connects from her mouth to Mike’s neck, reminding the audience of the realism (not romance) involved in kissing—the exchange of spit.

Velda, as a rejected woman of Film Noir serves as a reminder of atomic horror in her final scene in the film in which she huddles in the surf with Mike as Dr. Soberin’s beach house erupts in an atomic ball of fire. If Gabrielle functions as the Pandora of the film (Dr. Soberin actually tells her that the name Pandora suits her more than her own), Velda is its Cassandra. She constantly warns Mike to end his quest for “the great whatsit,” yet her advice goes unheeded. In general, the rejected woman functions in Film Noir as a reminder of the damage of the atomic bomb. She exists as the gaze in the film in relation to the bomb, reminding us that her burning (which I will explain later in my project) stands in for the burning of the victims of the bomb’s past, and the eerie potential promise of victims burning in the future. The Rejected Woman of Film Noir is a fascinating blend of indifference and terror; she seems harmless because she often is ordinary, and does not attract (patriarchal) attention, yet she also embodies fear and terror because of her potential power. The Rejected Woman of Film Noir also represents fallout; the text often treats her as though she were radioactive, distancing her, cordoning her off. She represents the fear/awe of the bomb and its aftermath. In the
world of Film Noir, the femme fatale and the home girl are July fourth – the heady, dizzying feeling one gets when intoxicated by attraction. In fact, exploding fireworks often stand in as a trite symbol of romantic love and sexual attraction. In contrast, the rejected woman represents July fifth – the day of the hangover, the regret, and taking measure of the damages done in the excesses of the July fourth celebration.

**The Films**

Although hundreds of Film Noirs exist, this project concentrates primarily on seven films. Focusing closely on only a handful of Film Noirs allows for closer description and analysis of specific filmic moments as they relate to the rejected woman discursively, formally, and contextually. I chose depth over breadth, or if put in musical terms, pitch over range. This choice does not suggest that rejected women do not exist in other Film Noirs than the ones mentioned here. I picked films that provide a particularly archetypal portrayal of this character, such as *Casablanca*, *Key Largo*, and *Criss Cross*. I also use the two films that bookend the cycle, *The Maltese Falcon* from 1941 and *Kiss Me Deadly* from 1955. I chose films mostly from the post-war period, as I investigate the connections between the rejected woman and the atomic bomb, yet I include two pre-1945 films, both coincidentally, starring Humphrey Bogart, *The Maltese Falcon* and *Casablanca* to demonstrate the character’s ubiquity in the genre. I also mention the proto-noir, French realist film, *Pépé Le Moko* because of its construction of Inèz as rejected woman and how she prefigures the characters of Effie in *The Maltese Falcon* and Yvonne in *Casablanca*, and the noirish melodrama *The Letter* (William Wyler 1940) because of its portrayal of race through the character of Ong, who prefigures the rejected-woman-like character Nick in *Kiss Me Deadly*. 
I also concentrate heavily on the two Film Noirs by director Fritz Lang in 1953, *The Big Heat* in *The Blue Gardenia* because they are rejected-women-heavy (each film has four), and Lang’s portrayal of rejected women quintessentially features them as the sites of ambivalent sources power. Douglas Pye notes that “*The Blue Gardenia* seems a kind of stoical endeavor, made knowing it would not be recognized” (82). Both of Lang’s films here are “stoical” in that they are very smart movies, perhaps, as Pye suggests, smarter than they needed be. Pye discusses Lang’s ambivalent attitude toward his audiences, both disdaining their lazy reading and inattentive attitude, yet creating films that constantly challenged them to watch closely, to think, and to dream of what existed in these worlds he created. Pye argues that in *The Blue Gardenia*, the characters remain blind, in that they do not pay attention to the clues offered them, and thereby make foolish mistakes. *The Blue Gardenia* sets up a similar scenario for its beholders, for they, like the characters often “rely on habitual modes of seeing, reading, response” (87) that blinds them to the truth of these films. Although Pye does not discuss *The Big Heat*, his astute analysis applies to this film as well.

The stoicism of *The Blue Gardenia* reflects that of the rejected women characters in all these Film Noirs. They take risks to make positive changes, often times putting their own personal safety in peril. Also, they are strong, dignified and true to themselves despite the fact that hardly anyone in either the diegesis or the audience notices or appreciates these qualities. *The Blue Gardenia*, like the Rejected Woman herself, has not received the attention it deserves. In his “Noir 101” essay, for instance, Philip Gaines pans the film by sardonically asking, “should one sit through Lang’s *Blue Gardenia* just to comment on its crab dolly work?” (332). I have chosen films that
challenge creative and careful viewers to look at them in multitudinous ways that cannot be exhausted. Despite the copious amount and high quality of scholarship produced on many of these films, I do not believe these films have been “done” or “solved.” They remain so complex, nuanced, and well-made, that they open themselves up to continued analysis. Stanley Cavell writes:

    in my experience people worried about reading in, overinterpretation, or going too far, are, or were, typically afraid of getting started, or reading as such, as if afraid that texts—like people, like times and places—mean things and moreover mean more than you know. . . . my experience is that most texts, like most lives, are underread, not overread. (35)

I have chosen texts that despite their massive critical attention are still “underread” and remain so, even after my efforts here.

**Methodology: Three Risks**

Elizabeth Grosz implores feminist theorists to take “theoretical risks in the hope that new methods and models, new techniques and contexts” will enhance already-established feminist methods of trying to understand sexual difference (210). I take a big risk in presenting a quote by Stanley Cavell as one of my opening epigraphs. Cavell has been critical of Laura Mulvey’s ground-breaking essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,”¹⁰ and one of my goals of this project is to remind scholars of the importance of Mulvey’s work. Besides the risk taken in choosing the Cavell epigraph, I have taken three “theoretical risks” in this project in relation to my methodology.

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¹⁰ From this point forward, I will refer to this essay as “Visual Pleasure.”
Risk One: Renewal of “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”

Recently, Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure” has fallen into the basement of film theory, and I want to call for a renewed look at this foundational feminist text. “Visual Pleasure” offers a way to understand a world that is still ordered by sexual difference, in which looking and activity often equals power and not looking and not moving equals impotence. Although her essay is thirty-five years old, the paradigms she delineates are still in play. I doubt Mulvey imagined in 1975 that her ideas would still hold validity in the 21st century. In a world that is still sick with sexism, we still need Mulvey’s “prescriptive” approach to understanding films. Mulvey’s essay is famous for its popularization of the concept of the “the male gaze,” the notion that men control power both in and outside of films through of looking. Women remain in the passive position of receiver or object of the male gaze, and when they attempt to co-opt this power, the film often subjects them to punishment. Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze is useful in analyzing how rejected women function in Film Noir because it delineates the ways power operates in cinematic texts based on the three ways of seeing film encompasses: the look of the male protagonist, the look of the spectator at the screen, and the look of the camera ("Visual" 17). Mulvey’s use of the term “male gaze” has sparked controversy and disagreement because, I will argue, Mulvey’s choice of the term “gaze” was unfortunate, and it caused a conflation between her concept of the gaze and the one put forth by Lacan’s The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis – The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI (1964).

This confusion is augmented by the fact Mulvey does employ another of Lacan’s texts,

11 Lynn Spiegel announced in an essay in 2004 that she recently relocated all of her old feminist film theory books to the basement of her home. She called it a “meaningful gesture” as she no longer regarded these books as “primary texts” (1209).

12 From this point forward, I will refer to this text as Seminar XI.

“Visual Pleasure” should not exist, as it seems to right now, as merely an historical feminist artefact. Scholars have (rightly) criticized the essay for its critical blindspots, in relation to ahistoricity, hetero-normativity, lack of ethnic diversity, and over-generalizations in its lack of close readings. Nevertheless, what these scholars have failed to acknowledge that Mulvey’s essay provided an important jumping off point, which has resulted in the blossoming of critical explorations that it has been condemned for ignoring.Mulvey’s essay shows how sexism operates in film and its apparatuses, which provided paths for other critics to imagine how other (and Othered) films and its spectators intersected, which how these intersections explain racism, classism, and homophobia. Mulvey’s work also helped legitimize film studies and provided profound insights that, presently, are largely forgotten or ignored, or dismissed as “old-fashioned,” out-dated” and “prescriptive.” Indeed, one recent feminist scholar referred to Mulvey and other pioneering feminist film scholars as “the cranky mothers of feminist film theory” (Spigel 1212). This contemporary dismissal of her work is at best short-sighted and at worst dangerous.

From this point forward, I will refer to this text as the Mirror Stage essay.
The first step in recovering “Visual Pleasure” involves explaining what it is, and more importantly, what it is not. Many of the essay’s most valuable insights have been over-shadowed by its radical polemics, and thereby not given the proper critical attention they deserve. The essay first appeared in *Screen* magazine in Autumn, 1975. It had a polemic thesis: to destroy the pleasure involved in the cinema because this pleasure rooted itself in the subjugation of women: “It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article” (8). Mulvey hoped that by destroying pleasure, she could end a form of female oppression, which she located in narrative mainstream Hollywood cinema in which men actively looked at women, and women passively existed as objects. Mulvey’s attempt at destroying the pleasure of cinema has turned off many critics, who venture no further than this statement on the third page of her essay. In considering Mulvey’s battle cry to destroy cinematic pleasure, one must consider the historical context of her essay.

First, it grew out of heady revolutionary times. The radical student uprisings in the late 1960s both in the United States and Europe and the impact of second wave feminism fueled the notion that women could end patriarchal oppression. Mulvey, reflecting on essay thirty years later, said she wrote it in “the tradition of utopian aspiration” of the 1970s (“Looking” 1286). Second, it originally appeared in the issue of *Screen* which immediately followed Christian Metz’s “The Imaginary Signifier.” In certain ways, “Visual Pleasure” is a response to Metz’s androcentric approach to film spectatorship. In the spirit of this utopian hope to end patriarchal oppression and assertively to respond to Metz’s theory of the spectator, Mulvey appears to have been perhaps over-enthusiastic at best and reckless at worst. Destroying pleasure does not
provide the answer to ending oppression, because pleasure cannot be destroyed. Perhaps pleasure functions as a broken bone, and breaking it only results in its becoming stronger as it re-knits itself together. This one polemic line caused a backlash, which acted like the re-fortified broken bone: Mulvey’s statement not only alienated those who might have found her observations useful and interesting, but it also reinforced the patriarchal opposition to feminist film theory. Mulvey appeared to some (mostly male) critics as a castrator, desiring to chop off their pleasure in watching films. Her own work in psychoanalysis should have suggested to her that pleasure cannot be destroyed because destroying it would also result in a type of pleasure that one derives from displeasure, in line with Freud’s theory of the “fort”/ “da” game in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. In addition, Lacan’s notion that pleasure exists only in displeasure, in the fact that we continually long and strive for objects we can never obtain, also makes it impossible for any kind of destruction of pleasure to occur.

Indeed, Lacan’s Mirror Stage essay, which Mulvey directly refers to and uses as a basis of her argument, is founded on the concept that the pleasure we receive at recognizing ourselves in the mirror is immediately imbricated by the displeasure received from mis-recognizing [Méconnaissance] ourselves in that image. The Mirror Stage is “jubilant” because as infants, we recognize ourselves in the mirror for the first time and realize our position as separate beings from our caretakers. Yet, simultaneously, this recognition is “melancholic” because “[h]aving recognized ourselves in the mirror, we are bound to go through life looking outward for evidence of

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14 Freud observed a young child (his grandson) playing with a wooden reel attached to a string. The boy would throw it out of sight and say “fort” (gone) and then pull the reel back to him using the string and say “da” (here). The boy repeated this game over and over. Freud hypothesized that this game prepared the child for upcoming losses or displeasure because through his making the object disappear he was rehearsing for upcoming experiences of loss. (Chapter II, 10-17).
who we are. We will seek out ordinary mirrors (which deceive if only by reversing left and right) and we look into the mirroring gaze of others which will just as surely distort, diminish, aggrandize" (Lupenitz 225). Mulvey comments on the antinomic nature of the mirror stage:

Recognition [in the Mirror Stage] is thus overlaid with mis-recognition: the image recognised is conceived as the reflected body of self, but its mis-recognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego. . . Hence it is the birth of the long love affair/despair between image and self-image which has found such intensity of expression in film and such joyous recognition in the cinema audience." (10)

Mulvey’s understanding of the co-existence of “recognition/mis-recognition” and “love affair/despair” shows her understanding that displeasure always already is programmed into pleasure. Neither can be destroyed as the attempted destruction of either one automatically produces the other. This puzzling disjunction between her radical mission to destroy pleasure and her own understanding that psychologically this plan is not possible suggests an alternative reading of the famous line quoted above about destroyed pleasure: What if she were being deliberately ironic (and perhaps joking) in making this claim? In examining the controversial sentences: “It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article” [my emphasis], we note that Mulvey’s choice of the phrase “it is said” does not indicate “who” exactly says that analyzing pleasure or beauty destroys them.

An author usually uses any expletive, in this case, “it” to call attention to the subject following the verb (Hacker 254), which, here, would be the word “analysis”—the

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15 Some Lacanian scholars have a different interpretation of the Mirror Stage: the child recognizes itself and does not see wholeness but realizes instead that “I” means more than just a corporeal body. The child realizes that “I” is fragmented, which leads to a healthy development of the split subject, or the subject being a multiplicity of selves that is necessary for operating in the world. For example, we are different selves with our children as opposed to our work peers. Lacan’s Mirror Stage essay is written in such a way that it can be interpreted either way.
nominalization of analyzing. The sentence, without the verb “said” becomes: “It is the analysis of pleasure or beauty that destroys them.” Mulvey’s use of the word “said” throws the sentence in flux and leaves its meaning up for grabs. For example, I think of F. Scott’s Fitzgerald’s writing in *The Great Gatsby* that Myrtle tells Tom and Nick that her sister Catherine is *said to be beautiful* (32 my emphasis). This word “said” introduces doubt. Is she beautiful, or is that just something people say about her? The word “said” destabilizes Mulvey’s sentence, layering it with a doubt and a sense of whether or not Mulvey uses the word “said” as a kind of theoretical wink to her audience, whom she could imagine were well-versed in Freudian and Lacanian notions of pleasure. Could she have meant: “I know this destruction is not possible, but now that I have your attention, let’s look at how the patriarchal constraints of our culture inform the film-making and film viewing processes in ways that subjugate and objectify women.” Or, perhaps, the “wink” I am reading into the word “said” was entirely unconscious to her, serving as a Freudian paraprax – a written “slip of the tongue.”

In the last line of “Visual Pleasure,” she claims that women “cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret” (18). This line opens the possibility for the question: Why would women have regret of any kind, especially not sentimental regret, for a system that only oppresses and harms them? Certainly, women exist who so completely identify with the patriarchy that they enable a system that abuses them. Unless a majority of women falls into this category, no regret would exist whatsoever, much less sentimental regret, at the passing of an oppressive system. In “Afterthoughts,” Mulvey confesses to her “own love of Hollywood melodrama (equally an issue shelved in ‘Visual Pleasure’),” so, in keeping with her
claim made in “Visual Pleasure” to radically destroy viewing pleasure, her suggested
course of action would obliterate her own pleasure in watching these types of films, and
becomes, ultimately, self-destructive.

Mulvey’s prediction, made thirty-five years ago, for a new type of cinema did not
materialize. Conventional narrative cinema remains the dominant form of cinema, and
feminist film scholars still return to classic Hollywood films, like Film Noir, not, I hope, for
a healthy dose of masochism, or for a co-opting of patriarchal oppression, but to
understand how and why these systems exist, and what they signify in relation to the
lives of women. It is here that Mulvey makes her most valuable insights, and why,
despite its shortcomings, the essay remains valuable for film theory today. The most
influential and quoted lines from Mulvey’s “Visual” essay remains the locus of both its
most fecund insights and colossal misunderstandings:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split
between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze
projects its phantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly. In
their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and
displayed, with their appearance coded for the strong visual and erotic
impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (11)

She identifies the underlying power paradigm operating in most narrative cinema.
Men look. Women are looked at. These two sentences, the former grammatically written
in active voice, the latter in passive, represent the active versus passive roles assigned
to men and women in western society which Hollywood cinema reflects and
regenerates. For example, in Kiss Me Deadly, Aldrich opens up the shot at Carl Evello’s
house literally on the back of a scantily clad cocktail waitress [Fig 1-5]. The screen
begins in black (issuing from her bathing suit) as she walks out from the camera. By
filming this opening shot this way, the film works off the back of this woman, using her body to create interest for the non-diegetic male spectator.

Mulvey’s insight of active male and passive female conflates Foucault’s ideas about power, Althusser’s theory of state apparatuses, and Lacan’s Mirror Stage essay. Still, “Visual Pleasure’s” primary influences, I would argue, come from two diverse camps: John Berger and Christian Metz. John Berger’s book, *Ways of Seeing*, was first published in Great Britain in 1972. Berger’s book also spawned a BBC television series that ran in the same year. Berger discusses many of the ideas surrounding the “male gaze” that Mulvey would echo in “Visual Pleasures.” In particular, Chapter Three of *Ways of Seeing* deals with the way Western society sees and perceives women. He begins by establishing the difference between the “presence” of men and women: “A man’s presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you for you. . . . By contrast, a woman’s presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot done to her” (46). A woman’s notion of herself splits into the surveyor and the surveyed:

She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being appreciated as herself by another. (46)

Berger also notes: “One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (47). In a very similar fashion, as mentioned above, Mulvey observes that in “their traditional exhibitionist role” women “connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (“Visual” 11). Berger claims that “the surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision; a sight” (47). Berger
ends his chapter by writing that “the essential way of seeing women, the essential use 
to which their images are put, has not changed” since the Renaissance in the history of 
Western art (64). Women are depicted differently from men “not because the feminine 
is different from the masculine—but because the ‘ideal’ spectator is always assumed to 
be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him” (Berger 64). Mulvey 
develops this idea in her quotation of director Budd Boetticher, who said, in relation to 
the female characters in his films: “In herself the woman has absolutely no importance” 
(“Visual” 11). Berger challenges that “if you have any doubt” about his argument:

make the following experiment: Choose from this book an image of a 
traditional nude. Transform the woman into a man. Either in your mind’s eye 
or by drawing on the reproduction. Then notice the violence which that 
transformation does. Not to the image, but to the assumptions of a likely 
viewer. (64)

Berger’s use of the word “violence” suggests that by undergoing a commutation 
test in relation to sex does violence (traumatizes) the way we see the world. To 
perform the commutation test on Film Noir, could we imagine a sex-change between 
noir heroes and femme fatales? Or noir heroes and rejected women? In the iconic still 
from Kiss Me Deadly’s ballet scene, could we imagine a switch between Velda and Mike 
[Fig 1-6]? One in which Mike hangs on the ballet pole in a skimpy outfit, perhaps 
bathing trunks and a tank top, with his stomach heaving to catch breath. Could he

16 Berg isolates this objectification in the European tradition: “It is worth noticing that in other non-
European traditions—in Indian art, Persian art, African art, Pre-Colombian art—nakedness is never 
supine in this [women as object] way. And, if, in these traditions, the theme of a work is sexual attraction, 
it is likely to show active sexual love as between two people, the woman as active as the man, the actions 
each absorbing the other” (53)

17 John O. Thompson takes the idea of “commutation” discussed by Barthes in Elements of Semiology, 
and applies it to film studies. Thompson asks us to imagine what would happen to a film if another actor 
had played a role—How would that change significantly change a film, and make it “ungrammatical.” He 
gives the example of imaging John Wayne and James Stewart in each other's roles in The Shootist. 
Thompson argues that Wayne playing the doctor is “ungrammatical” and therefore, hard to imagine (194). 
Richard Dyer would suggest in his essay, “White” that we try the commutation test in relation to race (46).
become a vision for the female gaze of the audience and for Velda (who would take Mike’s position) without any undo “violence” or at the least a reorganizing of our ideas of gender roles?

In relation to gender roles, Mulvey calls out Christian Metz’s biased use of gender in “The Imaginary Signifier.”18 In some ways, “Visual” is a re-working of Metz’s work. Both essays use Lacan’s Mirror Stage essay to explain how the cinematic experience captivates its audiences in a way that resembles how children first recognize themselves in the mirror. In contrast to “Imaginary,” “Visual Pleasure” emphasizes sexual difference. While the child looks whole and coordinated in the mirror, in his corporeal reality, he19 feels maladroit and uncoordinated because his “physical ambitions outstrip his motor capacity, with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than his own body.” (Lacan “Mirror” 9). Mulvey hypothesizes that the cinematic screen, then, acting as a mirror, allows the male spectator to continue this illusion of superiority because he identifies with his male likeness—the hero on the screen: “The character in the story can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator, just as the image in the mirror was more in control of motor coordination” (“Visual” 12). He vicariously can “be” like his admired movie gods, such as Clint Eastwood, John Wayne or Cary Grant: cool, brave, in control, and able to get the girl.

Mulvey confirms Metz’s application of the Mirror Stage while also correcting some of its (sexist) blind spots. Metz theorizes that cinema is different from other forms

18 From this point forward, I will refer to this text as “Imaginary.”

19 Mulvey’s essay refers to the male spectator’s relation to film, so I will use the pronoun “he” for this section as well.
of art because its signifier simultaneously is present (we see the screen; we are not imaging it) and absent (the profilmic event we watch occurred long ago and is forever absent and unavailable): “The unique position of the cinema lies in this dual character of its signifier: unaccustomed perceptual wealth but at the same time stamped with unreality to an unusual degree... More than the other arts... the cinema involves us in the imaginary” (822). Lacan describes three registers of human experience: The Imaginary, the Real and the Symbolic. Although inspired by Freud’s Id, Ego and Superego, Lacan’s triptych is not analogous to Freud’s. The Imaginary is comprised of day dreams and fantasies. The Symbolic is made up of language; it allows human beings to communicate with one another. The Real is that which the first two registers cannot capture. The Real is trauma that horrifies and simultaneously fascinates that words cannot express.²⁰ Lacan’s Mirror Stage essay chronicles the events of the child in the Imaginary register, and Metz and Mulvey, using this essay as a touchstone text, imagine their version of looking at film (which Mulvey, not Metz, calls “the gaze”) as housed in the Imaginary.

In situating the cinematic spectator and the Mirror Stage child in the Lacanian Imaginary, Metz proclaims: “Thus film is like the mirror,” yet it differs from the “primordial

²⁰Žižek uses Robert Heinlein’s *The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag* to present an excellent illustration of the Lacanian Real in *Looking Awry*. In Heinlein’s story, Hoag, an alien and a “universal art critic” tells Randall and his wife Cynthia that our world is the creation of some mysterious artistic beings who create different worlds as works of art. Hoag has discovered some “minor defects” in our world that will be quickly repaired in the next few hours. He instructs Randall and Cynthia that as they drive home they must not, under any circumstances roll down their car windows. On the way home they witness a child being run over by another car, and when they then see a police officer, they roll down the window to speak to him only to find “[O]utside the open window was no sunlight, no cops, no kids—nothing. Nothing but a grey and formless mist, pulsing slowly as if with inchoate life” (Heinlein qtd in Žižek 14). Žižek explains: “‘This grey formless mist, pulsating slowly as if with inchoate life,’ what is it if not the Lacanian real, the pulsating of the presymbolic substance in its abhorrent vitality? But what is crucial for us here is that the place from which this real erupts the very borderline separating the outside from the inside, materialized in this case by the windowpane” (14-15)
mirror” of the Mirror Stage: “everything is projected on the screen, except the subject’s own body” (822). In another sense, “the screen is not a mirror” because the absent spectator, unlike the child in the mirror, cannot recognize himself as an object, as he does not appear on the screen. He holds the position of subject: “At the cinema it is always the other who is on the screen, as for me, I am there to look at him …I am all-perceiving . . . all powerful” (823). The spectator has the power both to be camera, in that his eye “records” the film, and projector in that he “releases” the film; it does not start for him until he enters the theater (825). Metz connects cinema with voyeurism, which produces a lack because the desired object does not exist in the same spatial or time continuum, cutting off any chance of obtaining the object of desire, as opposed to the theater in which the subject has a slight opportunity of obtaining this object of desire because they share the same time and space. This “lack,” although essential to voyeurism and the desire of the voyeur, ultimately reminds men of another lack, castration, experienced in the Lacanian “symbolic drama in which castration takes over in a decisive metaphor all the losses, both real and imaginary, that the child has already suffered (birth, trauma, maternal breast, excrement, etc.)” (Metz 832). Metz’s castration stays in the pre-Oedipal stage. He disavows any relation to Freud’s account of the lack produced by metaphorical genital castration, which occurs during the Oedipal phase. This inability to take castration into the realm of sexual difference opens the door for Mulvey to relate how Metz’s “the screen is a mirror” theory speaks to sexual difference and issues of castration.

21 I use pronouns associated with the male, as Metz only imagines a male spectator in his theory.
In “Visual Pleasure,” Mulvey uses Metz’s ideas to think about how sexual difference and (a more Freudian view of) castration figure in Lacan’s Mirror Stage. Mulvey explains that the central paradox of phallocentrism [of which the cinema belongs] rests upon “the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world. . . .it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence” (6). Woman, as the “bearer of the bleeding wound” “can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it” (7). Therefore, voyeuristic pleasures do not come without problems for the male spectator. Castration anxieties keep the male spectator from fully enjoying his viewing: “Hence the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in context, and it is woman as presentation/image that crystallizes this paradox (11). Women, in their “traditional exhibitionist role” are creatures of spectacle, often performing not only for the males in the audience but also for the males in the film in their frequent appearances as showgirls in classic cinema. They are pleasurable to look at, yet they continually remind the male of the threat of castration. A shot in Kiss Me Deadly serves as a (humorous) illustration of male castration fears. When detective Mike Hammer visits the treacherous Gabrielle, she points a gun at him that aligns directly with his penis [Fig 1-7]. Mike Hammer, the super macho man here visually becomes the castrated male. The mise-en-scène creates the illusion that as a femme fatale, Gabrielle represents the threat of castration, which is represented visually with her gun standing in for Mike’s penis. Mike appears decapitated in the shot, another representation of castration. At the film’s end, Gabrielle will penetrate him with a bullet reducing him to the position of the feminine. She will, receive, however, the ultimate punishment for appropriating the male “gun” and embodying the threat of castration—death by nuclear meltdown.
Mulvey asserts that the male unconscious has “two avenues of escape” to assuage this castration anxiety: he can choose to punish, or punish and then redeem the woman, or he can undertake a “complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object [‘fetishistic scopophilia’]” (13-14). These two avenues are not exclusive—they can be undertaken simultaneously. The former is usually associated with Film Noir through the character of the femme fatale (as noted in the example of Gabrielle and her gun and discussed earlier in this chapter). Mulvey’s second “avenue,” fetishization, involves the over-valuation of the female star, which occurs less frequently in Film Noir than the punishment “avenue.” Through fetishization, the female star gets broken down into body parts so she appears less threatening. Close-ups of women’s lips, breasts, legs and buttocks chop up their bodies, reducing them to a series of specific parts to be over-valued by the male spectator. This strategy is seen in Film Noir on occasion, such as Walter Neff’s fascination with Phyllis’ ankle (Double Indemnity), the emphasis on Gilda’s hair and gloves in the film of the same name (Charles Vidor 1946), or the way Siodmak’s camera cuts up Anna into pieces as she dances in the scene in which Steve first sees her when he returns to Los Angeles (Criss Cross). Siodmak cuts between shots of Anna’s dancing body and Steve’s adoring look [Fig 1-8]. Steve’s look in this shot also serves as a definitive example of the male gaze.

**Risk Two: Repairing the Rift and Renewing Psychoanalytic Film Theory**

Lacanian film theory presently (and woefully) is under-used in film analysis. Joan Copjec writes: “psychoanalysis is the mother tongue of our modernity and the important issues of our time are scarcely articulable outside the concepts it has forged. While some blasé souls argue that we are already beyond psychoanalysis, the truth is that we have not yet caught up with its most revolutionary insights” (10). Copjec reminds us that
by using psychoanalysis’ profound revelations, such as Lacan’s concept that the picture sees us, we inaugurate innovative approaches to analyzing and understanding texts that can teach us about ourselves, our community and our historicity both in terms of our contemporary moment of spectatorship and the moment in which the film was made. Presently, the state of psychoanalytic film theory is in disrepair because of a four letter word—GAZE—and the misunderstandings surrounding Mulvey’s application of this word. I contend that Mulvey does not “misread” Lacan’s theory of the gaze, as claimed by Copjec and Todd McGowan; she simply does not address it. Her unfortunate choice of the word “gaze” to describe the optic operation of looking has caused an avalanche of misunderstanding in relation to Lacan’s use of the word “gaze” in *Seminar XI*. By showing how “gaze theory” is really comprised of two separate branches or concepts: “look theory” proposed by Mulvey, and “gaze theory” proposed by Lacan, I demonstrate how both approaches are fruitful in yielding innovative readings of the Rejected Woman in Film Noir. They complement, not contradict each other.

Part of this confusion over the look and the gaze resides in the fact that the words gaze and look are near synonyms in English. Mulvey perhaps chose the word gaze because of its strong connotations of looking intensely and longingly, which inadvertently fettered a connection between these two terms, which for Lacan, are unrelated. Another part of the problem comes into play when scholars perceive “Visual Pleasure” as a reading of Lacan’s gaze theory; a prevalent mistake, most likely due to the opaqueness of Lacan’s ideas and the misunderstandings surrounding the word “gaze.” In *Seminar XI*, Lacan uses *le regard* for what has been translated into English

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22 Scholars have admitted the difficulty in comprehending Lacan’s complex theories. For example, Annette Kuhn notes that many scholars are relieved to see that the field is moving away from Lacan
as “the gaze.” Lacan does not use the term *le regard* in the Mirror Stage essay. Ironically, Lacan discouraged translation of “*objet petit a*” into other languages, leaving us to speculate if much of the confusion surrounding his gaze theory might have been avoided had he insisted that *le regard* remain untranslated as well.

Copjec and McGowan explain the difference between beholding (looking with one’s eyes) and the gaze. In their attempts to correct this theoretical error, however, I think they have lost sight of how Mulvey’s essay is extremely valuable for understanding how power circulates in films through the act of looking. In other words, in their attempt to explain the psychological misunderstandings, they have ignored the psychological and sociological value of Mulvey’s work. One wonders if perhaps Laura Mulvey presently functions as a Rejected Woman of Film (Noir) scholarship. Even if the work inspired by Mulvey led to the conflation of the word “gaze,” this entire body of work need not be denigrated or annihilated. In Mulvey’s theory, the eyes and the bodies that serve as objects for these looking eyes matter. If one of the major criticisms of psychoanalytic theory is that it concerns the mind and not the body (Kaplan “‘Global’ 1239), then Mulvey’s theory gives a body to psychoanalytic film theory.

McGowan writes “We should greet the news of the death of Lacanian film theory as the opportunity for its genuine birth” (5). McGowan believes that “the further that Lacanian film theory moved in the direction of specifying spectators in their particularity, the more that it paved the path leading to its own demise” (4). In other words, the more

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23 As noted by Todd McGowan in *The Real Gaze* (5)
“gaze theory” carved out groups of individual spectators (women, minorities, gays and lesbians), the more it splintered from Lacan’s idea that the gaze was in the film, not the spectator who watches it. I am hesitant to call this a “demise” rather than a different way of seeing film based on sociological and political aspects that tie into the Imaginary of Lacan’s Mirror Stage. McGowan (and also Copjec, who I will discuss below) wishes to deny that this Imaginary stage takes place in relation to film, which has been foundational to psychoanalytic film theory since the 1970s. McGowan objects to this approach because it assumes the spectator’s looking (gazing at the film) is the necessary component of the process, and the Lacanian gaze does not work in this manner: “But unfortunately, the real never appears in the psychoanalytic film theory developed in the 1970s” (3). Although McGowan is correct, and the Lacanian Gaze, located in the object, does work in the realm of the Real, to dismiss that gaze also works in this Imaginary register seems premature. I would suggest that Copjec’s theory, reinforced by McGowan’s, supplements Lacan’s concepts put forth in the Mirror Stage, that the gaze is housed in the Imaginary.

In Seminar XI, Lacan suggests that the gaze exists in the picture as well as in the eye of the beholder: “In the scopic field, everything is articulated between two terms that act in an antinomic way—on the side of things, there is the gaze, that is to say, things look at me, and yet I see them” (“Four” 109). Lacan’s lectures on the gaze took place around the time he had received a copy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (his close friend) posthumous book, The Visible and the Invisible. Inspired by his friend’s work regarding “sight” and blindness, Lacan argues that spatial conceptions of vision show that the blind can see: “What is at issue in geometrical perspective is simply the mapping of
space, not sight. The blind man may perfectly well conceive that the field of space he
knows, and which he knows as well, may be perceived at a distance" (86-87). A scene
from Alfred Hitchcock’s The Paradine Case (1947) exemplifies Lacan’s idea. Andre
Latour testifies about the way Colonel Paradine looked at him (although the Colonel
was blind) upon hearing that Latour had an affair with his wife: n He looked at me for a
minute in this blind way.” Earlier in the film, Mrs. Paradine notices a police officer
looking at a portrait of her late husband and she says, “I think the artist captured the
look of the blind man quite well.” If we do not need sight to see, Lacan hypothesizes,
then why can’t objects see?

Lacan writes: “The eye and the gaze—this is for us the split in which the drive is
manifested at the level of the scopic field” (73). In other words, Lacan argues that the
gaze elides us. “I see only from one point, but in my essence, I am looked at from all
sides” (72). This being looked at from all sides comes from a world that “is all-seeing.”
We are looked at from “all sides” and the sense of loss that registers in this idea comes
from our own split involving what we can see. For example, I can never see myself
seeing myself. This gaze is lost to me as much as Colonel Paradine’s. I also can never
see myself gazing at another person. Lacan writes: “When, in love, I solicit a look, what
is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that—You never look at me from the
place from which I see you.” (103). In other words, when I look at my beloved in a
lovingly way, I can never see how that look goes out from me to the other person. I can
no more see this look than can Colonel Paradine—my being sighted in no way brings
me closer to “seeing” the gaze. It eludes me and remains a lost object, or objet petit a.
The gaze is forever lost to us *because* we can never see ourselves seeing ourselves or seeing anything else.

Lacan’s earlier work in the Mirror Stage, which Mulvey uses in “Visual Pleasure,” concentrated on the Imaginary, and he does not totally abandon it in his later work in *Seminar XI*. Maureen Turim points out that Lacan’s use of the poem *Contrechant*, with which he opens his lecture on Anamorphosis, connects ideas in *Seminar XI* with those found in the Mirror Stage essay. She argues that Lacan’s use of the poem is “delightfully double” (158) in that the “you” in the poem represents both the speaker’s lover, whom the speaker can only imagine as a “dreamt of shadow” in that he cannot know her, only his imagining of what he thinks she might be. And, the “you” is also a “direct address” to the reader because the speaker of the poem tells us that we may experience an encounter with the Real – the trauma of lost love just as he has. The speaker’s eye remains “empty” and “blind” because like a mirror, it can only reflect back what it sees; the speaker has no means of entering his beloved. His connection with her remains on the surface and unsatisfying. Turim believes that Lacan’s choosing a poem that specifically employs a mirror, yet his neglect in mentioning the mirror in his discussion of the poem, is an example of “Lacan’s famous elliptical style” that he uses to indicate “how interconnected the mirror-stage theory is with all that follows in *The Four Fundamental Concepts [Seminar XI]* – the Tuché, the automaton, the eye and the gaze, the picture, anamorphosis, and transference” (“Looking” 159).

Jacqueline Rose sees this connection as well, and puts forward the theory that Lacan's theory of the gaze belongs to the Imaginary. She claims that in *Seminar XI*, Lacan uses a series of models and anecdotes to prove that the subject cannot see itself seeing itself, except, as Rose argues, if the subject sees itself as an Other, which can only be done in the Imaginary. As subjects, we are endlessly pictured and photographed, which make us objects at the source of light. We are, as Lacan says, “photoographed” or written by light (“Four” 106). For example, Jackson's Browne's “Fountain of Sorrow” begins: “Looking through some photographs I found inside a drawer, I was taken by a photograph of you. . . . You were turning around to see who was behind you. And I took your childish laughter by surprise. And in the moment that my camera happened to find you. There was just a trace of sorrow in your eyes.” The song shows how a subject can be “photoographed” or written upon by light (enlightened). The speaker is “taken” by a photograph he previously had taken of his beloved. He catches her just as she turns around; the camera taking her by surprise well as taking her picture. This photograph reveals a “sorrow” that he had not previously noticed. Looking at the photograph, he sees (gains enlightenment) her sorrow or her dissatisfaction with their relationship. The photograph, then, takes him, because it reveals to him a sorrow he had not previously perceived. Rose uses Lacan's concept of the two superimposed triangles, each pointing in the opposite direction from *Seminar XI* to explain how the middle of these intersecting triangles (the line that would cut the diamond formed by their superimposition) becomes the screen. Desire acts like an over-intense light which we blinds us through its glaring, so we cannot see any objects in this
light’s path. When we introduce a screen, however, we can then discern the objects (Rose 190-194).

Imagine the screen as a pair of sunglasses. When the sun glints off an object, we cannot see it. If we put on sunglasses, however, we then can see the object clearly, because the glare from the object (its line of light that “looks” at us) is removed. Still, even with the screen in play, the object still looks at us; we just temporarily blind ourselves to this fact by erecting the screen (i.e. wearing sunglasses). The screen then, has a dual function. First, it is the place of the image where the subject plays at an attempt to control the way the object captivates him/her. Second, the screen serves as a sign of the elusive relationship between the object of desire (objet petit a) and the spectator. By placing a screen that allows us to see the object, it escapes from us. In other words, when we want something, we cannot see it; yet, when we do whatever is necessary to obtain it (fashion a screen that allows us to see the object), it escapes us. We can never truly see this objet petit a or “catch” it. The screen then becomes the place where we can “play” or imagine scenarios for dealing with that desire. It symbolizes our desire to control the captivation of the object. The screen then, like the mirror in the Mirror Stage, becomes a locus for play and experimentation as we continue to experiment with the ways images can be manipulated by the mirror and/or screen. The “I” I see in the mirror is not really me, but an image of me that I can manipulate by moving the position of the mirror or changing its magnitude. Rose reminds us that the look of the object does captivate us, and our donning a screen is only an illusory attempt to control the object; a lesson we originally played out in the Mirror Stage as infants and continue to play with throughout our lives.
Imagine the screen is a movie screen. The flickering objects of light from the movie projector are made controllable through the interaction of a screen—the movie screen—we now see the objects and pretend that we can control these objects that captivate us. We can convince ourselves, as Metz writes, that “[a]t the cinema, it is always the other who is on the screen; as for me, I am there to look at him. I take no part in the perceived, on the contrary, I am all-perceiving. All-perceiving as one says all-powerful” (823). Yet, at the same point, this control is only an illusion. As Metz also reminds us, the “spectator does not escape these ‘pincers’ for he is part of the apparatus and also because pincers on the imaginary plane . . . mark our relation to the world as a whole” (824). Metz sees the apparatus as suturing us in place with pincers, but he also acknowledges our relationship with the Imaginary keeps these pincers in place, playing a role in our captivation with the play of light that produces the figures on the screen.

As opposed to Rose’s reading of the Lacanian Gaze as part of the Imaginary register, Copjec (like McGowan) argues that the gaze operates in the Real. Copjec traces her reading of the gaze through the work of Michael Fried, who argues that the shift from theatricality (the self-sufficiency located in the diegetic world of the painting, or its “assertion” that it did not need an audience to exist) to absorption (which followed Diderot’s injunction to “act as if the curtain never rose!”) caused the audience to become more fascinated by paintings than they had beforehand (111-112). She comments on Fried’s uncovering of an interesting paradox in painting that echoes in film: paintings draw in their beholders more intensely by refusing to acknowledge the beholders exist.

25 Copyjes uses the word “beholders” to describe people who look at objects as opposed to the terms “viewer” or “spectator.” She does not explain why, but I guess she uses this term because the terms
Copjec believes that Fried’s work in isolating this paradox is “heroic,” but his work “is missing….a theory of the gaze” (112). Fried does not adequately explain what causes “the mechanism of [the paintings’] simultaneous binding and disregard of the beholder” (113), which can be understood and explained through Lacan’s theory of the gaze.

Copjec uses Fried’s analysis of Tintoretto’s *Susanna and the Elders* to demonstrate the aporia found in Fried’s thesis. Susanna shields her naked body from the elders, but exposes it to the beholder. Fried quotes Diderot’s analysis of the painting which asserts that Susanna is seen but does not exhibit herself to the beholder. If Susanna were to look directly at the spectator, she would then be exhibitionistic; her looking would remove the beholder from the absorption in the scene and produce anxiety in him/her. Lacan believes that picture knows we look at it, but does not want to show us that it knows. He calls this phenomenon the picture’s “all seeing aspect” and he likens it to “the satisfaction of a woman who knows that she is being looked at, on the condition one does not show her that one knows that she knows” (“Four” 75).

Copjec uses the eponymous character in the film *Marnie* (Alfred Hitchcock 1964) as parallel to Susanna. Early in *Marnie*, Marnie looks at her image in a mirror after dyeing her hair. This mirror is located only a few degrees off from the camera lens. She almost, but not quite, looks directly at the lens (the audience). Likewise, in exposing her nakedness to the beholder, Susanna flirts with the transgression of never looking directly at the audience as a means of reinforcing it (Copjec 113). These characters know they know we look at them, but we must never indicate that we know they know, or the spell of absorption dissipates. For Lacan, the distinction between the look and the

“spectator” and “viewer” are tied so closely with discussions of the gaze in film in which the gaze = looking (like Mulvey’s).
gaze is that the beholder can and must look at the presented world; what is prohibited, however, is the arousal of the beholder's gaze. The world does not provoke our gaze, so for Lacan, the terms look and gaze are "antinomic" (Copjec 111). According to Lacan, "the world is all-seeing, but not exhibitionistic—it does not provoke our gaze. When it begins to provoke it, the feeling of strangeness begins too" ("Four" 75). A spectator feels this "strangeness" when something "catches" his or her attention in the film.

This strangeness experienced by the spectator could also be explained by Lacan's theory of anamorphosis, which he illustrates by using Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* [Fig 1-9]. Lacan points out the strange blob of an object that stands in the painting's foreground:

What, then, before this display of the domain of appearance in all its most fascinating forms, is this object, which from some angles appears to be flying through the air, at others to be tilted? You cannot know—for you turn away, thus escaping the fascination of the picture. Begin by walking out of the room in which no doubt it has long held your attention. It is then that, turning round as you leave . . . you apprehend in this form. . What? A skull. (88)

The skull represents an encounter with the Real. Holbein's painting suggests that although these two men have all the privileges life can offer them, their attempt to hold on to the material possessions, the security of their position in society, in the end, remains but a futile effort to stave off death (represented by the skull). When we look at the picture, we may be fascinated by this blob, which is reminiscent of the "grey formless mist" that Žižek uses to describe it. Something about it sticks at us, however. Lacan uses the analogy of having a cuttlebone stuck in our throats ("Four" 88); we can still breathe and swallow, but the little bone just will not go down. When we look at it straight on, however, we cannot see that this object actually looks at us. When we look at it "awry" or from another angle, we see the skull and realize that its look at us represents
an encounter with the Real; death really exists in all our metaphorical pictures of our lives, because it is our ultimate fate, and our attempts to distract us from this inevitable outcome, with possessions, education, and with our going about living our everyday lives in no way mitigates our ultimate date with death. The skull in this picture is the gaze, the object that sticks in our metaphorical throats. Lacan explains that “this picture is simply what any picture is, a trap for the gaze” (“Four” 89). The gaze traps us in both the positive and negative sense of the word: it catches us in its snare and precipitates an encounter with the Real, a trauma. Yet, the gaze also traps us in that we are captivated by it; much like the child is first captivated by his image during the Mirror Stage, which ties the gaze to the Imaginary.

Copjec argues film theorists mistook anamorphosis for an occasional rather than a structurally necessary phenomenon because of Lacan’s “notorious difficult style” (185). With this error, Lacan’s reading of The Ambassadors becomes anecdotal instead on intrinsic to Lacan’s explanation of the gaze: Every time we encounter a picture, we risk an encounter with the Real. If we look for the gaze, only in literal anamorphosis, which is what the Ambassadors supplies, we lose what the Gaze signifies; and according to Copjec, this error has caused psychoanalytic film theory to get off track, an idea shared by McGowan. In Looking Awry, Slavoj Žižek speaks to same issue, as the title of his book suggests. Žižek uses an example from Richard II, act II scene II to explain anamorphosis: the King has left for war and the Queen feels a sense of foreboding and an inconsolable sorrow she cannot fathom. Bushy, the King’s servant, tries to console her by pointing out the illusory, phantomlike nature of her grief. He tells the Queen she cannot see clearly because her eyes are filled with tears. The tears
distort the reality of what is happening and make it appear worse or other than it is (9). Žižek employs this conversation to show that looking at something involves two opposing realities. We have the common sense reality that if we look at something straight on, we see it “as it really is,” while the gaze impregnated by our desires and anxieties produces a distorted and blurred image that only can be looked at “awry.”

What Žižek points out, however, is that Bushy is wrong, and the opposite of what he says is true: “If we look at a thing straight on, i.e., matter-of-factly, disinterestedly, objectively, we see nothing but a formless spot; the object assumes clear and distinctive features only if we look at it ‘at an angle’ i.e. with an ‘interested’ view, supported permeated and ‘distorted’ by desire” (11-12). In other words, from our looking awry, we are able truly to see. In the example from Richard II, the Queen only can see the situation from the “distorted” view through her veil of tears. The “formless spot” Žižek refers to is objet petit a. The paradox of desire is that it posits retroactively its own cause. For example, objet petit a can be perceived only by a look distorted by desire; it does not exist as an object when one looks objectively at it.

I experienced this phenomenon as a young child. I remember an incident as that occurred when I was about seven years old. I misbehaved (I don’t recall what I did), and I received a spanking from my mother. I started to cry profusely, and tears clouded my vision. I remember looking at the Christmas tree lights, and I noticed that through my tears, the colors began to run and they took on a new beauty; my fascination with the running colors of the lights stopped my crying, which was also good for another reason, as my mother had threatened me with another spanking if I kept crying. Looking at the

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Žižek takes his book title from one of Bushy’s lines: “so your sweet majesty,/Looking awry upon your lord’s departure/ Finds shapes of grief more than himself to wail.”
running colors of the Christmas tree lights was an antinomic moment: I was overcome by sadness, having just been spanked and called “a bad girl.” I remember feeling unloved in that moment, but simultaneously, my tears created a situation in which I looked awry, and I experienced the lights in a way that would have been unavailable to me had I only looked at them “objectively.” In essence, I had never really looked at the lights before, and their beauty was made available to me only through the running colors produced by my tears. I had to go through a trauma, the spanking and the scolding, in order to see the lights as truly beautiful. Hence, the double-edged sword of the object-cause of desire, objet petit a, is revealed as an exquisite melding of pleasure and pain, and fascination and terror. Pain and pleasure are not antinomic but dependent upon each other. This theory also gives us another avenue for exploring the Rejected Woman in Film Noir. She embodies both pain and pleasure. At first look, she seems only to be “pain.” When we look at her awry, however, we find circled within this pain, pleasure -- or within powerlessness, power.

The Rejected Woman of Film Noir often experiences encounters with the Real through object with a gaze, most notably, the gazes of the oyster fountain, the whirlpool and the popping meat that all signify the trauma of Norah’s rape and pregnancy in The Blue Gardenia. McGowan reaffirms Copjec’s belief that the gaze is both an encounter with the Real and that it belongs not to the spectator, the camera or the characters, but to the film itself. McGowan’s study of the gaze concentrates solely on the film itself and does not engage the empirical spectators nor contextual elements: “We find history and the spectator through filmic interpretation, not through archival research and surveys” (x). If the gaze belongs in any way to the Real as opposed to the Imaginary, as
McGowan argues, then an encounter with the gaze needs to address the individual spectator as well as the collective spectator that would form as the result of historical events. For example, one collective encounter with the Real that post-war American spectators share is the fear/fascination of the atomic bomb, so they may see a gaze that represents the bomb in a shared or collective way. Individually, the gaze has the ability to affect a spectator on an individual level based on his/her own experiences and background. For example, what captivates me about certain events, objects, activities or movements in a film may not catch another viewer the same way.

**Risk Three: The Gaze of Descriptive Movie Group Practices**

The third “theoretical risk” I take in methodology involves combining psychoanalytical methods with those practiced by the descriptive-oriented scholars, sometimes referred to as the *Movie* group. Critics who employ the descriptive method of film criticism guard against the over generalization that can evolve when we can no longer see the film, the metaphorical tree, through the ideological forest. If film scholars reach a point where they can write about films that they have not seen (based solely on reading plot summaries or screenplays of films), they lose the art and skill that is film analysis. Films are not merely moving plots; their status as film requires that we always consider the form as well as the discourse. Throughout my project, I rely on close, descriptive readings to bolster my theoretical and ideological interpretations. *Movie* critics base their readings on describing what they see on the screen and put meaning to these filmic moments. They value “significance over prominence” (“Notes” Klevan

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27 This *Movie* group refers to: (1) the scholars/critics who wrote for the film magazine *Movie*, which premiered in June 1962, (2) their students who keep up this detail-oriented, “looking for the visible” close-reading approach to film, and (3) Stanley Cavell, who did not write for *Movie* but agrees with *Movie* group’s approach to reading film.
218). In other words, they look for small moments in the film that personally captivate the critic, and then move from that point to understand how the significant event, object or issue teaches us about the film. For example, in his analysis of In A Lonely Place, V.F. Perkins isolates the same gesture—one man’s grabbing another man’s shoulders from behind, which occurs three times in a brief portion of the film’s opening scene. He discusses how this same gesture has a dissimilar pretense (from patronizing to intimacy to oppressive) and how this repetition ties into the film’s central theme, “the uncertainty of emotion, a story of passion dogged by mistrust in which only the strength of feeling (not its nature) remains constant” (“Moments” 212). Movie critics encourage readings that involve an acute attention to film style and the “flexible and agile involvement” of reader and text (Klevan “Notes” 216). Their task is to encourage critics to become artists, in a sense, to create analyses of films that best describe their stylistic and narrative concerns. Through use of the techniques employed by the Movie critics, I describe what I see and hear on film. Stern and Kouvaros write “film has a particular way of conjuring up presence, of touching us in the dark theatre, of magnetising a range of senses” (14). Taking the idea of touching from performer to spectator to film scholar to (most likely) another film scholar. The descriptive method techniques infuse my work with a “ludic advantage” to quote Barthes, which works “to multiply the signifiers, to not reach some ultimate signified” (“S/Z” 165).

Coincidentally, this type of “ludic advantage” is seen in Lacan’s writing style, which at times is playful. For example, in Seminar XI, he jokes that one way we can comprehend anamorphosis by watching a tattoo on a penis as it changes from flaccid to erect (88), or as I will discuss in Chapter Six, the way he depicts the way mimicry works
as the stain in the picture by using an example of an animal that mimics the anus of another animal (99). Lacan’s style invites play and imagination, along with its theoretical conceptions. Turim discusses the playful quality of Lacan’s Mirror Stage essay and persuades scholars to imagine the ways a more poetic Lacan could bolster film studies: “If mirror stage is to continue to enhance film theory,” it will be “because of its fundamental duality. We must comprehend more subtly how the mirror stage speaks to fascination, identification, empathy, aggression, and desire. Its poetics need to be appreciated before its means can be understood” (160).

This project employs the idea of play in relation to my reading of the films. I have taken some imaginative leaps, some might say, perhaps too imaginative or too big. Still, the Movie critics approach, and the “poetics” potential in Lacan’s Mirror Stage essay (and Seminar XI) encourage play and imagination, which I bring into my theoretical approaches to and readings of these Film Noirs. Oscar Wilde contends that the critic “will be always showing us the work of art in some new relation to our age. He will always be reminding us that the great works of art are living things--are, in fact, the only things that live” (164). I hope my project reaffirms the idea that as critics, we have a responsibility to make our subjects live and breathe. My task is to bring the Rejected Woman of Film Noir to life. I take “artistic” chances, for lack of a better word, which I hope bring freshness to some already well-studied ideas and films. The critics and the artist are not so far apart as we might sometimes, in film scholarship, place them.

Chapters

I have divided this project into two main sections: the first section, uses Mulvey’s “Look” theory to analyze power structures at play in Film Noir in relation to Rejected Women, and the second employs Lacan’s “Gaze” theory to show how the Rejected
Woman functions as the gaze in Film Noir, and how her function as the gaze, identifies her as a stain in the picture that reminds viewers of her oppression. Chapters Two and Three analyze power structures at play in Film Noir in relation to rejected women. Chapter Two looks at how Film Noir renders rejected women invisible, they connote a kind “to-(not)-be-looked-at-ness” which renders them invisible. Chapter Three focuses on how the power dichotomy of active looking versus passive being-looked-at extrapolates into other power paradigms, such as mobile versus immobile and writer versus written-upon text. Chapter Four uses theories of both the look and the gaze to examine the way non-white bodies in Film Noir operate and how the rejection of non-white bodies, through invisibility and lack of power often echoes the experiences of the (white) rejected women of Film Noir. Chapter Five deals with the ways objects in Film Noir function as the Lacanian gaze in both the Real and Imaginary registers. This chapter examines the way inanimate objects can emit a gaze that signals either delight or, most often, terror in relation to the rejected women. Chapter Six continues the analysis of the gaze in the picture, only instead of looking at how objects emit a gaze in relation to the rejected woman, this chapter focuses on the way the rejected woman herself becomes the stain or the gaze in the picture through mimicry. I also show how the rejected woman functions as gaze in her role as an abject object, which will ultimately tie into Chapter Seven, in which I connect the rejected woman as the gaze in the picture to the nuclear bomb, the historical gaze that haunts many Film Noirs and signifies the ultimate clue that America lives in a “July Fifth” society since the development of the nuclear bomb.
My approach to this project was heuristic. I started with the character type, and closely analyzed her place in these few Film Noirs, using “Look” theory and “Gaze” theory that I infused with the descriptive practices of the Movie group. I discovered that the Rejected Woman of Film Noir is inherently antinomic: she simultaneously encompasses pain and pleasure, visibility and invisibility, movement and immobility, and writing instrument and text. Her fluidity ultimately reflects her attempt to find sources of power in a culture and society that constantly forecloses her access to power. In the end, however, she finds that the sources of power she accesses are ultimately ambivalent and not helpful to her personally. In her status as a rejected woman, she often experiences the trauma associated with rejection, which we can chart through her encounters with the Lacanian Imaginary and Real. She uses the Imaginary to escape the harsh realities of her life. In relation to the Real, her rejected status leads her to trauma, shock and pain. I believe she has been “rejected” to date by spectators and scholars because by acknowledging her, we must confront our own realities about the injustices of patriarchal society: the unfair distribution of power between men and women and the way women who do not fit the paradigms of beauty in our society are often rendered invisible by a patriarchy that often values women for their physical appearance. These conditions push the Rejected Woman to the margins of Film Noir, not only in terms of the discursive and formal elements of the film, but scholarly and audience reception of her. My comparing the (white) rejected woman of Film Noir to non-white people in Film Noir further shows that the dichotomy of center/margin that informs power structures and sets up the traumas (Lacanian encounters with the Real) that develop from rejection.
In this project, I examine how patriarchal society rejects the rejected woman character and how she bears up under this rejection. Rejected women struggle against a patriarchal power system, which Film Noir anthropomorphizes into the character of the noir hero. They seem to be captivated totally by its (his) power, yet they manage to accomplish minor feats of resistance, and make sacrifices that only they are in a position to make. These sacrifices are noble and cause significant changes, yet the rejected woman never seems to gain these sacrifices, which only benefit the patriarchy (noir male hero). A profound ambivalence surrounds their existence in Film Noir, which is why they probably remain largely un-discussed and ignored by people in and outside the diegesis of the film. Their gaze makes us uncomfortable; we should have a better answer concerning what they signify, and be able to codify how and why the sacrifices they make are worth it for them. In an early scene in *Kiss Me Deadly*, detective Pat Murphy begs Mike to stop his investigation because it will lead to danger and horror. Mike’s response is, “Well, what’s in it for me?” The femme fatale and the home girl always ask this question, although the home girl’s asking is more implicit (her desire for stability and security). The rejected woman never asks this question, leading us to wonder, why she does not.

Although women (and minorities) have made advancements since the 1950s, overall women still lack power in a patriarchal society and the rejected women serves as a reminder of this problem. In a crucial scene in Adrian Lyne’s *Fatal Attraction* (1987), Rejected Woman in (Neo) Noir Alex Forrest tells her ex-lover Dan Gallagher, a married man who discarded her after an intense weekend-long sexual affair: “I will not be ignored, Dan!” Although Alex’s’ character degenerates by the end of film into a knife-
wielding, bunny-boiling psychopath, this one scene allows her some dignity and clarity, as she refuses, she tells him, to be treated “like some slut you can just bang a few times and throw in the garbage.” The Rejected Woman in Film Noir, like Alex, has been ignored, diegetically by the noir hero, formally, by the film’s formal composition, by the spectator, and most significantly, for my project, by film scholars. By defining rejected women, showing how they are rejected and by whom, and explaining what this rejection signifies, I hope to ensure they are not ignored, and we will all be the better for it.
Figure 1-1. Leland’s cutting comment about nurses

Figure 1-2. Triangular space occupied by memory of Kane
Figure 1-3. “July Fourth”: Alfred Eisenstaedt’s August 14, 1945 photograph

Figure 1-4. "July Fifth": Velda and Mike
Figure 1-5. Enticing the "male gaze" of the audience in *Kiss Me Deadly*

Figure 1-6. Commutation Test: Could Velda and Mike switch roles?
Figure 1-7. Gabrielle’s gun = Mike’s penis in *Kiss Me Deadly*

Figure 1-8. Steve’s adoring “gaze” at Anna in *Criss Cross*
Figure 1-9. Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors*
CHAPTER 2
INVISIBILITY OF REJECTED WOMEN: A “TO-(NOT)-BE-LOOKED-AT-NESS.”

“Vince should have never ruined my looks”

—Debby Marsh, The Big Heat

This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper

—T. S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men”

Invisibility and Agency in Rejected Women

The Big Heat’s Debby Marsh loves to look at herself in the mirror. When she first enters Dave’s hotel room, she looks in the mirror, taps on her already perfect hair, moves back, tilts her head, moves back in to tap her hair again, this time turning sideways to admire her profile. Debby performs this last gesture earlier in the film when she is in Vince’s apartment. She stops to admire herself in the mirror instead of immediately responding to Vince’s command to “Shut the door!” so he can talk in private to his boss. She looks at herself not to fix her hair or her make-up. She knows she looks perfect; She believes she is beautiful, and just to make sure she knows for sure, the mirror assures her, that yes, she really is that beautiful. Debby is not yet a Rejected Woman in Film Noir when she visits Dave’s hotel; nevertheless this scene plants the seed for that transformation. Vince douses her face with scalding coffee because Debby has gone to Dave’s hotel. The coffee scars her face, and with her disfigurement, she enters the ranks of the Rejected Women of Film Noir. For Debby, “checking her face is like reading the stock market quotes, making sure her future is secure” and that Vince Stone “destroys Debbie’s collateral in a sexist society” (Gunning “Big” 431). When this “collateral” is destroyed, or in the case of most rejected women, never existed, women cannot rely on their “good looks” to carry them through life. If we filter the phrase “good
looks” through Mulvey’s prism, it has a double meaning: It means being attractive, but it also means that a woman receives good (long, intense, desirous) looks from men.

When Debby lays dying on the floor of Vince’s apartment, at the end of film, her looks are on her mind. She says to Dave: “I must look awful,” and “Vince should have never ruined my looks.” Vince’s act ruins her attractiveness, and her ability to attract the “good (in her case profitable) looks” of men.

Debby dies before she has to experience the invisibility the lack of “good looks” visits upon most Rejected Women in Film Noir. Because she is ignored, the rejected woman neither owns the look, nor is subjected to “the male gaze,” which gives her a cloak of invisibility. Although obviously she can be seen—she appears on the screen—her lack of being seen registers in the way characters in the film and viewers in the audience do not seem to notice her. For example, when I tell people I am incorporating Casablanca into this project, they usually respond by telling me how much they enjoy the film, and they ask how I use the film. When I answer, “I'm primarily working on the scenes involving Yvonne,” I usually get a puzzled look, with the corresponding question, “Who is Yvonne?” I remind them that Yvonne is the woman who Rick uses sexually and discards, and then they remember her. Although Yvonne is present in Casablanca, many people who claim to know the film well cannot recall her. As a Rejected Woman in Film Noir, Yvonne does not attract the look of the audience, nor does she attract Rick’s gaze (desire).

Mulvey’s thesis in “Visual” explains that men have the active power of looking, and when they train this look on a woman, she becomes an object. What happens, then, when men do not look at a woman or do not want to look at her? One possibility is
that she becomes invisible to them. Inversing Mulvey’s concept of “to-be-looked-at-ness,” the rejected woman instead seems to possess a “to-(not)-be-looked-at-ness,” which renders her invisible. This invisibility, however, gives her access to a kind of power and agency not available to the femme fatale, the home girl, or even the noir hero. She exercises resistance against the power paradigms by showing how easily they can be penetrated because of their own blind spots. Her lack of “to-be-looked-at-ness” renders her blind to them, and this gives the ability to act, not merely react. She utilizes the power she gains from invisibility, however, not for her own edification, but to promote the agenda of the noir hero. The rejected woman is also marked as invisible in the way she exits the text. Whereas the femme fatale leaves Film Noir with a bang, the rejected woman leaves with a whimper. The film pays little to no formal or discursive attention to her exit—she merely slips away, eclipsed by darkness, or chopped out suddenly by a quick cut of the camera, never to appear again. Sometimes, she hovers for a moment as an overlap dissolve before floating away or is neatly tucked under the noir hero’s arm as the camera leaves her to follow him.

The rejected woman’s invisibility may resonate with certain audience members who see in her their own potential futures of being alone, forgotten and invisible. In a scene from the television series Six Feet Under, Ruth and Bettina, two middle-aged women, are shopping in a high end department store. Bettina sees a $200 scarf she likes but cannot afford. She rips off the tag and stuffs the scarf down her pants. Ruth is mortified and fears getting caught. Bettina, along with her moral justification that the scarf is priced at ten times its production cost, tells Ruth: “Fortunately, women our age are invisible, so we can really get away with murder” (“Eye”). Bettina uses her
“invisibility” in relation to the patriarchy to launch her personal campaign of resistance against a power structure that values women solely for their physical appearance: namely their attractiveness and youth. Since they are not looking, she seems to say, because in their structure I have a “to-[not]-be-looked-ness,” I am going to take advantage of the disadvantage they try to saddle on me. Interestingly, this scene follows one in which Ruth’s daughter Claire attends an art lesson in which the teacher tells her she must find “the eye inside” and let this internal eye guide her artwork. He tells her she mimics the art she has already seen because she does not trust the vision she sees inside herself. In a sly way, Bettina keenly is aware of her inner eye in that she knows what “art” exists in the world (pretty young women) and instead of mimicking them, she uses her inner knowledge to create her own ‘art’ through pilferage.

Mulveyan “look” theory shows how traditionally beautiful women attract the gaze of the male, and how that gaze turns her into a passive object. If a woman is not looked at, does this signify she does not become relegated to the passive position? My project shows that the Rejected Woman of Film Noir exists as a symptom of a sexist society. Because our society is controlled by a patriarchy, and men like to look at (attractive) women, women who are deemed less than attractive do not have access to this brand of “power.” The Rejected Women of Film Noir I discuss in this chapter seem to have mastered the first part of Bettina’s knowledge—they know they are invisible. In fact, several of them “get away with murder” in that they either help the noir hero murder a noir villain, or do it themselves. Because of their invisibility they can perform these acts. In contrast, they have not mastered Bettina’s ability to personally benefit from their invisibility. Gaye Dawn of Key Largo and Selma Parker of The Big Heat use their
invisibility to get things done that no other characters can or are willing to do. In the end, however, for both women, this power is ambivalent: it gives them a sense of accomplishment and whatever satisfaction can be found in self-sacrifice, but ultimately their acts put them at great personal risk, and do not benefit them directly.

**Invisibility and Sexual Longing in Rejected Women**

The other question we can ask in relation to invisibility involves sexual longing. Film Noir neuters the rejected woman by foreclosing on her sexuality. She often harbors lust and sexual attraction toward the noir hero, yet he does not respond to or even notice these feelings. Occasionally, she captures the attention of the noir hero, but it is always ephemeral. In *Casablanca*, Yvonne beds Rick, but he soon rejects her. Velda has an intimate relationship with Mike, but the noir hero uses her to entrap his clients’ husbands. At least in these two cases, the rejected women had some chance to satisfy their sexual wants. The three women I analyze here, Effie from *The Maltese Falcon*, the Lush (the film only provides this name for her in the credits) from *Criss Cross*, and Selma from *The Big Heat*, all want their noir heroes sexually, but their longings are shut down harshly and with finality. We can analyze the rejected woman’s longing for the noir hero, in relation to Mulvey and Doane’s theories of female spectatorship.

Mulvey herself responded to “Visual Pleasures” with “Afterthoughts.” Mulvey explains why she uses the pronoun “he” throughout “Visual Pleasure” and asserts that the spectator does not have to be a man: “I was interested in the relationship between the image of woman on the screen and the ‘masculinisation’ of the spectator position, regardless of the actual sex . . . of any real live movie-goer” (122). “Afterthoughts” theorizes the role of female spectators (or anyone who approaches the film from a feminized position), who have two possible ways to watch film. In the first way, “the
female spectator is carried along . . . by the scruff of the text” because she finds “herself so out of key with the pleasure on offer, with its ‘masculinisation,’ that the spell of fascination is broken” (“After”122). In the second way, the spectator finds herself “enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides” (123). Mulvey concentrates on this second avenue by conducting a close reading of Pearl in King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun* to show that like this character, the female audience may not “achieve a stable sexual identity” because she, like Pearl, is “torn between the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity” (123). Like Pearl’s position in *Duel in the Sun*, the female spectator “temporarily accepts ‘masculinisation’ in memory of her ‘active’ phase [in the development of her sexuality according to Freud]. Rather than dramatizing the success of masculine identification, Pearl brings out its sadness” because her “tomboy pleasures, her sexuality” are never fully accepted. “So too,” Mulvey concludes, “is the female spectator’s fantasy of masculinisation at cross-purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes” (129). Women are stuck in the unstable position of oscillating between masculinity and femininity in their role as spectators.

Doane, using both of Mulvey’s essays, sketches a more complete picture of female spectatorship. She too, uses a two-avenue approach, suggesting that women watch films by employing two possible positions, which can be held simultaneously, the “transvestite” (as Mulvey suggested) and “the masquerade.” Doane argues that women get distance from their own bodies by performing these roles, because the act of spectatorship requires fetishization, which requires distance from their own fetishized
bodies. In the position of the transvestite, women watch a film “like a man,” in order, for example, to “get” a dirty joke told at a woman’s expense,

1 (Doane “Film”87), which would be akin to Berger’s role of the surveyor (discussed in Chapter One). In the masquerade position, a female spectator watches a film via the position of hyper-femininity in an effort to distance herself from her own body, “which is so close continually reminds her of the castration which cannot be ‘fetishised’ away” (Doane “Film” 75-76.). The masquerade makes fetishism possible and allows the female spectator to avoid the reprisals that derive from being a woman who looks. The masquerade:

in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed. The masquerade’s resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as precisely, imagistic. (Doane 81-2)

By donning the mask or disguise of femininity, she ironically gets the distance necessary from her own feminine body to become the voyeur. On the screen, the femme fatale character performs the masquerade: she “plays” the role of femininity in order to get something (money, power) she wants (Doane “Film” 82). Similarly, the female spectator assumes the masquerade in watching film to get something she wants: the ability to look without the fear of (male) punishment. The rejected woman also assumes the positions of the transvestite and the masquerade in order to look without risking reprisals from the noir hero.

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1 Doane provides an example of the transvestite position in this essay through her analysis of Robert Doisneau’s photograph *Un Regard Oblique*. In the photograph, a woman’s gaze is engaged—she looks at a painting, which gives her male companion the opportunity to look at a picture of a naked woman. Doane writes: “Doisneau’s photograph is not readable by the female spectator—it can give her pleasure only in masochism. In order to ‘get’ the joke, she must once again assume the position of the transvestite (87). In other words, in order to understand the joke, a female viewer of the photograph must look at it like a man.
Man is reluctant to stare at his exhibitionist like,” according to Mulvey in “Visual Pleasure,” because he is uncomfortable having people look at him (12). He is supposed to be the looker not the one who is looked at. Doane also comments on the male dislike of being looked at: “There is always a certain excessiveness, a difficulty associated with women who appropriate the gaze, who insist upon looking” (“Film” 83). Doane gives the example of Ellen Berent in Leave Her to Heaven (John Stahl 1945) whose desire for Richard Harland channels itself through excessive looking: she stares openly and intensely at him while sitting across from him on a train. Doane argues that this intense look signifies Ellen’s “excessive desire and over-possessiveness” (“Film” 83). Ellen pays for her “looking” through her descent into madness, homicide and suicide. Doane provides other examples from classic Hollywood, but this case of women being punished for active looking continues beyond the 1950s. For example more recent films, one from 1978 and another from 1994 both depict terrible punishment for active looking. The Eyes of Laura Mars (Irving Kershner 1978) features a woman photographer, the eponymous Laura Mars, whose close friends are murdered by a serial killer who dislikes her photographs. Laura falls in love with detective John Neville assigned to the case only to learn that he, suffering from multiple personality disorder, is the actual murderer. One reading of the film suggests Laura is punished for her role as an active looker. She owns the look of the camera as photographer and several shots of the film feature her looking into the film camera’s lens with her lens. Another example of a female character who is punished for openly looking is Pulp Fiction’s (Quentin Tarantino 1994)

2 An interesting aside: the Sept/October 1982 issue of Screen magazine that features Doane’s essay on female spectatorship has a photograph of Laura Mars (Faye Dunaway) on its cover. Also, I think the name of this heroine who looks being Laura with a last name that begins with “M” is a little more than coincidental, seeing that the film came out three years after Mulvey’s iconic essay.
femme fatale Mia Wallace. Mia looks with total control at Vincent Vega when he enters her house for their “date.” She sits behind a camera and watches his every move. She directs his actions through an accompanying sound system. Mia pays for her open and intense looking with a near death experience in which she just barely survives a heroin overdose. Vincent saves her by slamming a needle packed with adrenaline into her heart. The penetration serves as payback for her feminizing Vincent through her controlling look in the earlier scene.

Under my application of Doane’s theory, both Laura Mars and Mia Wallace try to hide their active looking through the guise of either of masquerade or the transvestite. Outside of her “masculine” career choice, Laura Mars is coded as hyper-feminine through her long hair, high pitched voice and wardrobe of silk blouses and high boots. Her mannerisms are feminine as well as her desire to be saved by the hero. Mia Wallace, in turn, appropriates the role of the transvestite. She wears a masculine white Oxford button-down shirt and black slacks. She has short hair and a deep voice. Despite their attempts at appropriating the disguises of the masquerade and the transvestite, their efforts fail because their acts of looking are so blatantly and openly transgressive (Laura and Mia both take ownership of the camera) in relation to the prohibition of women appropriating the male gaze. In the case of the rejected woman, as opposed to female characters coded as attractive like Ellen Berent, Laura Mars, and Mia Wallace, the irony remains that her looking does not register as excessive because it is never noticed. Ellen eventually marries Richard, showing her longing is at least acknowledged. Detective Neville sexually wants Laura, and Vincent wants Mia.
The Rejected Woman in Film Noir is perhaps the one type of female character, because of her invisibility, who could get away with looking, in that her active looking would not agitate male anxiety or ire, yet, she still uses the covert methods of looking Doane identifies in female spectators. Filtering Doane’s theory of the female spectator through the lens of the rejected woman, we notice that she assumes these two positions in relation to her sexual longing for the noir hero. In attempting to disguise the fact that she looks at him and to avoid arousing his anger, she may don the role of the transvestite: she either tries to become his male buddy, or helper, as seen in the case of Selma and Effie. Effie’s position in this role becomes more complicated when we factor in the many masculine reference codes endowed with this character, and the potential of her lesbian desire. Or, the rejected woman can put on the mask of the masquerade to become hyper-feminine in an attempt to disguise her lustful looking. For example, the Lush in *Criss Cross* becomes hyper-feminine as seen in her hairstyle, clothes and girlish gestures in an attempt to hide the fact that she longs for Steve. Ironically, the noir hero never sees her in the first place. Her effort to hide the fact that she looks is sad, because the object of her longing never notices her. The rejected woman then, has the power to stare as openly at she wishes at the noir hero without the threat of male anger and its successive punishment. She could look as Ellen. Laura and Mia do, without punishment, but, she does not use this potential power to her own best advantage, which once again highlights her ambivalent relationship with power and agency.

**Close Readings: Specific Examples of Rejected Women of Film Noir as Invisible**

**Gaye Dawn in *Key Largo***

To briefly summarize the story, noir hero Frank McCloud comes to Key Largo to visit the father (James) and widow (Nora) of his army friend, George Temple. Frank was
with George when he died during the Italian campaign of World War II. Frank finds other guests at the Temple Hotel when he arrives, and Frank automatically feels something is not right. He meets Gaye Dawn, the girl-friend of gangster Johnny Rocco along a few of Rocco’s henchmen, Angel, Toots, and Curly in the lobby. Rocco remains in his room unseen. A bell rings, and the men all jump: Rocco wants something in his room. Toots goes to respond and comes back and tells Gaye, “He wants you.” Gaye, obviously drunk, puts on lipstick and rushes upstairs. A few minutes later, we hear her screaming in pain because Curly “socked” her “in the kisser” and locked her in her room. Frank tells Nora and Mr. Temple about George’s bravery in the war, and they ask him to stay with them so he can tell them more about George. Frank agrees; he obviously had a pre-disposition to like Nora and Mr. Temple because of the many stories George told Frank about his family. Two local men, the Osceola brothers, have broken out of jail after being arrested for public drunkenness. Sheriff Wade and his deputy Sawyer interview Mr. Temple, because the Osceola brothers trust Mr. Temple, and Wade figures they would go to Temple’s hotel. When Mr. Temple tells them he has not seen the Osceola brothers, they leave. Sawyer returns, however, feeling that something about the guests at the hotel is off. Sawyer recognizes Rocco and tries to arrest him, but Toots knocks him out. With Sawyer’s car left outside, Mr. Temple asks questions and soon Nora, Frank, Mr. Temple and Sawyer become hostages. Frank also recognizes Rocco, who was deported, but has snuck back into the country. He has a counterfeiting scheme worked out and waits at the hotel for another gangster, Ziggy, to come and buy his phony money. Rocco also has to wait out the impending hurricane before Ziggy can arrive from Miami, which delays Rocco’s escape to Cuba by boat.
When Frank expresses his distaste for Rocco, he offers his gun to Frank, goading Frank to shoot him. Frank takes the gun but does not shoot. Sawyer grabs the gun and goes to shoot Rocco, but the gun has no bullets, which Rocco knew. Rocco guns down Sawyer and the gangsters dump the body in the ocean. Rocco calls Frank a coward for not firing the gun, a sentiment echoed by Nora, who later apologizes for this comment when she realizes the depth of Frank’s bravery. Rocco bars the local Native Americans from entering the hotel during the hurricane. He coaxes Gaye to sing, when she clearly has lost her talent for doing so with the promise of drink, and then reneges after she humiliates herself by singing off key and out of tune. He also frames the Osceola brothers for Sawyer’s murder, which leads to their deaths. After the hurricane, Sawyer’s body washes up in front of the hotel, and Rocco fools Wade into believing the Osceola boys killed Sawyer. Ziggy arrives and the money exchange takes place, but Rocco’s boat is gone; the skipper sailed away because of the hurricane. Rocco forces Frank, who has past boating knowledge (he told Nora within earshot of Curly, “My first sweetheart was a boat.”) From what we have learned about Rocco’s nature, we assume, as do the characters, that Frank will not survive this trip. As they prepare to leave, Gaye asks if Rocco will take her along. He says no, and she jumps into his arms begging him to take her. Rocco pushes her away, and she sobs and runs into Frank’s arms. Her actions are a pretense to get her close enough to Rocco to take the gun out of his pocket. She does and gives it to Frank. A forlorn Nora, Mr. Temple and Gaye mourn the preeminent death of Frank. Gaye leaves with Sheriff Wade right before the phone rings. It is Frank. He managed to out-gun Rocco and all his men on the boat, and although wounded himself, he heads back to Key Largo.
"Key Largo" introduces Gaye Dawn in a way that presages her invisibility [Fig 2-1]. In her first appearance, Gaye is relegated to the background. She appears as a small figure in a busy mise-en-scène, invisible to all but those viewers who intentionally look for her. She faces away from the camera. Frank, in the foreground, is also shot from behind. Shooting characters’ backs is unusual, and by introducing Gaye in this manner and by having Frank in the same position, the film suggests their connectivity. They are both outsiders. She sits at a bar stool, solidifying her relationship to the bar; she is a creature of bars, a B-girl and as we will soon learn, her alcoholism is a key component of her life. She sits with only one buttock on the seat, her other leg stretched out to the floor. This posture and her tight-fitting dress enhance the feminine curves of her body. In her past, this curvy body was her means to power, which at one point cemented her “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Frank’s request for a beer is denied, and Gaye, yells: “Give him a drink!” She receives no response. “Give him a drink,” she bellows a bit louder, still no answer. Her invisibility is reinforced by her inability to be heard by the men in the room. While they physically hear her, they ignore her. Finally, at top volume, she bellows: “You heard me! Give him a drink!” and Angel finally responds by pouring Frank a beer. Gaye’s speech slurs, her voice thick with alcohol. By giving Frank something he wants or needs, these first lines of dialogue set up the final scene between them in which Gaye will make sure Frank gets what he needs (a gun) to save himself from Rocco.

Frank thanks Gaye and sits next to her, the camera capturing them in a two shot. With only a brief cut to the radio itself, the camera remains on the two of them as Gaye cheers on her horse in an alcohol-soaked voice: “C’mon Lady Bountiful! C’mon Lady Bountiful! C’mon!!” [Fig 2-2]. Her cheering on “Lady Bountiful” appears as a chant,
signifying her wish not only for her horse to win the race, but also for Gaye’s wish for a more bountiful or fulfilling life than the one she now leads. It also serves as a foreshadowing, because Gaye will function as Frank’s lady bountiful by freeing him from the grip of Rocco. After the horse wins, Gaye says to Frank, “Can I pick ‘em or can I?” They hear a buzzing sound. Gaye’s smile melts from her face, and the camera focuses on a board showing the room from which the buzz generated. Huston uses a quick panning shot to swoop back to the bar, signifying the energy that emanates from that “buzz” as Curly says, “That’s him.” Gaye staggers off her bar stool and says she will go. Toots says, “If he wants you, he’ll ask for you.” She stumbles back to her seat. Gaye tells Frank she always plays the long shots, and they usually come in for her. She explains to him why the current long shot she’s eyeing, “Fancy Free,” should have odds at 4 to 1 not 12 to 1. She speaks of the horse’s breeding and track record. She asks Frank his name and he answers: “McCloud, Frank by John out of Helen.” Frank’s describing himself in horse breeding terms reinforces his function, metaphorically, as the prize-winning race horse of the film (it may also refer to Huston’s being an avid racing fan). He, like Gaye’s “Fancy Free,” is the long shot, who will deliver. Gaye’s line of “Can I pick ‘em or Can I pick ‘em?” applies not only ironically to inability to pick the right male partner—as the film unfolds we discover her relationship with Rocco has ruined her life, but also applies to her perspicacious ability to “pick” a winner in Frank. She can see, where others cannot, that he can defeat Rocco. Frank’s status as “Fancy Free” will be solidified soon when he explains to Nora, the home girl, how he has been untied to any job, place or person since the war—in a position, we could describe in a clichéd expression, as “footloose and fancy free.” Toots invades the next shot, telling
Gaye that “he” wants her. The camera then captures her from behind (for the second time in the first five minutes of the film) in long shot as she walks unsteadily toward the stairs while applying lipstick. The color of the background blends with her dress, and she appears to fade into the background, another nod to her invisibility as a rejected woman [Fig 2-3]. By shooting Gaye from behind in two of her first appearances on screen, Huston sets up the paradigm of how Gaye will be deserted and forgotten by the diegesis and its characters.

Gaye realizes over the course of the film that Rocco no longer desires her. She witnesses his making crude passes at Nora and registers his disdain when he tells her that her singing is “rotten.” This lack of desire makes Rocco oblivious to Gaye, which renders her invisible. She becomes a pest he must shake off. As Rocco and his gang prepare to leave the hotel with Frank as their hostage, the camera shows Rocco change his gun clip, and then it immediately cuts to a close-up of Gaye to show she registers this change. Her head does not turn, but her eyes move screen right, a gesture that indicates that she is thinking. The camera cuts back to Rocco as he places the gun in his coat pocket. Gaye then stages a masterful performance that erases her previous dismal one (singing the song “Moaning Low” off-key). She asks Rocco, “Where are my things?” Rocco tells her she is not coming, and he peels off bills from a wad of cash, stuffs them in her hand and says, “Here. On this you can stay drunk for a month.” She grabs his neck and cries, “Please, Johnny! You’ve got to take me. I’ll stop drinking, I’ll do anything!” She continues begging as he tries to free himself from her grip. Gaye only performs this charade in order to get close enough to Rocco to steal his gun. She can only accomplish this act if she knows ahead of time, that he does not want her. If he
wants to join them, he would not have pushed her away, and she would not have been able to deliver the gun to Frank. In contrast, Rocco asks Nora, "Do want to come along sister?" indicating his desire to have her on the trip to Cuba, and showing that Nora, through her “to-be-looked-at-ness” and lack of invisibility could never pull off what Gaye manages to do. Nora could get close to Rocco, but Rocco would not push Nora away, as he does to Gaye. In the close-up of the gun exchange [Fig 2-4], it looks like Frank and Gaye hold hands, but they do not; her hand is closer to the camera than his, creating the optical illusion that they touch, but she receives no affectionate touches, such as holding hands. Earlier in the film, Frank makes a loving gesture in which, to awaken her, he pats Nora’s hair after the storm has ended. This gesture of tenderness is repeated when Nora puts her head in Mr. Temple’s lap after Frank leaves for Cuba; he strokes her hair in the same gentle, loving way. Gaye is present in both scenes, but receives no warmth or tenderness. The only touches she receives in the film come from the strong arming from Curly and pushing away from Rocco. As Rocco pushes her away, she feigns sobs of anguish, and she pretends to run to Frank’s arms for comfort at which time she deposits the gun she took from Rocco’s pocket into Frank’s hands during their embrace. Huston shoots this exchange of the gun in a close-up of Frank and Gaye’s mid-sections. Gaye’s right hand clutches the barrel of the gun in a provocative manner, her red nail polish accentuating her grip on the phallic-like object that gives power to whomever possesses it [Fig 2-4]. Gaye takes this power from Rocco, but cannot keep it for herself; she only passes it to another man. Yet, because the way her “to-(not)-be-looked-at-ness” cloaks her in invisibility, she can take the gun

3 In this close-up, Gaye and Frank eventually do touch when she puts the gun in his hand, but this touch is motivated by necessity, not tenderness.
without Rocco’s knowing it. The money featured in this shot both emphasizes the value
of what she has done, and Gaye’s past as a “bought” woman. It also signifies the price
she must pay. Gaye has agency available to no other character through her ability to
feign begging in Rocco’s arms. She uses this agency, to help the noir hero at great risk
to herself (if Rocco caught her, he would have killed her) and with no personal gain or
benefit, besides the few dollars Rocco throws her way.

The film highlights her invisibility in her exit from the film, particularly when
viewed in comparison with the last shot of Nora. The end of the film makes clear that
Frank will return to Key Largo and live with Mr. Temple and Nora, while Gaye
accompanies Sheriff Wade to Georgia to identify Ziggy, never to return. Formally, Gaye
gets cut out of the film as she heads for door with the sheriff. Just before Gaye leaves,
she does get a medium-close-up that she shares with Sheriff Wade [Fig 2-5]. Shadows
cover half her face as she says, “No one in the world is safe as long as Johnny Rocco is
alive.” The sheriff says, “We better go now, miss, “and the two of them walk out of the
Temple hotel and out of the film. Immediately after Gaye leaves, the telephone rings
announcing that Frank has survived and is heading back to Key Largo. Gaye made his
return possible, yet she does not get to even know that her sacrifice has allowed Frank
to live. As a rejected woman, she is even denied that satisfaction. After Nora tells Mr.
Temple the news, she opens a window; her body is bathed in sunlight as the scene
dissolves to Frank’s boat heading back to Key Largo, forming an iconic image of the
home girl surrounded by sunlight, which reflects her purity and goodness [Fig 2-6]. In
stark contrast, Gaye’s last image coats her in the shadows that suggest her dark past
as a B-girl, reinforcing the idea that she is not pure, good, or attractive enough to
partner with Frank. The dark shadows of this shot also reflect her being left in the dark; they reinforce her ignorance in that she never realizes the outcome of her sacrifice.

**Selma Parker in *The Big Heat***

Like Gaye Dawn in *Key Largo*, *The Big Heat*’s Selma Parker takes a large personal risk solely for the benefit of the noir hero. She risks her life twice for Dave. First, she gives him the initial clue of the name “Larry” at Victory Auto Wrecking. In doing this, she certainly risks her job because her boss would immediately fire her if he found out she spoke to Dave. Also, if Larry, a hit man who has already killed Katie Bannion, found out that Dave had his name, he could easily trace the name back to Victory. The Victory Auto scenes also connote Selma’s attraction to Dave, which remains unrequited and unnoticed. Second, she returns at the film’s end and helps Dave gain entrance into Larry’s apartment, which also endangers her life.

**At Victory Auto Wrecking**

Robin Wood’s insightful and detailed analysis of Selma overlooks one crucial detail: Selma’s existence as a sexual human being. He writes:

> Although she appears briefly in the background of the scene in her boss’s office—the image I think everyone retains is of her hobbling on her stick between the rows of wrecked cars toward Bannion, who is on the other side of a chainmail fence. She defends her boss (who, out of fear, has refused to give Bannion information)—he ‘isn’t a bad man,’ and after all, who else would employ a woman like herself?—before risking her own life (we know that she could easily join Lucy Chapman in the morgue) by telling Bannion what he needs to know. It’s an extraordinary little scene—understated, almost thrown away: Selma is the one character if the film whose motives are absolutely pure. 104 (my emphasis)

Wood’s referring to her first scene as “almost thrown away” reflects the condition of the Rejected Women in Film Noir in general. Selma exhibits compassion, bravery and

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4 See Chapter Three for a plot summary of this film.
passion that usually goes unnoticed or is “thrown away” metaphorically by the viewer and the characters in the text who do not significantly “see” Selma, because she is not physically alluring in a way that would code her as desirable to men. Wood also describes her as the only character in the film whose motives are “absolutely pure.” The word “absolutely” is slippery, however.

Katie Bannion exhibits “absolutely pure” motives, operating solely by love and devotion to her family. So, why then, is Selma “absolutely pure” and Katie not? Perhaps a sexual connotation lies behind Wood’s words. Katie’s sexuality overtly is displayed. She suggestively reminds Dave they share “other things” besides liquor and cigarettes. When Katie tells Dave their daughter Joyce is “angelic all day, but at night she’s a holy terror,” Dave grabs her arm and says, “That’s the way I usually describe you.” Selma’s “pure” motivations reflect how she exhibits references codes that make her readable as a spinster librarian type; a woman who is uninterested in sex because she is not viewed as sexy or desirable. Wood’s labeling Selma, and only Selma, as “pure” robs her of any sexual desire or passion. While a sense of good citizenship provides one motivation for Selma, she also has a more personal and passionate investment in Dave. McArthur interprets the entire sequence at Victory Auto Wrecking as “replete with images of imprisonment,” particularly the “wire-mesh fence” that separates Dave from Selma during their conversation in the Victory auto yard (66–68). In the original script, Victory’s owner, Atkins, was friendly, but in Lang’s revision he is evasive and passively hostile. This change shows Selma as courageous in her going behind her boss’ back to give Dave information (McArthur 66). Like Wood, McArthur places Selma’s motivation solely with the fight against Lagana and does not pick up on Selma’s desire for Dave.
Interestingly, or perhaps ironically, Mc Arthur writes that she acts because she is “steamed up” over Lagana’s rule and represents the people who “organise and fight back against crime”(66). While part of Selma’s character may represent the oppressed and angry population of Kenport, she is also “steamed up” by something more personal: her sexual attraction to and desire for Dave.

Katie’s death in the family automobile leads Dave to “Victory Auto Wrecking.” Its name ironically, if not slyly, implies that within this space, Dave’s victory over Lagana has its embryonic beginning. We see the shop first through Dave’s eyes—a subjective establishing shot of Victory. The *mise-en-scène* appears bleak and dismal. The metal, twisted carcasses of dead cars stand in the foreground, obscuring the building. Telephone wires thread the dismal sky in the background. This tangle of telephone wires figures prominently in a subsequent long shot of Dave walking into Victory, visually emblematizing Dave’s tangled emotions as well as evoking the cut up and criss-crossed space of film noir. Dave enters the shop amongst mounds of auto litter, making him appear small; the broken auto parts tower over him, reflecting his overwhelming emotions of having to pull his wife’s dead body from his wrecked car. The first interior shot, overstuffed and cluttered with junk, extends the messy chaotic and claustrophobic feel of the shop’s exterior. Two figures come into view in the background. The shop’s owner, the portly Mr. Atkins, sits screen left, with his back to the screen that wordlessly expresses his unwillingness to help Dave. Selma, his bookkeeper, sits screen right, a small figure amongst the clutter and chaos. Dave never looks in Selma’s direction; in this first shot of Selma in the film, Selma is already invisible to Dave.
He approaches Atkins and begins questioning him. As Dave says, “someone planted dynamite in our car,” a quick cut away medium-shot to Selma intimates that she has important information for Dave. She quickly looks up upon hearing his words and slowly lowers her head down, returning to writing her figures. Selma is a middle-aged woman, conservatively dressed in a corduroy jacket and a high collar blouse. She wears glasses and her hair is neatly ensconced in a bun. She is harshly lit, which enhances her plainness. The rejected woman often is harshly lit and filmed in unflattering angles, as we will notice is also the case with the Lush and Effie.

When Atkins refuses to provide any information, Dave asks: “You wouldn’t stick out your big, fat neck for anybody, would you?” Atkins replies: “That’s the truth, but it’s my big, fat neck.” We get echoes of Rick Blaine’s isolationist policy—“I stick my neck out for no one”—writ small. The threat of isolationism is no longer the fate of the world at large, as the war is over. The camera follows Atkins as he grabs another cola, pulls back, revealing a three-shot of Dave, Selma and Atkins [Fig 2-7]. Atkins, in the foreground and screen right, is enveloped by darkness, reflecting his inability to “shed light” on Dave’s investigation. His dialogue, “Sorry, I can’t help you,” punctuates his lack of assistance. Dave stands screen left in the middle of the depth of field. He is half in shadow, half in light, hinting that he is not doomed to the darkness of Atkins’ non-cooperation. Selma sits between the two men in the background under a large, round, hanging light. Although the farthest figure from the camera, deep focus allows the audience to see Selma clearly. The spotlight over her head connotes her ability to enlighten Dave with her information, yet even with this spotlight, he does not see her. As Atkins continues to rebuff Dave’s questions, Selma looks up and faces Dave’s
direction; she opens her mouth as if to say something. By the time Atkins returns to his stool; however, Selma looks down and returns to her writing, almost like the passing of Atkins large body across the screen has dimmed her courage. Atkins tells Dave: “Cops are paid to take risks; I'm not. I've got a wife and kids too.” Dave walks out of frame, and we assume, out of the shop entirely, unable to bear the reminder that he, unlike Atkins, has suffered the destruction of his family.

Dave walks out of Victory and beyond the perimeter of its wrecking yard when he hears Selma’s voice off: “Mr. Bannion! Mr. Bannion!” He turns screen left to give attention to the voice. From the other side of the chain link fence, Selma walks toward Dave between two smashed up automobiles that are, like Selma, disabled and marked by misfortune or accident. She glances over her shoulder to make sure she is not followed. She uses a cane; her gait marked by a prominent limp. Selma says, “Mr. Atkins may come outside. He isn’t a mean man.” She rests the fingers of her left hand on the links of the fence. Her fingers are outstretched toward Dave in a gesture that reflects a desire to touch or caress Dave [Fig 2-8]. She continues: “Not many people would hire someone like me.” The fence provides a visual distraction and a physical barrier during their entire exchange. The choice to shoot both characters from behind the chain-link fence in shot-reverse-shots emphasizes Selma’s separation from the outside world. She is inside the fenced-in yard; he is outside. Yet, both characters must see and communicate with each other through this barrier, which itself suggests a number of dichotomies: 1) Male/Female, 2) Physical prowess (Dave easily out-boxed and knocked out Lagana’s bodyguard in an earlier scene, and Dave’s offer to Lagana:
“You wanna pinch hit for your boy?” went unanswered)/Physically challenged, 3) Accepted/Rejected, and 4) Unattainable object of desire/Desiring subject.

Selma’s comment of “someone like me” reflects her belief that she deems herself inadequate or lacking. The tone of her voice implies that she not only supposes herself as undesirable for employment but also for romance. Her words underlie her unrequited desire for Dave, intimating that Dave would never have romantic interest in “someone like” her. Indeed, Dave shows no interest in her other than as a conduit for information. In contrast, Selma’s restless left hand, reaching out through the chain link fence signifies her desire for Dave. Atkins’ scene ending line: “I have a wife and kids too,” punctuates his role as father, which contrasts with “Miss” Parker, who almost certainly is childless. Sylvia Harvey’s essay, “Woman’s Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir” points out that women in Film Noir rarely have a family-life, and that Film Noir style emphasizes the absence of family life as well as discursive elements: “in film noir it is not only at the level of plot and narrative resolution that lovers are not permitted to live happily ever after, but it is at the additional and perhaps more important level of mise en scène or visual style that the physical environment of the lovers . . . is presented as threatening, disturbing, fragmented” (37). Selma’s wish to be Dave’s “lover” is represented by the visual obstruction of the fence, signifying her inability to connect with Dave on this intimate level. This reading of the fence does not oppose McArthur’s interpretation that the chain link fence is a visual metaphor for imprisonment under Lagana’s stranglehold; instead, it adds one more possible way of seeing the scene and Selma by showing how her performance suggests another level of imprisonment and a desire to escape it.
Selma tells Dave that Atkins lied: “There was a man who come to see Slim [her co-worker involved in the Bannion bombing who has since died of a heart attack] about two weeks ago. They had a long talk out in the yard.” Dave’s brow creases with strong vertical lines indicating the intensity of his interest. He asks, “Remember what he looked like?” Lang shoots this scene mostly in shot-reverse-shot, with the camera constantly remaining behind the chain link fence. The audience sees the characters as they see each other—separated by a teasingly porous yet discrete barrier that discourages intimacy, both emotional and physical. “I’m not much good at those things,” she answers as she gazes up and down Dave’s entire body, looking him over slowly: “He was tall, like you.” On one level, her gaze fits her words literally; she gives Dave a full body gaze to measure his size against Slim’s visitor. On another level, however, this gesture, associated with sexual desire, implies Selma’s attraction to Dave. He provides her with an excuse to look over his entire body and she does not waste it. Her not being “much good at those things,” takes on a dual meaning as well, registering her lack of experience with the corporal male body. Selma assures Dave she would be able to recognize the man if she saw him again. He continues firing questions at her, discovering a man named “Larry” called around the same time the mystery man visited Slim. Selma answers his questions quickly and accurately, her left hand becoming clenched and animated, as if she is excited to be interacting with Dave. He asks, “No last name, huh?” The camera cuts to the first close-up of Selma. She looks small and frail. The cameo she wears at her throat is now prominent, cementing her reference coding as a “spinster-librarian type.” She overheard a phone call, and tries to remember
the name of the place Slim and Larry agreed to meet. It was a “peculiar name” she says, putting her hand to her mouth.

Lang cuts to a close-up of Dave’s eager face; he hangs on her every syllable, then back to Selma, “Something like a monastery…oh you know, where people go off alone to think.” Selma’s choice of the word “monastery” hints at her own celibate status. Lang cuts to Dave, who wears an enigmatic slight smile that reflects relief, joy, and gratitude, as he knows she refers to The Retreat where he had earlier met Lucy. Dave asks Selma, “The Retreat?” Her eyes become bright, catching light, harkening back to the lamp bulb over her head in the previous scene. The camera returns to Selma.

“That’s it,” she says, looking pleased and invoking the clichéd metaphorical image of a light bulb appearing over the head of someone who has an illuminating thought. Indeed, Selma is an agent of illumination here. She is ephemerally bright and happy; however, she only smiles for this one instant in the entire film. Shallow focus places emphasis on Selma’s smiling face [Fig 2-9]. Then Dave, in close-up says, “I’m very grateful Miss—” Dave’s face reflects a mix gratefulness, pity and patronization. His use of the word “Miss” as opposed to “Mrs.” evinces his automatic assumption that she is unmarried. Selma looks down at her feet. Her smile is gone, and her face is heavy and sad as she answers in a low voice: “Parker. Selma Parker” [Fig 2-10]. Her movements and tone emit feelings of inadequacy; she is almost embarrassed by Dave’s kindness and his attention to her as an individual. She also may be reading Dave’s pity and ever-so-slight condescension toward her, which also digs at her emotional pain and damage—the trauma written on her psyche for believing or perhaps being taught that she lacks value because of her disability. The camera cuts back to Dave: “Miss Parker. You’ve been
most helpful.” Selma answers, “I’m glad. Good luck, Mr. Bannion,” as she turns and retreats toward Victory, giving the viewer another chance to see her labored gait before the scene ends with a close-up of Dave. An overlap-dissolve turns the frame into a shot of Joyce’s rag doll, which reflects Selma’s lack of mastery over her own body. Dave lifts Joyce and kisses both her and the doll good night. Selma’s desire for Dave overlaps into this scene through the doll, and the kiss it receives symbolizes the kiss Selma desires.

At Larry’s apartment

The scene begins with a close-up on Larry’s gun, and the soundtrack plays a buzzing doorbell. Larry picks up the gun and deposits it in his pocket (just as Rocco did in Key Largo). The gun manifests the mortal danger facing the person at his door. With the camera positioned behind Larry in an over-the-shoulder shot, he opens the door to Selma. She asks him: “Is Mrs. Davenport at home?” “You’ve got the wrong apartment,” he answers and slams the door. This shot captures Selma, her body well-lit, yet looking small in contrast with Larry’s body, which appears as a hulking dark mass, signifying his status as threatening and dangerous [Fig 2-11]. Selma is featured in the center of the frame as well as positioned in the frame of Larry’s door. This frame-within-a-frame shot draws attention to Selma. She is center stage, the main “player” assisting Dave. She also “frames” Larry by playing a role and tricking him into opening the door to Dave. She wears a long cloth coat and a collared blouse buttoned at her throat and carries a cane in her right-gloved hand. The cane links her to the earlier scene, which prominently featured her limp. The cane should remind the viewer of Selma’s previous appearance and the earlier assistance she gave Dave. Once more, she risks her life to help him.
Selma helps Dave trick Larry into answering the second doorbell buzzing, which he assumes is Selma returning to ask another question.

After Larry tells Selma she has the wrong apartment, he slams the door, and the camera follows Selma. Her back toward the audience, she walks down the hall with the same limp she displayed earlier at the chain link fence of Victory Auto Wrecking. By concentrating on her body in motion and by shooting her from behind, the film rhymes Selma’s earlier movements with her movements here, implying that Selma is more easily remembered by her disability than by her face or other features [Fig 2-12 and Fig 2-13]. Selma has identified Larry, and her appearance at the door distracts him. Now, when Dave buzzes Larry’s doorbell a few seconds later, he incorrectly assumes Selma has returned, so he does not take his gun, which allows Dave to overtake him. Before buzzing Larry, Dave waves Selma away [Fig 2-14]. Lang uses deep focus in order to clearly feature Dave in the foreground and Selma in the background. Selma turns to face Dave; she nods and points toward Larry’s door. The light from the window in the background and the light from her white shirt are the strongest light source in the shot, connecting light and Selma visually and Selma to enlightenment because her knowledge leads to Dave’s uncovering his wife’s murderer. Dave’s “waving” off of Selma is an ambiguous gesture that can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it is paternal, demonstrating his desire to protect her, waving her away from danger. On the other hand, it is a gesture of dismissal. Selma’s cut off and unfinished exit from the shot mirrors her abruptly cut off relationship with Dave. With a wave of his hand, Selma disappears from the film, and the audience assumes, from Dave’s life.
Like Gaye, Selma confronts a trigger-happy psychopath in order for the noir hero to gain something he desperately wants. Larry easily could have shot Selma, had he recognized her as Slim’s co-worker. Larry had seen Selma before at Victory, and Selma had no way of knowing that Larry would not recognize her and wonder why Atkins’ bookkeeper was at his door. If Larry fingers Selma, she dies, and the “Big Heat” never materializes. The narrative, therefore, depends on Selma’s invisibility—on Larry’s not recognizing her. Selma probably did not even entertain the idea that Larry might recognize her. Neither does Dave, the ace detective, worry about this potential danger to Selma, showing that he too dismisses her after using her to get what he needs despite her being an extremely valuable person in his investigation. The film shows Selma’s invisibility in terms of her not being seen by characters, which allows her to get things done other characters cannot. In addition, her invisibility takes on a second dimension in her appearing invisible in terms of her sexual longing, as evidenced in the scene at the chain link fence.

**Effie Perrine in *The Maltese Falcon***

Like most Film Noirs, this one has a complicated plot: the beautiful Miss Wonderly contacts private investigators Sam Spade and Miles Archer to find her sister who has run off with a man named Thursby. Archer agrees to meet Brigid that evening to confront Thursby at his hotel. Instead, Miles gets shot, and Sam learns that Miss Wonderly is really Brigid O’Shaughnessy who made up the sister story, because the real story involves her criminal enterprise with Thursby who was her partner, but Brigid claims, now wants to kill her. When Thursby ends up shot as well, the police suspect Sam thinking he was avenging the death of his partner, as they all assume Thursby shot Miles. Sam begins to investigate both deaths under the pretext of having Brigid as
his client. In reality, he wants to solve his partner’s murder and clear his own name. Sam becomes sexually involved with Brigid, but knows not to trust her. Sam finds out she is part of a motley crew of criminals who are all trying to steal a valuable artifact, the Maltese Falcon.

Sam gets caught up with Brigid and her interactions with Gutman, a criminal who has been obsessed with the Falcon for over twenty years, along with his partner Joel Cairo. Apparently Gutman, Joel, Brigid and Thursby all were partners, but each try to double cross each other to get the Falcon for him/herself. Sam gets involved in this search for the Falcon as well, forming an uneasy partnership with all them; Sam pretends to be interested in money, but his interest really lies in solving the murder of his partner, because he does not believe Thursby shot Miles, because Miles would never go into a dark alley without his gun drawn, and certainly not with a man he knew was dangerous, like Thursby. The only person Sam trusts is his faithful, much put upon secretary Effie Perrine. She takes care of Sam’s many messes, whether they be calming down Miles’ widow Iva, who is in love with Sam, or housing Brigid for a few days when Sam thinks she is in danger. Sam’s investigation leads him to a ship that recently docked in town that carried the Falcon. The ship catches on fire while in port, and the Falcon disappears. The ship’s Captain Jacoby, (although shot by Wilmer, Gutman’s ineffectual gunsel) manages to stagger into Sam’s office with the Falcon, and drops dead. Sam hides the Falcon, and manages to gather all the principle players in his apartment. He has Effie retrieve the Falcon and bring it to them. The Falcon turns out to be counterfeit. Gutman and Cairo leave, as they resign to once again, pick up the Falcon’s trail. Sam confronts Brigid about Miles’ death, as he has suspected her all
along, but did not want to believe it because of the attraction he feels toward her. She confesses and promises she loves him, and she begs him not to turn her in. Sam does turn her in to the police, because, “When your partner is killed, you’re supposed to do something about it.” His friend, Detective Tom Polhus arrests Brigid, and Sam tells him where to find Gutman and Cairo who are both implicated in Captain Jacoby’s death. When Tom asks him what the Falcon is, Sam delivers the film’s last line: “The stuff that dreams are made of.”

The first time we see rejected woman Effie, Huston shoots her from behind Sam’s shoulder to show his power in relation to her. Even though we only see his back, we know he is looking down and not at her. Her hair is neatly groomed, and she wears an attractive dress with a distinctive brooch; a sharp, curved sword with two tassels hanging down from the sword, which takes on phallic dimensions—Effie, in effect, possesses a penis and testicles [Fig 2-15]. Effie’s opening line identifies her as hip; she speaks quickly: “There’s a girl wants to see you. Her name’s Wonderly.” When Sam asks if she is a customer, Effie answers, “I guess so. You’ll want to see her anyway; she’s a knockout.” Her use of the colloquialism “knockout,” which means a beautiful woman, presages the violence that Brigid brings with her. The slang phrase itself has imbedded in it the power of the femme fatale; her beauty and sex appeal are so overwhelming, the noir hero feels “knocked out” or unable to think.

In my reading of the film, Effie is in love with Sam, and all of her motivations involve this love. She has remained unmarried and living with her mother because she holds on to a secret hope that he will finally realize how wonderful she is; as opposed to the completely un-wonderful nature of the woman he does sleep with, the ironically
named “Miss Wonderly,” also known as Brigid O’Shaughnessy. Robert Ray discusses
the way masculine and feminine reference codes make Effie a sexually ambiguous
character:

_The Maltese Falcon_ provides numerous clues to Effie’s ambiguous
sexuality and incomplete ‘femininity.’ She lives with her mother, rolls a
cigarette like a tough. . . . Effie’s physical appearance emphasizes her
mannish features: the square jaw, short hair, and sparse make-up. Yet,
despite this ambiguity, her reactions to Jacobi’s death—the scream, the
near faint—adhere to the cultural stereotypes of feminine squeamishness.
(241).

A lesbian reading of Effie adds an interesting dimension to the text, and it would explain
why she was so willing to have Brigid stay with her, and why she felt compelled to touch
Iva’s warm slip. Although this reading is viable, the majority evidence in the text
supports a reading that Effie is in love with Sam. Effie wants to do whatever she can to
please Sam, even if it involves his losing his head to a knockout. Effie checks out
women for Spade, like “Miss Wonderly,” to make him happy and to reinforce the idea
that she is his buddy or his comrade. She becomes, in Doane’s language, the
transvestite; she appears to him in a similar way a male companion would in order to
disguise the fact that she looks and harbors an attraction for him. The masculine
reference codes suggest her transvestism in relation to keeping her desire for Sam
unknown. Hence, her rolling cigarettes, phallic brooch, and accepting of comments like
“You’re a good man, sister.” Effie’s love for Sam, as she will prove over and over again,
is selfless. In Effie, we see shades on another rejected woman created a few years
earlier—Inèz in _Pépé Le Moko_. Inèz keeps Pépé from running out of the Casbah in a
drunken stupor (and into the hands of waiting police officers) by telling him that
Gabrielle waits for him in Inèz’s apartment. Inèz ignores her own feelings of rejection in
order to selflessly save Pépé, for as she told him, she knew he would not stay for her,
so she says whatever she must to keep him from making a tragic mistake. Whereas Inèz finally succumbs to jealousy (she informs later in the film when Pépé attempts to visit Gabrielle’s hotel), Effie stays unflinchingly loyal to Sam.

The scene in which Effie rolls a cigarette for Sam reinforces the implication that she longs for him sexually. The scene occurs the morning after Archer’s murder. Iva has just left Sam’s office and Effie enters. Huston cuts to a medium shot of Effie and Sam. She has moved around to his desk and sits on top the desk in a gesture that suggests intimacy or familiarity. They touch two times during this scene: The first time she reaches into his hands and takes the bag of tobacco; their fingers touch. Effie pours the tobacco into the paper roller and closes the bag with her mouth the same way Sam closed the bag in the film’s first scene. Through the tobacco bag, they have kissed – their mouths have both touched the tab of the tobacco bag. This kiss is subtle, much subtler than if she had licked the cigarette closed, as Sam does in the opening scene. Instead, she rolls it, and then places it in front of Sam’s mouth so he can lick it closed [Fig 2-16]. The sexual imagery of her holding the cigarette while he licks it represents Effie’s wish fulfillment. She craves physical contact with Sam and wants to kiss him, but she will do nothing to overstep her bounds. She can get away with closing the bag with her mouth, because her hands are full; but if she licked the cigarette closed, this gesture would cross a boundary, and she might scare Sam off; she knows he scares easily.

When Effie asks, “Do you suppose she [Iva] could have killed him [Archer]?” Sam laughs and says “you’re an angel, a wonderful rattle-brained angel,” and he puts his hand on her thigh [Fig 2-17]. This gesture reinforces Sam’s condescending attitude toward Effie. He calls her “sweetheart,” “precious” and “angel,” and this gesture
translates those verbal gestures into the physical — he gives her a little pat on the thigh, as a way of saying, “Nice try, little girl, but you cannot beat me at my own game; I’m the detective here, not you.” He also reminds Effie that she belongs to him, and thus, he can pat her wherever or whenever he chooses. Effie shows absolutely no reaction to this intimate touch, suggesting that this type of touching probably has happened many times before. Her lack of reaction could indicate that she enjoys it. Perhaps this touch produces a thrill and increases her hope that if she hangs in long enough, one day he will be hers. The gesture could signal that she knows her job depends on this man, so she has to let him touch her and listen to his condescending drivel. She keeps on her poker face, not letting him know the touch secretly thrills her. Sam and Effie play a sadistic/ masochistic game. Sam leads Effie on with his small touches, his tiny brushes with intimacy, and uses her sexual attraction for him so that she will continue to do his dirty work, whether it involves breaking the news of Miles’ death to the parasitic Iva, or agreeing to hide Brigid at her house. This sadistic/masochistic game doubles the active/looking/sadistic versus passive/ being looked at/masochistic dichotomy Mulvey proposes. Effie cannot let Sam know she looks at him with desire, so she disguises her longing by playing the role of male buddy.

So far in the film, Huston shoots Effie only from unflattering angles in medium-shots or close-ups—with the camera always below her, as seen in her opening medium-shot and again in the shot in which Effie crosses her arms after she asks Sam if the police really think he killed Thursby [Fig 2-18]. She looks frustrated; Sam has just touched her more than once, and her crossed arms and angry countenance could represent her sexual frustration—she is “cross” with Sam for frustrating her desire.
Later in the film, Sam will ask Effie if she is “strong enough” to handle Brigid at her home for a few days. Physical strength often is equated with the masculine, so perhaps Sam asks her to assume to position of the buddy in that she has to be strong to handle Brigid. Also, as Brigid is his lover, by asking Effie to take her in, he forecloses the possibility of Effie’s having a romance with him, a point Huston humorously punctuates by having Sam cup or cover his genitals through this entire conversation with Effie, as if to remind her that she is denied access to him [Fig 2-19].

In the beginning of the scene in which Captain Jacoby delivers the Falcon to Sam, Effie beams at Sam beatifically as she takes care of his bruise (Wilmer kicked him while he was passed out in Gutman’s apartment). Sam and Effie touch again here, and Effie tells Sam the story of the black bird is “thrilling.” Captain Jacoby enters the office, and Effie screams loudly, in voice-off, as he falls over. Ray argues that “because Effie cries from offscreen, the viewer can never definitively connect her to that sound; in fact, the scream sounds entirely out of place, as if lifted from another soundtrack. Effie’s yell, therefore, remains an abstract feminine code (danger + scream = woman) rather than the response of a particular person” (241). The lost or unlocatable quality of Effie’s scream reinforces her status as a rejected woman. She is not seen or heard fully because of her invisibility. Ray’s observation that this scream ties her to the feminine speaks to the complex nature surrounding Effie’s gender identification. She oscillates between damsel in distress and smart tough-guy” during this scene, in way that echoes Mulvey’s words about the female spectator’s being “restless in its transvestite clothes” (“After” 129). Sam expects her to stay “in drag”: he tells her she cannot faint, and he
rewards her with the compliment, “You’re a good man, sister,” implying she can handle the situation involving a dead body “like a man” despite her initial feminine reaction.

When he gives her complicated instructions about how to interact with the police in relation to Jacoby’s body, she does not hesitate, or need anything explained to her. She is clear-headed, and despite having just seen a dead body, she follows his instructions perfectly. She is the only character in the film that Sam trusts completely—enough, in fact, to have her pick up, possess for a short time, and then deliver the Falcon to his office—a task he could never trust with any of the other characters. Sam calls Effie and tells her where to find the claim check to pick up the Falcon. At any time, Effie could run off with the Falcon. Her love for Sam keeps her from doing so. Sam, Brigid, Gutman, Cairo and Wilmer all wait in Sam’s apartment for Effie’s arrival with the Falcon. Effie arrives as Sam’s door, and she hands him the package containing the Falcon. He does not invite her in. Their conversation is clipped:

   Sam: Thanks lady. I’m sorry to spoil your day of rest.
   Effie: Not the first one you spoiled. Anything else?
   Sam: No, no thanks.
   Effie: Bye, bye then.

   And with that line, she turns and walks away out of the film; her exit represents the typical Rejected Woman in Film Noir non-dramatic exit. Effie is at the elevator, and we see her as Sam is about to close his door. We see her from behind and from under Sam’s arm [Fig 2-10]. She is under his control as she is visually under his arm in this shot. Effie’s back is partially obscured by the Falcon Sam holds in his arms. Sam then closes the door and Effie vanishes from the film. She heads down the same elevator that soon will transport Brigid with a “bang,” in a visually lavish and dramatically intense
exit scene that vastly differs from Effie’s “whimper” of an exit. V. F. Perkins notes:

“There is always an out-of-sight just as there is always an off-screen. Out of sight cannot be entirely out of mind: we may not know what lies beyond the horizon but we do know that there is a beyond” (“Where” 22). A small part of my (feminist) delight in watching this film is imagining this space beyond the screen in relation to Effie. After she leaves, we learn the Falcon is a fake. I like to imagine that Effie absconded with the real Falcon and left Sam and company holding a copy, a lead bird, a scenario in which Effie gives the bird to Sam both literally and figuratively. To echo Rose’s notion of the gaze in the Imaginary register, as a spectator, I delight in the idea of an Effie who cashes in on the real Falcon, and leaves Sam’s patronizing thigh-patting arrogant personage far behind. When I really dream, I imagine she heads fourteen years into the future and picks up Velda Wickman,—another put-upon “Girl Friday” of Film Noir—on her way to paradise.

**The Lush in Criss Cross**

In the *American Film Institute*’s entry on *Criss Cross*5, the character Joan Miller plays is listed only as “the lush.” (“Criss” *AFI*). This derogatory moniker reflects her marginalized position in the film as a rejected woman. The first time the Lush appears in the film, she is situated over Lieutenant Pete Ramirez’s shoulder as he warns Steve not to enter the restaurant to see Dundee and Anna [Fig 2=21]. Siodmak shoots in deep focus, so she is clearly visible over his shoulder. She stares straight ahead with a blank expression. She receives no introduction, and no one ever refers to her by name. Steve faces her but does not look at her. She obviously eavesdrops on their conversation. She

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5 See Chapter Six for a summary of this film.
looks in their direction, yet her look is occulted by the masquerade in her hyper-feminine behavior and appearance that she uses throughout the film, which allows her to look at Steve in a way that he does not see her. The film does not move chronologically, so this first scene of the Lush chronologically takes place in the middle of the film. She already has met Steve, and her look tells us she is interested in him. She dresses in a feminine flower-laden top. She wears heavy jewelry and pays much attention to her hair style in an attempt to attract Steve.

When the film flashes back in time, we see when the Lush first meets Steve. He returns to the bar for the first time since returning to Los Angeles after a year’s absence. Steve enters in the background of the shot. As he opens the door, he brings a shaft of light into the film. The Lush sits in the foreground. She is not dressed in the overtly feminine outfits she wears after meeting Steve. She wears comfortable looking slacks and a low cut shirt with a busy design. When Steve enters the bar, she looks up almost mechanically, reacting to the light, but not able to see Steve because of it. Steve functions here as Lacan’s sardine can, the shaft of light looking at her, functioning as her object of desire, objet petit a. In terms of Rose’s theory, one could say she places a screen between Steve and herself so that she is able to fantasize about him. One manifestation of the screen she erects could be her mask of the feminine masquerade. The masquerade serves as a type of metaphorical sunglasses, in that they screen out the trauma of Steve’s rejection. Additionally, her playing the masquerade allows her to hide her look of longing from Steve as he moves past her, just as she notices him. The camera cuts her out of the frame at this moment. She is eclipsed from the frame, which

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6 See Chapter Five for my discussion of Lacan’s anecdote of the sardine can.
visually demonstrates that the narrative forecloses her desire for Steve; she notices and admires (lusts after) him, but he will not return these affections [Fig 2-22]. When Steve walks back to the bar, her eyes follow him.

The Lush finally gets the courage to speak to Steve: “Hey mister,” she says. Siodmak uses standard shot-reverse-shot to capture their conversation:

Lush: Are you looking for some special party?
Steve: (Laughing). No. I’m not looking for anybody.
Lush: Then what are you? A checker?
Steve: What’s a checker?

The bartender and the Lush are concerned that Steve is a from the state liquor license board, and they are suspicious of his questions (he is trying to find out if Anna still frequents the nightclub). The Lush asks him to reveal if he is there to “check” or perhaps spy on people. She calls Steve out for what he is—he is a checker—not an employer of the state liquor licensing bureau, but he is at the Round Up to check on Anna. Tellingly, the Lush is a “checker” herself, as she checks Steve out during this scene. Siodmak features her again in long shot as Steve asks for nickels for the phone. The camera follows him as he heads to the phone booth. The Lush looks at him lustfully and says, “Swell looking, well-built guy like that, a checker” [Fig 2-23]. Although her look does not center the frame, that position belongs to the bartender, shallow focus puts her look in focus and foregrounds it. She looks far out of the right edge of the frame, reinforcing the marginalization of her look and indicates that her chances of having a romance with Steve are “out of sight.” The shadow across her face also reinforces the way the narrative will eclipse her sexual longing.
Later that evening Steve returns to the Round Up. Siodmak repeats the earlier shot of Steve entering the bar in the background screen left, but now the bar is crowded. The Lush still remains in her usual seat. She wears a dress with a flower print and she has large accessories, including a bracelet, ring and necklace that make her look much more feminine than earlier that day. Outside the world of the film, we know she has gone home and changed into an outfit that codes her with excessive femininity. She may have usually changed into fancier clothes for sitting at the bar at night than in the daytime, but we also can imagine she makes these changes for Steve, because he gave the impression in his earlier visit that he would be returning. She sees Steve and waves at him enthusiastically. He gives her an indifferent glance [Fig 2-24]. He does not stop to speak with her; he goes directly to the dance floor. The band begins playing a rumba. The camera follows Steve as the Lush falls out of frame. Steve’s eyes find Anna on the dance floor, and Siodmak punctuates Steve’s desire through his on-the-beat editing of Anna’s dancing intercut with close-ups of Steve’s looking longingly at Anna [Fig 1-8]. The camera does not return to the Lush, but we can imagine her disappointment and her wish that Steve would look at her the way he looks at Anna.

In her final scene, the Lush obviously has paid great attention to her physical appearance. Her hair is styled in an elaborate up-do. She wears an attractive shirt and sweater set and high heels. Siodmak shoots her from behind, and the camera stays on her back for several seconds as if to accentuate her appearance [Fig 2-25]. Steve sits at the bar to her left. This shot is similar to the one in which Huston shoots Gaye Dawn from behind while sitting on a barstool [Fig 201]. These two rejected women have a lot in common; they drink heavily and long, unrequitedly, for the noir hero. The shot from
behind indicates a lack of awareness, or not having the ability to see something coming at her. Perhaps the Lush fantasizes that now that Anna has married Dundee, she has a chance at romance with Steve. Unfortunately, she cannot see what awaits her immediate future: Steve’s impending cruel and vicious verbal attack. Chronologically, this scene takes place the evening after Steve sees Anna at the train station and finds out Dundee has beaten her and that his friend Ramirez had threatened to have Anna arrested if she did not stop seeing Steve. Steve displaces his anger onto Frank the bartender and especially, the Lush. She is the “girl” he can depend on; he can always find her, unlike Anna, who is unpredictable. In this scene her eyes once again are on Steve. Her conversation with Steve reveals her as kind and well-intentioned, but not smart. She is naïve and the text abuses her for having this quality. Mulvey argues that male anxiety concerning castration leads the noir hero to punish the femme fatale. In contrast, the Rejected Woman in Film Noir is often punished for her naïveté. Shooting the Lush with her back to the camera also connotes vulnerability. In addition, her back is about to be metaphorically lashed by Steve’s vicious tongue.

When the camera cuts to a close up of the Lush, we see the look of love in her eyes [Fig 2-26]. She also is coded as very feminine. She has manicured her nails and decorates her flowered blouse with two brooches. Her hair is well-coifed, and her makeup is more elaborate and obvious that in past scenes. In short, she gussies up in order to catch Steve’s attention. She searches his face in an attempt to catch his eye, and perhaps to figure out what to say to him to capture his attention. After a few seconds hesitation, she says, “Bad day at the races?” Steve answers, “Yes,” sarcastically, and ironically. His luck has been bad since coming back to Los Angeles. By asking if he bet
wrong, the Lush reminds Steve of something he does not want to face: his lousy luck since he has returned home. Being naïve, she has not picked up on the clues that he is volatile right now. He has just verbally lashed out at Frank, who very gingerly told him to cut back on this drinking. Steve yelled at him, “Mind your own business!” He complains that he is tired of “big-hearted jokers” trying to look out for his interests. The Lush looks delighted at making a “right guess” that Steve lost a horse race [Fig 2-27]. She smiles broadly for the only time in the film. Most of the time, she wears a wounded look because she is often the butt of jokes. This smile, however, will soon disappear. Steve tells her she “hit it” right on the head. And, she answers, “I can size a person up, just like that,” and snaps her fingers. The camera remains on Steve. He says to her, “You know everything too, is that it?” Siodmak cuts to her and the smile is gone. She says, “I didn’t quite say that. You see, everybody’s got their own individual problems. I can always spot it.” Steve crosses his arms; he looks for a fight:

Steve: “You people got a gift”

The Lush: “Well, I call it intuition rather.”

Her “intuition” tells her Steve has a gambling problem. She probably detected this alleged difficulty when he asked for a roll of nickels earlier in the film to use a phone booth that people often use for placing bets. Here, the Lush’s “woman’s intuition” is off, much like Effie’s was in relation to Brigid. Steve yells at her, inviting her to size up Frank’s problem, since she is so good at picking out people’s problems. The camera cuts of a long shot of the bar, showing that Steve’s angry words have caught the patrons’ and Frank’s attention. The camera cuts back to the Lush who is confused and visibly hurt [Fig 2-28]. Her hyper-femininity demonstrates her adopting the masquerade in order to allow her to look without punishment. But in this case, she is punished,
because she does not masquerade enough; her look of longing is so intense here it becomes transgressive despite her elaborate efforts of the masquerade. In this one instance, her look crosses the line and she is punished for its active intensity, as were the non-rejected women characters mentioned earlier, Ellen, Laura and Mia.

“You people got intuition!” Steve yells. She counters with, “Look mister, I’m sorry you lost at the races. I know what it’s like myself, but you should not have to bet if you can’t afford to lose.” She adds the word “have” into this sentence, perhaps because she is flustered. But to say he should not have to bet, instead of saying what would make more sense, or sound better in the sentence: “You should not bet” introduces the notion of compulsion, which she correctly reads in Steve, but his compulsion is not for gambling, but for Anna. Steve becomes angrier. She has unintentionally hit a nerve. He says: “I’ll bet anything I like.” She answers, “Gosh, What have I said now?” [Fig 2-29]. The Lush can say absolutely nothing to quell his anger because her words do not matter. Steve wants a fight, and he will pick out individual words that have to do with his own situation, and twist them around to pugnaciously attack her. She keeps saying “I didn’t say that!” and “What have I said now?” His words cut her, and he intentionally lashes out at her. He aims his finger at her, which is “loaded” with his cigarette; he stands ready to burn her [Fig 2-29]. Her hands are down in a gesture of surrender. She does not want a fight; she merely wants to understand and ameliorate Steve’s pain, by telling him she has felt like he does. “Gosh, what have I said now?” are her last words in the film. The camera moves screen left as Ramirez enters the Round Up. The camera cuts the Lush out of the frame almost entirely, only her hand, palm down, and a small scrap of her dress remain in the frame. Just as Steve’s words have cut her, the film cuts
her as well, only leaving a small piece of her in the frame [Fig 2-30]. Siodmak puts the Lush in three more shots. Each time, she is pictured over Steve’s shoulder as he argues with Pete. The last shot of the Lush is a blurry background shot with Steve in focus in the foreground [Fig 2-31]. In this last shot, she looks at Steve. This shot is similar to her first appearance, only she looks over Steve’s shoulder, whereas in her first shot, she looked over Pete’s. The Lush must practice her looking furtively over shoulders. This last blurry image of her reflects the way the text blurs her as a person and puts her desire for Steve out of focus, out of reach, and out of sight. She then vanishes from the film.
Figure 2-1. Introduction Shot of Gaye Dawn

Figure 2-2. Gaye: “C’mon Lady Bountiful!”
Figure 2-3. Gaye fades into background

Figure 2-4. Close-up: Gaye gives the gun to Frank
Figure 2-5. Gaye’s closing medium-shot

Figure 2-6. Nora’s closing shot
Figure 2-7. Victory Auto Wrecking *mise-en-scène* - Selma in background

Figure 2-8. Selma's fingers reaching for Dave
Figure 2-9. Selma’s only smile. Shallow focus emphasizes her smile.

Figure 2-10. "Parker. Selma Parker" Selma looks down while telling Dave her name.
Figure 2-11. Selma framed within a frame narratively framing Larry

Figure 2-12. Eye rhyme, part I: Selma's walking away from Dave at Victory
Figure 2-13. Eye rhyme, part II: Selma’s walking away from Dave at Larry’s apartment

Figure 2-14. Dave’s “ambiguous” waving off Selma
Figure 2-15. Effie’s phallic brooch

Figure 2-16. Sam licks cigarette closed while Effie holds it
Figure 2-17. Sam touches Effie's thigh

Figure 2-18. Effie "cross" with Sam
Figure 2-19. Effie denied access

Figure 2-20. Effie's non-dramatic exit from the film
Figure 2-21. First shot of The Lush in *Criss Cross*

Figure 2-22. The Lush's marginal look of desire for Steve
Figure 2-23. The Lush looks lustfully at Steve

Figure 2-24. The Lush waves enthusiastically at Steve; he looks ambivalently at her.
Figure 2-25. Long shot of Lush with her back toward the camera

Figure 2-26. The look of love in the eyes of the Lush
Figure 2-27. The Lush enchanted by Steve’s attention

Figure 2-28. The Lush visually wounded by Steve’s words
Figure 2-29. Steve picks on the Lush

Figure 2-30. The Lush cut out of the frame except for her hand (screen right)
Figure 2-31. Last shot of the Lush
CHAPTER 3
AMBIVALENT RESISTANCE: THE IMMOBILE AND WRITTEN UPON BODIES OF REJECTED WOMEN

Is the pen a metaphorical penis?

—Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*

**The Body of the Rejected Woman: Passivity and Ambivalent Resistance**

Friedrich Kittler writes, “as long as women remained excluded from discursive technologies would they exist as the other of words and printed matter” (214). Rejected Women in Film Noir exist as “excluded” in relation to the telephone and the pen. The rejected women of *The Blue Gardenia* work as telephone operators, but do not control the system they operate. The rejected women in *The Big Heat* serve as the written-upon texts. Men write on their bodies through scarring, maiming and torture. In terms of writing, “The female body has been feared for its power to articulate itself” (Gubar 294). By keeping women in the position of the page and not the pen, the female body is kept under control. Both the rejected women characters of *The Blue Gardenia* and *The Big Heat* function as examples of how a patriarchal society controls women through the telephone and the pen. The concept that men look and women are looked at addressed in Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure” reflects active versus passive dichotomies that long have existed in patriarchal societies. Helene Cixous, another feminist thinker whose ideas have fallen out of fashion, especially her work concerning *L'écriture Féminine*, points

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1 *L'écriture Féminine* was a movement in feminist theory which proposed that women “write their bodies.” The movement looked at how women were forced into male patterns of writing, which included “climax” driven narratives (climbing action, climax and dénouement) which mimicked male sexual responses, “important” subjects, and “masculine” punctuation. The writers of *L'écriture Féminine* theory argue that women who strayed from these patterns (writing narratives not focused on moving aggressively through a plot, or about “trifles” such as cooking, clothes, daily household activities or with punctuation such as dashes and exclamation points) were derided by male critics and not taken seriously. A larger discussion of this movement is out of the scope of this project, but the major criticism leveled against it is its potential essentialism.
out: “The hierarchization subjects the entire conceptual organization to man. A male privilege, which can be seen in the opposition by which it sustains itself, between activity and passivity. Traditionally, the question or sexual difference is coupled with the same opposition: activity/passivity” (440). Although this chapter will not attempt to recover Cixous’ work involving L’écriture Féminine (one feminist recovery per project is enough!), her work in spotlighting these dichotomies needs attention, because society still places women in passive roles. Like Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure.” Cixous’ functions as a bitter tasting pill, a prescription needed in a society that still is with the disease of sexism.

The rejected women’s interaction with the telephone and pen demonstrates how power circulates in Film Noir. In their occupations as secretaries and operators, the telephone literally fetters them to a given location limiting their mobility and agency. In their role as passive text (their bodies) to the active pen of the men, women are acted upon, assuming the passive position. In each of their encounters with these power structures, however, rejected women also manage to foment a resistance against their placement in the passive position, and try to assume their own agency. Just as in the case of rejected women’s ambivalent relation to agency in terms of invisibility, this equivocal relationship also exists in their efforts of resistance in regard to the telephone and the pen. They make attempts at resistance, but it has little to no effect on their situations. The first half of this chapter deals with the telephone, the second, with the pen. In the first part, I explore how these rejected women are fettered to the telephone in their occupations as secretary (Effie in The Maltese Falcon) or as telephone operators (Norah, Crystal, and Sally in The Blue Gardenia.) In both the telephone and
pen segments, I show how rejected women attempt resistance, with less than stellar results. Still, the way the telephone operators of *The Blue Gardenia* create a separate world from the repression of the patriarchy is extraordinary and reminds us that rejected women can find comfort, companionship and safety among themselves. The second half of the chapter focuses on rejected women characters in *The Big Heat* and their status as written-upon texts. These women resist as well, some more than others, and the results again, are ambivalent, a point which visually is punctuated by the remarkable last shot of the film.

**Immobile Bodies of Rejected Women and the Telephone**

**Effie and the Telephone in *The Maltese Falcon***

Several times, *The Maltese Falcon* presents Effie as only a voice on the telephone. Sam calls Effie, yet her voice comes across as only feminine, inarticulate squawking. This motif of the audience’s receiving bits of Effie off-screen, either as a voice on the other end of a phone or in her voice (and scream) offs, hints at Effie’s “less than there” (invisible) status as a Rejected Woman in Film Noir. This telephonic presentation of Effie first occurs when Sam calls her to inform her of Archer’s death and orders her to “break the news to Iva” because Sam would rather “fry” first. Sam calls her a “good girl,” and even though we don’t hear her words, we know she has agreed to do this errand for Sam. He calls her an Angel.

In Effie’s next scene, she stands at her desk while talking on the telephone. The film does not explain why she is standing, but this posture makes her prominent in the *mise-en-scène*. She taps the desk with her middle finger [Fig 3-1] as she speaks to Iva,

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2 See Chapter Two for a summary of the film.
who is calling the third time that morning for Sam (Iva was spying on Sam and saw him enter his apartment with Brigid the previous evening). Effie’s gesture could imply that she is giving a “Fuck you!” to Iva, because of her annoyance with Iva’s numerous phone calls. Most likely, however, Effie’s gesture is aimed at Sam, who requested Effie stay with Iva the night before. Effie has completed this laborious task, and now must deal with Iva on the phone while Sam canoodles with Brigid in his office. Effie’s giving “the bird” is particularly funny in a film in which everyone obsesses about getting the bird (the Falcon). It also presages the later scene in which Effie will literally give the bird (the Falcon) to Sam. The gesture also serves as an act of defiance or resistance. Effie spends the night babysitting Iva while Sam has sex with Brigid. To add insult to injury, Sam now romances Brigid while Effie must clean up his messes by placating the jealous Iva. Sam then asks Effie to take Brigid home with her for a few days. He returns to his office with a patronizing “thanks, darling” to Effie. As he re-enters his office, Brigid calls him “darling,” punctuating the fact that Effie is not his “darling” and that she remains romantically invisible to Sam. Effie tells Sam her mother will have a “green hemorrhage” when she sees Brigid, but in essence the green hemorrhage belongs to Effie: she is green with envy of Sam’s relationship with Brigid.

The next time Effie appears in the film, she remains unseen and on the other end of Sam’s telephone. Sam calls her after he wakes up from being drugged at Gutman’s apartment. Once more, we do not hear Effie’s words; we only hear her as noise. He tells her “Let’s do something right for a change,” when none of her actions has resulted in

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3 Huston shows his sense of humor when inserts the poster for one of Bogart’s worst films, *Swing your Lady* in the background of the Archer murder investigation (Ray 221-1), and the shot in which Sam cups his genitals as if to give Effie the message that she is denied access (discussed in previous chapter).
problems; Sam’s wrong moves result from his behavior only. Effie’s major wrong move in the film is in trusting Brigid. She tells Sam that Brigid is “all right,” a mis-firing of the “women’s intuition” Sam asks her to summon. Effie falls prey to Brigid’s tricks, illustrated in the scene in which Effie talks to Brigid on the telephone after Captain Jacoby delivers the Falcon to Sam. The telephone rings, and despite the intensity of the moment, Effie is compelled to answer it, because in her role as secretary, she answers the phone, not Sam. Brigid gives a (phony) address and then begins to scream into the receiver. Effie falls for Brigid’s “damsel in distress” routine and begs Sam to find Brigid. Her answering the phone, in this case, only makes her out to be as foolish about Brigid as Sam is. Effie’s strange orgasmic-sounding exclamations, “Yes, yes, yes!” into the telephone supports a queer reading of Effie, as her ejaculations come while she talks to Brigid. Although I do not discount this reading, Effie’s “Yes, yes, yes!” also can be read as an affirmation of her empathetic response to Brigid’s (pretend) suffering.

Norah, Crystal and Sally and the Telephone in The Blue Gardenia

Through their occupations as telephone operators, Norah, Crystal, and Sally interact with the telephone extensively throughout the film. In addition to their occupational interaction, the telephone also plays a significant role in their personal lives. The film opens at a telephone company and ends on a medium-shot of Sleepy reading a book of telephone numbers. Because of the intense focus on the telephone throughout the film, I split this analysis of The Blue Gardenia into two sub-sections: passivity and resistance.

The Blue Gardenia and passivity

In one of The Blue Gardenia’s first post-credit shots, newspaperman Casey Mayo, interviews telephone operator Crystal Carpenter. She stares blankly into space,
signifying the boredom associated with her occupation, while flirting with Casey by offering her phone number: “Granite 1466” [Fig 3-2]. Crystal’s cumbersome headset identifies her as one of the many faceless female voices associated with the telephone. Gunning writes that the phone system reduces the identities of the three main female characters, Norah, Crystal and Sally “to a single string of numbers” (“Blue” 397). As telephone operators, all three women literally have their hands on the switchboard, yet their proximity to this control center works not to affirm their power, agency and identity but to deny them. Yet, within this place of oppression, the three roommates fashion a safe house—the apartment they share—to shelter them from the oppressive patriarchal storm. And in The Blue Gardenia, the patriarchy does not rain, it pours. The male characters are despicable and treacherous at worst and obtuse and carelessly cruel at best. Casey, the noir hero, is egotistical and deceitful. Harry Prebble, the film’s villain, is a misogynist who cruelly uses and discards women, and (as I will argue in Chapter Five) rapes Norah. Even the minor characters of “Sleepy,” Casey’s photographer, and Homer, Crystal’s boyfriend/ex-husband, come off poorly: Sleepy as a lazy mouth-breathing, lascivious goon, and Homer as an obtuse lug with a wandering eye. In The Blue Gardenia, the telephone not only carries information, but also rejection, pain, boredom, and terror for its female characters. As part of the mise-en-scène, the telephone binds and restricts female bodies, while simultaneously showing how male bodies negotiate the telephone without becoming encumbered or entrapped. The Blue Gardenia shows that women are tethered to ringing telephones both discursively and formally, and in doing so, reminds its audience of the difficulties that face women in an androcentric society. These difficulties are augmented by the fact that the sanctuary
created by the women temporarily comforts, but ultimately does not sustain them. This small fort of resistance falls away under patriarchal pressure, thereby, once again suggesting that the ways rejected women find and keep power remains tenuous.

The plot, like most Film Noirs is complicated: Telephone operator Norah, despondent after receiving a “Dear Jane” letter from her fiancé, accepts a blind date with Prebble, who gets her drunk and then attempts to have sex with her in his apartment. She fends off his advances by striking him with a fire poker and then blacks out. She later runs out of his apartment with no memory of what happened after she struck him. Prebble is found dead the next morning, and Norah assumes she has killed him. Casey, who is writing a series of stories on “The Blue Gardenia,” the name he gives the murderess because of the blue gardenia corsage left at the murder scene, agrees to help the still unidentified murderess if she gives him an exclusive story. Norah meets Casey and eventually reveals herself as the Blue Gardenia, although she has no memory of killing Prebble. She learns Casey never intended to help her and disingenuously made the offer only to get a story. The police, who have been following Casey because of a tip, find them together, and they arrest Norah. Casey discovers a clue (a different record was playing on Prebble’s record player when the police find his body, not the one Norah said was playing when she lost consciousness), and Casey tracks down the actual murderess, a woman named Rose, who Prebble impregnated and deserted. The police free Norah, and the film ends with Casey, despite Norah’s playing hard to get, telling his photographer Sleepy that he and Norah will soon be together, a “happy ending” that seemingly is reinforced with the film’s final gesture: Casey’s throwing his “Little Black Book” to Sleepy.
Lang contrasts the shot of Crystal in her headgear with the preceding shot, in which Casey walks toward the elevator of the West Coast phone company. A newspaper stand prominently features his picture and the caption: “Daily . . . in the CHRONICLE! CASEY MAYO.” Casey has the freedom of movement in his employment, an idea further reinforced by the credits sequence of the film, which shows him driving on the freeway. Casey has mobility through his occupation, which contrasts with the trapped positions of the telephone operators. In voice off, Casey asks, “Age?” Crystal turns screen right to answer Casey, making the cumbersome quality of her headset particularly noticeable. She responds, “Age? Middle-left twenties. Nationality: Chicago. My phone is Granite 1466.” Casey’s first question, asking for her age, and Crystal’s agile sidestepping of it speaks to the emphasis on female shelf life. As Sally will later say, “Every girl should have birthdays…up to a point!” The shot widens as Casey moves in closer to Crystal, telling her that he will “have to check with [his] numerologist” before accepting her offer. Prebble’s sketch pad becomes visible, and the audience realizes that Crystal poses for Prebble as she answers Casey’s questions.

Prebble, a man endowed with massive physical bulk, (the large and husky Raymond Burr plays this role) assumes the position of power in the frame. He sits on top of the desk where Crystal poses, indicating his freedom of occupying any space he chooses. Crystal’s hands remain folded and securely in her lap as she absentmindedly fiddles with the plug end of her headset. Her hands are not free, but encumbered with the equipment that keeps her literally fastened to the phone, reinforcing her entrapment. Casey (screen right) and Prebble (screen left) flank her. Her hands betray what the rest of her has not figured out. She feels free, as she openly flirts and smiles with Casey, but
she is imprisoned not only in the *mise-en-scène* but also by her position as a woman, which becomes apparent when Casey gives away Crystal’s number to Prebble in the following exchange:

Prebble: What is it about you newspaper men? I’ve been trying to get her phone number for a week. You didn’t even have to ask for it.

Casey: It’s all yours. Granite one-four-six-six.

Casey, featured in a two shot with Crystal, puts his hand out toward Prebble in a gesture suggesting his munificence in giving Crystal’s number (and in a way, Crystal, to Prebble). Crystal’s face quickly registers surprise and embarrassment [Fig 3-3] as she looks down, then back at Casey. Her humiliation is obvious; she has been rejected by one man and publicly passed off to another. Crystal recovers quickly. She saves face by making a joke: “You’re not going to put it in your column are you? I’d be swamped with calls!” Crystal can plan on receiving one call—from Prebble—he writes her phone number on his drawing of Crystal. Lang cuts to Casey and the operators’ supervisor standing in the background of a shot foregrounded by rows operators (all women) wearing head gear, their hands busily plugging wires into holes [Fig 3-4]. They remain at the hub of communication, doing the physically demanding, dull and repetitive work of connecting callers, but they make no calls for themselves. The switchboard serves as a larger metaphor: Keep women in place physically at work, and they remain in their proper place in society. In contrast, Casey, as a newspaper reporter, Sleepy as a photographer, and Prebble as an artist have occupations that allow freedom and mobility.

The film further illustrates the dichotomy of immobile women versus mobile men when Prebble is called into the supervisor’s office for a phone call “from a girl.” He brags
to Casey, “I’ve got more numbers than the phone company,” signaling his status as a telephonic stud. Rose, the woman Prebble has sexually used and now wants to discard, is on the line. Lang shoots this phone interaction so that it emphasizes Prebble’s physical domination. He sits on a desk and his large body looms in the foreground of the shot. His back is turned to the audience. The telephone cord is looped, suggesting the loopholes and double-talk Prebble will employ to get Rose off the telephone. We first hear Rose’s voice as inarticulate squawking (as we also hear Effie over the telephone in *The Maltese Falcon*). Prebble barks into the phone “I TOLD you NOT to call me here!” He listens, his interlocutor’s voice not registering beyond the diegetic filmic world. His answer, “I was busy last night,” makes it easy for the audience to determine the nature of Rose’s words. Prebble picks up a pencil and begins doodling—he draws a picture of Norah which he continues throughout his phone conversation. The camera cuts to a medium shot of Rose at a pay telephone, indicating that she must pay to talk with Prebble. It also signifies the heavy price she already has paid for knowing him, because she carries his child, and he has no intention of marrying her—and the price she will pay in the future, because that evening, she will murder him, and later attempt suicide when the police arrive to question her. She clenches her right hand tightly on the telephone cord, which reflects her intense emotional state [Fig 3-5]. Perhaps she hopes that if she grasps the wire tightly, she can somehow touch or “grasp” Prebble through it. She hopes Prebble will be “touched” by her predicament, but metaphorically, she only gets a busy signal, for Prebble cannot be reached. Rose begs: “You have to help me Harry.” He responds: “I just can’t talk now. Take it easy I’ll be seeing you” and he hangs up, thus indicating the ease with which people can be cut off
with the technology of the telephone. The absence of a reaction shot of Rose after Prebble’s hang-up further emphasizes her marginality and powerlessness.

Instead, the camera cuts to a close-up of Prebble’s drawing of Norah in which she wears a medium-length black cocktail dress. An overlap dissolve transforms to a shot of Norah wearing an identical black dress and striking the same pose that Prebble had drawn. Prebble has never seen this dress—Norah wears it for the first time that evening to celebrate her birthday. Prebble’s uncanny imagining of Norah in this dress, which he will see later that evening, presages the way telepathy eerily moves through this film, a point I will discuss in detail in Chapter Five. Norah twirls, modeling the birthday dress for her roommate Sally. The telephone rings and Crystal runs out of the bathroom to answer it. Crystal pops into the shot, grabs her unlit cigarette and races to the phone. She poses seductively with the cigarette dangling from her mouth, purring “Helllllooo” into the receiver [Fig 3-6]. Deep focus allows Sally to be visible in the background, as Crystal in the foreground huddles near the right edge of the frame, suggesting the way she buys into the patriarchy by allowing herself to be so invested in men. Her inability to answer the phone without getting into (feminine) character with her “prop” (her unlit cigarette) and seductive posture and voice (all of which imply that she hopes a man has called) keep her dependent on men. The phone call is from a man; the drug store clerk calls to inform Sally that the new Mickey Mallett mystery is available for rental. As Crystal drags the phone over to Sally, we see that it has a long cord, which hovers in the bottom of the film’s frame, resembling a snake ominously poised to strike. Peter Bogdonovich calls The Blue Gardenia “a particularly venomous picture of American life” (217), which takes on a new dimension if we imagine this wire operates
like a venomous snake slithering across the bottom of the frames, striking and poisoning each of the roommates through her interactions on the telephone: Crystal gets no call from Casey; Sally gets a call from the rental library about a murder mystery novel she wanted, and she will retreat into a fantasy world “of passion and violence” as Crystal calls it.

The telephone will soon deliver its most powerful strike at Norah because it will bring Prebble, poison personified, into her life. As Sally bounds off the couch, eager to obtain her new book, the wire is clearly visible in the frame [Fig 3-7]. Crystal chastises Sally for her over-eagerness on the telephone: “Sally that’s no way to talk to a man, and it was a man!” The wire still remains visible, hovering at the bottom on the screen, reminding us of its power and presence in the lives of the women. The camera then follows Norah capturing her entanglement with the telephone line and the extra steps she must take to free herself from its grip [Fig 3-8]. Narratively, this gesture serves as a visual rhyme to what Norah says as she negotiates the wire. She tells Crystal that Homer has “a lot of good qualities.” Her words are “tangled up” because they are ironically funny. The milquetoast Homer has no discernable good qualities; he even hits on Norah while waiting for Crystal to get ready for their date. Norah’s words also are a bit twisted because Homer used to be Crystal’s husband. She divorced him because dating is more exciting than marriage, as Crystal tells Norah: “Homer used to have a husband’s faults; now he has a boyfriend’s virtues.” This entanglement also works as visual reinforcement of Norah’s own entrapment with the telephone, through her vocation, and soon through its ability to facilitate her encounter with Prebble. The camera captures Norah’s walk entirely in long shot to emphasize the encounter with the
wire. The wire affects and controls the women even though it deceptively remains in the margins of the frame, like a venomous snake in the grass poised to strike.

The film goes out of its way in deep-focus long-shots to display and document the dimensions of the living space of these women, which serves a dual purpose. It highlights its utilitarian qualities and emphasizes the importance it plays in the lives of these women.\(^4\) We also realize that the major living room/dining room space converts into sleeping quarters for the three women. Norah’s perfect birthday dinner with her fiancé is ruined when she reads his letter and learns he plans to marry another woman. The telephone then rings. Prebble has called Granite 1466 to invite Crystal to meet him at the Blue Gardenia restaurant. Prebble’s invitation for a “date” right now, is a come-on for a sexual encounter, which Crystal would have understood, but Norah, with her judgment impaired by grief and her lack of sexual experience, does not. She accepts Prebble’s invitation without telling him that she is not Crystal. When questioned by Sally, Norah tells her she has a “date” with “a man” indicating her lack of understanding that accepting this kind of “date” sends a message she did not intend. The telephone serves as an instrument that fails to get its message across on either end: Prebble hopes for a quick sexual liaison with Crystal and Norah hopes for a new Prince Charming to rescue her from the pain and rejection of her present life.

Norah arrives at the Blue Gardenia restaurant and a waiter escorts her to the Coral room where Prebble awaits “Granite 1466.” When the wrong girl (Norah) with the right number shows up at his table, Prebble initially is nonplussed but soon adapts,

\(^4\) See Janet Bergstrom’s excellent essay on the film in which she provides a copy of Lang’s detailed drawing of the women’s apartment set (103). Bergstrom’s essay also explores the archival significance of the film in terms of Lang’s brush with McCarthyism and its impact on the film.
proving Mulvey’s theory that “[I]n herself the woman has not the slightest importance” (“Visual” 11). The morning after her gruesome date with Prebble, Norah awakens and feels terribly hung over and sick but has no memory of her date with Prebble or his attack.⁵ Norah goes to work alongside the other operators, who like her, are literally bound to the switchboard by wires [Fig 3-9]. The audience sees Sally wearing an expression of sadness on her face that contrasts with her happy-go-lucky personality shown at home. The deep-focus of this shot also reveals Captain Haynes, who looks over the operators as he decides which ones he should question due to the fact that Prebble “made time” with many of them. The supervisor fetches Hazel, the operator next to Norah. Hazel drops and shatters her compact. Norah stares at the fragments, and she flashes back to her shattering Prebble’s mirror with the fire poker the night before.

The film cuts from this shot to a close-up of a blue gardenia in the hand of Mae, the blind woman who sells corsages at the Blue Gardenia restaurant. Prebble bought one for Norah the previous evening, and Casey interviews Mae for his newspaper article on the murderess. Casey questions Mae about what she remembers about the woman with Prebble in the restaurant. She tells him the mystery woman’s dress was made of taffeta: “Taffeta has a voice all its own.” The camera features her in medium shot, smiling, perhaps because she helped Mayo, or perhaps she was remembering the pleasure of the sound of taffeta. Like Selma, she too is physically challenged and provides clues that help the male protagonist. She also shows the gaze is not limited to the sighted, as pointed out, by Lacan in Seminar XI. Mae sees Norah through her

⁵ I describe the scenes of Prebble and Norah’s “date” at the restaurant and its conclusion of rape in Prebble’s apartment in detail in Chapter Five
voice, which she describes as “friendly and quiet” and through the rustle of her taffeta dress. Casey also discovers Mae “sees” the mystery murderess through her perfume which is subtle, not overpowering, unlike most of Prebble’s dates. The next shot overlap dissolves to Norah at her switchboard, interacting with customers in her “quiet and friendly” voice. Since its invention, the telephone “could not ‘do without’ the clear voices of women” (Kittler 57). When Hazel returns, she says the police asked her if she was out in the rain without her shoes, and Norah becomes increasingly agitated. Norah leaves her shoes behind, which provides a clue for the police. She asks her supervisor to relieve her on the switchboard because she feels “dizzy.”

Norah’s having to get permission to leave her seat emphasizes the immobile position of her occupation. Norah and Hazel only can converse intermittingly, because they need to keep connecting calls through the switchboard. Norah exits her chair at the switchboard, and the film dissolves to her exiting an elevator. As she attempts to alight, an unknown man impedes her. She ends up tussling with him as she tries to get past him and their interaction resembles, for a few seconds, an embrace [Fig. 3-10]. This visual, which is not in any way necessary to the narrative, tells us what we already know: Norah is not good at negotiating men. She has not handled the rejection of her fiancé well, which made her vulnerable to Prebble. Furthermore, she did not negotiate Prebble well either; she was unable to see that he was dangerous. Very soon, she will not handle Casey well, mistakenly trusting him with her life. The fact that she seems to be embracing the man reinforces her inability to pick proper romantic partners. All of Norah’s romantic embraces go awry: whether fantasized or imagined in the past
(George) or future (Casey), or encountered in the Real (Prebble). This one short tangle at the elevator’s threshold distills Norah’s luck with men into a brief visual manifestation.

Norah sees a headline from The Daily Tribune about the murder, and she assumes she is the killer. Meanwhile, Casey is displeased that he has not been able to uncover the identity of the Blue Gardenia murderess (the headline Norah sees in the lobby is from a competing newspaper). He runs out of time when his boss assigns him to cover the H-bomb test. He asks his editor, “What am I supposed to do about my girlfriend, the Blue Gardenia?” He answers, “You’ve left dames before. Write her a letter.” Casey’s letter becomes The Chronicle’s headline the following day. The letter implores the “Blue Gardenia,” the moniker Casey gives the murderess, to “go to the nearest phone booth and invest a dime in the rest of your life.” Norah’s investment in her life already is heavily tied up with the telephone through her occupation. Her trouble with Prebble started with a telephone call and Casey disingenuously offers a source of relief through this same invention. Casey sets Norah up for her third rejection by men in the film: First, George’s letter; second, Prebble’s rape (a rejection of her as a romantic partner and, more broadly, as a human being); and third, Casey’s lying to her that he wants to help the Blue Gardenia and his subsequent rejection of her when he thinks she is the murderess. Casey’s rejection is not based on his belief that she killed Prebble, but upon her decisions to go to a man’s apartment at night unescorted. Casey is more turned off by the possibility of her being a fallen woman than a murderer.

Norah reads Casey’s letter decides to call him when the telephone rings. Lang cuts to a medium shot of the telephone and its surrounding objects, creating a mise-en-scène that simultaneously suggests comfort and danger [Fig 3-11]. The shot seems
strangely balanced, with the comforting elements of the home—the books, the lighted lamp and the vase of flowers situated screen right, which oppose the menacing elements—the dark telephone\(^6\) and the strange-looking gimcrack of a woman’s head, done up in heavy make-up, whose large black bow makes it appear as if she cradles a telephone receiver uncomfortably in the crook of her neck. Dark, ominous shadows also cover the left side of the screen. This shot mirrors Norah’s own feeling about her home. A place that once served as a safe haven from the everydayness and boredom of her job, where she and her roommates share chores and laughs, now is infected by the betrayal and menace she experiences at the hands of the patriarchy.

This same night, Casey works in his office. He has installed an extra phone line to handle the flood of responses he receives from his letter. He juggles two calls at once, a work version of his little black book. Here, his “little black (and white) letter to the unknown murderess has garnered more attention than he expected. After many unrelated phone calls, Norah calls Casey from a telephone booth. She identifies the shoes the police found at the crime scene, “Suede pumps, the left one with a loose rubber heel, size 5 ½ B.” Norah runs away from the telephone when a police officer approaches. In her haste, she drops the handkerchief she used to muffle her voice, which evokes the trope of the flirting woman’s dropping her handkerchief to garner a man’s attention, a cliché Lang inverts by showing a perverse form of flirting that takes place between Norah and Casey. Norah calls Casey back, but her voice is different without the handkerchief. She creates subterfuge claiming that she knows about the

\(^6\) This telephone is the “300” Type Desk Set model, invented in 1937. In 1949, the “500” Type Desk Set Model was available (Stern and Gwanthmey 34). The fact that the roommates have the older model also suggests the low-paying nature of their jobs in that they could not afford the newer model.
earlier call, but is not same woman, but a friend of hers. She buys a new handkerchief at a local drugstore and goes to meet Casey in his darkened newspaper office. Other scholars have written about Norah’s arrival in the Chronicle office. Casey sees her arrive, and shuts off the lights in his office so that he can watch her walk through the maze of desks, which make her look like a trapped rat in a maze, a common formal device used in Film Noir. The signs flashing outside pulsate and flash on Norah’s body as she walks through the maze of desks. Casey’s darkened position lets him watch her, as a male spectator watches a woman on the screen.

Norah and Casey have dinner at a local beanery, and Norah agrees to bring her “friend” to meet Casey at 3:40 pm tomorrow in time for the “Sunset Edition.” The next day, the police arrest Norah during her meeting with Casey. He has just confessed that he had no intention of helping the Blue Gardenia suspect; he only wanted a story. Her arrest is facilitated by a telephone call from Bill, the owner of the restaurant, who “dropped a dime” on Norah when he realized who she was after seeing her with Casey in the restaurant the previous evening. Captain Haynes thanks Bill for “keeping” his “ears open.” Interestingly, Casey’s keeping his ears open leads to Norah’s eventual acquittal. Casey hears Wagner’s “Liebestod” playing through a loud speaker. He remembers this record was playing when Prebble’s body was found. The last record Norah recalled hearing was “Blue Gardenia” by Nat King Cole. He meets Captain Haynes at the record store, where they discover Prebble’s killer, who attempts suicide.

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7 See Kaplan (“Place” 86) and Murlanch (110).
8 I discuss this scene in detail in Chapter Five.
9 Sound plays a large role in cinema as well as sight, as this scene indicates. The investigation of sound is beyond the scope of this project, unfortunately.
by cutting her wrists. The scene overlap dissolves to a medicine drip from a hospital vial. The camera moves out to reveal Rose in a hospital bed confessing to Prebble’s murder. On the night of the murder, Rose persistently knocked on Prebble’s door until he let her in. Prebble appeared uninjured, so we know Norah’s swing with the fire poker did not hit him. Rose did not realize Norah lay passed out a few feet away. Norah couldn’t hear, at least not consciously, that Rose was in the apartment. Norah ended up “witnessing” a murder that she neither saw nor heard, thus a fact reflected in the way Lang shoots the part of the scene involving Rose and Prebble in long-shot from Prebble’s living room, as if from Norah’s point of view [Fig 3-12].

After Rose’s confession, the police release Norah. A barrage of flashes from the local newspapers meets her and her roommates. Casey emerges from the crowd and attempts to talk to Norah. She rebuffs him, following Crystal’s advice. Norah and Sally walk away, and Casey asks Crystal, “Didn’t Captain Haynes explain?” Crystal answers, “You know women; the stubborn sex? Take a tip from information honey. The number is Granite—” And Casey realizes he has had Norah’s number all along. Crystal joins her roommates as they walk out of frame, with Norah saying, “Crystal, I did just like you said, I played hard to get.” And Crystal cautions her, “Yes, but don’t be too eager when he calls you tonight.” “Yes Ma’am,” Norah answers, showing her ability to follow the rules necessary to get a man. Like most Rejected Women of Film Noir, these three women get an uneventful exit from the film. They walk out of the frame, screen left, leaving the men to have the final scene in the film.

**The Blue Gardenia and resistance**

The camaraderie among these women and their support of each other is evident in the scenes that occur in the women’s apartment. First, the apartment exists as a
place where the women can be comfortable and relaxed among themselves. No males penetrate it physically (except for the inept Homer). Men enter the apartment only through the conduit of the telephone (and newspaper). The domestic space as a whole serves as an unusual scene location for Film Noir. Lang’s staging of scenes in the bathroom and kitchen flouts Hollywood conventions of Film Noir. The first bathroom scene features Norah quickly opening the bathroom door, striking Crystal in the derriere [Fig 3-13]. Crystal hunches over the sink in pain, yelling “Ow!” When Norah asks if Crystal is hurt, she responds: “I think my sacroiliac shifted two points south.” She turns, looking at her backside in the mirror, “which might be an improvement.” Norah laughs at Crystal’s suggestive joke, gently chiding her with, “Oh, Crystal!” This odd, seemingly gratuitous scene could be read as merely an attempt at humor. Crystal’s “joke” indicates that this imaginary “shift” brought about by the door whacking her derriere changed her shape making it sexier. This joke alludes culturally to the myth that women must suffer to be beautiful. Crystal has endured the pain (the door knob hitting her back), which creates a better figure. A two inch shit south in the sacroiliac bones would cause the coccyx, or tailbone, to pop through the open space of the pelvis, making the coccyx protrude from the groin area forming a penis.10

Perhaps behind Crystal’s “joke” lies her desire for masculinity, or the power that comes with it. Out of the three women, Crystal is the alpha female. She instructs Sally and Norah on how to behave in relation to men. She tells Norah that Blue Gardenia murderess had to be a morally inferior or stupid woman because only these two types would go to the apartment of a “wolf” like Prebble. Sally and Crystal make comments

10 Of course I am speaking metaphorically not medically, as this type of alternation is medically impossible, as would be Crystal’s suggestion that the door shifted her sacroiliac “two points south.”
that suggest that the woman who killed Prebble was of easy virtue. Sally reads the article about the unknown murderess and the clues the police have put together, such as her wearing a “probably black” taffeta dress. Sally says “Black? Ha! Probably red. That kind of woman always wears red.” Sally labels the murderess as a scarlet woman not because she has murdered Prebble, but for a worse sin: she went alone to a man’s apartment. Crystal defends Sally’s interpretation, and for all her espousing of proper behavior with men, however, Crystal defies these same rules. She divorces husband Homer because she prefers dating him. She tells Norah: “Since we divorced, I’m beginning to like the big lug.” Crystal delivers the line while in front of a mirror, indicating the duality of her role as wife/girlfriend as well as the inverted choice she makes in relation to Homer. Crystal’s returning to her pre-martial state (living with her girlfriends), and divorcing only to date her ex-husband can be interpreted on many levels. First of all, this arrangement suggests a possible queer reading of Crystal’s lesbian longing.\(^{11}\) It also reinforces a common trope in Film Noir—the destabilization of the nuclear family. Harvey notes: “And if successful romantic love leads inevitably in the direction of the stable institution of marriage, the point about film noir, by contrast, is that it is structured around the destruction or absence of romantic love and the family” (37). The few times the nuclear family emerges in Film Noir, as in The Big Heat, it quickly gets blown apart, in the case of this film, literally through the bombing of the Bannion family car with mother Katie inside. A third possible explanation for this arrangement is that Crystal, Norah and Sally form a healthy family unit that nourishes all of them and defies the societal pressure to marry.

\(^{11}\) An interesting and fruitful endeavor, but beyond the scope of this project, which examines heterosexual dynamics at play in Film Noir.
As a family unit, the women function very well, as evidenced in the first domestic sequence shown in the film that begins with Norah trying on her birthday dress for Sally and ends with Norah leaving the apartment to meet Prebble. Norah and Sally playfully squabble about sharing household chores, such as ironing and cleaning. Crystal kisses Norah as she says “Happy birthday, darling.” Norah prepares for a birthday dinner (with her absent fiancé). Sally looks forward to a night of reading a Mickey Mallett mystery novel (another man who is not physically present), and Crystal prepares for a date with Homer (a man who was present as Crystal’s life partner, but whom she has discarded in favor of Sally and Norah). All three women take steps, either consciously or unconsciously, to secure their own family unit by creating relationships with absent men. In this safe space, Sally acts out her fantasies and play acts as being one of Mickey Mallett’s heroines for Norah: “It’s all about a beautiful red-headed debutante who gets hit in the head, stabbed in the back, shot in the stomach—Pow! Pretty badly hurt, she staggers down the stairs.” Sally acts out these violent attacks with a child-like delight that not only shows her innocence and immaturity, but also eerily depicts the violence to come in the film. Sally represents the rejected woman who chooses to live her life in the Imaginary to avoid pain. Her books are a form of protection, a barrier that keeps her from realizing the quiet desperation of her drab life—her low-paying dull, repetitive job and her lack of social interaction outside of her connection with her roommates. When violence enters the world of these women in the Real through Prebble’s murder, Sally’s treatment of his death anchors in the Imaginary—she cannot imagine his death other than in the fantasizing way she processes death and violence. She says, “I didn’t like
Prebble much while he was alive, but now that he’s been murdered, that always makes a man so romantic.”

The film also portrays them as a cohesive and caring family unit in the “morning after” scene in which Norah, Crystal and Sally wake up to go to work the morning following Norah’s date with Prebble. The scene opens on Crystal’s ringing alarm clock. The camera pans out to include Crystal in bed, as she slaps the clock and orders it to “shut up!” The disgust for the alarm highlights the monotony of their jobs. The morning alarm clock, which Crystal refers to as the “mine whistle,” ushers in another day of boredom and rote repetition associated with their occupation. The camera pans over to Sally, who rises out of bed. She eats a few kernels of stale popcorn out of a tin and heads toward the bathroom [Fig 3-14]. She wears a very short pajama top with no bottoms, and her legs are bare from her feet to the top of her hamstrings. Sally’s legs are shapely and sexy; however, they are not coded for titillation. Sally, with her child-like naiveté, is not coded for sex. She functions in the role of child to Crystal’s and Norah’s parents. The male gaze appears not to be interested in her, which frees her to dress provocatively on her own terms, and not as a prisoner of male voyeurism. As Sally heads to the bathroom, Crystal reminds Sally she gets the bathroom first on Thursdays and orders Sally to make the orange juice. Crystal notices Norah’s black taffeta dress crumpled on the ground and teasingly rouses Norah from her hung-over sleep. When she does not move, Crystal sarcastically bellows to Norah: “The lady’s here with a bright new morning!” Crystal is surprised to see Norah is nude. “Where’s your nightgown?” she asks, and Norah confesses she cannot remember getting home or getting into bed. Crystal tosses Norah a robe, and when Norah has trouble putting it on, Crystal lovingly
teases her again with, “the arms go in the sleeves,” and by describing particularly nauseating hangover remedies, such as “raw eggs, worcheshire sauce, and sauerkraut juice.” The intimacy of the women’s bodies at home continues when Sally approaches Norah and places a glass of orange juice in her hands. Sally unbuttons her top, steps into the shower and throws the top out of the shower stall as Norah approaches the bathroom sink. Sally’s naked arm is seen in the mirror as Norah stands at the sink [Fig 3-15]. The scene provides a look into the intimate world of these women where they are scantily clad and show no modesty among themselves, suggesting a sort of sisterhood, in which nudity and various levels of undress are seen as everyday events. This “morning after” scene emphasizes the level of comfort and ease among the women.

The night following the Prebble murder, Lang shoots the women in the kitchen [Fig 3-16]. Sally reads the paper (Casey’s story on the Blue Gardenia) as Crystal and Norah do the dishes. The opening deep focus shot of this scene features Sally in the foreground. She sits poised in front of the newspaper. We can read its headline, “Police Dragnet.” Sally has an affinity for gritty crime pulp novels, and the Blue Gardenia news story is her crime novels come to life: “This is better than Mickey Mallet,” she says. Out of the three women, only she is dressed for bed, signifying her immaturity—the grown-ups remain dressed in street clothes. Also, Mom and Mom take care of the chores. Crystal washes the dishes and Norah dries and puts them away. Sally paints her nails, and blows on them intermittently to dry the polish as she reads the “story” of Prebble’s murder out loud to her roommates. This scene marks the only time a woman wears slacks in the film. Norah’s slacks perhaps represent her wanting to disrobe from feminine cultural constrictions. In addition, the trousers imply a kind of empowerment,
as Norah defends the Blue Gardenia’s actions in the face of Casey’s sexist insinuations in his article with such phrases as “high-voltage doll” and “a flashy blonde putting on an act as a lady” along with her roommates’ sexist comments about bad girls getting what they deserve. When Norah suggests the Blue Gardenia might have been “defending her honor,” Sally responds that a girl who would go out with Prebble “never heard of that word.” Crystal responds, “That’s what I told the cops today.” Kaplan discusses this scene as one way to show that this film is unique among the androcentric world of Film Noir because it features a noir heroine (Norah): “Reversing the situation in most noir films, where women are seen only within the male discourse, here that discourse is demystified through the fact that Norah is allowed to present herself directly to us.” This scene makes Norah its center of consciousness, allowing the viewer to realize “the disjunction between Norah, whom we experience as a gently, warm and honest person, and the ‘fictional’ woman the men and society in general conjure up” (“Place” 85). Kaplan also notes the intensity of the double-standard in that no one in the diegesis stops to consider the bad behavior of Prebble. When Norah, exasperated, says, “Maybe he deserved it!”, Crystal’s response chillingly echoes the defense of date rapists that still evades our culture today: “Honey, if a girl killed every man who got fresh with her, how much of the male population do you think we’d have left?” Examining the shot in which Crystal delivers this line illustrates the dichotomy that has haunted the spectre of feminism. Crystal’s face and her body language register the tired resign of one who has learned to accept her place as Other. She rests her (dishwashing-gloved) hand wearily on the counter, and her shadow looms large, reflecting the dark culturally constructed “truth” of being a woman in a sexist society. In contrast, Norah’s face and body
language show pain, fear, and perhaps a trace of anger. She presently experiences the inherent unfair nature of what being a woman means in patriarchal culture: you will be judged for your sexual behavior, and if you are sexually assaulted, well, perhaps you were asking for it. ¹²

The next kitchen scene indicates that Crystal at least, comes to see the mistakes she has made in maligning the Blue Gardenia murderess. Norah comes home from her meeting with Casey. Crystal waits for her in the kitchen and lets Norah know she figured out that Norah is the Blue Gardenia murderess. Crystal is not judgmental, but supportive and loving. When Norah begins to cry, Crystal gently and lovingly rubs her head [Fig 3-17]. Crystal also supports Norah by going with her to turn herself into Casey the next day. This reconnected solidarity continues when Lang shows the women emerging from the elevator together triumphant after Norah’s police pardon. After the exchange between Crystal and Casey about “taking a tip from information,” the three women then exit the film, arm in arm and smiling, indicating their solidarity of functioning as a family unit in resistance to patriarchal conformity.

Yet, this act of resistance and solidarity is eclipsed by the fact that the last minute of the film belongs to the men. An unknown man in the foreground obscures their exit, so we do not even see them leave the film [Fig 3-18]. Casey appears center screen. He tosses his “little black book,” of telephone numbers to Sleepy, signifying the end of his single days, and the “happily-ever-after” ending he plans on having with Norah [Fig 3-19]. The film began at the telephone company with Casey refusing a phone number

¹² Last year, I had a conversation with a male peer (a well-educated, intelligent, graduate film student) who asked me: Didn’t I really think that if a woman was raped while drunk at a fraternity party that it was her own fault, because shouldn’t women know better than to drink excessively around men?
from one operator (Crystal), and now ends with his refusing all the telephone numbers of women, except Norah’s. Ironically, he could reach both women at the same number, “Granite 1466.” The last shot of the film features Sleepy lustily gazing at the “string of numbers” in Casey’s address book. Women are translated into telephonic codes, categorized and catalogued for male pleasures. Earlier in the film, Sleepy flips through Casey’s book and asks, “I don’t dig your code system. What do three exclamation points after a girl’s name mean?” Casey takes the book away, claiming it contains “private stock,” suggesting that the numbers, and the women they represent, are objects that belong to him. The last action in the film, Casey’s throwing the book to Sleepy, suggests these numbers are objects that can readily pass on from one (male) owner to another, confirming Luce Irigaray’s claim that woman serves as “exchange value among men,” or as “commodity” whose price will be determined by “subjects: workers, merchants consumers” (31). Under Irigaray’s paradigm the exclamation points would serve as “prices” for each of the woman in his black book. The last line of the film, Sleepy’s “Oh Brother,” confirms this patriarchal line through which these objects (women) pass from brother to brother in the patriarchal society.

The film demonstrates how men circulate freely both in their professional and personal lives. Their jobs allow them movement; in their personal lives they pick up and exchange women. In contrast, the women professionally are physically fixed geographically to one spot, an office, and in the case of the operators, literally tethered to their machinery. Socially, they must also stay fixed to a spot—by the telephone—waiting for a man to call. The film depicts this dependency through Crystal’s elaborate getting into character to answer the phone, and her chastising Sally for her
inappropriate telephone interaction with a “man.” The personal lives of the three roommates also hint at the way the patriarchy views them as interchangeable objects. They are about the same size and share the same facial features and hairstyles. Prebble easily interchanges Norah for Crystal when Norah mistakenly answers a telephone call meant for Crystal. Homer implies he would like to exchange Crystal for Norah, and Crystal does not seem readily upset by this suggestion. Sally is happy Norah’s new dress is black because it will look good on all of them. Crystal raids Norah’s closet looking to borrow the black birthday dress and shoes when Homer invites her to visit The Blue Gardenia restaurant where Crystal wants to sit in the same seat Norah had occupied.

This coding of the women as interchangeable, however, exists solely in the way the patriarchy defines these women. As mentioned in the introduction, I examine rejected women through this same lens by positioning their rejection in terms of their relationships with men, with particular focus on the noir hero. Indeed, men reject all three of the main female characters, as seen through Norah’s triple rejection by George, Prebble and Casey. Casey and Homer reject Crystal. Men in general reject Sally. She gets no male attention and retreats into a fantasy world. All three women function as rejected women through their dull, repetitive and unglamorous jobs as telephone operators. Among themselves, however, these women form a protective unit, and insular bubble in their apartment, away from the patriarchy and its demands, showing the resourcefulness of rejected women and their ability to take care of, and love one another, and their subtle resistance to its power. Still, as we have seen through this and
other examples of rejected women throughout this project, the resistance of Rejected Women never becomes strong enough to make any significant changes in their lives.

**Written-Up Bodies of Rejected Women in The Big Heat**

*The Big Heat* begins with scene of writing. The first shot of the film is a close-up of a revolver. The shot widens as Tom Duncan’s hand enters the frame as he grabs the gun. His hand moves off screen, followed quickly by the sound of a gunshot. A puff of smoke appears on screen, signifying the off-screen suicide. Tom’s hand falls back into frame, landing on an envelope. Bertha, Tom’s wife, descends a staircase. The low-key, high-contrast lighting exaggerates Bertha’s shadow, signifying the dark penumbra she has cast over her husband and that will loom large over the film; Bertha will control the letter that serves as the lynchpin in making or breaking the syndicate. The close-up of the revolver, along the pens and envelope, all instruments of writing, connect Tom to two scenes of writing: his literal writing of a letter, putting pen to paper, and the “writing” of his own death by suicide, putting gun to body. In *The Big Heat*, human bodies, most particularly the bodies of three rejected woman characters—Lucy Chapman, Doris the B-girl, and Debby Marsh—function as texts bearing violent marks of metaphorical pens that gouge, scar, and maim. Lang’s film opens and closes with scenes of literal writing, thus setting up the importance of writing as marking and clearly delineating the role of active writer with “pen” in hand, and the passive vessel that serves as his text. “Is the pen a metaphorical penis?” This provocative question opens Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s landmark 1978 feminist tome *The Madwoman in the Attic* (3).

In many ways, *The Big Heat* concerns the power struggle for control of the “pen.” Many scholars argue Dave bears responsibility for the deaths of every woman in the film. Gunning writes that Dave’s “quest is littered with the bodies of dead women” (429).
Gunning’s diagram, incorporating the dichotomous titles “Wife” and “Whore,” effectively illustrates how Bertha Duncan and Katie Bannion (“Wives”) as well as Lucy Chapman and Debby Marsh (“Whores”) all die, thus making up “the deadly foundation of Bannion’s success” (429). Grant Tracey claims the film’s female body count speaks to the text’s “unconscious” misogyny: “Ultimately, Lang isn’t conscious of the misogyny of his text, but structurally the need to contain and destroy women informs the noir angst of The Big Heat. Bannion is responsible for every woman’s death, but it is his work that goes on” (125). Robin Wood believes Dave is culpable for the deaths of Lucy and Debby, which “he never, in his smugness, allows himself to fully recognize” (102). Bannion’s “smugness” leads him to perceive Lucy and Debby as morally inferior and therefore expendable (102). Fixing the deaths of these two rejected women, along with the deaths of Katie and Bertha, however, solely on the shoulders of Dave, gives him far too much power as well as blame, and implies that the women of The Big Heat exercise not even a modicum of control over their destinies. That being said, each woman experiences rejection and acceptance of Bannion, not necessarily in that order, which profoundly affects her. In addition, every female body in The Big Heat becomes a written-upon text, marred by violence and destruction. Their damaged bodies exist as sites of ambivalence, giving off mixed signals in relation to power structures. Throughout the film, Lang pays a kind of curiously inattentive attention to the rejected women that highlights their inner strength, beauty, intelligence, honesty and courage and testifies to the film’s admiration for the perseverance, struggles and strength of these rejected women and their continued quest for agency in a society that seems invested in denying it to them.
To briefly summarize the film, police officer Tom Duncan pens a suicide note to the police commissioner explaining all of his corrupt activities involving Mike Lagana, the syndicate head. Tom’s unscrupulous wife Bertha confiscates the letter and uses it to blackmail Lagana. Sergeant Dave Bannion investigates the Duncan death and closes the case as a suicide. Duncan’s mistress, Lucy Chapman, contacts him and swears Duncan was not suicidal. She plans to go to the newspapers. Dave mistakes her grief for greed, and he warns Bertha that Lucy might “try a little blackmail.” The syndicate tortures and kills Lucy, and Dave investigates her death. Dave’s investigation upsets Lagana, who orders his top henchman, Vince Stone to kill Dave. Vince arranges to have Dave’s car outfitted with a bomb, but Dave’s wife Katie gets killed instead of Dave. After this event, Dave spends all his energy investigating Katie’s death. He quits the police force when his bosses, also on Lagana’s payroll, tell him to ease up on Lagana. Dave’s investigation leads him back to the Retreat, the seedy bar where he first met Lucy. Dave sees Vince burn a B-girl with a cigar, and connects Vince with Lucy’s cigarette-burned corpse. Dave kicks Vince out of the club, and treats the burned B girl with kindness, which gets the attention of Vince’s mistress, Debby Marsh.

Debby follows Dave to his hotel room and makes a pass at him, which Dave rebuffs. He wants Debby in his hotel room so he can ask her questions about Vince and Lagana. Vince finds out Debby was with Dave and punishes her by throwing scalding coffee in her face, badly disfiguring her. She escapes from the hospital to Dave’s hotel room where he takes care of her. Dave, with the help of Selma Parker, a bookkeeper at an auto junkyard connected to the car bombing, discovers Bertha’s blackmailing plot. He tries to get Bertha to confess, but she treats him with contempt, and she tells him
Lagana will never hurt her because if anything happens to her, her husband’s letter automatically goes to the District Attorney. Dave is tempted to kill Bertha but gains control of himself and leaves. Dave tells Debby about Bertha’s plan, and Debby shoots Bertha. She then throws hot coffee in Vince’s face. Vince shoots Debby, and Dave arrives in time to arrest Vince, and to talk to Debby until she dies in his arms. The last scene of the film shows Dave back at work as a police officer.

Tables 1 and 2 [see tables at the chapter’s end] chart the numerous scarred, penetrated, burned and damaged bodies of *The Big Heat*. Only Dave and Lagana emerge untouched, physically. Corpulent (male) bodies, like those of Atkins and Tierney serve as metonymies for the clogged, heavy, ill-functioning body of the city of Kenport. The city’s heart will fail if its collective blood is not thinned of the coagulating cholesterol that is Lagana’s syndicate. Atkins and Tierney symbolize corruption, but neither of these men dies in order to save the city. Tom Duncan dies, but the marks written upon his body come from his own hand. With the exception of Vince and Larry, the men’s “maimed” bodies result from their own choices, signifying a level of agency not extended to the women. With the exception of Dave’s little daughter Joyce and the unnamed B-girls, every woman is physically marked. Most women are burned, suggesting not only Lagana’s (and by proxy, Vince Stone’s) scorched earth policy in pursuit of pleasures, but also the way “The Big Heat,” which Lotte Eisner explains, “is a slang term for concentrated police activity against criminals” (333) must be paid for with the burned bodies of women. The only female who functions as “writer” is Debby, who marks Bertha with bullets and Vince with scalding coffee.¹³ Both of Lang’s Film Noirs,

¹³ One could argue that Selma functions as a “writer” as we see her writing figures in a ledger at Victory Auto. Selma does not act as “writer” in terms of writing on bodies the way Debby does.
The Big Heat and The Blue Gardenia hold an ambivalence for rejected woman characters that suggests a mixture of sympathy and contempt, as especially evidenced in both films’ last scenes. Perhaps Lang’s own experiences of marginalization in relation to his belief HUAC had “gray-listed” him around the time he made these films endowed him with an appreciation for being in the Othered, passive position that women occupy in patriarchal societies. Tracey is a bit harsh in labeling Lang as misogynist. Instead, I view Lang, at least in this period of his career, as a kind of “unconscious feminist — a man who identified with and liked women more than he might have wanted to admit consciously. This conscious/unconscious dichotomy could explain his equivocal portrayal of rejected women characters who are admirable and likable, but nonetheless, must be ignored, punished or destroyed.

Lucy Chapman

Lucy first appears to the audience in writing. Dave writes “Lucy Chapman. The Retreat” on scrap paper provided to him by his wife, Katie, who enables this scene of writing, but does not write herself. The shot dissolves to an interior of The Retreat [Fig 3-20]. The perspicuous viewer will notice that Larry Gordon, the man who later murders Katie, is playing dice with Doris the B-girl who Vince later burns. The juxtaposition and dissolve from Dave’s idyllic home space into the honky-tonk quarters of the Retreat marks not only his change of location but also a metaphorical time warp. He enters what Sobchack calls lounge time, 14 a chronotope far removed from the pleasure of home. We

14 For Sobchack, Film Noir utilizes the “chronotope” [a spatiotemporal structure that moors a text to its specific time/space location] of the “hotel or boardinghouse room, the cocktail lounge, the nightclub, the diner or roadside café, the bar and the road house, the cheap motel—these are the recurrent and ubiquitous spaces of film noir that, unlike the mythic sites of home and home front, are actual common-places in wartime and post-war American culture. Cinematically concretized and foregrounded, they both constitute and circumscribe the temporal possibilities and life-world of the characters who are constrained by them — and they provide the grounding premises” for film noir (148).
can no more imagine Mrs. Bannion in the Retreat than we can Lucy Chapman in a pinafore apron cooking steak for Dave. When Dave meets Lucy, he enters lounge time, the only time and spatial dimension in which Lucy Chapman appears in the film. Lucy first appears on screen in a medium-shot, screen center, sitting at the bar, absent-mindedly holding an empty wine glass [Fig 3-21]. She appears lost and despondent. Her face shows neither the greed nor dishonesty of which Dave will accuse her. She wears a low-cut off-the-shoulders dress that shows a lot of skin, which soon will become blank canvas for Vince’s malignant cigarette (pen). As Lucy and Dave move to a booth, Lang places the camera behind the bar, using it as a visual obstacle between the viewer and the characters to emphasize the bar’s significance in Lucy’s life. It simultaneously represents her livelihood and the barrier between her and middle-class society. “This story’s all wrong, Mr. Bannion! Why, Tom wouldn’t kill himself,” Lucy says, as she takes a newspaper article from her purse and hands it to Dave. Lucy, in her role as text, passes the writing on to an authority figure. She merely functions as a transferring vessel; she does no writing herself. The camera frames them in a medium-two-shot. Dave sits fairly close to Lucy, but as their conversation continues, he moves further away. Cigarette smoke floats into the shot from Dave’s direction, analogous to bourgeois smoke screen Dave erects in relation to Lucy. It also prefigures the numerous cigarette burns Vince will place on her body.

The bar scene transitions with an overlap dissolve to the Duncan home. Dave decides to follow up with Bertha to ask about the summer house in Lakeside and to warn her that Lucy might “try a little blackmail,” a line Grant Tracey notes, is “draped with irony” (121). This dissolve creates a brief visual instance in which Lucy hovers
between Bertha (screen left) and Dave (screen right) [Fig 3-22]. The position of Bertha’s head matches that of Lucy’s, especially their downcast eyes, emphasizing their physical likeness and emotional alterity. Bertha looks haughty and arrogant as opposed to Lucy’s sad, lost look. Lucy’s image hovers in this scene because she has the more legitimate claim as Tom’s partner and therefore belongs in his house. A photograph of a man, whom Dave will point to and identify as Tom Duncan, rests between Lucy and Bertha, symbolizing their rivalry. Tom inhabits this scene as well, both present in the photograph and absent in his death. The overlap dissolve allows Lucy to linger ghost-like between Bertha and Tom, and it presages her death, which will occur shortly after this meeting, and will be announced with a scene of writing. Lucy’s body will be scarred and maimed by cigarette burns before Vince Stone strangles her.

The scene at the Duncan home ends with a dissolve from Bertha’s face at a window watching Dave leave to a Teletype machine pounding out the words: “ATTENTION: HOMICIDE DIV. - KENPORT POLICE.” The camera dissolves to a long shot of the police station without revealing the name of the victim, emphasizing her anonymity and unimportance. A clerk gives the Teletype printout to Dave, and the audience reads it, along with Dave from a subjective camera angle. Colin Mc Arthur believes Lang’s choice to use case lighting highlights the information about the Lakeside fashion shop, allowing the viewer and Dave to puzzle out at the same time that Lucy is the unidentified female victim (59). Dave now “sees the light” and realizes and regrets his actions and attitudes toward Lucy. Tracey’s reading of the morgue scene emphasizes the way the Dave’s own lit cigarette “writes” the scene of Lucy’s death:
Lang conflates images of an on and offscreen cigarette to link the unseen images of Lucy’s cigarette-burned body with Bannion’s discouraged gestures. Remorseful after reading the coroner’s report of her body burns, Bannion butts his cigarette in an ashtray and tells the coroner that he saw ‘Every single one of them.’ As he grinds the cigarette, Lang slyly suggests that Bannion is guilty for the torture and burns that Lucy experienced. (122)

Dave intensely follows up on Lucy’s murder, even after Lt. Wilks orders him to stop because he feels guilty over patently rejecting Lucy, which contributed to her fate. Lucy fights the power structure forced upon her by standing her ground when talking to Dave; she does not buckle under his bullying. Her plan to give her story to the newspapers also serves as an act of defiance; unfortunately, Lucy’s act, although brave and honest, ultimately has no positive effect on her own life. Her death does serve as a catalyst to prompt Dave to investigate the corruption of Kenport, which eventually crumbles, but Lucy pays the ultimate price for this positive change.

**Doris the B-Girl**

Doris the B-girl has no last name. She represents one of the many bar girls who, along with Lucy Chapman, frequents the Retreat. Vince Stone burns Doris, because she is lucky. Vince’s voice is heard off screen: “Keep your hands off; I won’t tell you again.” Dave, who is in the Retreat following Selma’s lead about his wife’s death, turns his head in Vince’s direction. Doris plays a dice game with Vince. “I’m sorry Mr. Stone,” Doris responds. He answers: “When I say don’t pick up the dice so fast, I mean it.” Vince’s large cigar is prominent between the index and middle finger of his right hand [Fig 3-23]. Lang shoots mainly in deep focus, which allows the audience to see the expressions and reactions of people at the bar. Vince and Doris have money in front of them, indicating the financial stakes of the dice game. Doris contritely says, “I’ll roll ‘em again if you like.” “Go ‘head,” he responds and takes a puff from his large cigar.
Obviously, she had a lucky turn of the dice, and Vince blames it on the way she picked them up. Her tone and her words indicate her deferential actions toward Vince; she appears to fear him, yet seems excited to be playing with him. The camera pushes in as Doris picks up the dice, framing the pair tighter, and cutting their hands out of frame. As she shakes the dice, Doris’ her facial expression first registers apprehension —she glances at Vince and licks her lips. The camera moves in tighter, building up tension and a sense of foreboding. The bottom of the frame cuts off the cigar in Vince’s hand. In writing about this scene, both Gunning and McArthur recollect that Vince had a cigarette instead of a cigar, an interesting oversight, and perhaps an almost unconscious effort to make Vince’s menacing misogyny less “big” (In contrast, Lotte Eisner correctly identifies it as a cigar!) Vince’s misogyny is so unsettling that perhaps some male scholars may (unconsciously) desire to shrink Vince’s tool of torture (Gunning 424, Mc Arthur 123, Eisner 333). Doris’ facial expression changes momentarily to a smile as the dice tumble out, implying that the new throw also favors her. Vince jumps off his stool and burns Doris’ hand with his lit cigar [Fig 3-24]. Doris yells out “AAAHHHGGGG,” an inarticulate, animalistic sound that signifies unbearable and unspeakable pain. Debby projects herself into the frame, quickly grabbing Vince’s hand and pulling it away from Doris’ skin. Doris puts her hand to her mouth and runs to a nearby table, in a gesture resembling that of a wounded animal with an injured paw. A woman is victimized, and another woman (Debby) immediately comes to her rescue. The men behind Doris function as “scared rabbits,” a phrase Dave uses earlier to describe the complacent citizenry of Kenport. They watch the brutal act but take no action, which suggests either
a sadistic pleasure in watching Vince penetrate this woman’s skin or a cowardice and selfishness.

Debby, who has the most to fear in helping Doris, takes action. Yet, she disavows this brave action and Dave ignores it as well, almost as if neither she wants to admit it nor acknowledge it. When Debby follows Dave to his hotel room in the next scene, the first question Dave asks her is “How come you sat still when Stone burned that girl?” She answers, “Well, I’ll tell you. The last time I butted in; Vince worked me over.” Narratively, this line anchors Vince’s position as a brute who enjoys hurting women. It post-figures his torture of Lucy and Doris and pre-figures his torture of Debby. Dave’s question, however, as well as Debby’s response, is confusing in light of the fact that she did not sit still. Debby’s arm features prominently in the shot of Doris’ burning. Lang foregrounds Debby’s arm, and it stands out in sharp contrast to the darkness of Vince’s suit. The visual image of Debby’s action disavows the discursive element of the text (her words). The dichotomy of the two (visual/words) provides another example of how ambivalence encompasses the resistance of the rejected woman. Debby does something no one else in the bar will do, yet she will not speak of doing it.

Dave, connecting the two incidents of burning, says to Vince: “Maybe you’re the one who worked over Lucy Chapman.” Cutting to a long shot, Vince nervously twirls his pinky ring, visually registering his fear of Dave. The camera cuts to a shallow focus close-up of Vince, which emphasizes his darting, nervous eyes, as he says, “Take it easy, Sergeant; you don’t know what you’re talking about.” Doris’ voice-off cries of pain accompany his words, bridging the discussion of Lucy’s “working over” with the one Doris has just undergone. The camera slowly pans left, following Vince’s movement as
he approaches Doris. He peels a few bills from his stash and throws them on the table in front of her: “Here baby. This is for you. Get yourself something nice. No hard feelings, huh?” Vince places his hand on Doris’ arm in a mock gesture of a concern; he merely is performing for Dave, as he quickly adds, “That square it Sergeant?” Doris never looks at Vince. She alternates pressing a handkerchief to her wound then to her eyes. By not acknowledging Vince’s “gift,” she passively combats his oppression, yet she mostly relies on Dave to fight her battle. Her position as a B-girl does not give her much choice—she rebels in the small way she can. Dave answers Vince with, “Get out of here while you can still walk.” Dave’s words manifest his power—he can write on the bodies of men—inscribing them with physical impairment and pain. Vince walks out of frame, screen right; Debby’s eyes follow him. Vince is so afraid of Dave he leaves Debby at the bar, as she later relates to Dave, “Like an old beer or something.” Doris’ dark, round wound is featured on screen in the foreground as she examines her hand [Fig 3-25]. This long shot does not draw attention to the wound, as a close-up would. As a rejected woman, Doris has to compete for attention in a busy mise-en-scène. The viewers must have their eyes fixed on Doris to notice her injury. Dave approaches Doris and touches her tenderly on three different parts of her body. First he puts his arm around her back. Then, he lightly takes her fingers in his hand, in a gesture reminiscent of a man about to kiss a woman’s hand (Doris’s wound is located precisely where such a kiss would land) and examines her injury. He gently touches her arm, stressing the travesty of Vince’s earlier similar gesture. He asks her, “Are you going to be alright?” She answers, “Yeah, sure. Thanks, mister.” Gunning notes that Lang added the Doris burning incident to Boehm’s script as “another current of violence in this film which
involves not grasping for air, but burning with fire, exerted primarily by the gangsters and primarily against women” (“Big” 428). This scene registers another rejected woman as a written-upon text, but it also demonstrates that woman’s courage and strength. Doris does not take Vince’s money, and her telling Dave that she is “all right” shows her stoicism and her capacity to survive. The scene also allows for Debby to show her concern and her willingness to help another woman in need. As seen in the example of the telephone operators, and repeated here, Rejected Women in Film Noir, when given the opportunity, support each other often when no one else does.

**Debby Marsh**

Of all written-upon rejected women in The Big Heat, Debby Marsh is writ upon most large. Debby does not begin the film as a rejected woman, but she evolves into one when she becomes physically unattractive as a result Vince’s violent act. Debby is an interesting conglomerate of several female characters. She is sexy and alluring, but not to such an extent that men are completely entranced by her sexuality. Debby, unlike the femme fatale, does not serve as an impetus for the noir hero’s transgressions, nor does he find her sexually irresistible. She is also funny and witty, two traits not usually seen in rejected women. She taunts Vince with “Vince, it’s him!!” accompanied by an elaborate worshipping bow, when Lagana first calls. She tells Lagana she enjoys when he calls because she likes to see Vince “jump.” She later tells Stone that her new perfume attracts mosquitoes and repels men. When Vince says it does not repel him, she says, “That’s the general idea,” and Vince does not realize the insult. She calls out Vince and Larry, in front of Lagana, for the circus animals they are, jumping through ringmaster Lagana’s hoops. She pretends to be such an animal, jumping and yelling: “Hup Vince! Hup Larry!” Eisner points out that Debby’s positive qualities extend beyond
her stunning looks noting she is “outspoken, clear-sighted, and honest, even about herself” (330). Debby’s main assets, her droll intelligence and strength, exist pre and post disfigurement. Her humor though, is passively aggressive, partially aimed at embarrassing Vince, which it does, and at her own self-hatred for settling for Vince. She commits her actions as “writer” (the shooting of Bertha and the scalding of Stone) for the most part, because she possesses inner strength and the sagacity of knowing her own mind, although her Dave-related motivations are obvious, Debby also kills Bertha and mutilates Vince for her own reasons. Like Selma and Gaye in Key Largo, she is able to get things done the other characters, including the noir hero, cannot.

Admittedly, figuring Debby as a rejected woman is somewhat problematic in terms of the amount of attention her character receives. Debby is a memorable character who lacks attention neither inside the diegetic world of the film nor or outside it. The cover of Mc Arthur’s BFI Film Classics book on the film features Debby. In discussing the film’s 1988 reception in re-release in Britain, Mc Arthur notes that film took “on a momentum of its own in popular culture so that The Big Heat came to be remembered, often by people not particularly interested in cinema, as the film in which Lee Marvin throws boiling coffee in Gloria Grahame’s face” (33). It is this most-remembered scene; however, that marks Debby as a Rejected Woman of Film Noir. Debby sees her physical attractiveness as her main asset, confirmed by her constant appraisal of her looks. The violence transforms Debby in terms of the way the patriarchal society sees her. She mutates from desirable to undesirable solely because of the disfigurement of her face. This immediate transformation marks not only her body as text, but also her position in society. Certainly, Debby’s “disfigurement” garners much
more attention than Doris’ or Lucy’s, and Debby’s actions after receiving her injury are the subject of extensive critical discourse. My discussion of Debby focuses on some of the smaller filmic moments involving her before, during and after her disfigurement.

Although I would not define Debby as a femme fatale, the moment in the film when she exhibits femme fatale qualities occurs during the scene when she exits the bar to follow Dave. “Put the Blame on Mame” plays as she exits the bar, tying her to the femme fatale Gilda in the film Gilda, that, perhaps non-coincidentally, stars Glenn Ford. Lang further evokes intertextuality in relation to Gloria Grahame’s previous role of Violet Vick in Capra’s It’s A Wonderful Life. Grahame runs into a long shot of the Kenport city street in the direction of the recently departed Dave. The mise-en-scène resembles an up-scale version of a street in “Pottersville,” the town Bedford Falls would have been had George Bailey not been born, with its array of clubs and bars. Both streets feature a “Bamboo” inspired nightclub, which weaves the films together in addition to Grahame’s presence. This intertextuality suggests that Kenport is the nightmare town come to life under the evil despotism of a greedy, soulless monster. In Kenport, Mr. Potter exists in the Real; he is not embedded only in George’s Imaginary; he exists as Lagana. Perhaps Violet Vick would have grown up to be Debby Marsh, peeling off the sleazy drunks in Pottersville to find a slightly better existence as Vince’s girl. In a post-world-war II America, George Bailey gives way to Dave Bannion, a man who lives by a violent, almost Darwinian hard-edged cynicism that Bailey could never imagine.

After Dave’s rejection at the Marlin hotel (he tells her, “I wouldn’t touch anything of Vince’s Stone’s with a ten foot pole”), Debby returns to Vince’s apartment, confidently bounding into the card room, asking “Everybody winning?” a line dripping with irony in
that “everybody” playing cards at that table will either be dead or in jail by the end of the film. Vince stands up and says, “Deal me out for awhile, huh boys?” Lang cuts to a long shot of Vince walking toward Debby. The camera pans screen left following Debby as she walks with a compact case to the mirror, revealing for the first time, the ominous pot of furiously boiling coffee. Stone sits on the couch; the coffee pot remains between them, center screen [Fig 3-26]. Their brief conversation sinisterly hints at the violence soon to come. The audience already is aware of Vince’s potential for brutality, evidenced in his burning Doris, whose “betrayal” involved merely an incorrect handling of dice. What violence would he visit upon a woman he believes betrayed him by sleeping with his enemy? Debby’s “betrayal” is intensified by her public display. Tierney, the bar owner, the customers, and Larry all witnessed her following Dave out of the bar. Vince faces humiliation, and he must “save face.” In doing so, he destroys Debby’s face. A close-up of Debby has the audience see her mirror image as she puts lipstick on an already perfectly made-up mouth. She tells Vince: “I got a hot flash for you; he [Dave] hates your guts.” Her use of term “hot flash” presages that scalding hot flash she will soon receive. The quick flash of fear in her eyes is also visible in the mirror—she realizes her mistake—How would she know what Dave thinks unless she spent time with him?

As Vince peppers Debby with questions based on the information given to him by Tierney, she responds: “Tierney wouldn’t know a gag until it hit him right in the face” eerily auguring her own fate of being literally hit in the face with the coffee. Vince rises, and the camera follows him as he stands behind Debby. The coffee is featured intermittently behind Stone, and we can see the steam rising from it, signifying its own
brand of “big heat.” “That’s a real pretty kisser,” he says as he strokes the left side of her face. “Isn’t it?” she responds, enhancing the irony of the upcoming scalding of the left side of her face. Debby tells Vince that Dave dropped her off at the Gayety Club, which he knows, based on Larry’s spying, that Debby is lying. A close-up features Vince’s hissing at Debby: “Why you pig! You lying pig!” as the off camera sound of boiling liquid penetrates the mise-en-scène. Stone looks screen right then left, as if looking for the source of the sound. A close-up of the coffee, clearly boiling, follows. Vince’s hand reaches into the frame and yanks the pot out of the frame. Debby screams in pain off screen, which vocally rhymes with Doris’s earlier non-lingual enunciations.

The coffee pot shot visually rhymes with the opening shot of the film. A weapon (gun/boiling coffee) appears in close-up, alone on the screen. A hand reaches in, takes the weapon, followed by a sound (gunshot/scream) indicating the act of violence as a scene of writing, the opening act of violence is supposed to release “the big heat,” in that Tom Duncan penned the suicide letter hoping to end Lagana’s stranglehold on the city. In a macabre sort of irony, this rhyming shot, in which literal “big heat”—the boiling coffee—scalds Debby’s face, eventually leads to Debby’s shooting Bertha, which releases “the big heat” of Tom’s confession. Through this series of visual rhymes and parallel construction of visual aspects of these two scenes, the script of Tom’s letter is transferred, and can be seen and read, on Debby’s face. In other words, the coffee writes Tom’s confession on Debby’s face.

When she reveals her scarred and deformed face to Vince at the end of the film, we see in it the ugliness and deformity visited on Kenport by Lagana [Fig 3-27]. In another way, Doris’ hand, Lucy’s burned body, Katie’s burned body, and perhaps even
Selma’s limp serve as written-upon texts that tell the story of Kenport and its deformation. Although her limp is not caused by Lagana’s violence, Selma embodies the disabling effect on the mobility of the city under Lagana’s rule. When Debby shoots Bertha, Lang presents this act of violence as an inversion to the Tom suicide/Debby scalding scenes. Lang does not show the gun in Debby’s hand, but shows Bertha’s body being penetrated by the bullets and falling to the ground, on the spot, not coincidentally, where her husband earlier took his life. Debby, off camera, throws the gun into the frame. Correspondingly, when Debbie throws scalding coffee in Vince’s face, Lang shoots the results of the action---we see the coffee going into Vince’s face and his reaction. A reverse shot of Debby shows her holding the weapon, the coffee pot. She tells Stone, “It’ll burn a long time Vince” before she pitches this weapon from her hands as well. Unlike Bertha’s shooting, in which we only see the gun land center screen, we see Debby’s throwing the pot aside and we hear, but do not see, it crashing to the ground. Lang uses visual inversions in filming these two sets of scenes. In Tom suicide’s and Debby’s scalding, he puts the writing utensils (gun/coffee) on camera. In Bertha’s murder and Vince’s scalding he films the written-upon text (Bertha shot/Vince scalded). This inversion suggests a healing or a suturing. The emotional and physical wounds inflicted upon Dave (Tom’s suicide leads to his wife’s death) and Debby are healed or closed by Bertha’s death and Vince’s maiming. Debby, as writer (righter) of wrongs, saves the city and eases Dave’s emotional pain, yet she pays the ultimate price. And, like Selma Parker, her reward for this sacrifice is under-valued. She spends her last minutes alive listening to Dave talk about his family. Even in her last minutes,
Debby still helps Dave, allowing him to talk about his wife and daughter in a therapeutic way that strengthens him. As Debby grows weaker, Dave grows stronger.

**Last Shot of *The Big Heat***

Lang ends both his Film Noirs in an enigmatic way that allows for more than one possible interpretation and certainly no “right answer” seems readily available in the final determination of the women of *The Blue Gardenia* or *The Big Heat*. In *The Blue Gardenia*, final moments are given to the men, and the last line, “Oh, brother!” puts a metaphorical exclamation point on the text, signifying the dominance of male power, despite female strategies of resistance. The ending of *The Big Heat* is even more ambivalent; its last visual image is remarkably multivalent, yet, its ultimate message confirms the patriarchal power structure as well. Why does this film create sympathetic female characters only to destroy (or in the case of Selma Parker, profoundly disappoint) them? As written-upon texts, do rejected women have any agency, or practice resistance to power paradigms? The answers to these questions are both yes and no, and this is what makes the text so rich and complicated. It provides no easy solutions. And, this complexity carries into the last image of the film. The last scene opens with a medium shot of Dave at his desk. He asks his assistant: “How ‘bout some coffee Hugo?” “Coming right up Sarge,” Hugo responds, as he walks out of the frame holding an array of pencils between his fingers like an anachronistic Freddy Krueger. Dave takes his “Sgt. Bannion” sign out of his desk drawer and places it on the desk, providing a visual reinforcement of Hugo’s “Sarge” comment. Dave receives a call about a “hit and run over on South Street.” He writes down the location, thus ending the film, as it began, with a scene of writing tied to violence. As he heads to the door with his partner, Burke, he says, “Keep the coffee hot Hugo,” while walking past a large poster
than reads “Give Blood Now.” The words “The End” superimpose the shot. The screen fades to black just as Dave exits the frame, leaving Hugo, who answers, “OK, sir,” standing in the margin of the frame with a cup of hot coffee in one hand and the pencils protruding, claw-like, in his other hand [Fig 3-28].

Walter Metz, whose essay “Keep the Coffee Hot, Hugo” reads the film a cautionary tale about the dangers of nuclear weapons, writes:

If anyone should know the ghastly effects of “coffee” (i.e., atomic radiation), it should be Bannion: it vaporized his wife and it brutally scarred the face of Debbie, the only other woman in the film about whom he cared. Given the way Glenn Ford delivers the line ["Keep the coffee hot, Hugo"]—with a sort of disgusted contempt—Bannion could be read as delivering an ironic commentary on the drama we have just watched. . . . To again reinforce the human effects of this nuclear warfare, the film ends on a written rebus. The sign "Give Blood Now" produces the grimmest reminder that the cost[s] of the projected war . . . are always human: the sign is the film’s way of reminding us that humans bleed blood, not coffee” (61-62).

The “Give Blood Now” sign reminds us of the terrible price paid, in women’s blood, for the restoration of Kenport. It also references an earlier “give blood” sign, seen inside the phone booth Tierney uses to call Lagana to alert him to Dave’s visit to the Retreat in the wake of Lucy’s murder. The “Give Blood Now” sign also reminds us that Kenport exists as a diseased and clogged body due to Lagana’s corruption, which is corporealized by Atkins, Selma’s corpulent boss. The meaning of the sign is more profound, however, because as Metz points out, people bleed blood, not coffee. The spilling of coffee releases the big heat in a way that only is made possible through the spilling of blood.

Metz’s reading of Dave’s tone as “disgusted contempt,” in the line of dialogue differs from my own significantly. I hear optimism and contentedness in Dave’s tone, which reflects his pleasure at being back at work. These different readings may be attributed to Glenn Ford’s fine acting, in that he delivers two antipodal significations in
one line, or to the film’s complexity, or to critical ears (mine and Metz’s) being attuned to hear what we want, so that we end up finding what we went looking to find in the text, what David Bordwell calls “recalcitrant data” (30). Metz calls the “Give Blood Now” sign a visual rebus, but he does not go one step further to note that Dave’s last words serve as an aural rebus as well. On a narrative level, Dave’s words represent a return to normalcy. Dave is back at his job as a sergeant, and like any ordinary day, Dave plans to have a cup of coffee. His plans are interrupted by the need to investigate a crime, and his asking Hugo to “keep the coffee hot” makes us understand that Dave’s work comes first. He will have coffee when he returns, and Hugo’s job is to make sure the coffee is still hot (enjoyable) when Dave returns to the station. Reading the mise-en-scène, however, the objects in Hugo’s hands tell a different story. Each hand holds an instrument of writing, hot coffee, the specific instrument of writing used on Debby, in the right hand, and pencils, a common tool of writing, in the left. The items in both of Hugo’s hands visually reinforce the pain and damage caused by writing on women’s bodies in this film. Hugo stands in the margin of the frame, so his pencils and coffee do not automatically draw the viewer’s eye; for those viewers who do notice them, however, they hang in the air after the screen goes black. So too, do Dave’s final words.

Can a reading The Big Heat, both in terms of its formal and discursive elements, as an example of empowerment of its rejected women be “undone” in the final frame? Is this final shot, with Hugo’s writing instruments hovering in the margin, a signal that the resistance employed the rejected women --Lucy’s plan to go to the newspapers, Doris’ refusal to acknowledge Vince’s apology or take his money despite his power to hurt her again, and Debby’s actions as writer --ultimately do nothing to better their own lives? I
would argue, yes, because Dave's mentioning “hot” and “coffee” so casually and cheerfully after witnessing its baleful effects on Debby, invokes a patriarchal privilege and subjugation of women that hovers throughout the film. Gunning asks his readers: “Can you drink it [coffee] after you watch this film?” (433). Apparently, Dave can and does. “Keep the coffee hot, Hugo” not only signifies Dave's ascension to power as the enforcer of law and order but also reminds the audience of the price paid for his ascension – the written-upon bodies of the rejected women in this text.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character as written upon text</th>
<th>Character who writes on her body</th>
<th>Writing Instrument</th>
<th>Type of bodily injury as writing</th>
<th>Does (s)he also function as a writer on other bodies?</th>
<th>Is Lagana indirectly responsible for injury?</th>
<th>Is Dave indirectly responsibl e for injury?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lucy Chapman</td>
<td>Vince</td>
<td>Cigarette</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Katie Dave</td>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>Bomb</td>
<td>Burns – Car bomb and fire</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Limited mobility of leg</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>Vince</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Vince</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Debby</td>
<td>Gun</td>
<td>Penetration (bullet)</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Character who writes on his body</td>
<td>Writing Instrument</td>
<td>Type of bodily writing</td>
<td>Does (s)he also function as a writer?</td>
<td>Is Lagana indirectly responsible for injury?</td>
<td>Is Dave indirectly responsible for injury?</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Himself</td>
<td>Gun</td>
<td>Penetration (bullet)</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Atkins</td>
<td>Himself</td>
<td>Soda</td>
<td>Obesity</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tierney</td>
<td>Himself</td>
<td>Bar Snacks</td>
<td>Obesity</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Larry Gordon</td>
<td>Vince</td>
<td>Gun</td>
<td>Penetration (bullet)</td>
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<td>NONE</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3-1. Effie’s gesture towardIVA, Brigid and/or Sam

Figure 3-2. Crystal staring into space
Figure 3-3. Crystal "rejected" by Casey

Figure 3-4. Telephone Operators
Figure 3-5. Rose on telephone

Figure 3-6. Crystal on telephone/Sally on couch -- Deep Focus
Figure 3-7. Sally bounds off couch - wire visible

Figure 3-8. Norah’s entanglement with the wire
Figure 3-9. Immobility: line of switchboard operators including Sally

Figure 3-10. Norah unable to entangle herself from man at elevator
Figure 3-11. *Mise-en-scène* – Norah’s, Crystal’s and Sally’s telephone

Figure 3-12. Norah’s "POV" of Rose and Prebble’s fight
Figure 3-13. Norah hits Crystal’s “Sacroiliac”

Figure 3-14. Sally’s bare legs
Figure 3-15. Intimacy in bathroom: Sally's bare arm in mirror and Norah at sink

Figure 3-16. *Mise-en-scène:* Kitchen scene opening shot: Mom, Mom and Baby
Figure 3-17. Crystal’s loving caress of Norah

Figure 3-18. Last shot of Crystal, Sally and Norah - A man blocks their exit; Casey in the background
Figure 3-19. Casey tossing his little black book to Sleepy

Figure 3-20. Overlap Dissolve from Lucy’s name to “The Retreat.”
Figure 3-21. First shot of Lucy - Dave [screen left] approaches Lucy at the bar

Figure 3-22. Lucy in overlap dissolve joins Bertha and Dave
Figure 3-23. *Mise-en-scène* at the Retreat prior to public burning of Doris’ hand

Figure 3-24. Vince burns Doris’ hand; Debby’s arm reaches into the frame
Figure 3-25. Doris' burned hand. Deep-focus encourages eye to focus anywhere

Figure 3-26. *Mise-en-scène*: boiling coffee between Debby and Vince
Figure 3-27. Debby's face as written-upon text

Figure 3-28. Last shot of the film- Note items in Hugo's hands
CHAPTER 4
THE OPTIC WHITENESS OF FILM NOIR AND REJECTED “WOMEN” OF FILM NOIR

The world brightens as it darkens.

—W.E.B. Du Bois

Our white is so white you can pain a chunka coal and you’d have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn’t white clear through

—Lucius Brockaway, from Ralph Elision’s The Invisible Man

**Mama Ochobee as the Gaze in the Picture**

In an early scene in *Key Largo,* as Nora and Frank secure the lines of a boat in preparation for a hurricane, Charlie Wenoka and his family arrive at the Temple’s dock. One of the occupants of the boat includes the family’s matriarch, Mama Ochobee. Nora tells Frank, “Every Indian around here is a descendant of Mama Ochobee. She admits to being 108, but she has a son 112 so we suspect Mama lies about her age.” Huston shoots a number of close-ups of Mama Ochobee. In one, she smokes a cigarette (given to her by Frank) in which her face, creased and lined, reads like a map of her life [Fig 4-1]. Her eyes stare focused at an undetermined spot, and in those eyes, one reads pain and oppression. The close-up of Mama Ochobee functions like the Lacanian gaze. As the stain in the picture, she represents an encounter with the Real of racism and oppression. This close-up encourages the audience to behold this woman and consider the life experiences that went into creating that extraordinary face. The close-up also reinforces the pain and misfortune endured by the Wenoka family. Huston shoots their small rowboats approaching the dock from under the ropes used to tie the expensive watercraft of the white people [Fig 4-2]. A young man bails water, depicting the inadequacy of their boats, which strikingly contrasts with the Temple’s boat and Rocco’s

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1 See Chapter Two for a summary of this film.
opulent yacht. The poverty displayed by the Wenoka family becomes more conspicuous because Nora has just told Frank that Charlie is the descendant of a Seminole prince, yet now, "He sells sea shells at the sea shore" suggesting that his once royal family now relies on white tourists for their meager income. In these few shots, Huston suggests the colonization and oppression of Native Americans by European settlers, a theme he will thread throughout the film, culminating in the wrongful shooting deaths of the Osceola brothers, Tom and Johnny.

If the Seminoles represent one way the United States has gone wrong through its mistreatment of indigenous people, Rocco represents the worst of America’s immigrants – he is a ruthless bully, a man who will step on anyone in his quest for wealth. Rocco, as an Italian immigrant, also functions as marginalized “Other” if we configure the white center as Northern Europe. Rocco’s “Otherness” is less marginalizing that the Wenokas, although he does not hesitate to complain about his position as Other. He whines about being tossed out of the country as an “undesirable alien,” a slight he smarts over, yet he has no empathy for the suffering of others, as judged by his abominable treatment of the Native Americans in this film. The showdown of Immigrant versus Native American is played out most acutely in the scene where Rocco tells Sheriff Wade that the Osceola brothers murdered Sawyer, which eventually leads to the Osceola brothers’ deaths. The film shows how prejudice circulates: Sheriff Wade takes the word of another white man (who is a stranger to him) and automatically assumes the Native Americans are guilty.

Huston’s film is rare among Film Noirs in its including both in formal prominence (the close-ups of Mama Ochobee) and discursive elements (the sub-plot of the Osceola
brothers) people other than Caucasians. Films of the classic Noir cycle are, in many ways, films about white people doing dark things in dark places. Manthia Diawara observes that in Film Noir: “Women, bad guys, and detectives are considered ‘black’” because “they occupy indeterminate and monstrous spaces such as whiteness traditionally reserves for blackness in our culture” (262). Eric Lott echoes Diawara’s thesis in his essay “The Whiteness of Film Noir,” and concludes that Film Noir uses black people almost as an objective correlative for what is bad or immoral: “film noir’s relentless cinematography of chiaroscuro and moral focus on the rotten souls of white folks . . . constantly though obliquely invoked the racial dimension of this figural play of light against dark” (543). In Film Noir, the “black” of the “black and white” film is taken up by the black deeds of white people, which marginalizes people of color [here I am stretching a bit in including all non-whites as “black,” but I think the point applies in relation to how Film Noir utilizes non-whites] in two ways: First, black is associated with evil, and second, white bodies usurp both colors, leaving non-whites out of the picture for the most part, or reducing non-whites to marginal roles. In this chapter, I will analyze three aspects of how non-white bodies function in Film Noir. First, non-white bodies work to make Film Noir “more white.” Second, non-white women are practically non-existent in Film Noir almost as if the film cycle erases their existence. Third, non-white men can function as Rejected “Women” in Film Noir through their marginalization and feminization. I also address the problem of comparing non-white men to white women.

The Optic Whiteness of Film Noir

In Ralph Ellison’s novel, The Invisible Man, the eponymous hero spends a short time working at the Liberty Paint Factory after he is expelled unjustly from college. At Liberty Paints, he learns the secret to making the company’s “Optic White” paint, which
his boss Mr. Kimbro describes as being “as white as George Washington’s Sunday-go-to-meetin’ wig. . . . the purest white that can be found” (152). In order to make the paint as white as possible, ten drops of “dead black” liquid must be added to each can of paint; by adding these few drops of black ink to “Optic White,” the paint becomes whiter (152). Ellison’s choice to include the word “optic” into the paint’s name conjures up the associations of that word with the eye and ways of seeing. We use an optical device to better see. Optic also refers biologically to the function of seeing—the eye operates with the help of the optic nerve. Ellison’s Optic White paint suggests that in his world, the way of seeing is dominated by whiteness. The notion that a few drops of black help to make the paint “more white” speaks to the ways white colonizers have used or exploited non-whites to further their own cultural projects as well as increase their colonial wealth. Roland Barthes explores this idea in *Mythologies*, in which he deconstructs the image of a black man saluting the French flag and reads it as a reinforcement of French’s colonizing influence. In that cover of *Paris-Match*, the picture of the black soldier works to make the magazine more white (116-177). Ellison’s ironic naming the paint company “Liberty” further reinforces the oppression that goes into the making of “Optic White” paint. Using Optic White paint as an analogy for Film Noir, we can see the way this cycle of films feature a few non-white characters, whose sparse appearance in Film Noir function like the ten drops of “black” liquid that are added to each can of Optic White paint. Their appearance in Film Noir only serves to make it more white. The Film Noir cycle “whitens” itself through its inclusion of a very small group of non-white people.

To use another analogy from the novel, like Ellison’s Lucius Brockaway, the African-American worker kept in “basement number two” of the Liberty Paint Factory,
non-white people seem to exist in the basement of Film Noir, emerging only long enough to reinforce the whiteness of the society they inhabit. This phenomenon is seen particularly in the attempt to portray the noir hero as the hip “White Negro,” as discussed by James Naremore, Jans Wager and Philip Wegner. The white noir character co-opts black culture to further establish his “hipness.” Film Noir often has scenes of white noir heroes frequenting African American night clubs, such as Jeff Markham’s visiting Kathie Moffat’s ex-maid Eunice in a New York City jazz club (Out of the Past, Jacques Tourneur, 1947), and Mike Hammer’s hanging out at the Pigalle club after Nick’s murder (Kiss Me Deadly). Ellison’s “Optic White” paint serves as a metaphor for the white-washing of American culture as seen in Film Noir, where a few “drops” of black bodies get lost in the sea of white bodies, which work to make the American culture portrayed in Film Noir more white.

Manthia Diawara and Eric Lott argue that African Americans in Film Noir make white people black by associating African American characters with crimes committed by white characters. This argument is the inverse of mine: I argue that Film Noir makes black people white; whereas they believe that Film Noir makes white people black. What we all agree on, however, is that Film Noir’s color-play oppresses non-white characters. Diawara sees that in classic Film Noir, “blackness is a fall from whiteness” (263). Film Noirs made by black people, or as Diawara calls them in the title of his essay “Noir by Noirs,” correct these hurtful and negative associations of black with evil and crime by turning these films through their own control as makers into something positive—a form of film that shows how Western society oppresses black people and renders them invisible: “black people [are] trapped in the darkness of white captivity,
and the light shed on them is meant to render them visible, not white. . . . In a broader sense, black *film noir* is a light (as in *daylight*) cast on black people” (263). Diawara’s registering black people of Film Noir as invisible echoes my own thesis that rejected woman characters are invisible. This invisibility is a common trait which ties these two character types together and is, I will argue, conflated in the way Film Noir turns black and non-white male characters into Rejected “Woman” type characters in Film Noir.

Lott argues that “Film Noir is replete with characters of color who populate and signify the shadows of white American life in the 1940s. . . . ‘Black film’ is the refuge of whiteness” (545-546). In other words, Lott seems to say that Film Noir (“Black Film”) should be called Film Blanc (“White Film”) because they are films about white people. Richard Dyer discusses how often white people do not view films as being about white people when only white people populate the screen:

> if invisibility of whiteness colonises the definition of other norms—class, gender, heterosexuality, nationality and so on— it also masks whiteness as itself a category. . . . whiteness secures white power by making it hard, especially for white people and their media, to ‘see’ whiteness. This, of course, also makes it hard to analyse. It is the way that black people are marked as black (are not just ‘people’) in representation that has made it relatively easy to analyze their representation, whereas white people—not there as a category and everywhere everything as a fact—are difficult, if not impossible, to analyse *qua* white. (46)

Film Noir’s co-opting of people of color into these “white” films works as a colonization process. These Othered people work in order to enrich the dominant structure. The one Film Noir that does *not* seem to make this move is *Key Largo*. The plot of the film does not turn upon the inclusion of the Tom and Johnny Osceola sub-plot or the trek of the Seminoles to Key Largo during the hurricane. Huston’s inclusion of these scenes involving the Native Americans demonstrates the negative effects of post-colonialism. The film’s white villain mistreats the Seminoles by denying them entrance
into the hotel. Huston features a shot of them huddled, cold, wet, and frightened on the porch metaphorically represents the relationship between the white immigrants and the indigenous peoples that pervades United States history. The film’s inclusion of the scene in which the sheriff automatically takes the word of a white stranger that the Osceola brothers murdered Sawyer, when he, like Mr. Temple, has known the Osceola brothers their entire lives and knows they are not violent, demonstrates the racist society at work. The film presents this subplot in a way that laments racism and shows the violence it visits on non-white people. Still, the film can be read to suggest some inculcating of the racist society it criticizes. The film holds Mr. Temple up as a “great white father” figure. When Nora tells the Osceola brothers that Mr. Temple thinks they should give themselves up, Tom answers: “What Mr. Temple say, we do. Him good friend to Indian.” Norah then tells Frank, “They really trust Dad Temple; all the Indians. As far as they’re concerned he’s the United States of America.” During the scenes involving the Seminoles, the background music plays a stereotypical Native American tribal type of music, which appears patronizing and condescending.

The conflation of Mr. Temple and the “United States” also implies an acceptance of their colonized condition that ultimately proves fatal to them. Unlike other Film Noirs, the non-white people in Key Largo do not serve to make the white Noir hero cooler. They exist on some part to show the compassion of Mr. Temple. Nevertheless, the film establishes Mr. Temple’s compassionate nature even without the scenes involving the Osceola brothers. He shows concern for Gaye when he believes Curly hurts her, he shows love and sorrow in relation to his dead son, and he is kind to Frank. Overall, the film shows the Native Americans in a way does not make them appear as stereotypical
one-dimensional characters, nor do they exist solely to bolster the image of whites. Another way, formally, that Huston encourages the audience to identify with these characters is through the assignment of camera time and close-up shots. Robert Stam and Louise Spence argue that affording close-ups and camera time to characters allows the audience to identify with them. They discuss how Hollywood Westerns often depict “[filmic encounters of whites and Indians [which] involve images of encirclement,” such as the “besieged wagon train or fort” that become the “focus of our sympathy.” “The spectator,” they argue, “is sutured into a colonialist perspective” (12). For example, Anthony Mann’s Winchester ’73 features a scene in which the white cast is surrounded by a hostile Native American presence. Stam and Spence also explain how The Battle of Algiers (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966) undermines this standard paradigm by suturing the spectator into the position of the Algerians, and making the French the “Others” of the film through the use of close-ups, point of view, and camera time. The close-ups of Mama Ochobee, and the medium shots of the Osceola brothers [Fig 4-3], develop audience sympathies with these characters.

In contrast to Key Largo, most Film Noirs use non-white people as “drops” of color. Dan Flory believes contemporary black filmmakers are producing “Black Noirs,” films based on classic Film Noirs. The main difference among the approaches of Flory, Lott and Diawara is that Flory sees something positive in the classic Film Noir, namely the way it uses subversive tactics to highlight the experience of the marginalized film noir hero. Where Diawara and Lott see darkness in the classic Film Noir cycle, Flory sees a potential positive influence in terms of subverting white power structures in place. Flory contends that contemporary African American filmmakers work in relation to
the tradition of Film Noir and how it deals with heroes who feel marginalized and trapped by society. They take these feelings of entrapment and marginalization to produce “Black noir”—films in which the African American heroes experience marginalization due to race tensions and prejudice. Classic Noir has a subversive capacity because “whether explicitly or inexplicitly [classic Film Noir] offers up to viewers knowledge and perspectives meant to change how they believe, think, perceive and act morally” (Flory 24). Rather than letting Fanon’s notion of “the white gaze” “[d]etermine dominant moral perceptions, “Flory is concerned with the “racial fantasyland (quoting Charles W. Mills) that undergirds white dominance and social advantage,” which generates from “an epistemology of ignorance that typically prevents whites from perceiving reality and effects of their own beliefs concerning racial difference” (11). These African-American male scholars, each in his own way, are looking for ways to understand how African-Americans function in both the classic Film Noir cycle and presently, in Neo Noirs made by African American filmmakers.

Their different positions on how power circulates in these texts in relation to marginality parallel the power-related issues that plague the Rejected Woman in Film Noir: namely her invisibility, her lack of mobility and agency, and use of her body as text. If a few “drops” of black bodies make Film Noir more white, a few drops of estrogen seems to work to make Film Noir more male. What happens when Film Noir conflates these drops? When, for example, Film Noir attempts to oppress male non-white bodies by feminizing them? Quite often, non-white men end up occupying the same position as
the Rejected Woman of Film Noir. The film renders him invisible\(^2\) (formally and discursively) despite his invaluable contributions to the noir hero, and immobile. His position as written-upon text marks the passive status the “white” patriarchy wishes to place upon him.

**Othered Persons in Film Noir**

Many scholars have discussed scenes involving non-white actors in Film Noir. For example, Lott’s close reading of *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder 1944) proves that non-white characters function as reminders of Neff’s criminal activities: “Secluded after hours in the darkened Pacific All-Risk Insurance Company office building tended almost wholly by black janitors and custodians, Neff now inhabits the racial space *Double Indemnity* constantly links with his dark deeds” (546). Lott argues that from references to the “colored woman” who never appears on screen who cleans his apartment (where he first hatches the plot to murder Mr. Dietrichsen), to the use of Charlie as an alibi, the film fetters African American characters to Neff’s crimes (549, 547). Lott further illustrates this point using a scene from *In A Lonely Place* (Nicholas Ray 1950): “The anonymous black figure [the florist Dix Steele visits the morning after Mildred’s murder] signifies Steele’s dark past relationships with women, whom we are told he has beaten and otherwise abused; Steele atones by sending his black double with white (and whitening) flowers” (555). In addition, Naremore discusses how the white male characters, Jeff Markham (*Out of The Past*) and Mike Hammer (*Kiss Me Deadly*) are

\(^2\) James Naremore picks up on this point as well: “The ordinary run of films noirs in the 1940s make black people almost invisible, like the briefly glimpsed figures who carry Walter Neff’s bags or wash his car in *Double Indemnity*” (239-40).
infused with coolness and hipness by visiting nightclubs in which all the patrons are African-American:

blacks extras or bit players also give the protagonist an aura of ‘cool,’ so that he resembles what Norman Mailer once described as the ‘White Negro.’ This effect is especially apparent in ... Kiss Me Deadly... when we first meet Hammer, he is listening to Nat King Cole on the radio; later, we discover that he is a regular customer at an all-black jazz club, where his friendship with a black singer (Madi Comfort) and a black bartender (Art Loggins) helps to indicate his essential hipness. (241)

Mailer’s imaging of a primitive and pleasure-centered “Negro” buys into culture stereotypes that blacks are closer to their bodies than whites [a prejudice also applied to woman]. Although Mailer’s concept of the White Negro celebrates the body, it also produces an “existential” intellectualism made available only to the white Negro. The White Negro then, usurps whatever physical enjoyment he believes African-American men have access to which the white Caucasian is denied. The white Negro enters into a union with black hipster culture, with as Mailer notes, “marijuana” serves “as the wedding ring” and to which the Negro brings his “cultural dowry” (4). All the while, the White Negro keeps his “crazy man” intellectual coolness (4). This marriage seems rather parasitic with blacks giving a cultural dowry of “hipness” and access to imagined sensual pleasures and getting nothing in return. It mimics the parasitic relationship of most colonial arrangements.

Jans Wager notes that Out of the Past’s jazz sequence opens “with a phallic flourish, a close-up of a black horn player hitting a raucous high note before moving into a dance groove” (“Jazz” 223). This “phallic flourish,” which often is denied non-white male characters in Film Noir, also appears in an early scene in Kiss Me Deadly.3 Aldrich

3 See Chapter Five for a summary of this film.
opens a long take with an unusual shot from behind a punching bag. An African American man featured in medium-shot punches the bag. His eyes focus solely on the bag, indicating the intense concentration the sweet science demands [Fig 4-4]. This dramatic opening of an African American man operating an instrument essential to his vocation is similar to the shot in *Out of the Past* in which Tourneur features an African American trumpeter in medium close-up. Both Aldrich’s and Tourneur’s featuring of African American males in medium close ups puts them center stage, if only for a brief moment. This boxer in *Kiss Me Deadly*, like the trumpeter, remains unnamed.

Both men are used as “establishing shots” to signify the Noir hero has entered the space of a nightclub/boxing gym to do his job, yet at the same time, these scenes increase both men’s hipness factor through the addition of African Americans. Aldrich pictures the boxer in front of a wall of newspaper stories about boxers—these stories promote boxers the same way the appearance of the boxer promotes the hipness or coolness of the film. During this same shot, a young African American man wearing a zoot suit, which has its own significant cultural code, walks in front of the camera, and the camera follows him, with his back to the screen, as he heads toward a flight of stairs. As the man goes down the stairs, he passes Mike heading up them. The camera picks up Mike, and the shot continues tracking Mike through the gym. He passes the man hitting the punching bag (who we now see is coached by a white trainer) and

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4 Mexican and African-American men wore zoot suits as a form of protest in defiance of the War Production Board’s rationing of cloth. The wearing of zoot suits often made these men targets of violence. In 1943 “zoot suit riots” erupted in several American cities because of “militant disgust with unbending American racism” (Lott 550). In the mid forties, in an effort to ban these suits, the Los Angeles City Counsel made wearing one a misdemeanor, “facilitating the easy arrest of Mexicans and blacks” (Lott 551). Although the zoot suit controversy was over ten years old at the time *Kiss Me Deadly* was made, this suit’s cultural history and currency suggests that the film may subtly be referring to this issue and Los Angeles’ racist past.
heads over to his friend, Eddie, a boxing promoter. The tracking shot establishes that this gym is not segregated, as we see both black and white boxers. Mike’s friend Eddie, an older African American man, has a large phallic-looking cigar in his mouth, and he talks to Mike about his newest prospect “Kid Nino” in feminine terms. He asks Mike: “Isn’t he pretty? Doesn’t he move pretty?” and a few minutes later, “Isn’t he beautiful? Isn’t he lovely?” We never see “Kid Nino” (who has an Italian name) indicating the film plays with the idea of a black man “owning” a white man. The film probably is aware of the Freudian-type joke about the large cigar in Eddie’s mouth. The obviousness of the cigar trope is made apparent when Eddie’s completely “erect” cigar goes immediately limp in his mouth when Mike asks him if he ever knew a fighter named Lee Kowalsky. Mike learns two “cannons” who work for the gangster Carl Evello visited Eddie, and they him an offer that Mike cannot top: “They said they’d let me breathe.”

Although this boxing club scene works mostly to prove Mike is a cool hipster, it does exhibit subtle clues that suggest resistance, such as the zoot suit, the black man owning a white man, and Eddie’s appropriation of the masculine power through his phallic cigar. In addition, we can read Nick’s car as another possible site of resistance, one that borrows on a similar trope of car as sign of oppression in an earlier film, William Wyler’s proto-Noir film *The Letter* (1940). Aldrich composes a shot in which Nick appears with his own broken down jalopy and Mike’s new sports car [Fig 4-5]. This shot highlights the schism that often occurs in an oppressive culture. A new expensive sports car symbolizes the rich white man while an old junk heap jalopy symbolizes the non-white, who has less access to economic prosperity.
This shot is reminiscent of *The Letter* in which Ong Chi Seng drives away in his jalopy among the fancy cars of the rich white men he works for. Wyler’s film highlights the social injustice and inequality in the distribution of wealth. At first, we see the large expensive cars of the white lawyers [Fig 4-6]. We hear a motor start, and we assume that Ong owns one of these cars. We then see Ong driving out from among these large cars in his small jalopy [Fig 4-7]. This series of shots occurs immediately after Ong has informed his boss, Howard Joyce, that he will receive $2,000, or a 20% cut of the $10,000 blackmail money that Ong and his friends squeezed out of Leslie Crosbie in order to keep her murderous secret—she killed her lover because he left her for an Asian woman. Ong’s successful blackmail attempt represents his successful resistance against the racial oppression suffered by non-whites in his city (Singapore). His car symbolizes that oppression as it does for Nick’s in *Kiss Me Deadly*. Sen Yung’s measured, quiet performance in which he plays the subservient “Oriental” all the while seething, just below the surface with an intense anger, signifies his outrage over the colonization of Singapore and the way the law bends to protect whites. The film is ambivalent about Ong; he is a loathsome blackmailer, yet it also encourages the audience to enjoy his private glee of getting the better of the white people who have colonized Singapore and who, literally get away with murder. By showing Ong driving his dilapidated car from among the fancy ones, Wyler visually demonstrates why Ong’s motives are justified.

By juxtaposing Nick between the two vehicles, one deficient, one exquisite, Aldrich too, visually reinforces the dichotomy of rich/privileged white vs. poor/marginalized “Other.” Unlike Ong, who outsmarts and rebels against colonization,
Nick colludes with the dominant power structure and even loses his life in his quest to help Mike. Nick dies in part because he wants to be like Mike, and this includes having a car like Mike. The film implies that non-whites who buy into the white power structure will face death and defeat, a message quite different from Wyler’s proto-noir film, in which beating the white man at his own game is a thrilling and winning proposition. On the other hand, Nick’s bravery and sacrifice in attempting to get information for Mike aligns him with the Rejected Women of Film Noir. Certainly, the film solidly illustrates Nick’s immobility in a society that oppresses him by having his death serve as the ultimate form of immobility—he gets pinned under a car. He dies while working at his unglamorous job as car mechanic. Yet, Nick differs from the rejected woman prototype in that self-sacrifice does not motivate him. While Nick, like the rejected woman desires the noir hero (see my argument below), Nick, unlike the female rejected woman character, also wants to be Mike and possess what Mike has (a glamorous life and an expensive car).

**Othered Women In Film Noir**

Scholars are mixed on whether or not the subjugated position of women and African American men warrants a comparison between the two. Lott talks about the “overlapping series of gender and racial feelings” that exist in Film Noir. But he argues that more attention needs to be paid to race (544). In contrast, E. Ann Kaplan sees a parallel between the experiences of white women and black men: “While the specificity of [the white man’s] fears of women, homosexuals and people of colour are different, all three groups share a similarity as marginalised by the white centre” (“Intro” 9). Kaplan also contends that mainstream films tend “to use a similar structure in relation to kinds of difference. That is, Hollywood puts different kinds of difference into the same position
vis-à-vis the imaginary white center” (9). In other words, Kaplan believes “difference” unites people under oppression, and the “white” center does not automatically include all white people, and that oppression occurs even in groups that oppress others, such as white men oppressing white women. Hazel Carby will counter this argument (see below) by asserting that some white women oppress people of color, so for Carby the distinction of white center (men) and white women (margin) is unrelated to the situation of minorities. Diawara believes that formalist criticism used by feminism and Marxism may be helpful in understanding how Film Noir portrays African Americans: “From a formalist perspective, a film is noir if it puts into play light and dark in order to excite a people who become ‘black’ because of their ‘shady’ moral behaviors. Through its focus of familiar devices, feminist criticism [and Marxist criticism] exposes film noir’s attempt to paint white women ‘black’ in order to limit or control their independent agency, their self-fashioning” (262). Diawara has the model of the femme fatale in mind with his analogy. She is “black,” because she is evil.

Using Diawara’s idea as a starting point, I argue that Film Noir not only paints white woman black through their depiction of evil, but also through their invisibility — black on black cannot be seen, and is therefore, invisible. If Film Noir depicts white women as black, it also paints non-white men black by putting them in the position of the feminine in general, and at times, specifically, in the position of the (white) Rejected Woman in Film Noir. Of course, as Carby points out, this alignment leaves non-white women entirely out of the picture, which is problematic. She urges the white woman to “listen!” to her argument, yet she does not instruct black men to do the same. Scholars Diawara, Flory, and Lott focus their concern on the ways race plays out in relation to
black men in Film Noir. Rarely do they mention black women. What these male scholars are finding, albeit in slightly different ways, (Diawara does not see the subversive quality of Film Noir that Flory does) is that classic Film Noir provides motivation and inspiration for African American male filmmakers to tell stories about the African American (mainly urban) male experience. In putting forth the argument that African American men (along with other non-white males) assume the position of the white Rejected Woman in Film Noir, I am, in essence, repeating this same aporia in relation to non-white women. Like Kaplan, however, I do see similarities between white women and Othered males, because Film Noir feminizes or neuters Othered males to reduce their potential masculine threats. This feminization may result in their assuming the role of the femme fatale, yet they may also fit the trope of Rejected “Women” in Film Noir. I want to acknowledge that I am aware in making this comparison, that I am leaving non-white women out of this equation. The comparison of experiences of oppression between white women and non-white men is apt in that both white men oppress both groups.

Carby’s admonition “White woman listen!” (my emphasis) suggests that by putting it in the singular, she wants to make her appeal personal. She addresses each and every white woman as an individual, not as a collective group. She reminds white women that they share the role of a member of an oppressor’s society. White women must also realize that issues of race, gender and class are at play as well, and the experience of oppression is multivalent. Carby writes:

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5 Diawara discusses the role of the “black femme fatales” in contemporary “Black Noirs,” like Imabelle in A Rage in Harlem) (274).
the herstory of black women is interwoven with that of white women but this does not mean that they are the same story. Nor do we need white feminists to write our herstory for us, we can and are doing that for ourselves. However, when they write their herstory and call it the story of women but ignore our lives and deny their relation to us, that is the moment in which they are acting within the relations of racism and writing history (original emphasis). (223)

Bell hooks echoes this sentiment as well. She claims that white women’s books about women are really about white woman even though they do not “refer explicitly to their racial identity.” She calls this “racism” because the dominant race, in a “racially imperialized nation” such as the United States, “reserves for itself the luxury of dismissing racial identity while the oppressed race is made daily aware of their racial identity. It is the dominant race that can make it seem that their experience is representative” (138). Do white women then, when writing about feminism, isolate the experience as only a white experience? Might that create the conundrums suggested by Doane, who argues that Franz Fanon’s “unenviable position as a black psychiatrist involves the activation of therapies which evolved within white culture to psychopathological conditions made possible by the colonialism and imperialism of that culture? His double bind is still ours” (“Femmes” 245). Doane claims that black women’s assertion that white feminists “examine their own racial identity” is made difficult because whiteness is defined in terms of a universal norm, which makes delineating its limits, attributes, and the specific features of its representation “a hopeless task or, alternatively, can produce” paradoxes:

Whiteness takes on a different semiotic value in texts produced from within a black culture which feels no imperative to define it as non-specificity. . . . [but] . . . there is nothing essential about the racial identity of the white woman, nor is there anything in it to embrace or to invest with pride. There are often compelling political reasons for the black’s espousal of blackness, but this is not the case for the white’s relation to whiteness. To espouse a
white racial identity at this particular historical moment is to align oneself with white supremacists. ("Femmes" 246)

Doane’s argument produces a double bind as well: by accepting whiteness as a universal norm, we could possibly be feeding into a system that colonizes the norm. Doane’s argument illustrates this very conundrum facing the white feminist theorist. She worries that this identity with white roots could foreclose

men writing on feminism, heterosexuals writing about homosexuality, whites writing about blacks, etc. . . . Such a position threatens to collapse together experience, discourse, and ontology by transforming every type of writing into pure autobiography. The solution is not simply to place the word ‘white’ before each use of woman in white feminists texts. The situation instead calls for a reexamination and reevaluation of the concept of experience in feminist theory. ("Femmes" 247)

The non-identity of whiteness makes it difficult to assert a position of being white, or making a film about white people. If Film Noir is defined as films about white people, would this statement be considered exclusionary, instead of it meaning that historically, almost all films of the Film Noir cycle feature white characters? By arguing that films about white people exist, does this gesture help break down the colonization of the norm to which Dyer refers, or does it further inscribe exclusion? One of the problems with emphasizing the white racial identity “could readily be seen as a reinscription of the white woman’s centrality and a repetition of the gesture consigning the black woman in invisibility” (Doane “Femmes”248). Under Doane’s logic, my argument that certain women in film, like the Rejected Woman in Film Noir, already are invisible, then my calling this trope the White Rejected Woman in Film Noir only marginalizes non-white

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6 In "White" Dyer writes: “white is no colour because it is all colours. This property of whiteness, to be everything and nothing, is the source of its representational power. On the one hand . . . white domination is reproduced by the way that white people ‘colonise the definition of normal.’” Dyer has the phrase “colonise the definition of normal” in quotation marks because he is quoting the makers of the film Being White (45).
women further, putting them in the impossible position of the more invisible than invisible. In other words, continually reminding readers that this trope consists of white women implies a centrality of whiteness that needs to be deconstructed, not reinscribed. Carby does not address the issue of black men documenting their own experiences with oppression and leaving out black women, yet she does speak very sharply about the way white feminists have left out the black women’s experience in feminism by assuming that the white women’s experience in being oppressed was universal. Nor does she adequately provide a space where white women can write in such a way that they are simultaneously non-exclusionary and non-racist. It seems that every step the white woman takes, she steps in a puddle of racism that many times, even with her best efforts to avoid it, lands right in its middle, which for many white feminists is a painful and sorrowful place to be. For example, I noticed that E. Ann Kaplan’s essay on The Blue Gardenia mistakenly refers to Nat King Cole as Cole Porter (“Place” 82). Could this error be interpreted as “racist” because Kaplan, to put it in terms Eric Lott uses, puts Nat King Cole in “whiteface dream-work” (551) by referring to him as Cole Porter? Kaplan’s error could have resulted from her essay’s having been written before VCRs and DVDs were readily available, so she could not return to the film or to a website that would give her film credits information. Or, perhaps Kaplan is not a music aficionado, and her substitution of one musical “Cole” for another resulted in this error.

According Krin Gabbard, the choice of Nat Cole was “ideologically appropriate” in that “Cole’s presence carried associations with black jazz artists, linked in the popular imagination with loose sexuality and drug abuse. Otherness is encoded into the music from the beginning. Thus, the song ‘Blue Gardenia’ becomes a sliding signifier
The song never attaches to Norah, and it never becomes her leitmotif, because, as Gabbard argues, once she is found innocent, the song is no longer tied to her: “The song is anchored more to Norah’s supposed guilt than to Norah herself” (249). The song and Cole are fettered in the (white) audience’s mind to the stereotypes and negative images associated with jazz musicians. In contrast, Wager notes that the “cinematic nightclubs” of Film Noirs “provided a venue for popular jazz entertainers such as Nat ‘King’ Cole, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, or Hazel Scott, who could perform in these locales without directly affecting the filmic narrative” (“Jazz” 227). She believes the presence of African Americans in films of the 40s and 50s resulted from social activists insisting the black characters be other than stereotypes, which resulted in the influx of African Americans as nightclub performers: “black women become singers and chic patrons instead of cooks or mammys and black men become musicians and sophisticated well-dressed customers instead of porters or servants, although many still worked as waiters or bartenders on screen” (“Jazz” 227). Although the upward mobility of the jobs can be read as a positive sign, the appearance of African Americans in nightclubs also can be read as perpetuating a type of oppression. Black chanteuses like Hadda Brooks in In A Lonely Place and Madi Comfort in Kiss Me Deadly both conform to white ideals of beauty. Both women possess light skin and have European features. Hadda Brooks’ performance of “‘Til You,” although elegant, gets interrupted by Dix and Laurel. Brooks shows anger at this rudeness, but she receives no apology or acknowledgement for this disrespect.
Madi Comfort is subjected to even more disrespect than Brooks in *Kiss Me Deadly*. Madi Comfort's/Kitty White's deeply emotional and moving rendition "I'd rather have the blues than what I've got" provides the objective correlative for the sadness Mike cannot express. Aldrich claims the way Comfort held the microphone in this scene caused more trouble with the censors than any other part of the film (Silver and Ursini, quoted in Wager, “Jazz” 225). This fact seems astonishing in light of the amount of violence and sexuality in the film. The microphone is phallic (at one point its shadow reflects on her skin) [Fig 4-8], and Comfort caresses the microphone in sexually-charged way. This hyper-sexuality crosses the race line to all women in the film, such as the opening shot of Christina’s bare feet, Velda’s tight-fitting ballet outfit, and Friday’s overtly expressed sexual come-on to Hammer. Aldrich shoots Comfort in close up for fourteen seconds, and moves to a long shot, which he intersperses with reaction shots of Mike watching her and shots of Mike talking with the bartender. Comfort’s holding the microphone does not appear overly sexual in the close up, but in the long shots, she caresses the instrument and puts it very close to her mouth, connoting fellatio [Fig 4-9].

This scene also contains continuity errors. The two reactions shots of Mike do not match the action of the film. Comfort’s character still sings, yet in the mirror image of her, she appears to be seated at a piano and her mouth is not moving [Fig 4-10]. Of course, in reality, her mouth does not produce the sounds it makes, because she is lip-synching, so this mis matching make be a sly joke on that account. The off kilter reaction of seeing the character standing/singing in direct shots, and sitting/not singing in the shots of her in mirror that take place in the same diegetic time of the film is

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7 Jans Wager reports that Jazz singer Kitty White provided the actual vocals; Madi Comfort lip-synched (“Jazz”225).
disorienting. I supposed a very cynical reading of this “mistake” in continuity editing could be that as this scene involves primarily African American characters, the film’s main audience, white people, will not really be paying attention to this scene, so the error will go unnoticed and not worth the re-shooting required to fix it. The fact that the error can only be read (seen) in the mirror signifies the kind of backwards world the mirror provides us (as noted in the scene in Velda’s dance studio, in which we think we see the real Velda at first, but then realize we only see her mirror image.) The error in the mirror signifies the inverted and contorted reality that Film Noir reflects to its audience in its absence of non-white bodies.

The chanteuse and the bartender have close-ups and these characters are portrayed as sensitive and caring in relation to how they treat Mike. According to Stam and Spence’s theory of spectator suturing, these formal choices help the audience identify with these characters. The bartender gently wakes him out of his drunken stupor, and the chanteuse says, “I’m really sorry, Mike,” when a police officer enters the bar to break the news that Velda has been kidnapped. This scene, along with the one in the boxing gym, indicates the film wants to be inclusive, as neither of these scenes mentions race. Yet, perhaps Gabbard’s thesis about The Blue Gardenia’s use of Nat Cole applies to Kiss Me Deadly as well. Cole’s version of “I’d rather have the blues than what I’ve got” plays on the radio during the opening credits as Mike and Christina ride into the darkness of the night. Perhaps Cole’s presence as a jazz singer here also connotes to the white audience that this film will be about sex and murder. And in the end, this bar

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8 See the discussion on colonial suturing discussed earlier in this chapter.
scene reinforces Mike as a hipster who is welcome in all places; his being the only white patron in the Pigalle gives him a patina of cool.

**Othered Men as Rejected “Women” of Film Noir**

Film Noir rarely includes non-white men. When these men appear, often they exist, as previously discussed, to give the noir hero street credibility or hipness. Other times, when not used to amp the street credibility of the Noir hero, non-white men exist in positions similar to those occupied by women in Film Noir, such as the rejected woman. These men mirror the rejected women position in their low-status occupations, the feminization of their appearance, and the neutering of their sexual desire.

Occasionally, as in the case of Selma Parker in *The Big Heat*, they undergo a total sex change, turning from black male into white woman. The information Selma gives Bannion was originally supplied by a non-physically-challenged African American male character named Ashton in the novel by William P. McGivern (Mc Arthur 13, Metz 49). The original screenplay by Sidney Boehm included the physically-challenged Selma, but she was imagined as “a foul-mouthed, disabled news vendor” to which Lang, making extensive changes to the script, transforms into “the sympathetic figure of Selma Parker” (Mc Arthur 66). Ashton’s transformation from African American male to a wise cracking disabled woman and finally, to the stoic Selma speaks to the equation made by the adaptation of the novel: African American man equals physically challenged woman. This equation not only aligns the position of black men and white women, but also implies that blacks are less than whole (the physical challenge serving as a metaphor for less able). In the case of *The Big Heat*, the African American male presence was not neutered but completely erased. Other non-white male characters, are not erased, but become invisible in the way Rejected (White) Women of Film Noir do.
Nat King Cole and the Unnamed Waiters in *The Blue Gardenia*

In *The Blue Gardenia*, the non-white men at the restaurant are feminized in their appearances. Their low-status occupations, as lounge performers and waiters mirror the unglamorous jobs of the three female rejected women characters. The desire of these Othered male characters is neutered or cut off, which also ties them to the rejected woman trope. Nat “King” Cole assumes the position of lounge-lizard extraordinaire in the Blue Gardenia restaurant. Immediately after Prebble purchases a blue gardenia corsage for Norah, the band begins playing the signature song, “Blue Gardenia.” The camera shifts to a long shot of Nat King Cole at the piano, accompanied by three additional African American men on guitar, violin and upright bass [Fig 4-11]. During the song, the camera stays primarily on Cole, holding him mostly in medium-shot with no camera movement, to allow the audience to concentrate on Cole’s performance. He is feminized by the lei of flowers around his neck, as are the members of the band. The positioning of a mirror above Cole, suggests the double-consciousness⁹ of the African American experience, which is further highlighted by a long-shot of the exclusively white audience clapping and smiling. The mirror reflects the back of Cole, the side he does not present to his audience. The mirror completely exposes him to the audience, leaving no place of privacy while on stage. The mirror allows the diegetic and the non-diegetic audience full access to Cole, putting him doubly on stage. Lang cuts away from Cole only a few times during his performance, twice to Norah and Prebble’s table,

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⁹ I refer to the “double consciousness” identified by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*: “It is peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One every feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro: Two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideas in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (715).
highlighting Prebble’s ordering more alcoholic drinks despite Norah’s protests. And, once, to show the blind flower woman, Mae, who approaches Cole’s piano, placing a blue gardenia on his piano.

In the last chorus of the song, Cole stands and sings to the flower itself, expressing how they both suffered from the rejection of the women they love: “I lived for an hour/What more can I tell?/Love bloomed like a flower/Then the petals fell.” At the song’s end, Cole stands up to bow, as the applause lingers. Lang cuts to the shot of a waiter, also donning a flower lei, bringing more food to Prebble and Norah’s table, tying him to Cole as an Othered male. Cole’s hair is slicked back – and tamed (and burned) by lye, reinforcing how he had to conform to white ideals of physical appearance. The feminization of Cole and the band shows the changes black performers had to undergo to subscribe to white appearance standards. Cole’s performance is miles away from James Baldwin’s orgasmic “cup of trembling” that rested on Sonny’s piano as he played in “Sonny’s Blues.” Cole gets no “jazz” as “orgasm,” the reservoir of sexual satisfaction that Mailer describes as available to African American men. Instead, his “cup of trembling” becomes a flower, another signifier of femininity, which he actually sings to at the end of his song.

The Asian men who work at the restaurant: the maitre‘d who greets Norah, and the waiters and bartender also function as rejected women characters. When Norah enters the Blue Gardenia restaurant, she speaks with the maitre‘d, and tells him she is there to see Prebble. He answers, “Of course” hinting at his familiarity with Prebble as a ladies’ man. He opens the velvet ropes and has a “boy” [a grown man] escort her to the Coral Room. Coincidentally, the actor who plays the maitre‘d (Sen Yung), also played
Ong in *The Letter*. His ordering a “boy” (another Asian man) to take Norah to Prebble’s table indicates his co-opting the power structure that denies non-white men the status of being men. The term boy infantilizes the man, stripping him of sexual agency that comes with adulthood. The film displays repressed sexuality or neutering of non-white males in the scene that begins with Prebble’s walk around the restaurant (and its fountain) and ends on Casey at the bar. The Asian bartender greets Prebble by calling him “mister” to which Prebble responds with “Hello, Joe” signifying their different status. This catches Casey’s attention. He turns and asks Prebble: “Alone?” A cut to a medium shot of Prebble shows his sly arrogant smile and gentle shake of his head “No,” Casey asks, “Granite 1466?” and Prebble gives him an enigmatic smile. “Whoever she is, happy hunting,” says Casey. This exchange signifies the potency of (white) male sexuality, as these two wolves prepare to hunt: Prebble looks forward to his encounter with “Granite 1466” and Casey will make a phone call to a girl named Marilyn as soon as he finishes his conversation with Joe the bartender. After Prebble leaves, Joe admiringly comments that Prebble is a “fancy man with the ladies.” Casey asks, “Jealous Joe?” He responds, “On no. No. I fancy man myself.” Casey takes out his address book and Joe, seeing it, asks, “How you do with little black book?”

Joe’s accent marks him, along with his dark skin and Asian features, as “Other” to Casey’s white-ness. Joe’s intense interest in Casey’s black book belies Joe’s words; he does envy Casey and Prebble. Even though he brags that he is “fancy man” like Prebble (and Casey), the black book of the white man captivates him. He wants to enjoy the valorized status of the white males of the film, and he can only accomplish this enjoyment by proxy. Because Joe is coded as a Pacific Islander, through his physical
appearance and his accent, these reference codes suggest the history of the plantation. I am thinking of the system in Hawaii in particular, in which the white plantation bosses pitted the various minority groups against each other (such as Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, Native Hawaiians and Filipinos,) and further encouraged them to create their own racialized hierarchies among themselves in order that they become so busy antagonizing each other, that they do not notice they all suffer exploitation from their dominant white bosses. Joe, in his willingness, to co-opt the subjugation of women despite his own oppression, operates under a sort of sexualized plantation mentality.¹⁰

He also attempts to identify with the dominant category of white men by suggesting he is one of them in that he, like them, objectifies women. Joe participates in the Othering of the Other in which one minority group (non white men) oppresses another minority group (women).

Joe, unlike the other members of the wait staff does not wear a lei, although he wears a similar, highly stylized shirt. This de-flowering of him further expresses his desire to access male power, or it may show a hierarchy in the restaurant’s treatment of employees. A bartender is “higher” up than a waiter, but lower than the maitre d, who wears a suit and tie. Joe hopes that by co-opting the ways of the white male, he will gain power in a society that uses him through his own prejudices, (his objectification of women, for example) to divide and conquer people in the minority.

To stretch this point, the frames in which Joe looks approvingly at Casey’s black book are punctuated by the black mark of the film stock [Fig 4-12], indicating the changing of the film reel. This black mark, however, also represents, perhaps,

¹⁰ Milton Murayama’s novel *All I Asking for is my Body* describes this plantation phenomenon in depth.
unconsciously, the black mark placed on women and non-white men, whether through co-opting Othered men to colonize women, or metaphorically as the dot at the end of Casey’s exclamation points in his little black book (Sleepy will later reveal Casey’s book has a code that uses exclamation points). The black mark reminds the audience that both the bodies of women and non-white men are marked by male white privilege.

Casey tells Joe he must conduct “a little research” as he lustfully gazes at a young blond woman approaching the bar. Casey leaves the bar and heads to the phone booth to call “Marilyn,” one of his marked women. Joe, fettered to the bar through his occupation (like the telephone operators in this film) lacks the mobility of Casey. He only can watch Casey, along with the audience, as the camera follows Casey, leaving Joe behind.

**Nick in *Kiss Me Deadly***

In Nick’s first scene in the film, he wears a scarf around his neck [Fig 4-13] that strongly resembles a scarf that Velda wore in an earlier scene [Fig 4-14]. This visual repetition ties Velda and Nick together as (feminine) playmates for Mike, who flirts with and sexually teases both of these characters throughout the film. Like Velda, Nick functions as a Rejected Woman in Film Noir. First, he has a low-paying, menial job (like Selma in *The Big Heat* and Norah, Crystal and Sally in *The Blue Gardenia*). Second, the noir hero uses him to further his own personal gain (like Mike does with Velda; Mike flirts and teases both Nick and Velda shamelessly to get what he wants). Third, Nick puts himself in harm’s way in service of the noir hero (like Selma in *The Big Heat* and Gaye in *Key Largo*), and Nick dies in his efforts to help the noir hero achieve success (like Debby Marsh and Lucy Chapman in *The Big Heat*). Like Debby, the noir hero, who
forgets him in the pursuit of his own goals, only mourns Nick briefly. In Nick’s opening scene, he greets Mike with unbridled joy. Mike repeats the gesture he just enacted earlier with Pat: he takes the cigarettes out of the pocket of Nick’s jumper. Nick also tries to inject robust male heterosexuality into this scene by telling Mike that the way to get over his feeling “shaky” from his near-death accident is for the two of them “to pick up a couple of cute little Greek girls! You know what I mean? Va-va-voom! Pretty pow!”

Nick’s signature expression used throughout the film, “Va-va-voom! Pretty pow!” may appear to be a random exclamation, but it needs unpacking for the various ways it codes Nick as feminine and Other. First, “Va-va-voom!” is an expletive akin to the “wolf-whistle” in the mid-century. It often was used to signify the presence of a sexually alluring female, a woman who is “real woo-bait” as one of the members of the Interstate Crime Commission describes Velda. Nick’s constant ties to the phrase “va-va-voom” fetters him to the feminine in that it becomes a way for characters to identify Nick. Velda calls him “Va-va-voom” later in the film. Nick’s constant use of “Pretty Pow!” brings to mind the “pow” of explosions of deadly weapons (Nick almost gets blown up in Mike’s car); his addition of the often coded feminine adjective “pretty” further feminizes his signature exclamation. The “Pow!” can also be read as a reminder of Nick’s Othered position as a person of Mediterranean descent. Pow is “Wop” spelled backward, a derogatory term for people of Mediterranean descent, usually referring to persons of Italian or Greek heritage. A.I. Bezzerides the screenwriter, being of Greek heritage probably had familiarity with this slur, and his giving Nick this odd signature phrase, subversively invites us to ponder Nick’s position as an “Other” in the Wasp society represented by the primary characters of the film.
In the scene in which Nick admires Mike’s new car, the Othering of Nick occurs in addition to the economic codes suggested by the cars. Nick’s car envy represents his envy of Mike’s masculinity and puts Nick into the position of the feminine, a role he holds throughout the film. Nick’s feminization is emphasized in this car scene, where he plays the damsel in distress to Mike’s dashing hero. Nick decides to take a quick ride in Mike’s new car before Mike wakes up. As Nick is about to turn the key, Mike runs out of his apartment complex, stopping him just in time. Mike saves Nick’s life and then gives him a series of commands to demonstrate the power paradigm in place: “open the hood,” “no not that side, the other side,” and “check around the starter.” Nick unhooks one of the two bombs Evello planted in the car. After Mike assures Nick the car is safe, they take a drive, with Mike in the driver’s seat. Nick shouts, “Oh bo bo! My moustache! My father’s moustache!” to express the pleasure he feels in riding in the sports car. This odd exclamation provides humor at Nick’s expense regarding his incomplete grasp of English, especially in relation to its slang, but it also represents Nick’s trying to secure his masculinity. By using the term moustache, a metonym for the male body, to describe his pleasure and by evoking his “father,” Nick attempts to hang on to some piece of his masculine identity that is constantly being stripped away from him by Mike, either through his orders, or his attempt to feminize Nick by protecting him. Lott writes that “Hammer’s whiteness may contrast with the Greekness of his yammering friend Nick, who runs around hysterically, salivating over nice sports cars and shouting ‘va-va-voom’ like the automobiles with which the so-called ‘grease-monkey’ is literally identified” (554). Lott’s use of the word “hysterical” obliquely codes Nick as feminine, although Lott does not indicate the feminization of Nick, or the homo-erotic nature of their interactions.
When they arrive at Nick’s auto shop, they disengage the second bomb, and Mike tells Nick he can have Mike’s car (“Down to the last cotter pin”) if Nick can find out “who souped her up,” or who installed the bombs. Sammy, Nicks assistant warns him: “Nicky you should ask what it’s worth to him? What he’s getting out of it.” Sammy’s warning sounds like a parent warning a daughter to be careful about the “intentions” of a man. The conversation has strange undertones, suggesting the relationship between Mike and Nick parallels that of Mike and Velda—the sexual user and the sexually used. The unusual composition of the shot, in which Sammy and Nick are shot in close-up, occupying an enclosed frame creates a claustrophobic and ominous mood [Fig 4-15].

The exaggerated facial gestures of Nick, especially his mouth in the way he pronounces one of his signature phrase throughout the film: Voom-Voom-POW!” has him at one point, appearing as if he either holds his breath (a presaging of the way his breath will soon escape his body when he is crushed to death) or suggests his mouth is full – perhaps insinuating, metaphorically, his sexually servicing Mike, which would give the shot strong homoerotic overtones. Furthermore, his exclamation of “Voom! Voom Pow!” stands in for the act of fellatio: The Voom Voom requires a humming or vibrating action of the mouth, followed by the orgasmic Pow! This metaphorical act of fellatio is bolstered by the visual provided through the overlap dissolve which transitions from a close up of Nick’s face to Mike opening a door. The lap dissolves positions Nick’s face, with puffed cheeks, in the same location in the frame as Mike’s crotch [Fig 4-16].

Although this framing may have been unconscious, Aldrich battled the censors throughout the making of this film, and for these reasons, Aldrich may have included shots, such as this one, that are open to be interpreted as sexually explicit acts. The AFI
reports that a series of letters between Aldrich and PCA official Geoffrey Shurlock, dating from September 1954 through May 1955, chronicled the difficulty involved in getting the film approved by the PCA and the Catholic League of Decency (“Kiss” AFI). Perhaps Aldrich included scenes that could be interpreted as highly suggestive as a way of responding to his frustration with the code. As argued earlier, Aldrich’s shooting of Madi Comfort and her microphone have sexual overtone involving fellatio, so why couldn’t this shot signify the same act? Robert Lang writes that Mike’s motivations throughout the film are motivated by fears of latent homosexuality: “Mike Hammer’s fear, then, is not just a fear of women, but of the woman (the feminine) in himself, and of the feminine position that (he perceives) homosexual desire puts him in” (35). Therefore, Mike acts out in sadistic ways as a means of occulting his own fears of his homosexual desire in “a culture whose fear of homosexuality . . . is so great that it is denied to the point of conversion into symptoms” (Lang 34). Despite this reading, Lang does not identify Mike and Nick’s relationship as homosexual, merely homosocial, suggesting the two men bond over their love of cars. In fact, Lang suggests that Mike’s fears about his latent sexuality are quelled by his relationship with Nick because he sees Nick as his “social inferior,” (40) and Mike’s homosexual desire is tied to men more powerful than he (36). Lang uses the fact that Mike takes a package of cigarettes out of Pat’s pocket “in moments of doubt, when [he] must concede to Pat’s legal/moral authority,” which signifies “a phallic substitute for a surrender” (41). While this reading makes sense, it does not discuss the fact that Mike also takes a cigarette from Nick’s breast pocket as well. The cigarette, then, is not just “a phallic substitute for a surrender,” but represents a “phallic” longing or sexual desire. Also, Mike’s taking Nick’s
cigarettes off his body, the cigarette often read as a phallic symbol, becomes one more way that Mike feminizes Nick, which places Nick among the Rejected “Women” of Film Noir.
Figure 4-1. Close-up of Mama Ochobee

Figure 4-2. Wenoka boat passing under lines of Temple boat
Figure 4-3. Medium Shot of the Osceola Brothers

Figure 4-4. Opening shot of Aldrich’s long-take at the boxing gym
Figure 4-5. Juxtaposition of Nick's car and Mike's fancy sports car

Figure 4-6. Ong appears to own a fancy car
Figure 4-7. Yet, he drives out from among them in an old jalopy

Figure 4-8. Comfort with phallic reflection on her chest
Figure 4-9. Comfort in Long Shot

Figure 4-10. Mis-match of Comfort in the mirror
Figure 4-11. *Mise-en-scène*: Nat King Cole and band

Figure 4-12. Casey and Joe at the bar and the black mark hanging over the two of them
Figure 4-13. Velda's neckerchief ties her to Nick

Figure 4-14. Nick's neckerchief ties him to Velda
Figure 4-15. Claustrophobic close-up of Nick and Sam

Figure 4-16. Homoerotic potential of this overlap dissolve
CHAPTER 5
LACAN’S SARDINE CAN IN FILM NOIR: THE OBJECT’S GAZE AND REJECTED WOMEN

Why can’t that telephone ring? Why can’t it, why can’t it? Couldn’t you ring? And, please, couldn’t you? You damned, ugly shiny thing. It would hurt you to ring, wouldn’t it? Oh, that would hurt you. Damn you, I’ll pull your filthy roots out of the wall, I’ll smash your smug black face in little bits. Damn you to hell.

—Dorothy Parker, “A Telephone Call”

Wherever phones are ringing, a ghost resides in the receiver

—Friedrich Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter

**Lacan: the Gaze of the Sardine Can and Petit-Jean**

In Chapter Eight, “The Line and the Light” of *Seminar XI*, Lacan illustrates the concept that objects see us through his famous anecdote of the sardine can. Lacan sought a brief refuge from the life of an intellectual in his early twenties: “I wanted desperately to get away, see something different, throw myself into something practical, something physical” (“Four” 95). He joined a crew of fishermen from Brittany, and one day while waiting to pull in the nets, one of the men, Petit-Jean pointed out a sardine can floating on the water and glittering in the sun. He said to Lacan: “You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn’t see you!” (95). Petit-Jean was very amused by his joke, as were the other men, but Lacan was not.

The incident provided an epiphany for the young Lacan on two fronts. First, he realized Petit-Jean was incorrect: “if what Petit-Jean said to me, namely that the can did not see me, had any meaning, it was because in a sense, it was looking at me, all the same. It was looking at me at the level of the point of light, the point at which everything looks at me is situated” (95). Second, the fact that the sardine can owned a gaze and looked at Lacan represented an encounter with the Real. Lacan realized that these
fishermen lived difficult, and in many cases, short lives. He tells us that Petit-Jean died young of tuberculosis, as did most of his family members. The fishermen were poor, and their daily excursions on the sea involved life and death struggles, in contrast to Lacan, a wealthy, healthy, and bored young intellectual, looking for adventure. Lacan realized that he was out of place in the picture that was this fishing expedition; he was the stain, the thing that was not quite right ("Four" 95-96).

Lacan ends the story here, but if we unpack this short anecdote, we see the foundation of his thesis regarding the gaze. The sardine can, in essence, looks at both Petit-Jean and Lacan and gives each of them a discrete message that is both pleasurable and terrifying simultaneously. The gaze for Petit Jean of the sardine can be enjoyable, for he has a laugh at this effete young boy’s expense. It is also terrifying because it reminds him (although probably unconsciously) of his harsh and difficult life. In turn, the sardine can’s gaze for the young Lacan can be seen as enjoyable in that he experiences this thrilling robust adventure that takes him out of the classroom, but also terrifying because he sees phoniness in his pursuits. He can walk away any time—these other men cannot. He realizes life can be short, difficult and brutal. This short story encapsulates Lacan’s theory of the gaze, which is that objects look at us. When they do surface, they can provide us with the dual experiences of fascination and terror, although only one of these emotions may be consciously available to us. Also, like Petit-Jean and Lacan, we each experience the gaze individually based on our disparate life experiences: where I see a gaze; you may not and vice versa. The gaze that the object throws our way registers as objet petit a—the object cause of our desire.
Rejected Women of Film Noir and Encounters with the Lacanian Gaze

In *The Blue Gardenia*, the telephone has a gaze. It looks at the women in the film and the audience as well. Like Lacan’s sardine can, the telephone in *The Blue Gardenia* holds both terror and fascination. An image of Norah from the film perfectly captures this dichotomy [Fig 5-1]. She has just read Casey’s “Letter to an Unknown Murderess” and contemplates telephoning him, when her own telephone rings. Lang cuts between Norah and the telephone. In the second cut, the phone is larger in the frame, accentuating its power and the psychological claustrophobia Norah feels. She does not want to answer it, but she feels compelled to pick up the phone. The look on her face captures her terror – she looks as though the phone is alive and that it will leap up and bite her. According to Lacan’s theory of the gaze, the telephone has the power, at least metaphorically, to bite her through its gaze and its ability to facilitate an encounter with the Real. What Norah fears in the ringing telephone is her own death. She fears the police are calling because they have figured out she is the Blue Gardenia murderess. They will arrest her and she will subsequently be charged, tried, convicted and executed for Prebble’s murder. The telephone in Parker’s poem (in the epigraph) also has a gaze. It is an “ugly shiny thing” that stares at her, refusing to ring, and with that refusal, it brings the rejection of the man she wants desperately to call her. Her lover has promised to call at 5 pm. It is now 7 pm and she has received no call. The speaker of Parker’s poem sees in this telephone her own bleak future of loneliness and despair.

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11 See Chapter Three for a summary of the film.
In this chapter, I look at how the gaze functions as the stain or spot in the picture according to Lacan’s theory put forward in *Seminar XI*. The first part of the chapter looks at how objects function as the gaze in relation to rejected women. I look at many objects from *The Blue Gardenia*: an oyster fountain, a whirlpool, and a hamburger to make an argument that the gaze of these three objects indicate that Prebble rapes Norah and she is pregnant with his child. Next, in *Kiss Me Deadly*, I examine how a magazine cover functions as the gaze, and how this gaze can play out in both the Real and Imaginary registers. I return to the telephone in *The Blue Gardenia* to make an imaginary leap that requires us to suspend our disbelief and imagine the telephone possesses the ability to gaze into the future. Also the gaze of these objects reinforces my thesis that Rejected Women of Film Noir represent an ambivalent location of power in relation to the patriarchy. As seen is the preceding chapters, often the rejected woman resists the authority that binds her, but ultimately, her efforts fail her. I use the theory of the Lacanian gaze, as covered in Chapter One. The objects studied in this chapter symbolize the pain/pleasure paradigm that is the Rejected Woman in Film Noir. She is oppressed (pain) but she rebels (pleasure). I argue that in the end, pain has the advantage, and by reading the way objects gaze at the audience, we can see that these objects show us the same result: the two Rejected Women I discuss in this chapter, Norah and Velda, both face an encounter with trauma—the Real.

**Example One: The Oyster Fountain as Gaze in *The Blue Gardenia*: Foreshadowing Norah’s Rape**

The oyster fountain as gaze inaugurates the scene that sets up Norah’s rape. The connections from oyster to pearl to the female body (the pearl symbolizes both a clitoris and the “prized possession” of virginity) speak to Norah’s desire for a sexual and
social relationship with a man. When her fiancé rejects her, she moves on immediately to another man, Prebble, indicating the social pressure she feels in being a woman unattached to a man. Norah, like other Rejected Women in Film Noir, gets things done by launching a counter attack on Prebble that allows her to escape from him, but not before, I will argue, she undergoes horrific trauma. The strangeness of the oyster fountain and its connection to female sexuality marks the beginning of Norah’s descent into her hellish nightmare with Prebble. Prebble calls to ask out Crystal. He has read her as “easy” based on the double-entendres she throws his way as they flirt at the telephone company. Norah answers the call meant for Crystal and accepts a date. By inviting who he assumes to be Crystal to join him immediately, instead of following the protocol of calling and asking for a date in the future, Prebble is, in essence, inviting her out so they can have sex. Crystal would have understood the subtext of this invitation, but the sexually inexperienced Norah does not. Norah’s judgment also is impaired by grief over her fiancé’s rejection, so she accepts the offer to meet Prebble without telling him she is not Crystal. When questioned by Sally, Norah mysteriously tells her she has a “date” with “a man,” which brings out the inner detective in Sally, a by-product of the many mystery novels she reads. After Norah leaves, she reads Norah’s crumpled up “Dear Jane” letter and utters with contempt, “Men!”, which leads to an overlap dissolve from Sally to a close-up of Prebble’s face [Fig 5-2]. This shot underlines that Prebble is one of the contemptible “Men!” of Sally’s comment. The shot also confirms the commonality between Sally and Prebble: both characters live in a world of “passion and

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12 The sexual fluidity of the text suggested in the lesbian desire of Crystal is enforced further by the casting of Burr, a homosexual, as the hyper-heterosexual “wolf” Harry Prebble. Both characters of Crystal and Prebble open the text to a queer reading, that is, as I mentioned in Chapter Three, beyond the scope of this project.
violence.” Sally lives in the Imaginary, fantasizing through her reading of detective novels. Prebble also lives in the Imaginary—he lives in a fantasy world where he is a “fancy man” with the ladies, as Joe the bartender will call him. Yet, he will have an encounter with the Real, a Tuché when Rose attacks him later that evening, and he facilitates a Tuché for Norah in his attack upon her.

Prebble waits for Norah at The Blue Gardenia restaurant. He gives the waiter specific instructions that the drinks, Polynesian Pearl Divers, must be potent: “Don’t spare the rum.” This shot begins a long-take, as the camera tracks Prebble’s movement through the restaurant and into the bar, where he encounters Casey. Lang shoots most of this long-take in long-shot, emphasizing Prebble’s physical power, size, and presence, and he lets the audience see this “wolf” in action as Prebble leers at an attractive woman sitting at a nearby table. The shot also draws a curious attention to the oyster shell fountain that rests in the center of the main dining area [Fig 5-3]. Only this large, odd-looking item grabs attention away from Prebble during the long take. The fountain appears in the center of the screen through much of this shot, at times obscuring Prebble. The foregrounding of this object in the shot as well as its strange appearance make it an object that does not seem quite right, or an object that sticks like a “cuttlebone” in the throat, or acts like a stain in the picture. The innuendo of the oyster fountain suggests the “pearl” that the oyster produces.

On one level, the fountain may represent the power of the clitoris, a metonym for the woman and her sexual power. The fountain visually eclipses Prebble,

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13 The term “wolf” was loaded with cultural significance in the 1950s, evidenced not only in this film, but in other films of the 1950s as well. For example, in Anatomy of a Murder (Otto Preminger 1959), defense attorney Paul Beigler successfully maligns the character of the late Barney Quill by getting a witness, bartender, Al Paquette, to admit reluctantly and indirectly, that Quill was a “wolf.”
foreshadowing his soon-to-be permanent eclipse at the hands of Rose. Ironically, the name “Rose” also is tied to the female genitalia, and more specifically, the word “rosebud” (thank you William Randolph Hurst and Orson Welles), is tied to the clitoris. The connection suggested by the oyster fountain to a woman’s organ of sexual pleasure, and the fountain’s power in its centrality and its overpowering of Prebble in the mise-en-scène foreshadow how female power and passion eventually will cause his demise. His ordering “Polynesian pearl divers” suggests his desire to become a pearl diver, metaphorically, in relation to Norah’s pearl. The metaphor has its origin in the word to transport, and Prebble also uses these drinks as a means of transportation: they will (he believes) get him to where he wants to go by getting his female companion drunk, hence his order to the waiter to make the drinks particularly potent. The long take ends on Prebble directly after his encounter with Casey at the bar. “Whoever she is, happy hunting,” says Casey. Ironically, that evening, the hunter will become the hunted, but not until after he appropriates the role Casey has assigned to him earlier in the film. Casey had asked the telephone supervisor, “How’s the wolf doing with all the little red hiding hoods [yet another symbol for the clitoris]?” Prebble, as wolf, stalks, hunts and captures Norah’s virginity. The oyster fountain does not appear in the film again, yet Lang connects both its menace and fascination to the subsequent scene between Norah and Prebble in the restaurant. By calling the drinks “Polynesian Pearl Divers” Lang makes a connection between the oyster fountain and the drinks. In this way, the gaze of the fountain lingers through the Polynesian Pearl Divers: these drinks shape the course of events and ultimately provide the transportation method for Norah to trauma.
Norah functions as a Rejected Woman in Film Noir in that she has been rejected by her fiancé, whom, the narrative implies, Norah saw as her means of escaping her dull life as a telephone operator. The life of a “dashing lieutenant” as Sally refers to him, appeals to Norah. Norah’s conversation with Prebble at The Blue Gardenia restaurant focuses on pearls, bolstering the idea that the oyster fountain leaves a trace in the scene even after it has visually left the frame. As soon as Norah joins Prebble’s table, a waiter brings over two highly decorated Polynesian Pearl Diver cocktails, and Norah and Prebble have the following conversation:

Prebble: Have you ever seen a Polynesian Pearl Diver before?
Norah: Not served as a drink! (She laughs and smiles).

Prebble: They’re not really drinks. They’re trade winds across tropical lagoons. They’re the Southern Cross above coral reefs. They’re a lovely maiden bathing at the foot of a waterfall.

Norah: Ah, that’s pretty. It doesn’t make much sense, but it’s pretty.

This conversation not only confirms Prebble’s desire to be a “pearl diver;” the suggestive way he delivers the line also suggests that he is asking Norah if she is a virgin. Her response that she has not experienced one (as a drink) is coy and playful, and indicates that she understands the sexual undertones of Prebble’s remark. The alcoholic drink takes on many signifiers here. Prebble, memorizing a few cheesy lines from the Blue Gardenia menu page, classifies the drink as something warm, exotic, and feminine, terms that describe Norah’s body. To Norah, the words sound pretty and appearances matter to her. If she spends her birthday alone, she is on the path to turning into an “old maid” or a woman “going to seed,” as Homer already has warned her that she may become.
Prebble then asks Norah: “Do you know what a mermaid’s downfall is?” He opens the menu and reads the description: “To achieve a mermaid’s downfall, we begin with a seductive rum that insidiously lulls the senses—.” At which point, Norah catches on that the drink “Mermaid’s downfall” leads to a downward fall, or a loss of maidenhead. She smiles slightly and says, “Ah-ha. I think I’ll stick to Pearl Divers” and takes a sip of her drink. Prebble’s use of the word “insidiously,” which means a treachery that comes to a person from a supposedly benign position, makes for a strange drink description in the menu, but it describes Prebble’s intentions. Norah’s knowing response indicates that she sees herself as too smart to be the woman who would let a man take advantage of her by getting her drunk, so she would never drink a “Mermaid’s downfall.” Her “I’ll stick to pearl divers” suggests her belief that this drink, which is described by Prebble with harmless words of bathing in a moonlit lagoon, could not be insidious. Upon taking the first sip of her drink, Norah says, “Strong!” to which Prebble quickly counters, “Mostly ice and pineapple.”

She mistakenly thinks she can handle Prebble. Norah’s judgment is impaired because of her grief, certainly, but she also underestimates the potential dangers. Lang’s camera pushes in closer on the two-shot, placing Prebble and Norah in a tight claustrophobic space within the frame. As they drink, Prebble leers at her [Fig 5-4]. The sexually implicit table decoration, consisting of a lit phallic candle inside a womb-shaped glass, implies Prebble’s desired goal of sex with Norah. His bulging eyes, emphasized nicely by Burr’s rather naturally bug-eyed countenance, emphasize his lascivious leer as he watches Norah drink the potent pearl divers. When Norah says “Strong!!”, Lang shoots her in close-up: her eyes become wide and her lashes flutter doe-like making her
look vulnerable. The netting of her hat across the face just below the eyes also heightens her look as innocent and virginal, like a nun who has taken the veil. Her doe-like appearance and her misperception about the insidious potency of the drink (and also of Prebble) connote a feeling of uneasiness and menace, a carry-over from the gaze of the oyster fountain. Watching the scene is uncomfortable—Norah is vulnerable, and the audience is watching a young doe just before a wolf hunts her down and tears her jugular; indeed, we recall Casey’s earlier comment, “Happy hunting!”

Norah’s intense inebriation shows through her slurred speech. She suggests that Prebble order another round of “Pol-en-eezian South Sea Pad Drivers.” She leans over to touch Prebble, and he clasps her hand. Norah, with exaggerated hand gestures, suggests they should order four drinks instead of two, and as she speaks, she gestures clumsily with her chopsticks, flinging rice into Prebble’s face, grotesquely evoking the wedding tradition of throwing rice, as if this drunken meal serves as the ceremony, which will be followed by the obscene honeymoon of Prebble’s raping Norah. This rape also is presaged by Norah’s reaching into her nearly empty glass, pulling out the cherry and popping it into her mouth, foreshadowing her soon-to-be lost virginity.

Example Two: The Whirlpool as Gaze in The Blue Gardenia: Symbol of Norah’s Rape

If the oyster fountain as gaze sets up the traumatic event about to visit Norah (and Prebble), the whirlpool featured in the scene after Norah hits Prebble with the poker symbolizes Prebble’s physical attack of Norah. After their dinner, Norah returns with Prebble to his apartment. He tells her: “The night is still young. Your birthday party is just beginning.” Prebble coaxes her into drinking champagne. While uncorking the bottle, he yells “Ouch!” as he catches his finger on the bottle’s wire. Norah offers, and
he accepts, her handkerchief to wipe off the blood. Prebble’s bloody finger penetrated by the wire augers the penetrations to come: Norah’s soon-to-be broken hymen and the fireplace poker Rose will embed in Prebble’s skull. Norah playfully teases Prebble as he literally licks his wound: “See, it’s dangerous even before you drink it.” Although Prebble appears attentive and considerate, he is dangerous in a way that mirrors her fiancé—both men reject Norah and leave her vulnerable to pain. She had earlier found out that champagne is “dangerous even before you drink it” when she followed the earlier uncorking of the champagne on which she splurged for her birthday celebration with the reading of her fiancé’s “Dear Jane” letter. Prebble’s champagne is also “dangerous” before she drinks it. She never actually drinks it; she maladroitly throws her glass over her shoulder as she raises it to her mouth. The sculpture of a woman’s nude torso in the background hints at Prebble’s perception of women—they are body parts to be used for his pleasure. Ironically, the day Norah celebrates her birth is interlaced with death—the death of her relationship with George, the death of her virginity, and the death of Prebble.

Although other scholars have not read this scene in Prebble’s apartment as Prebble’s raping Norah, I offer this possible interpretation, bolstered through a close reading of this sequence. The camera movements, mise-en-scène and symbols evoked all validate this reading. Four well known film scholars discuss The Blue Gardenia in detail: Janet Bergstrom, E. Ann Kaplan, Douglas Pye, and Tom Gunning, and none of them interprets the film in a way which suggests that Prebble rapes Norah after she becomes unconscious in his apartment. For example, Bergstrom, in summarizing this scene, writes: “To fend of his advances, she strikes him with a poker from the fireplace
and then blacks out. Then next day she remembers nothing about the seduction or the struggle or even about coming home” (101). Kaplan’s description of the scene is similar: When Prebble “insists” on “making love” to her, “in defence against being raped, she grabs a poker and strikes out at him, fainting before we can see what she has done. Waking up some time later, she rushes out of the house without her shoes, and goes home” (“Place” 82). Pye observes that “Lang uses the familiar optical whirlpool effect to convey her fall into unconsciousness” (80), but makes no observations about what might have happened between the time Norah initially lost consciousness until the time she ran out of Prebble’s apartment. Like Pye, Gunning also comments on the whirlpool as a “traditional Hollywood image for loss of consciousness” (“Blue” 402), and writes that Prebble “attempts date rape” (“Blue” 403), which rules out an actual rape occurring. Despite, the general consensus that Norah passed out and then leaves untouched by Prebble, the film contains textual evidence that a rape has occurred, and later scenes support a reading that Norah has become pregnant as a result. This interpretation begins with seeing beyond the idea that the whirlpool, on which both Pye and Gunning comment, exists solely as a typical Hollywood device for loss of conscious, and consider it instead as an object with a gaze that causes Norah to have an encounter with the Real.

Initially, Norah’s rape is presaged by the earlier “textual” rape—the fiancé’s letter—along with the hints, discussed above, such as the name of the drinks with which Prebble plies Norah, and the implication that he will make a “dive” for Norah’s pearl, and the significant screen time Lang gives to Prebble’s lurking around the large oyster fountain. These earlier images and scenes support a reading of rape that can be seen
in the various stages of the scene in Prebble’s apartment: the attack, Norah’s loss of consciousness, and her subsequent fleeing the apartment. After Norah drops her champagne glass, she moves from the art studio portion of Prebble’s apartment to the living room area, the locus of the attack. She takes off her hat and its attached veil, and kicks off her shoes. Prebble reads these actions as an opening to make his move on Norah. He tells her, “Women always surprise me when they take off their (he pauses) shoes.” The pause intimates that taking off shoes leads to other garments. A large plant located screen-right casts a shadow over most of the living room and represents the dark, menacing presence of Prebble and his dark intentions. Norah’s taking off her hat and shoes, which Lang films in long shot, are performed in a clumsy, clunky way and do not suggest any kind of sexual seduction or strip tease on her part. Her maladroit actions reinforce the reading that she is sexually inexperienced and innocent, unable to anticipate the message she sends, despite her role-playing at the restaurant when talking about the drinks. Lang cuts between Norah and Prebble, who pours her coffee, to soothe her up, he claims. Lang cuts back to Norah, now clutching a pillow and curled up as if to go to sleep, and then back to Prebble, screwing the top on a bottle of liquor and putting it back on the shelf. Although the audience does not see Prebble pouring the liquor into the coffee, we see enough to understand that Prebble has spiked Norah’s coffee with liquor, which functions here as a date-rape drug. By cutting between the two of them this way, Lang punctuates Prebble’s sly trickery; he pours the liquor in Norah’s drink both out of her vision (her eyes are closed) and the viewer’s.

The open spatial feel of Prebble’s apartment, with its lack of delineation between rooms, reminds us of the same spatial outlay of Norah’s apartment, where most of the
apartment operates as one great room (Prebble’s apartment is up-scale as opposed to the threadbare apartment the women share). The similar layouts of the two apartments could possibly contribute to Norah’s confusion that she is in her own apartment and lying on her own bed, because in the women’s apartment, the living room doubles as a bedroom, and their couches and chairs transform to beds at night. Norah may also believe that if she is back in her own apartment, she is once again “with” her fiancée, as she was earlier that evening. Norah substitutes Prebble’s body for her fiancé’s; she kisses Prebble, asking him: “Why did you have to write that letter?” and “Why did you have to fall in love with that nurse?”

Norah operates as Prebble’s objet petit a because the object itself is of no importance—she could be anyone. In fact, she stands in for Crystal, who Prebble originally thought he was inviting out on this date. In turn, Prebble functions as Norah’s objet petit a, for whom either George or Prebble can function as a placeholder of her desire. Norah mistakenly fantasizes that Prebble can “become “George, which leaves her vulnerable. Although she uses Prebble to alleviate her pain, Prebble’s use of Norah is far more treacherous. The fact that Prebble spikes Norah’s drink and lies by assuring her several guests are waiting for them at his apartment in celebration of her birthday, colors his actions as deceptive and sinister. Formally, the low-key lighting of Prebble’s apartment with its strange shadows and the hulking presence of Prebble’s large body in dark clothing hovering over Norah reinforces the discursive elements that suggest Norah is in danger. For example, in Figure 5-5, we see how Prebble’s girth overshadows Norah to the point of seeming to swallow her or devour her. The coffee cup, the “weapon” Prebble’s uses to precipitate the rape, stands out as illuminated,
appearing almost to have a gaze of its own, functioning as an auger of the Real. The cup also harbingers the larger gaze of the whirlpool. In some ways, the cup (a pool of liquid) stands in as a mini-“pool” device; a small object with a gaze that serves as a forerunner for the larger “(whirl)pool’s” gaze that soon will follow. The cup and the whirlpool also function as weapons. Prebble uses the cup of coffee (laced with liquor) to get Norah drunker so he can take advantage of her. The whirlpool symbolizes Prebble’s body as it travels down Norah’s.

Norah struggles with Prebble on the couch, yelling, “No, don’t!” She then gets to her feet and says, “Where’s my hat?”, a commonly understood symbol for the vagina or womb in Freudian psychology. The physical struggle with Prebble lasts for several seconds and Lang presents it with ten cuts:

- Long-shot of Norah and Prebble – Norah fights off Prebble’s physical assault
- Medium-shot of Norah and Prebble’s upper bodies entwined, with Norah still struggling against Prebble.
- Medium-shot of the floor - Norah’s blue gardenia corsage falls into frame – hinting at her “deflowering” by Prebble. The fireplace poker looms large in this frame, suggesting the power of this weapon. Norah will attempt to defend herself by swinging it at Prebble, and Rose will later use it to kill Prebble.
- Medium-shot of Prebble and Norah from the waist up, still struggling.
- Medium-shot of Prebble and Norah from the waist down [Fig 5-6]. The dark hulking shadow of Prebble overpowers Norah. All we see of her is one airborne foot, showing that Prebble controls the situation; he is strong enough to sweep her off her feet. This colloquialism for being enamored with someone, takes on a grotesque meaning. This shot also shows Norah’s hand on the poker (screen left) and the coffee cup (screen right). This shot tells the story of what has and what will happen to Norah: the cup shows the past, her intoxication, and the poker shows her future, in that Prebble will “poke her” through the upcoming rape. Norah’s hand on the tip of the fire poker accentuates its phallic quality. The composition of the shot implies the upcoming sexual act. By shooting from the waist down, the shot emphasizes the crotch area of both characters. It also shows the intertwining of their bodies; they both wear black and we cannot tell where one body ends, and another begins, which foreshadows the soon to occur sexual union of their bodies.
Medium-shot of Norah and Prebble waist up: Norah and Prebble struggle and Norah pushes him out of frame. She lowers her head and reaches screen right (the location of the poker). We see her mirror image behind her.

Close-up of cracked mirror as Norah hits the mirror with the poker.

Close-up of Norah’s face; her right arm is out of frame, but it looks as though she is striking at something/someone.

Close-up of Prebble’s face in mirror as he screams, “Ahh!” and then mirror fragments away – leaving only a black space.

Medium-shot of Norah grabbing her head and she falls to the floor.

Without a cut, the whirlpool descends on Norah’s body. A rape would never appear on film in the 1950s. Lang uses the image of the whirlpool as a visual metaphor for Prebble’s body. When the whirlpool first appears, its center is superimposed over Norah’s genitals, which represents the initial penetration of Norah’s body [Fig 5-7]. As the whirlpool climbs up her body, before resting at her throat, Lang overlaps it with a series of waving, pulsating lines, which represent Prebble’s orgasm [Fig 5-8]. The whirlpool stops at her throat, and temporarily disappears while Norah’s body becomes ensconced in fog. Lang superimposes circular images over her body to indicate her lack of consciousness or lack of consent for what Prebble does to her. Tellingly, the whirlpool never travels above Norah’s throat. The whirlpool stands in as a visual correlative for Prebble, who is only interested in Norah’s body, not her mind (head). The whirlpool reemerges at her throat before traveling down her body, again resting on her genital region, which emphasizes the idea of violation. The camera slowly pulls back revealing Norah’s helpless posture. She lies on her back with her arms stretched out. The fragments of mirrored glass around her symbolize the shattering of her hymen [Fig 5-9]. The fallen gardenia is also visible (lower screen right), which also symbolizes her deflowering.
At this point in the narrative, the audience does not know that Prebble has escaped Norah’s attempt to strike him. Pye argues that cracked mirror is an obvious sign Lang uses to communicate that what we are seeing at this moment should be questioned and the audience needs to check with automatic assumption that Norah killed Prebble (80). During the flashback in which Rose tells her story, Prebble appears totally uninjured by his encounter with Norah. (Rose visits Prebble after Norah and Prebble tussle in his living room). He holds the poker in his hand, suggesting that he wrestled it away from Norah. It also serves as a metonymical penis, with which Prebble has violated Norah [Fig 5-10]. The fact that we see Prebble uninjured in Rose’s flashback indicates that Norah’s strike with the poker missed its target, leaving Prebble healthy enough for him to hit his. When Norah regains consciousness, she looks left, and Lang cuts to a subjective shot. The film sways and melts as Norah looks toward Prebble’s studio. These swaying lines imply her wooziness and unsteadiness. An objective medium reaction shot of Norah is followed by another subjective “wavy” shot of her gazing at the broken mirror.

Norah staggers to her feet, with her purse in hand. She walks unsteadily, and then rushes to Prebble’s front door without her shoes. Lang films Norah in long shot as she runs to Prebble’s door, with her feet clearly visible. Looking closely, we see Norah does wear stockings. The seams running up the back of her calf are visible and crooked. Perhaps Prebble left them askew when he fumbled with her panties and garter belt. The soles of her feet are also dirty, a harbinger of her feeling she has an unclean soul (sole) because she believes she murdered Prebble. They also signify her being “soiled” by Prebble’s act. At the time of the film’s release, even an audience member
who is not attentive enough to catch the seamed stockings would know that no respectable woman in the 1950s would go around with bare (no stockings) legs. One need only to look at a contemporary film to *The Blue Gardenia*, Preminger’s *Anatomy of a Murder*, which came out six years later in 1959 to realize the scandal and negative connotations that accompany a woman appearing in public with bare legs.\(^\text{14}\) She runs down the steps of his apartment and out into the pouring rain where she runs out of frame and the screen fades to black. While she has the presence of mind to grab her purse, she forgets her shoes. In order for the narrative to work, she needs to take her purse, or she would be immediately identified.

The whirlpool that symbolizes Norah’s attack resembles an eye—an eye that has a gaze both in the diegetic world of the film and outside of it. The whirlpool “looks” up and down Norah's body. It also gazes at the audience watching the film. Like the oyster fountain, the whirlpool is an object that looks strange and out of place. Certainly, as other scholars point out, the whirlpool is a visual short cut to show unconsciousness. The whirlpool, however, with its strange appearance captivates the audience and encourages the audience to look at it closer, or from different, and interested viewpoint, or to quote Žižek, to look at it awry, or from a metaphorically anamorphotic position. Norah loses a lot on this birthday: her fiancé and her virginity. Ironically, she probably was saving the latter for the former, only to be tricked and then violated by the evil, massive Prebble. Prebble is misogyny personified, a one-man wrecking crew, greedily taking all that he can. The scene with the large oyster shell prefigures his large appetite.

\(^{14}\) In this film, Frederick Mannion is accused of killing the man who raped his wife, Barney Quill. District Attorney Dancer interrogates Mannion’s wife Laura and tries to discredit her rape story by proving she is a loose woman. One of the ways he does this is through getting her to admit she went to a local bar bare legged, which is code for being loose or of easy virtue.
for women, as his eyes greedily gorge on the women in the room. He gorges on women’s bodies as well. The film’s execution of Prebble speaks to the contempt that the film holds for him. Extrapolating the film forward, I believe Norah is pregnant with Prebble’s child, and I imagine how Casey, who so fully aligns himself with Prebble’s womanizing, would feel upon finding her in this condition. He shows that he is unable to accept Norah as a “bad girl,” as evidenced by how his attitude toward Norah changes when he believes she went to Prebble’s apartment unescorted and intoxicated. I would imagine Casey would not accept Norah as pregnant with Prebble’s child, and Casey would reject her yet again.

**Example Three: Popping Meat and Mustard as Gaze in *The Blue Gardenia***

When Casey first meets Norah at the *Chronicle*, he does not believe her story that she is not the Blue Gardenia murderess, until she passes his test. He deliberately spills an ashtray of cigarette butts in her lap and then feigns an apology and a feeble attempt to look for his handkerchief, and he waits for her to produce one. He wants to determine that Norah does not have one (the gardenia murderess he was talking to on the phone dropped it). Norah purchased a new one before she meets Casey at the *Chronicle*, so she can keep up her ruse that she is merely a friend of the Gardenia, not the murderess. The spilling of the hot ashes in her lap also insinuates that she has a hot crotch, or is hot to trot, or it portends her “soiled” condition after being raped by Prebble. Norah does not jump up, nor do the ashes burn her, which is unusual since both of them are smoking. Even though Casey has lit her cigarette, it appears unlit and unsmoked. At one point she grabs it in her hands and crushes it as she tells Casey her “friend” cannot remember killing Prebble. Perhaps the cigarette was stubbed out, but even so, the hot ashes should remain. Also Casey’s ashes have been deposited in the
tray, so Norah’s not jumping up after having a tray of hot ashes dumped in her lap is as strange and unrealistic as her crushing her lit cigarette in her hand. The unrealistic interplay with the cigarettes mirrors the unrealistic nature of her story. Casey tells Norah that killers usually do not get amnesia after killing and that “a clever DA” can usually break down this defense rather quickly. After Norah produces her own handkerchief and wipes off her lap, the camera cuts to a smiling Casey who is relieved that she is not the Blue Gardenia because now he can feel better about the attraction he feels toward Norah because he knows she is a “good girl.”

The scene overlaps dissolves to Casey’s picking up some condiment residue with this napkin at Bill’s Beanery. He and Norah are eating messy, condiment-heavy hamburgers that require clean-up, mirroring the mess facing Norah, and her hope that Casey will clean it up for her. Casey says, “There’s a trick to eating one of these [messy hamburgers], but I’ve never learned it.” The camera cuts to Norah who presses down on her sandwich and the meat pops out of the bun. She lets out a whimsical giggle [Fig 5-11]. The popping out of the meat signifies Casey’s growing sexual attraction to Norah, symbolizing an erection. It also indicates that her stomach will be popping out because she has “a bun in the oven.”

This scene represents the second time in the film Norah eats food in a restaurant with a man who rejects her. In her first meal with Prebble, she cannot control her utensils and the rice flies off her chopsticks. In this scene with Casey,

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15 We find further evidence of Norah’s pregnancy in the scene in which Norah returns home after having “a hamburger and coffee” with Casey. Crystal has waited up for her, and pours her a glass of milk even though Norah says she wants nothing. The milk suggests that somehow Crystal intuits that Norah is pregnant. She also tells Norah she has figured out that Norah is (or thinks she is) the Blue Gardenia murderer. Crystal said it took her awhile because she was a “late baby” a horrible reference to the idea that women who had babies later in life had children who were not intelligent. Along with telling us something about the self-esteem issues Crystal might have, the mentioning of babies also could be conceived as a hint about Norah’s pregnancy.
she cannot control her food again, as the meat pops out of the bun. Prebble may be the literal rapist, but Casey metaphorically rapes her by deceiving her with his story that he want to help the Blue Gardenia, when in essence, he only wants to use her to get a headline. As with Prebble, Norah lets down her guard down and allows herself to laugh unaware of the danger she faces. Norah cannot control her food, and her open laugh allows Casey to read her as relaxed and letting him in, when in fact, she should know better and be on her guard. Her earlier relaxing and joking with Prebble in the restaurant led to tragedy, and Norah repeats the same pattern here, only with a different man and restaurant. Casey comments on the laugh:

   Casey: “Do that again.”
   Norah: “What?”
   Casey: “Laugh. It’s the first time since you walked into my office”

The meat that jumps up at Norah and the messiness of her burger both reflect the messiness of her situation and the way the patriarchal structure of the law will jump up at her. It is not an accident that the man who made this messy burger (Bill of Bill’s Beanery) will “jump up” on her and make her life messy. Bill calls in a tip to the police after seeing Casey with Norah, figuring that she might be the “unknown murderess” of Casey’s newspaper article, which Bill reads while the two have dinner. This popping-up meat also serves as an object with a gaze. The shot of the meat popping up looks unusual, and may function as another point at which the film looks at us.

   Norah continues eating her hamburger. Casey rises and moves to the opposite booth to sit next to Norah. He claims to be disappointed “in a relieved sort of way” that she is not the Blue Gardenia. He tells her, “When I heard your voice on the phone I made a mental picture of you. Boy was I wrong.” She asks him what he expected, and
he says he does not want to tell her now with dried tears “at the edges of your eyes and that mustard on your nose.” She denies having mustard on her face: “I have not!” she says. Then, she wipes her hand across her nose, sees the mustard and says, “I have!” The mustard, which is connected to the popping meat, operates as a literal stain on Norah’s face as well as objet petit a, the stain in the picture. It is something not quite right on Norah’s face that serves as a correlative about the many aspects of Norah that presently, are not quite right and signify the trauma in her life. First of all, if you accept my reading, she is pregnant with Prebble’s child. She is playing a dangerous game with Casey, confiding in him, but also lying to him by saying she is a friend of the woman who went to Prebble’s apartment, so she is not who she pretends to be.

In addition, she is traumatized by her own personal belief that she had the capacity to kill another human being. Norah cannot see the stain, because she cannot see herself seeing herself, the circumstance that helps form the gaze as a lost object. Her encounter with this gaze is not through sight, but through touch. Casey points out the stain, and Norah does not apprehend it by looking in a mirror, but by touching it and then looking at it on her finger. In this example from The Blue Gardenia, the mustard exists on Norah’s face; it stains her. Because she cannot see it on her face, she denies its existence. Once she can transfer it to her hand, and she can touch it and absorb it, then she admits it exists as stain. At this point, she, as subject, wipes away this object. What this false mastery of possessing it (holding it in her hand) belies, however, is that the mustard stain, and the trauma it represents, controls her. In essence, Norah functions in the Imaginary here. She dons metaphorical sunglasses that keep her from seeing the object (the mustard) from looking at her. By remaining in the Imaginary,
which she firmly does by denying the existence of mustard on her face, she allows herself to play with the fantasy that Casey is her handsome prince, who will rescue her. Casey functions as Norah’s mirror. He reflects Norah’s image by alerting her she has a spot of her nose. Like the mirror, however, Casey distorts Norah’s image of herself (he can only reflect it back, and this reflection cannot ever be Norah). Casey also distorts her perception of the current situation. Norah’s wiping it away establishes a bond between the two of them. It falsely signals to Norah: “You can trust Casey—he will tell you when something is harming (blemishing) you and point it out.” When, in essence, we know that he has not earned nor deserves her trust.

**Example Four: Velda and the Gaze of the Magazine in *Kiss Me Deadly***

**Summary of the Film**

*Kiss Me Deadly* is perhaps the most famous of all Film Noirs. Schrader refers to it as, “the masterpiece of film noir” (12). Like most Film Noirs, the plot is difficult to describe and only describing the plot ignores the intense stylistic elements that give the film its masterpiece status. The film opens on a dark highway outside Los Angeles. A young woman, Christina Bailey, runs into the middle of the road and flags down detective Mike Hammer. He begrudgingly gives her a ride. They go through a police blockade, and Mike learns Christina escaped from “the laughing house.” Christina cryptically tells Mike to remember her if they do not make it to the nearest bus stop. They get high-jacked by unknown assailants who torture Christina to death and send Mike and Christina’s body into ravine in Mike’s car. Mike wakes up in the hospital with his faithful secretary and girlfriend Velda perched over him. Mike is a “bedroom dick,” as one character calls him. He gathers evidence in divorce cases primarily by using Velda to tempt the husbands (Mike tempts the wives). When the government wants to
question him, and his detective friend Pat is overly curious about this accident, Mike gets the idea that he is on to “something big.” Mike begins to investigate Christina’s life. He starts by visiting Ray Dyker, a science writer who called Velda while Mike was in the hospital. Dyker appears horribly burned and very frightened. He provides Mike with Christina’s last address. Mike uses this information to track down Christina’s roommate, Lily Carver. Lily is really Gabrielle, a woman involved with Dr. Soberin, the mastermind criminal of the scheme who tortured Christina to death. Lily pretends to be scared for her life and gains Mike’s sympathy. Ray Dyker calls Velda with more information. Mike continues his investigation and discovers that gangster Carl Evello somehow is involved in the “something big” that Mike has stumbled upon, although Mike has no idea what that “something” is.

Mike drives forward hoping for a big pay day, because as Velda wisely observes, “a cut of something big is something big.” Mike’s good friend, the mechanic Nick is killed when Nick asks some questions about a bomb put in Mike’s car (that Mike disarms). Velda does her own investigation by having drinks with Ray Dyker and an art collector, William Mist. Velda tells Mike that there is a new kind of art in the world that people are paying large sums of money to own. Mike figures this art must be the valuable “something big” he has been looking for. Velda is disgusted by Mike’s greed, and says his quest for what she calls “the great whatsit” has already cost Nick his life, and she asks Mike how far he is willing to go in his investigation. He finds out later that night that the gangsters involved in this scheme kidnap Velda in an attempt to blackmail Mike into curtailing his investigation. Earlier in the film, gangster Carl Evello hinted at bribing Mike, but he got the impression Mike wanted too much money and that Mike did not
really know what he was looking for. Evello and his partner, Dr. Soberin capture Mike and try unsuccessfully to get him to talk. Neither Mike nor the audiences sees Dr. Soberin—he only appears as a voice.

Mike escapes and arranges for Evello’s own gangsters to kill him. Lily/Gabrielle contacts Mike, feigning fear saying “they” tried to get her. Mike hides her at his apartment. After Velda is kidnapped, Mike, with Gabrielle tagging along, locates the great whatsit by figuring out a clue Christina left for him in the poem “Remember Me” by her namesake, Christina Rossetti. He ends up in the coroner’s office, and obtains the key Christina swallowed after strong-arming the coroner’s assistant. (He tried a bribe first, but the man wanted more than Mike wanted to pay). The key opens a locker that contains the “great whatsit” a small metal box. Mike opens it and burns himself. He is frightened and locks it up, telling an attendant not to touch it. Gabrielle shakes loose of Mike, kills the attendant, and steals the box. She brings it to Dr. Soberin’s beach house where Velda is being held. Mike finds his way to Dr. Soberin’s beach house as well by tracking down clues involving the art dealer. Gabrielle shoots Dr. Soberin because he refuses to give her half of the contents of the box. Mike enters, and she shoots him too. She opens the box, which contains an atomic bomb. As she begins to melt and burn, the injured Mike breaks down a door, rescues Velda, and the two of them stand in the surf as the beach house explodes.

**Analysis of the Magazine as Gaze**

When Velda visits Mike’s apartment for the first time in the film, Aldrich opens the scene in a close-up of the two embracing, which establishes the physicality of their relationship. They interject kisses between their talk about work. Mike says to Velda, “You know, just to hold the soft part of your arms is a meal.” Mike places Velda in the
realm of the physical—she is body, not mind, and this body nourishes him or feeds him. One on level, Velda’s body does feed him as she uses her body to lure men to cheat on their wives so Mike can get evidence for the wives, his paying clients. This line also suggests cannibalism, which plays out metaphorically in the way Mike feeds off Velda’s body throughout the text by using her to nourish him both emotionally and financially. Mike, however, functions as zombie as well as cannibal, in that he metaphorically makes of meal of Velda’s brain as well as her body.\textsuperscript{16} Many incidents throughout the film indicate that Velda is the brains behind the operation. She does much of the work of the Christina Bailey investigation, proving herself a detective on par with, or perhaps superior to Mike. A scene in the film visually plays with concept of Velda doing “leg work,” when Mike physically moves Velda’s leg from her desk to a chair while she stretches, and she tells him of the progress she has made in the Bailey case [Fig 5-12].

Neither character comments on the gesture, nor does it interrupt the flow of their conversation about the case, but this visual wink to the audience indicates who does most of the leg work between the two. Mike gives Velda none of the credit; however, he takes it all for himself.

Mike constantly rejects Velda on many levels throughout the film. He uses her body to make money, he refuses to commit to her emotionally, and he devalues her intellectual prowess. The film is very obvious about the first two modes of rejection, yet it is rather sly about the third. One of the jokes of the film seems to be that Mike, for all his claims to be the brilliant detective, is rather obtuse and perhaps even stupid. In some ways, the film inverts the hegemonic dichotomy that Mike = brains and Velda =

\textsuperscript{16} I refer here to the trope that zombies eat human brains, as exemplified in George Romero’s \textit{Night of the Living Dead} (1968).
body; another reading suggests that Mike = body and Velda = brains. The film suggests this reversal through the use of *Physical Culture* magazine. The magazine also functions as the gaze, *objet petit a*; it looks at the audience and tells us that many aspects at play in this film are not quite right. It also signifies the Real and the Imaginary registers in relation to Velda. Detective Pat Murphy breaks in on their embrace, literally; he picks the lock to Mike’s apartment. Mike asks Pat about Ray Dyker based on the information Velda uncovered. Pat says, “Got to say it, he’s got a nose. He can sniff out information like nobody I ever saw.” Ray Dyker had called while Mike was in the hospital, and Velda completed a dossier on him because, as she tells Mike, “I thought you would want me to check up on him.” Mike then uses that folder to impress Pat with his “nose.” Pat leaves after warning Mike to stay away from the Bailey case, and Velda cautions Mike to cooperate with Pat. When Velda moves to sit near Mike’s fireplace, Aldrich films her in long shot. She holds a magazine with a cover that clearly features the head a woman with short dark hair, much like Velda’s [Fig 5-13]. Aldrich cuts away from Velda, but when he cuts back to a medium-shot of Velda as she sits down in the chair, Velda holds a different magazine.

This replacement goes beyond a simple continuity error because the magazine Velda now reads is clearly seen by the viewer. It is the magazine *Physical Culture*. This magazine was out of print in 1955, and the issue Velda reads is dated September, 1940, fifteen years prior to the making of *Kiss Me Deadly*. When Velda sits down, Mike tells her that the tape she made with “lover boy” (one of Mike’s recent clients) got lost. Velda nonchalantly flips through the magazine, and says, in ungrammatical English, “That goes your case!” Her use of the wrong word, “that “ for “there,” could suggest that
Velda wants to sound casual and light, and a bit playful, as if her casual reaction to this lost tape will act as a shield to protect her from the disgust she feels about her job. She does not want Mike to say exactly what he does say: she needs to “call him up and set up another session.” Aldrich’s camera is fixed on Velda as Mike says these words. She darts her eyes in his direction and her entire body freezes. She holds the magazine open across her body as if it can act as a shield against Mike’s cruel indifference to her humiliation at playing “woo-bait” for him. This shot also features a clear view of the cover of Physical Culture [Fig 5-14]. Mike gives her directions to call the man again, “Tell him you’re sorry.” Then he switches the topic to Christina. Velda gives him an update on the poetess Christina Georgina Rossetti as well as “his” Christina. When she talks about Christina Bailey, she absent-mindedly turns the pages of the magazine. When Mike tells Velda that Christina told him to “Remember Me,” Velda closes the magazine and markedly tosses it away. She rises and says, “So remember her. She’s dead, but I’m not. Hey, remember me?” She walks over to Mike and bends down to kiss him. He interrupts her, reminding her she needs to call “Mr. Friendly” and give him some of that “honey talk” that Mike likes to listen to on the tape recorder.

The prominence of the magazine in the scene and its strangeness, given the fact that first, the magazine featured in an earlier shot is replaced by this one when Velda sits down, and second, the magazine is fifteen years old, places the magazine in the position of the gaze, objet petit a, or the lost object. This magazine first appears directly after Mike mentions another lost object—the tape that featured Velda making love to one of his client’s husband’s. Mike evokes trauma for Velda upon saying these words because she knows what comes next: Mike will ask her to repeat her session with the
client’s husband. Velda’s holding a magazine called *Physical Culture* ironically points to the way her culture turns her into a purely physical being—a body. The government investigators call her “woo-bait,” and Mike functions as a high-tech pimp, employing high-technology (tape recorders and cameras) along with Velda’s body to make his living. Her flipping through the magazine is also her way of erecting a screen, where she can play out her fantasies that Mike will *not say* what she knows he will say: that she must repeat the trauma of being his prostitute. By casually flipping through the magazine, she can pretend that she and Mike are a casual couple, sitting down to an evening’s reading. This play of the Imaginary is trumped by the Real, however; we can read the pain on her face as Mike tells her she has to repeat one of her staged sexual acts.

Velda’s possession of this particular magazine and issue remarkably suggests many concepts at play in the film. It also tells the audience much about Velda’s status and experiences in the film as a rejected woman. Aldrich must have had to search for a fifteen year old magazine for Velda to use; the discontinuous substitution of *Physical Culture* for the previous magazine also indicates the importance of having Velda have this particular object, because she could have easily held and flipped through the magazine she held in the previous shot. *Physical Culture* magazine’s subtitle is “The Personal Problem Magazine” [Fig 5-15]. Velda’s “personal problem,” or her main source of rejection, revolves around Mike’s treatment of her. The cover story of this particular issue (September 1940) also could apply to Velda: “Tired? Worried? Discouraged? Irritable? MAYBE IT’S YOUR GLANDS” (“Physical” Ball). At this moment, Velma is all of these negative conditions, but her condition stems from Mike’s rejection of her as a
girlfriend and a human being. It also speaks to the glandular problem we see in Velda throughout the film, her excessive sweating—which I discuss in Chapter Six. The magazine has the subscription block on the front cover over the word Physical indicating Mike subscribes to the magazine, which he probably does to promote good health. In the opening scene of the film when Christina accuses him of being overly concerned with his looks, he asks her: “Are you against good health or something?” Velda also seems to value the benefits of good health, as we see her exercising vigorously through her ballet practice.

Velda is more than just body, or “physical,” however. The (address) block over the word “Physical” on the magazine’s cover works on another level, which makes Velda’s possession of the magazine telling. The text seems to treat her as “physical” object, yet, she functions as the brains /mind of Mike’s detective agency. The cross out of the word “physical” reflects the film’s (perhaps unconscious) understanding that Velda is not merely part of the physical culture of this film, or culture in general, but she has a keen mind that puts her squarely in the “mental” culture of the text, and culture at large—a dimension that the other characters (and perhaps the audience members) seem to miss. Velda’s physicality is noticed and exploited, yet her intellect/mind remains invisible to Mike. In this way, she shares the invisibility experienced by other Rejected Women of Film Noir such as Gaye Dawn and Selma Parker who also are invisible to the noir hero.18

17 In the copy of this issue pictured by Ball State University’s website, the word “Physical” also is covered over by a subscription label, indicating this was the general practice for labeling the magazine for subscription (see Figure 5-15).

18 See Chapter Two for an in depth discussion of invisibility and Rejected Women of Film Noir.
Physical Culture magazine was founded by colorful and controversial editor Bernarr Macfadden. The magazine was “sold mainly to men and was replete with half-tone pictures of naked or semi-naked men in classical poses, demonstrating the evidence of a ‘built’ physique” (Whalan 600). Physical Culture was controversial due to its illustrations and photographs of scantily clad women, as well as men, and its controversial articles about sex. For example, the issue Velda reads contains the article, “Will sex education become a modern church crusade?” The magazine serves as kind of a literary correlative for the film itself which also pushes the boundaries concerning the display of sexuality and features scantily clad women, such as Christina’s nude body underneath the trench coat, Velda’s tight fitting ballet costume, and the bathing suit clad women at Evello’s mansion.\(^{19}\) The magazine also printed confessional-type letters from its readers about their personal lives. Mary Macfadden, wife of the editor, explains that the magazine received many letters from “[b]roken-hearted women . . . after they had done two hundred knee bends, twice a day, and had thrown away their corsets, only to find that the Greek gods wouldn’t give them a tumble. . . . There were girls who confessed their sexual mistakes and thought they were fallen women” (qtd in Gerbner 29). This description could apply to Velda. We can picture Velda as one of the rejected women who wrote her “confession” to Physical Culture magazine. The magazine functions as an object with a gaze, not only because it signifies Velda’s personal trauma as a rejected woman and her site of Imaginary play, but also because

\(^{19}\) Macfadden was also linked to Fascism. He trained a group of Mussolini’s guards in health and fitness (Fabian 55). Aldrich, who abhorred Spillane’s right-leaning politics might also have included this magazine as a way to link Spillane’s hero, Mike Hammer, to Fascism in a sort of oblique way. Another tie exists between Mike Hammer and Physical Culture magazine creator Bernarr Macfadden is that both men used women’s bodies for their own occupational gains. Whereas Mike pimps out Velda’s body, Macfadden’s wife, Mary, referred to herself as “Bernarr’s biological laboratory” –the couple had eight children (Fabian 54).
it urges the audience to view this scene from a different angle (awry) to appreciate who Velda truly is.

What also makes this appearance of the magazine strange, out of place, or an object that metaphorically sticks in our throats is its chronological oddness. What is a fifteen year old magazine doing in this scene? The film dates itself as taking place in 1954 at the earliest, because the car Nick works on when Mike first visits him has a license plate with a “1954” date. Physical Culture’s last issue was December 1951-January 1952 (Bennett). Mike’s having a fourteen year old issue of a magazine in his ultra-modern living room seems out of place and strange. Perhaps Mike’s owning a magazine from the time before World War II is the film’s way of remembering a kind of pre-lapsarian utopia before the development of the atomic bomb, a time before, metaphorically, the United States bit into the serpent’s apple that is nuclear weaponry. The pre-war issue of the magazine establishes a wish in the text for a more innocent time before the bomb. The magazine cover looks at the film’s audience, reminding us that the pre-nuclear age time is past, the bomb is real, and hanging onto the past is an illusion. Similarly, Velda, as she holds the magazine has a wish or an illusion, that being that Mike will stop using her sexually. Her contact with the magazine emblematizes her wish for a time of her own innocence as well. In a last ironic twist, Velda closes the magazine in order to bring about a Physical Culture in Mike. She reminds him that she has a body—she is alive—not dead like Christina—and her body has desires. Mike’s desires, however, lie elsewhere. Whether they manifest in other women, like his brief interlude with Friday (Evello’s sister) or in men, as the homoerotic energy between Mike

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20 The magazine is pre-war in relation to the United State’s involvement in the war. Although the war began on September 1, 1939 in Europe, the United States did not enter the war until December 7, 1941.
and Nick attests, or the acquiring of “something big” through his business pursuits, Mike does not desire Velda. The changing of the magazine from one in which a woman on the cover resembles her to *Physical Culture*, with a woman on the cover who looks nothing like her, also hints that Mike’s desires lie elsewhere. The two other women he may possibly be interested in romantically, Gabrielle and Friday, are both blondes, like the woman on *Physical Culture*’s cover. Velda’s wants and Mike’s wants are not in synch, and the interaction between these characters leads only to disappointment and disaster. They perish on a beach a few yards away from a nuclear blast. The incongruous *objet petit as* of Velda and Mike are presaged in the first exchange of dialogue between them. Mike says, “You’re never around when I need you,” to which Velda responds, “You never need me when I’m around.”

**Example Five: The Telephone as Gaze in The Blue Gardenia**

In the final scene of the film, Lang shoots the three roommates as they emerge from an elevator in the police station [Fig 5-16]. Norah has just been released from prison, and they are smiling and ready to face the waiting newspaper reporters and photographers. This image of the three women is uncanny and telepathetic in relation to the telephone and its ability to signify the oppression of women. In this respect, it functions as an object with a gaze in the film. Freud describes the uncanny as a feeling that something (a person, impression, event or situation) appears simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, or comfortable and uncomfortable. Copjec’s interpretation of Freud’s uncanny emphasizes that it “negates the homely not from outside, not by returning from an elsewhere, but limits the homely from within. It leeches familiarity from

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21 I am summarizing (very broadly) Freud’s definition of the uncanny from his 1919 essay “The Uncanny.”
the familiar‖ (97). The uncanny, then, is the familiar tinged with the horrific; something that creeps us out, while concurrently drawing us in. Freud lists examples of the uncanny, such as the appearance of the doppelgänger or the uncanny that emerges when certain repetitions do not register as merely coincidence, but seem eerily related. Nicholas Royle believes “[e]veryone’s relation with the uncanny is in some sense their [sic] own and no one else’s” (“Uncanny” 26). I get a feeling of the uncanny when viewing this shot. These women appear as the uncanny triple, the “Dreifachgänger” if you will, ratcheting up the uncanny factor of the doppelgänger by one. They are about the same size and share the same facial features and hairstyles. They even wear the same expression, an open-mouthed smile. This shot, which occurs only minutes before the end of the film, reinforces the interchangeability of the women already shown throughout the film and discussed in Chapter Three.

The shot is also uncanny in its ability to predict the future. Sally’s dress has a design imprinted upon it that resembles the touch-tone telephone [Fig 5-16], which will not be invented until 1964, nine years after the making of this film [Fig 5-17]. Sally’s dress functions as an uncanny harbinger of the future and as an object with a gaze. The idea that Sally’s dress could predict the future both delights and horrifies us. Its delight, anchored the Imaginary, reinforces the idea the film screen is a place of play and of imagination. Watching the film in the present, we can enjoy seeing the connections that the film makes about a future it cannot know. This gaze can also function as the Real, however, because if this film really does predict the future; it harbors a presence in the universe that we cannot understand and it suggests that we may be more powerless
than we already seem to be. On a “Mulveyan” level, the design of Sally’s dress signifies the site of her oppression (the telephone), which here is branded upon her chest.

In his book *Telepathy and Literature*, Nicholas Royle notes: Telepathy is “part of a culture which is still in the process of being articulated, and in this respect perhaps the question ‘Do you believe in telepathy?’ need not be regarded categorically or essentially distinguishable from questions such as ‘Do you believe in the telephone?’ or ‘Do you believe in television?’”(5). In this scene, *The Blue Gardenia* employs a kind of telepathy through the future incarnation of the telephone that eerily predicts a future it cannot know. The future of the telephone calls its viewers through Sally’s dress design. Admittedly, this interpretation requires a stretch of imagination, and one can imagine rejecting this hypothesis, much like Jacques Derrida, in *The Post Card*, rejects the call he received from the future. Derrida does not accept the collect call he received in 1979 from the dead “Martini Heidegger” at the very moment he had just typed Heidegger’s name (21). Derrida regretted dismissing the call as a prank, and one may be tempted to reject this reading as my trying to, in the words of Bordwell, push recalcitrant data, into my thesis of how the telephone operates as a tool of patriarchal power and oppression.

Consider how the film uncannily deals with the issue of telepathy in the remarkable scene in which Prebble doodles the picture of Norah in which she wears a dress he has never seen [Fig 5-18], and how that drawing, through an overlap dissolve, turns into Norah in the same exact pose and dress in which Prebble draws her [Fig 5-19]. Prebble somehow channels this dress telepathically. The film itself doesn’t reject telepathy, so why should we close ourselves off to accepting its telepathic powers to demonstrate the imprisonment of future women, through Sally’s wearing of the
telephone? Perhaps if we dismiss the notion of the telepathic moment of Sally as future telephone and close ourselves off from this interpretation, we reject Sally, reinforcing her status as a Rejected Woman in Film Noir. Sally’s position in the roommate triptych leads one to wonder just how prescient this film may be. In Lacan’s registers, we can argue that Norah, through her trauma of rape, signifies the Real. Crystal, through her constant reminders of the “rules” of patriarchy (how to play hard to get, how to talk to a man on the phone) symbolizes the Symbolic, the law and word of the father. And Sally represents the Imaginary. Sally is lost to fantasy, living her life through adventures in her imagination, a lifestyle choice that would be validated by the end of the twentieth century when computers afford opportunities create virtual worlds in which the Sallies of the world can live out lives on computer screens and in virtual reality scenarios as fictional characters. Future technology would provide Sally with more chances to live within the fantasies in her own head. It is interesting that the conduit for rejecting an interpretation of the film’s ability to predict the future is the rejected woman’s body, or the dress adorning her body. This situation sets her up for one more type of rejection – rejection by interpretation. By “hanging up” on this potential reading, we close off the possibility that Sally’s body can tell us something about the future. Similarly, another rejected woman, Velda, faces this same kind of rejection by interpretation in relation to the past: if one rejects the interpretation that her reading a 1940 issue of *Physical Culture* magazine does not tell us about the past and Velda’s connection to it, we miss an opportunity to accept a new way of looking at film in general and the Rejected Woman in Film Noir specifically.
Figure 5-1. Norah hesitates before answering telephone

Figure 5-2. Overlap dissolve from Sally to Prebble
Figure 5-3. The gaze of the oyster fountain with Prebble behind it

Figure 5-4. Prebble leers at Norah in suggestive *mise-en-scène*
Figure 5-5. Prebble looming over Norah; his weapon, the coffee cup, present in the *mise-en-scène*

Figure 5-6. Medium shot of Norah and Prebble. Prebble sweeps Norah off her feet.
Figure 5-7. Initial whirlpool image: Norah's rape: Prebble's penetration

Figure 5-8. Pulsating lines representing Prebble's orgasm
Figure 5-9. Whirlpool rests on Norah's crouch. Her helpless posture and fragments of mirror imply rape.

Figure 5-10. Prebble talks to Rose (off screen). He is uninjured and holds the poker.
Figure 5-11. Norah smiles as the meat pops out of her sandwich

Figure 5-12. Visual clue that Velda does the legwork in Mike’s investigations
Figure 5-13. Velda in long shot with the first unknown (and replaced) magazine.

Figure 5-14. Velda: “That goes your case!” and *Physical Culture* magazine
Figure 5-15. Cover of *Physical Culture* magazine issue read by Velda

Figure 5-16. "Dreifachgänger" and Sally as “telephone”
Figure 5-17. The touchtone telephone

Figure 5-18. Prebble looking at drawing of Norah
Figure 5-19. Overlap dissolves into Norah
CHAPTER SIX
REJECTED WOMEN OF FILM NOIR AS THE GAZE

And if I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen, which I earlier called the stain, the spot.

—Jacques Lacan, Seminar XI (97)

**Mimicry and The Gaze**

Lacan argues that at its extreme point, the gaze becomes mimicry: “I situate myself in the picture as a stain—these are the facts of mimicry” (99). He uses ocelli as an example to illustrate his point. The ocelli, an eye-shaped design, mimics the appearance of an eye, and in doing so, emits a gaze. The ocelli also serve as stain or spot in the picture. Lacan makes this argument by referring to the work of Roger Callois, who believes that most cases of what we categorize as examples of ocelli in the animal world result from our anthropomorphism. In other words, because humans may think an object looks like an eye, say for example, the back of a cobra’s hood, this does not necessarily mean a mouse will see it this way. Callois is puzzled, however, by cases of “true” mimicry involving the ocelli, such as how the mantis uses its ocelli to paralyze its prey (Callois 7-8). Lacan is interested in Callois’ puzzlement. Do ocelli work like an eye? And, he wonders if perhaps the gaze works like ocelli, because objects have a gaze, even though they do not have eyes. Callois’ ambivalence interests Lacan because the nature of the gaze is difficult to pin down or define with physical certainties. Lacan perhaps uses Callois because his own uncertainly about how some animals truly are affected by the ocelli mimics Lacan’s concern about how each person’s individual experiences color her/his experience with the gaze. Using Callois as a starting point, Lacan tries to explain this stain or spot (the gaze) through the process of mimicry.
In mimicry, one animal places itself as a stain in the picture. He gives the example of an obscure crustacean, the caprella acanthifera [Fig 6-1], and discusses how it positions itself among other marine life, such as the briozoaires ectoproctes [Fig 6-2]. The caprella resembles a part of the intestinal tract of the briozoaires, an animal whose anus is exterior. This example seems to display Lacan’s rather cryptic sense of humor. He seems to be making a joke about how this crustacean chooses to become an asshole, or assume the position of shit, the ultimate staining device in the picture. Lacan discusses Callois’ claim that animals do not undertake mimicry as a means of adaptation or survival. I am making the argument that the Rejected Woman in Film Noir can function as the “stain,” as the “spot” in the picture, in the way she metaphorically takes on the position of the caprella in relation to metaphorical briozoaires.

If we consider the femme fatale or home girl as briozoaires, the rejected woman becomes the caprella. Often times she looks like the femme fatale or the good girl, but is an inferior copy of her in that she is coded as a being a slightly less attractive copy. She becomes, therefore, the model of mimicry Callois identifies as travesty. Callois’ three types of mimicry are travesty, camouflage, and intimidation. At times, she employs camouflage, which Lacan describes as “not a question of harmonizing with background but against a mottled background becoming mottled” (“Four” 99). For example, in Figure 2-3, Gaye Dawn’s dress makes her blend into the background. In a sense, she becomes “mottled” against a “mottled” background. This visual representation of her camouflage reflects the discursive elements of the film, as discussed in Chapter Two—she can steal Johnny’s gun because she is invisible to him in terms of her “to-(not)-be-looked-at-ness.”
Lacan describes intimidation, the second of Callois’ categories of mimicry as “a threatening gesture” and he uses the example of how American Marines fighting in Japan during World War II “were taught to make as many grimaces as they [the Japanese]” so that the Americans would not be intimidated by the Japanese troops (117). Effie’s “gesture” toward Sam (her middle finger) could be seen as a form of intimidation, although this would qualify as a very passive form of intimidation. I would argue that Rejected Women of Film Noir do not often employ this second type of mimicry. Lacan explains the third category of mimicry as travesty, which he relates to a certain kind of intended sexual finality: “Nature shows us that this sexual aim is produced by all kinds of effects that are essentially disguise, masquerade” (“Four” 100). In other words, although these disguises are not necessary for sexual acts to occur, they seem somehow to be intrinsically tied to this process. I do not wish to conflate the idea of travesty with Doane’s example of “masquerade;” however, My using Doane’s masquerade to explain invisibility in terms of sexual longing and Lacan’s use of this word to describe a form of mimicry is strangely coincidental, but not much more.

Doane’s idea of masquerade involves distance not mimicry.¹ What is interesting in the case of travesty in relation to the rejected woman is that this word also means “inferior copy.” And, in many cases, the Rejected Woman in Film Noir stands in as an inferior copy to the home girl or femme fatale. She mimics the femme fatale and home girl, and her efforts may come close, but the rejected woman is always an inferior copy of the original. The rejected woman’s mimicry is quite extraordinary at times, in that she either looks like, dresses like, gestures like, or is positioned in similar ways in the mise-

¹ See Chapter Two for an explanation of Doane’s theory of the masquerade (and the transvestite) and its (their) application to rejected women.
en-scène as the femme fatale or home girl. I would argue that this doubling places her as the stain in the picture. Here, she functions as the gaze in either the Real or the Imaginary register. In relation to the Real, she is often treated cruelly and rejected by the noir hero. In the Imaginary, her imaging a space where she can play at being the femme fatale or the home girl suggests a kind of screening produced in the Imaginary.

In this chapter, I closely read scenes involving Yvonne in *Casablanca* to show how the film presents her as an inferior copy of Ilsa, and how, like other Rejected Women of Film Noir, she finds some solace from her rejection by the noir hero through resistance. In Yvonne’s case, this resistance is globally political. I also highlight other moments of travesty in relation to rejected women, such as how the Lush and Gaye mirror (yet imperfectly) Anna and Nora respectively. Using the other metaphor Lacan discusses, each rejected woman serves as the gaze in her role as caprella to the femme fatale or home girl’s briozoaires: she become the “ass” or the butt of a joke. Each of them suffers ridicule at the hands of the noir hero.

**The Rejected Woman as “Sticking to the Seat” of Film Noir: “Lounge Time” and Abjection**

Three of the Rejected Women of Film Noir discussed in this chapter, Yvonne, the Lush and Gaye, have one thing in common: they are all B-girls, or bar-girls. Thus, in their first shot on camera, all three of them appear on a barstool. They are fettered to their barstools in a manner akin to Effie and the telephone operators in *The Blue Gardenia* being tied to their telephones. These B-girls are the inhabitants of Sobchack’s “Lounge Time.”² None of these women ever leaves the space of the bar. The Lush’s confinement is even more pronounced; she never leaves her bar seat. *Casablanca* is

² See the discussion on Lounge Time in Chapter Three, note 14.
mostly set in Rick’s bar; *Key Largo*’s setting functions almost like a play—the action taking almost entirely in the downstairs bar. *Criss Cross* opens up a bit, but many scenes are located in the Round Up. Despite these confined settings, the women that the rejected women mimic all appear outside the space of the bar at least once. Ilsa shops at a bazaar in the sunshine of *Casablanca*, Anna meets Steve in a drugstore and on a sunny corner of Los Angeles, and Nora heads to the boat dock with Frank to moor the Temple’s boat in the bright pre-hurricane sunlight.

In addition to being confined to the space of the bar, all three women have a connection in relation to alcohol. The Lush and Gaye both appear intoxicated on screen; Yvonne drinks heavily to forget her pain with Rick. Each woman receives rejection, struggles with alcohol, and is fettered to a barstool, all of these traumatic issues, sickness, loneliness, and despair, links them to the Lacanian Real. They also encompass the realm of the abject. Julia Kristeva uses the term abjection to define the detachable parts of the body that create feelings of disgust. She provides examples of abject materials:

A wound with blood or pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay …refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, harshly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. (3)

Elizabeth Grosz argues that in many cases, the abject is tied to the female rather than the male body. She does an in depth examination of the way menstrual blood is defined as abject, yet seminal fluid is not (197-198). In *Criss Cross*, Frank the bartender describes the Lush by saying: “She sits on that stool so much that frankly one day I think she’s gonna get stuck to it.” The misogyny underlying this cruel joke is particularly
disturbing. The line insinuates abjection in the Lush in terms of her sticky or unclean genitals.

Another Rejected Woman of Film Noir, Velda, is tied to abjection through her excessive sweating: Under the IMDB blog subject line “Velda Sure Sweats A Lot,” one blogger writes, “Her scene in the bedroom isn’t the only sweaty one. She’s also sweating like a pig as she is doing her ballet moves” (“Velda”). Wager calls Velda a “sweaty, whiny, and desperate” femme fatale (“Dames” 64), showing scholars also have picked up on Velda’s abjection. A discussion of the abject leads us back to Lacan’s caprella and its imitation of the briozoaires’ anus, or its excrement. If the rejected women serves as the stain in the picture along the lines of the way the caprella mimic the anus or excrement of the briozoaires, we tie together her as the gaze in the picture as well as her status as abject. In many ways then, the Rejected Woman in Film Noir functions as the gaze in film both through her mimicry of the femme fatale or the home girl, and in her role as abject. In this chapter, I will read Yvonne, The Lush and Gaye through their roles as mimics, and then end with an analysis of how Velda’s sweaty face manifests the role of the gaze in Kiss Me Deadly.

Examples of Rejected Women as the Gaze

Yvonne in Casablanca

Yvonne, the bar girl that Rick beds and discards, bears a striking resemblance to Ilsa, both in physical looks and costuming. Ilsa arrives in Casablanca with her husband, Lazlo unaware that her old lover, Rick, owns a popular bar in the town. The film takes place in December 1941, and the Nazis are winning the war. Lazlo is a resistance fighter who has escaped from a concentration camp. The couple heads to Casablanca in order to get the necessary papers to enter Europe. We learn through flashbacks that
Rick and Ilsa had a passionate affair right before the Germans invaded Paris. Ilsa was married to Lazlo at the time but thought he was dead. On the day the two of them make plans to flee Paris, Ilsa gets word that Lazlo is alive. She leaves Rick without explaining to him what has happened. Rick is now callous towards women, as noted in his cruel treatment of Yvonne. Ilsa’s appearance in Casablanca both upsets and excites him. He insults her at first, and then, when she professes her love for him, he comes up with a plot to get Lazlo out of Casablanca. The Nazis cannot arrest Lazlo because he is on unoccupied French soil in Casablanca, but they watch him closely looking for any reason to capture him.

Before the film begins, the unctuous Ugarte has shot two German couriers, obtaining the unquestionable letters of transit they were carrying, which Ugarte hopes to sell for a large profit. He asks Rick to hide the letters before Ugarte is arrested and executed. Lazlo tries to buy the letters from Rick, but Rick’s jealousy keeps him from giving Lazlo the letters. Once he reconnects with Ilsa romantically, he decides to give the letters of transit to Lazlo and Ilsa. He insists that Ilsa stay with Lazlo because she is an important part of his work, and Rick has work to do as well: “Where I’m going you can’t follow.” Ilsa gets on the plane with Lazlo, and Rick and the police prefect, Renault, walk off into the night fog, ready to join the French resistance against the war.

Yvonne first appears on the screen in medium-shot with Sacha, the bartender. She wears a low-cut, V-neck blouse, made up of white, shiny shingle-like fabric, which codes her as flashy and showy. A large brooch resting in the “V” of her cleavage and her bare midriff also connote her as sexually adventurous [Fig 6-3]. Her outfit flatters her attractive figure; her hair and make-up are perfect. Sacha pours Yvonne a drink from
“the boss’s private stock,” winking at her and then saying, “Yvonne, I love you” [Fig 6-4]. Yvonne, as Rick’s mistress, represents “the boss’s private stock” as well. Yvonne’s gaze is intense; she stares off-screen looking for Rick. Yvonne gulps down her drink and tells Sacha to “Shut up.” He says he will, because, as he repeats, “Yvonne, I love you.” As Rick walks into the frame, he eclipses Sacha, emphasizing Rick’s power. Yvonne keeps her eyes locked on him, but Rick does not look at her during their entire exchange. He keeps his back turned toward her, indicating her insignificance. She stands up, and places her left hand on the bar stool in front of her. She turns the stool about one-half of a full rotation, counter-clockwise [Fig 6-5]. This gesture, on one level, indicates her nervousness. She carelessly turns the stool to have something to do with her hands as she waits to see how Rick will treat her. On another level, her turning the stool counter-clockwise represents her desire to turn back the clock to a time where Rick paid attention to her. Rick never makes eye contact with Yvonne, even when he faces her as he walks into the frame. Instead, Rick focuses on Sacha, who says to Rick: “Some Germans boom, boom, boom, boom gave this check. Is all right?” Rick looks briefly at the check, then tears it up, and throws it to the ground because it is worthless. Metaphorically this gesture parallels his treatment of Yvonne; he tears her up, (breaks her heart) and throws her away.

Sacha’s four repetitions of the word “boom” after the word “Germans” emphasize the Germans’ aggressiveness in the war. “Boom” usually suggests bombs or gunfire. It could also be a slang word for sex. Sacha’s strange stuttering may foreshadow Yvonne’s upcoming affair with a German officer who will “boom” her the way the Germans “boomed” Paris. Or, perhaps his stutter expresses his desire to “boom”
Yvonne, as these words tumble out of his mouth like a Freudian slip. “Boom” may also trigger memories for Rick of the booming sound of the “German 77” cannon as the Germans got closer and closer to Paris on the last day he spent with Ilsa, partially explaining his coldness toward Yvonne, who looks a lot like Ilsa. They have similar hairstyles and facial features. Both women wear white V-neck blouses with silver brooches and large earrings when they first appear on screen. Figure 6-6 shows Ilsa’s first arrival at Rick’s Café Americain, and her outfits resembles the one Yvonne wears in her initial scene, only Ilsa’s is a less garish version of Yvonne’s. *Casablanca* introduces Yvonne before Ilsa, implying that she is merely the warm up act. Rick indifferently deflects Yvonne’s questions of “Where were you last night?” and “Will I see you tonight?” Yvonne’s first question proves that Rick stood her up the previous evening. He offers her no excuse or apology. “That was so long ago, I don’t remember.” Despite this poor treatment, she asks to see him again this evening. Yvonne functions here not only as a sexual pawn for Rick, but also as a narrative pawn “sacrificed” in order to demonstrate Rick’s power and masculinity. Sacha’s thrice repeating of “Yvonne, I love you” establishes Yvonne’s capital as a desirable woman. She symbolizes the Rejected Woman in Film Noir, however, because she is not desirable to the noir hero, Rick.

Yvonne’s anguish becomes more pronounced as a result of Rick’s clipped answers and cruel treatment. She slides her brandy glass across the bar and orders Sacha to give her another drink. Rick says, “Sacha, she’s had enough.” Rick’s line has multi-layered meanings: enough liquor, enough rejection from Rick, and the line possibly reflects Rick’s feeling—that he has had “enough” of Yvonne. She responds: “Don’t listen to him Sacha, fill it up!” As Sacha moves center screen, the camera pushes
in, producing a tighter triangle of Yvonne, Sacha, and Rick. Sacha’s visual prominence at center screen emphasizes his third uttering of “Yvonne, I love you,” but now he follows this phrase with: “but he [Rick] pays me.” Yvonne raises her voice protesting her treatment, but Rick cuts her off mid-sentence: “Rick, I’m sick and tired of having you—.” Rick’s body language indicates his indifference or even annoyance with Yvonne. Rick moves diagonally from the lower right corner to the upper left corner of the frame, keeping his back to the camera until he turns around and grabs Yvonne’s right arm, which finally becomes visible for the first time in this thirty-five second take [Fig 6-7]. The camera follows Rick’s movements, panning slightly left so that only Yvonne and Rick remain in frame, Yvonne pulls her arm away, trying to regain control of her limb, but Rick’s grip remains firm as he maneuvers her out of the bar under the pretext that she is drunk; the clues in the film, however, suggest otherwise. She speaks clearly and moves adeptly throughout the scene. She seems forlorn, not inebriated. Her silenced outburst is motivated by pain, not the counterfeit courage of alcohol. In addition, Rick’s delivery of the line, “You’re going home; you’ve had little too much to drink” conveys not compassion for Yvonne but his own personal and economic motivations to get rid of her. Her overtly displayed emotion annoys him and having a “hysterically” upset woman in the bar is bad for business. His vocal tone, slightly sarcastic, and his gestures—he dips his head slightly down and raises his right eyebrow—signify false concern and patriarchal condescension.

Yvonne and Rick walk to the left and out of the frame. A quick cut finds them in medium shot, in motion, at the threshold between the bar and the dining room. As Yvonne crosses this threshold, she shakes free of Rick’s grasp, and makes a half
counter-clockwise turn as she knocks over a chair with her left hand. Her pushing over the chair appears to be deliberate, instead of resulting from drunken stumbling. The knocked-over chair sits at a “Reserved” table and Yvonne’s shawl is draped over another chair at this table. Her knocking over the chair signifies her frustration that her plan to “reserve” Rick is in vain. Twice in the film, Ilsa sits at a “Reserved” table. Both times, the camera shows the waiter picking up the reserve sign after Ilsa is seated. Ilsa is lady-like and “reserved” whereas Yvonne is overly emotional, and therefore not reserved. Yvonne’s half-counter clockwise turn visually rhymes with her half counter-clockwise turn of the barstool, once more working on a second level, indicating her desire to turn back time.

As Rick and Yvonne exit the café, a search light captures and highlights them, as if to spotlight Yvonne’s frustration, pain and disappointment. The camera moves with them, motivated by their walking toward Sacha who has gone out before them in order to hail a cab. During this shot, Yvonne laments: “What a fool I was to fall for a man like you.” Rick ignores her. Strangely disorienting, Yvonne’s mouth is not synchronized with her words, possibly the result of poor quality dubbing or LeBeau’s difficulty with English. Still, the spectator can choose to read meaning into this asynchronicity, beyond the level of a technical gaffe. It perhaps conveys that Yvonne is not “in sync” with the proper codes of this hyper-masculine world. For example, Rick knows the acceptable (masculine) way to deal with rejection. It involves the expression of physical pain, used to act out the unacceptable expression of psychic pain, dramatized by his hitting his fist forcibly against the table in the famous “In all the gin joints” scene. It also involves heavy drinking and stoically taking his pain like a man, signified by his commanding
Sam to play “As Time Goes By” (“If she can take it, so can I!”). Ilsa also knows how to take her pain like a man. She takes it stoically and without feminine hysterics. She bangs her hand against the table knocking over a champagne glass to express her psychic pain during the Belle Aurora flashback scene. Ilsa’s eyes may fill with tears, but she never loses this sense of masculine control, yet another reason why the film seems to value her more than Yvonne, who takes the “feminine” approach to dealing with emotional pain.

The camera moves with Rick and Yvonne, keeping them in a medium shot. Rick reestablishes his grip on Yvonne’s right arm, despite her efforts to shake loose. Upon reaching Sacha, Rick relinquishes his grip on Yvonne’s right arm but only after Sacha’s grip replaces his own, signifying the men’s exchanging of Yvonne. Rick stands outside the café after he dispatches Yvonne. The searchlight catches him in its moving spotlight. The camera cuts to a shot of the source of the roving light, a large watchtower, then to a long shot of Renault in the foreground (screen left) and Rick (screen center) but farther away from the camera. Renault has observed the entire drama with Yvonne outside the café. The watchtower’s powerful gaze doubles the male gaze of Renault. Renault states: “How extravagant you are, throwing away women like that; someday they might be scarce.” Her value increases with every man who desires her. This quip makes a joke at Yvonne’s expense.

Renault’s line implicitly suggests that Yvonne’s value ties to her being a white woman in an African frontier town. Pépé Le Moko (1937) deals with the race issue implied by Renault. Pépé lusts after Gaby because of her whiteness and specifically her connection to Paris. She tells him that her perfume smells of the Metro. At one point
Pépé tells Inèz, the gypsy woman he lives with in the Casbah that he would never take her away with him, even if he could ever leave the Casbah, because she represents a portable version of the Casbah. Pépé rejects Inèz and does not appreciate her devotion and love for him. He callously courts Gaby in front of Inèz without concern for her feelings. Ginette Vincendeau notes that Inèz only gets one major close-up in which “her face [is] covered with dark criss-crossing shadows” [Fig 6-8] (59). She also notes that Inèz’s “skin shines with sweat” which is “associated with ‘natives’” (59-60). This sweating also ties Inèz with abjection and her abject status as a rejected woman. The link between Yvonne and abject is subtle, yet exists in the next scene involving Yvonne.

When Yvonne resurfaces later in the film, Rick’s cruel indifference to her is evident in his gestures as well as his words. Rick sits with Renault. His unfocused look is directed screen left (providing a mirror opposite of Yvonne’s earlier concentrated screen right look at Rick.) Rick nods and raises his eyebrows twice as he says to Renault: “Looks like you’re a little late.” As Renault answers, “Huh?” both men turn, directing their eyes screen left. The camera cuts to a long shot of Yvonne’s entrance into the café with a Nazi officer. The diegetic music immediately changes to an instrumental version of the hit song “You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby.” The song choice simultaneously informs Renault’s lustful feelings toward Yvonne. Rick’s comment refers to Renault’s earlier plan to catch Yvonne “on the rebound.” Yvonne has found a more powerful man than Renault in Casablanca, so Renault has lost his chance. Rick’s comment and his mocking gesture of raising his eyebrows serve both to tease Renault about his failure and to show how unaffected he is by Yvonne’s new romance. He
responds to her with a cynical amusement bordering on apathy. This moment also shows how both men easily make Yvonne a source of ridicule.

This ridicule also suggests the abject object of excrement. Rick’s gesture of pinching (or holding) his nose also could suggest that she figuratively “stinks” because she represents excrement. She is a consumed item, and the remainder of any consumption is excrement. Lacanian psychoanalyst Éric Laurent writes about the ways men interact with women in relation to three of the four Lacanian lost objects: breast, feces, and the gaze. Laurent asserts that a man who adopts “the anal approach to women” continuously is “falling in love, and then fleeing like a madman once the object he loves is reduced to an anal object that smells” (28). Yvonne, a cast away object takes on the position of excrement. This argument also ties back to her figurative position as caprella to Illya’s briozoaires—Yvonne is associated with excrement because in this arrangement, the caprella mimics the excrement of the briozoaires. Yvonne also “stinks” because she has “gone over to the enemy,” which despite all his feigned neutrality, disgusts Rick. As Renault later tells him, he always knew Rick was a patriot.

Instead of having the camera pan right and follow the couple as they go by Rick’s and Renault’s table, Curtiz shows Yvonne and the German soldier walking out of frame screen right, and then quickly cuts to them walking past the table. Rick’s comment indicates that he can clearly see Yvonne entering the café from his vantage point, so the distance from the door of the café to Rick’s table cannot be so great as to necessitate a quick cut instead of a continuous pan. The cut evokes Yvonne’s emotional pain—Rick’s callous rejection cuts her deeply. The cut also emphasizes how Yvonne is separated (cut) from the validity of her own convictions. By dating the Nazi officer, she
becomes a collaborator with the enemy. Yvonne lets out a loud (and obviously phony) laugh and looks over her shoulder at Rick as she passes his table [Fig 6-9]. Rick does not return her gaze. He looks down, and places his hand up as to physically block her look [Fig 6-10].

Yvonne's clothing once again highlights Yvonne’s status as an inferior copy of Ilisa. Yvonne wears a gown with a striped top [Fig 6-11], reminiscent of the striped outfit Ilisa wears when she visits Signore Ferrari with Lazlo [Fig 6-12]. Unlike Ilisa’s modest suit with its high neckline, Yvonne’s gown has a plunging neckline and is made of showy, shiny fabric, unlike Ilisa’s subdued and elegant clothing. Yvonne also wears brassy earrings, in contrast to Ilisa’s unadorned ears. Yvonne has no gloves, and she carries a large shiny square purse similar to Ilisa’s in shape and color, but its size and glossiness reflect Yvonne’s garishness. Yvonne’s prison-like stripes reflect her prison-like state. She returns to Rick’s on the arm of a Nazi soldier in her desperate and futile attempt to make Rick jealous. Ilisa wears an elegantly tailored white suit accessorized with white gloves, which connote a lady-like refinement, and a square white purse. The shirt under her white vest is striped white and black, connoting a feeling of imprisonment, which reflects her experiences on this day. She has endured a visit at Captain Renault’s office in which Major Strasser tells her and Lazlo that they will never obtain exit visas from Renault; they are imprisoned in Casablanca. Ilisa stays outside the Blue Parrot initially, as Lazlo goes inside to find out if they can illegally obtain exit visas through Signor Ferrari.

She encounters Rick, whose first words to her are, “You’re being cheated,” as a street vendor offers her a lace tablecloth at an inflated price. Rick “cheats” Ilisa as well—
he is not the same man he was in Paris. She tells him, “Last night I saw what happened to you. The Rick I knew in Paris, I could tell him; he’d understand. But the one who looked at me with such hatred.” The Rick she knew in Paris remains to her, and she to him, a prisoner of an irretrievable past. Rick wears a striped tie, indicating that his heart (the area covered by the tie) is imprisoned along with Ilse’s. Ilse joins Lazlo in The Blue Parrot and learns from Signor Ferrari that it would “take a miracle” for Lazlo to get out of Casablanca, “and the Germans have outlawed miracles.” The mise-en-scène suggests imprisonment too, as shadows cut across Ilse and Lazlo. When they sit with Ferrari at the table, a solid shadow cuts across their shoulders like a guillotine further demonstrating their dire situation. Ironically, Ferrari asks Lazlo if he knows he is being “shadowed.” Lazlo responds, “Of course.”

When Yvonne visits Rick’s Café with the Nazi officer, she tells Sacha to “put up a whole row” of drinks—starting here and ending here!” Yvonne punctuates the second here by clumsily gesturing with her large brash purse so that it almost knocks over a French soldier’s drink. Yvonne’s exaggerated gestures hint that she is intoxicated; perhaps as a way of drowning her pain concerning Rick, or taking the edge off her own self-loathing at dating a Nazi. The Nazi officer quickly grabs at Yvonne’s purse, pulling it closer to him and away from the French solider—the Freudian connections between Yvonne’s purse and the female genitals being obvious—thereby reducing Yvonne to object status yet again. The French soldier chides Yvonne, in French, for her choice of companions. Yvonne, responding in French, tells him to mind his own business. The Nazi officer challenges the French soldier, and their encounter metaphorically represents the larger battle at hand. When Rick enters to break up the fight, Yvonne
immediately looks at him. She watches him, perhaps hoping he breaks up the fight over concern for her. She will once again be disappointed; Yvonne’s actions do not motivate Rick; he never even looks at her. He states: “I don’t like disturbances in my place. You either lay off politics or get out.” A fellow French soldier pulls away his comrade, leaving Yvonne and the Nazi together at the bar.

In her penultimate appearance in the film, Yvonne sits at a table with the German officer. This shot features Yvonne (screen left) in profile and her Nazi companion (screen right) in the foreground. The German has his back to the screen, watching his countrymen perform “Die Wacht am Rhein” in the background of the shot [Fig 6-13]. The use of deep focus in this shot allows the spectator to see the Germans singing with gusto, thereby giving him/her the option of focusing on Yvonne and her companion in the foreground, or the Nazis in the background. The open bottle in the ice bucket signifies that the drink Yvonne cradles in her hands is champagne, implying the wealth of the German and his willingness to spend it on her. Yvonne looks forlorn. She glances down at her glass and looks at neither the singing party nor her date. Perhaps she is upset because Rick did not display any emotion, jealousy or otherwise. Or, perhaps she is upset because as a French woman, she is ashamed to be out with a German, a shame recently awakened by the Germans’ singing.

This deep focus shot is followed immediately by a shallow focus shot of Ilsa, sitting at another table in the café. Ilsa is approximately in the same location in the frame as Yvonne. Lazlo, out of focus, passes behind Ilsa and walks out of the frame on his way to rouse the band to play “La Marseillaise.” As Ilsa’s gaze follows Lazlo, she turns so that she is in profile, then face forward to the camera [Fig 6-14]. The moment
she is in profile, she assumes the same position as Yvonne did in the previous shot [Fig 6-13]. The camera moves in and captures her radiant face in close-up. The similarly of these two subsequent shots suggests the doubling of these two characters, but with Yvonne as the inferior copy. Whereas Yvonne remains in medium-shot, Ilsa gets a close-up with soft lighting. The camera is slightly left off center, filming the right side (screen left) of Ilsa’s face. A large shadow rests on her right cheek and neck (screen left), while the remainder of her face bathes in a soft luminous light. Back and top lighting give her a haloed effect, implying her angelic persona [Fig 6-15]. In contrast, Yvonne gets no close-up and shares her medium-shot through deep focus. The audience can choose to look at Yvonne, or choose, as Rick did, to look elsewhere.

Yvonne’s final appearance occurs shortly after this scene, during the singing of “La Marseillaise.” She has two close-up shots, her only ones in the film, before disappearing from the movie. Both close-ups relate to her singing of “La Marseillaise.” In the first close-up, Yvonne’s tear-streaked face fills the screen. Yvonne is shot exactly as Ilsa was during her close-up discussed above. Yvonne also is lit from the back and top, giving her the same angelic effect as Ilsa. She has a shadow on her right cheek, and the light source emanates from the left [See Fig 6-16]. The camera focuses on Yvonne for six full seconds as she sings two lines of the anthem: “Mugir ces féroces soldats? Ils viennent jusque dans vos bras.” [The roar of those ferocious soldiers? They come right here into your midst.]. In the second close-up, Yvonne screams: “Viva La France!” Viva La Democracie!” An extreme close-up of Ilsa intersperses Yvonne’s two close-ups, which serves to remind the spectator of how similar they are in appearance. The extreme-close-up of Ilsa allows her to eclipse Yvonne. Ilsa’s shot is much more
flattering than either of Yvonne’s close-ups. The camera catches Ilsa as she stares admiringly at Lazlo. Her eyes brim with tears and her mouth opens slightly, a gesture which helps express her extreme admiration for her brave husband. On the other hand, Yvonne’s close-ups feature her face in unflattering, yet gut-wrenching emotional contortions. During her first close-up, Yvonne is so infused with emotion that she appears on the verge of tears. She even slightly shakes from overwhelming passion. The experiences of the actress playing Yvonne, Madeleine LeBeau, also inform the intense display of emotion during these close-ups. Harmetz’s *Round Up the Usual Suspects* discusses the harrowing journey LeBeau and her husband, Jewish actor Marcel Dalio, who plays the croupier in *Casablanca*, made to the United States. They escaped from Paris hours ahead of the Nazi invasion. They traveled to Lisbon, and then waited two months to get visas to Chile. While docked in Mexico, they discovered their visas were forgeries. They eventually secured Canadian passports, and made it to the United States by the time shooting for *Casablanca* began in May 1942 (Harmetz 213-14). When we watch Yvonne singing La Marseillaise, we also see the real-life pain and personal struggles of the actress playing her (LeBeau) reflected in the emotionally powerful rendering of the song. Up to this point, all Yvonne’s passion has been directed at Rick. In this scene, Yvonne has the opportunity to redeem herself. She makes the turn from B-girl to French patriot. Yvonne learns that her romantic troubles with Rick “don’t amount to a hill of beans.”

**The Lush in *Criss Cross***

The Lush functions as an inferior copy of Anna, even more than Yvonne functions as the same for Ilsa. Yvonne is coded as sexually alluring and attractive, yet she wilts in the presence of the eternal brightness of home girl Ilsa. The noir hero also
rejects the Lush, but she never is coded as sexually attractive or desirous. She does, like Yvonne, stand in as a travesty of the main female character, in this case, the femme fatale Anna. The Lush’s character has no narrative significance. To briefly summarize the story, Steve Thompson returns home after a year away. He reconnects with his ex-wife Anna (They divorced because they fought and because Steve’s family did not approve of her). In Steve’s absence, Anna has taken up with local gangster Slim Dundee, who owns the local bar Anna and Steve used to frequent, the Round Up. The Lush is a constant presence in this bar. Anna and Steve start spending time together again, and then, Anna abruptly marries Slim Dundee, leaving Steve heart-broken. Steve returns to his job as an armored truck driver, and tries to forget about Anna, until he happens to run into her by accident. Steve finds out that Anna married Slim because Steve’s friend, detective Pete Ramirez, threatened to send Anna to jail if she did not stop seeing Steve. Anna tells Steve that Slim abuses her showing him her bruises.

Anna and Steve begin seeing each other behind Slim’s back, which is dangerous as they both know Slim will kill them if he finds out. When Slim does find out, Steve concocts an elaborate lie that he was seeing Anna in order to arrange a meeting with Slim so they could plan an armored car heist together. Steve is forced into planning and executing this robbery so Slim does not find out he and Anna are involved. They two lovers plan to leave town once they get their cut of the money. Steve realizes in the middle of the robbery that Slim plans to double-cross him, and when Slim kills Steve’s fellow armored car driver, Steve tries to stop the robbery by shooting Slim (who lives). Steve is also shot, and winds up in the hospital, and is hailed as a hero for stopping the robbery of his truck. Pete figures out that Steve was in on the robbery, and Slim still is
trying to kill him. Steve escapes to a secret hideaway where Anna waits for him with the money from the robbery. Soon after they reunite, Slim finds them and guns them down. They die embracing each other. The police sirens in the distance indicate they would not have gotten away, and that Slim soon will be caught as well.

During her first scene, Siodmak films cuts to a medium-shot of the Lush that shows her with a solemn tense expression on her face [Fig 6-17]. The lighting is unflattering and harsh; revealing the lines under her eyes. Her left hand is closest to the screen, showing she wears no wedding ring. Her left hand clenches a cigarette and is perched on an ashtray. Her right hand is about to grab a glass of beer. In front of the beer stands a chaser drink in a shot glass. In this one cut out medium shot, her reference codes signify her as a spinster and a heavy drinker. Her pained look could express the jealously she feels toward Anna. Her eyes look left, as she looks at Steve. Why Siodmak decides to cut to the Lush is curious, as she is not engaged in the conversation between Steve and Pete, which drives the plot. This cut out shot of her seems to exist only to code Steve as desirable and to show women notice him, which, is unnecessary and excessive because the actor playing Steve (Burt Lancaster) is very handsome, and as a trained acrobat, has an extraordinary physique. This shot, like other shots of her, and reminiscent of the shots of Effie, are particular unflattering. It accentuates her frizzy hair, which exists in stark contrast to Anna’s perfect, manageable hair. The Lush is flat-chested as opposed to Anna’s curvy, sexy figure. The previous close ups of Anna reveal no lines or wrinkles on her face [Fig 6-18]; Siodmak lights Anna so she appears almost dewy and moist, as opposed to the way the camera desiccates the Lush. In this scene, Steve tells Pete to mind his own business in relation
to his relationship with Anna, who at this point, has already married Slim, but Steve’s line also applies to the Lush who sits at the bar alone, eavesdropping on conversations of the glamorous, young and attractive people. The way the nightclub is set up, the bar stands on its margin. The nightclub is a place with lively music where couples dance; it is a world of glamour and coupledom. This world exists just over the shoulder of the Lush. Her bar seat rests on the edge of the nightclub, but she has her back to the nightclub portion of the bar, almost as if she were denied entrance. She wears a solid necklace that resembles a dog collar; making her appear like a dog with an electrified collar—if she strays into forbidden territory, she gets zapped.\(^3\)

The bartender, Frank, tells the Lush “you’re my best customer morning til night.” The camera switches from Frank to medium shot of the Lush beaming with pride. She smiles, her finger is caught up in the air in mid tap on her cigarette; she is proud to be the “best” at something. She is sharply photographed, although the patrons behind her are in soft focus. The light catches her chest making it appear sunken in, again showing the contrast between her and Anna. The Lush’s pride is short-lived, as Frank delivers the very vicious line about her getting stuck to the bar stool. Frank says these words to Pete, not to the Lush directly, but certainly so that she can hear them. The camera cuts again to the Lush, with chaser in hand, and a look of sadness and disappointment crosses her face. The lighting is again harsh, emphasizing the lines of her face, and her expression is similar to the one I discussed earlier in relation to Nurse One’s upon hearing Jededah’s cruel insult.\(^4\) This insult too cuts harshly, which is mirrored by the

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\(^3\) Of course, my reading here is anachronistic in terms of the film’s production. No such dog collar technology existed in 1949.

\(^4\) In Chapter One
way the lighting harshly cuts her face, making shadows gouge out lines and wrinkles through which we can read her pain. The Lush, the older spinster is not coded for desire, but even more perniciously, coded as abject. Although this brief reaction shot registers her pain, the film does not focus on it. The ultimate ironic cruelty of Frank’s comment is that throughout the entire film, the Lush never once leaves her barstool. The maximum amount of movement she undertakes is her turning around to look at Steve when he walks toward the telephone booth behind her. Even Frank in his position as bartender gets to move out from behind the bar. Her immobility mirrors that of the rejected women discussed in Chapter Three.

The film flashes back in time to when the Lush first meets Steve. As he opens the door in the background of the shot, she sits in her usual seat at the bar [Fig 6-19]. She has a drink to her lips and an open book on the bar. She wears comfortable looking slacks and a colorful shirt. By today’s (nearly impossible) standards of beauty, where women have to be a sample size to be considered beautiful, the Lush would be considered overweight, as she displays roundness of hips, and full thighs and stomach. She is, however, only slightly larger than the femme fatale, Anna. The Lush’s slight excess of flesh around the hips, thighs, and stomach code her as older and matronly. In a later scene, Anna sits on a drugstore stool eating ice cream, Steve tells Anna that she will get “as fat as a horse” if she keeps eating the ice cream she is so evidently enjoying. This scene is also the only one in which Anna wears slacks [Fig 6-20]. Anna receives Steve’s warning about her getting fat (and of course, unattractive to men!) while wearing slacks, which ties her to the Lush visually and formally in the film as they both sit at counters in similar postures and both wears slacks. Anna consumes ice
cream instead of alcohol, however. Still, the Lush serves as a cautionary tale for Anna. She represents what Anna might have become if she had lived that long. Like the Lush, Anna most likely would spend her middle-aged years stuck to the seat of a bar. When Steve meets Anna at the drug store, she sits a counter, just like the Lush sits at her barstool. Anna’s full body shot has her at screen left; the Lush is usually shot in the screen right position, suggesting a kind of an inverse relationship between them, and highlighting how the Lush serves as a poor copy, or travesty of Anna.

The next time the Lush appears in the film, Siodmak contrasts her to Anna through Steve’s happiness regarding his relationship Anna and his cruel joking with the Lush. Steve jubilantly bounces into the bar looking for Anna. He is in a great mood because of his reconnect with Anna. He asks Frank if Anna has arrived yet; he says no. He walks up to the Lush and says, “Now here’s a girl you can always find when you want her.” The irony in his statement is that he does not want her; he wants Anna instead. By contrasting Anna the woman he looks for but does not find with the Lush, the woman he does not look for but can always find, again illustrates the inverse kind of doubling between Anna and the Lush. She says, slurring her speech, “I don’t think I quite like that. The innuendo. I think I resent it. Bad taste.” Steve answers her in a condescending tone: “I beg your pardon.” The Lush’s hesitation coded in her saying “I think” and “I don’t quite like” shows her insecurity and her lack of confidence. She enjoys attention from Steve, but does not appreciate this negative interest. Despite all her time at the bar, we only see her visibly drunk and slurring words in this scene. The last time she was on film, she was waving wildly and excitedly at Steve, pleased at seeing him again at the Round Up. Since then, Steve spends all his time with Anna. He
has rejected her for a younger woman, and this may explain why she drowns her sorrows. Steve's approaching her now and teasing her adds insult to injury. She has the same drinks in front of her we saw in the first shot of the film, her whiskey and beer chaser. Her face in this shot is lined with pain. She continues, obviously intoxicated: “The average fella, just because a girl takes a drink now and then, jumps to conclusions—doesn’t treat her with respect.” Steve makes another joke at her expense. He teases her about calling him a checker when he first entered the bar. She tells him, “Get Lost” to which he snickers [Fig 6-21], indicating his cruelty to her and his lack of attention to her feelings. This “Get Lost!” is the closest the Lush comes to aggression (Callois’ second form of mimicry). She shows resistance in her attempt to stand up for herself; an ability she will not display again. In her last scene in the film, she is heartbreakingly unguarded, and Steve terribly wounds her (see Chapter Two for the discussion of this scene).

**Gaye in Key Largo**

Gaye’s relationship to Nora remains different from Yvonne’s and Ilsa’s and the Lush’s and Anna’s in one major way: the two women actually interact together in the film. Yvonne never meets Ilsa, and the Lush knows about Anna certainly, as vice versa, one may assume, but the two never speak. The link for both of these sets of women remains the noir heroes, Sam and Steve respectively. Nora, like Ilsa, is coded as a home girl: she lovingly takes care of her dead husband’s wheelchair-bound father. Like Yvonne and the Lush, Gaye is a B-girl. The film often presents Gaye as an inferior copy of Nora. Physically the two women are similar. They both have low voices, far set apart

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5 See Chapter Two for a summary of the film’s plot.
eyes. Both are blondes with even features. The film visually connects Nora and Gaye through a shared gesture: both women repeatedly put their hand up to their hair [Fig 6-22 and Fig 6-23].

The noir villain Rocco also connects the two women. Rocco ridicules Mr. Temple. In response Norah scratches his face. Rocco looks at himself in the mirror, dabbing at the scratches. He sees her in the reflection of the mirror and refers to her as “some little wildcat.” He says that Nora as “wildcat” reminds him of another young woman named “Maggie Mooney.” Maggie “scratched, kicked, bit” and even put a knife into him once. For “professional reasons” he had to change her name to “Gaye Dawn.” The professional reasons” insinuate that perhaps Maggie was underage, and the name change helped him hide this fact. Rocco’s words also align Nora with Gaye—they have similar temperaments and are both “fireballs.”

**Velda in *Kiss Me Deadly*[^6]**

Aldrich portrays Velda as sweaty early in the film. In her second scene, in which Mike kisses her in his apartment before Pat arrives. As they break away from their embrace, Velda’s face appears shiny as opposed to Mike’s non-burnished countenance. Velda’s real status as sweaty rejected woman occurs in her ballet scene in which she exercises in tight pants and a bare mid-drift [Fig 1-6]. Aldrich shoots the scene that begins in Velda’s apartment in a strange way which disorients the viewer: He begins by shooting the mirrored image of the scene. We assume Mike enters screen left, when in fact, as the camera pans Velda’s dance studio, we see he has actually entered screen right. This visual disorientation hints to the audience that something is

[^6]: See Chapter Five for a summary of this film.
not quite right, and that something oddly is askew in their world, which of course
becomes unavoidably obvious with the atomic explosion at the end of the film. We do
not realize we are initially looking at a mirrored image of Mike and Velda until the
camera pans away from these mirrored images of the characters to the characters
themselves. Velda practices ballet, and Mike comes in, and he pulls the needle off the
record. Velda looks at him and moves her leg to indicate her desire to keep dancing.
Mike returns the needle and she continues dancing as he tells her they are staying
away from “these penny ante” divorce cases. He has raised the stakes with finding
Christina, and Velda immediately catches on. She says, “and a cut of something big, is
something big.” Her words drip with irony because her words succinctly capture the
destruction and power of the “something big” that is the atomic bomb.

Aldrich shoots Velda turning around a pole; she acts like a child playing. She
swings toward and away from Mike all the while giving him a speech about the nature of
his work and the most likely outcome: “First you find a thread, which becomes a rope
from which you hang by the—neck.” When Velda says “neck,” she moves directly into
the center of the frame [Fig. 6-24]. She says the word in an exaggerated manner, to
reinforce her meaning to Mike, that being that he has become involved in something
big, but something dangerous. It also makes her exaggerate the opening of her mouth
which makes her appear sensuous. Her face is aglow with perspiration from her ballet
workout, but almost every time we see Velda, her face is wet, oily, and sweaty. This
sweating emphasizes the corporeality of the character. She is, as Mike previously
described her, a meal, something to gobble up. She always looks ripe and luscious,
which the constant dewy, wet nature of her face continually emphasizes. The Christina
Rossetti poem, “Remember Me,” haunts this text, yet, in this instance, Velda’s appearance brings to mind another Rossetti text, “Goblin Market.” Velda’s face looks like the delicious fruit sold by the decidedly grotesque Goblin men. Her face is a strange mixture of the sexually alluring and abject. She reflects the opposing impulses stimulated by the gaze, attraction and delight as well as repulsion and horror. In this scene, Velda is coded for sexuality and sex appeal, to entice the male gaze, to give the eye something to feed on. What the film slyly suggests, however, is that by seeing Velda strictly as “woo-bait” or only as a body, which the film goes out of its way to do, the audience blindly shares in the film’s prejudices.

If we watch carefully, we notice that Velda is perhaps the most intelligent character in the film, despite, her obvious, terrible choice in men. As mentioned in Chapter Five, she does a good deal of the investigative work. She follows up on Ray Diker and investigates Christina’s past. In this scene, she realizes long before Mike does that in continuing this investigation he is literally setting up his own execution. As she tells him, the thread he picked up—the one he initially told Gabrielle had led him to her: “I picked up a thread, anyone could do it”—eventually leads to a rope that literally binds him (Evello and Soberin tie him to a bed) and symbolically hangs him through his ultimate demise, suggested at the film’s close.\footnote{According to the AFI website, in August 1997, the Los Angeles Times and the LA Weekly reported that the film’s original ending, in which “Velda” and "Mike" watch while the beach house explodes, had been restored. Before the early 1970s, the film had ended with an image of the exploding beach house. The restoration was conceived by editor Glenn Erickson and film historian Alain Silver, who writes about the restored ending in “Kiss Me Deadly: Evidence of a Style” (234). The truncated ending was probably conceived as a way to punish Mike and show no hope of surviving. The AFI reports that the film had a great deal of trouble getting approval from the censors.}

The “something not quite right” also sets up the scenario in which Velda functions as the gaze. She stands in for the nuclear

\footnote{See Elizabeth Willis’ excellent article about how Rossetti’s poem informs and influences Kiss Me Deadly: “Christina Rossetti and Pre-Raphaelite noir.” Textual Practice. 18.4. (2004). 521–540.}
explosion at the end of the film. Her shiny face continually presages the ultimate shining at the end of the film, when Gabrielle releases the bomb from the box. Velda’s shiny face becomes the gaze in the film, and encounter with the Real that reminds us of the trauma of nuclear annihilation that awaits these characters at the film’s end, but beyond this, represents the potential nuclear annihilation of the audience members as well.

Aldrich stresses the point of Velda’s sweatiness in her penultimate appearance in the film. Mike goes to her apartment late at night, awakens her and tells her of Nick’s death. Velda automatically turns away from the light Mike has turned on to wake her. Perhaps she does not want Mike to see her in this unflattering light, but most likely she hides from the light because she is sleeping off a hangover after entertaining an art dealer who could provide Mike with some information about the great whatsit. Her face appears particularly shiny and sweaty in this scene [Fig 6-25 and 6–26]; the sweat again makes her seem to emit light, like Lacan’s sardine can. She also serves as the stain in the picture through her sweat (stained) face. In the remaining chapter of this project, I look at the gaze of the atomic bomb and how it relates to Velda, as well as other Rejected Women in Film Noir.
Figure 6-1. The crustacean *caprella acanthifera*

Figure 6-2. The Briozoaires Ectoproctes
Figure 6-3. Initial shot of Yvonne

Figure 6-4. Yvonne and Sacha at the Bar. Sacha winks and says “Yvonne, I love you.”
Figure 6-5. Yvonne turns the barstool. Rick keeps his back to her.

Figure 6-6. Ilsa's outfit entering Cafe for first time with Lazlo.
Figure 6-7. Patriarchal condescension: Rick grabs Yvonne's arm

Figure 6-8. Inèz's crossed gaze in *Pépé Le Moko*
Figure 6-9. Yvonne looks at Rick while walking with past his table with the Nazi officer.

Figure 6-10. Rick puts up his hand as if to block Yvonne’s gaze.
Figure 6-11. Yvonne enters café in outfit similar to Ilse’s “prison” outfit

Figure 6-12. Ilse in "prison" outfit similar to Yvonne’s striped dress
Figure 6-13. Deep focus shot of Yvonne in profile, and in foreground, screen left.

Figure 6-14. Shallow focus shot of Ilsa. Shot immediately follows similar shot of Yvonne. See Figure 6-13.
Figure 6-15. Shallow focus close-up of Ilsa

Figure 6-16. Close-up of Yvonne singing “La Marseillaise”
Figure 6-17. Medium Shot of the Lush

Figure 6-18. Close-up of Anna in contrast with the Lush
Figure 6-19. The Lush at the bar as Steve walks in

Figure 6-20. Anna in slacks eating ice cream
Figure 6-21. Steve snickers at the Lush

Figure 6-22. Nora: gesture—hand to hair.
Figure 6-23. Gaye: gesture—hand to hair

Figure 6-24. Velda sweats during the ballet sequence
Figure 6-25. Velda’s sweaty face in bed—shot one

Figure 6-26. Velda’s sweaty face in bed—shot two
CHAPTER 7
“SPECTATOR, CAN’T YOU SEE WE’RE BURNING?” REJECTED WOMEN AND THE NUCLEAR BOMB

In the shadow of the mushroom/Seconds tick the countdown/On the galactic clock/And the era’s monument/Is the evaporated man/Who left his shadow sitting/On some steps in Hiroshima/For the Age of Overkill

—Olga Cabral, “The Shadow of the Mushroom

I am putting make-up on empty space

—Anne Waldman, “Makeup on Empty Space”

She died a famous woman denying/her wounds/denying /her wounds came from the same source as her power.

—Adrienne Rich, “Power”

In the Shadow of the Bomb

Jerome F. Shapiro describes his 1984 visit to the spot that Cabral describes in her poem. Shapiro’s prose mirrors the horrific imagery of Cabral’s poem:

I was dumbstruck by the dark silhouette of a body on stone steps, the surrounding surface having been bleached by the light of an atomic bomb. I have been unable to excise this image from my memory. It sits on my mind like a third eye looking inward, (1)

What Shapiro calls the “third eye” could be interpreted as the Lacanian Gaze. His description of his experience conveys fascination and horror, and clearly establishes that this silhouette looked back at him, much like the skull does in Holbein’s The Ambassadors. This particular image, however, also evokes the fascination, anxiety and terror of all people who now live in the shadow of the atomic bomb. Mark Osteen writes that “the characters’ [of Kiss Me Deadly] obsessive fascination with the ‘Whatsit’ powerfully dramatizes our culture’s mixture of dread and attraction for violence of all kinds, but especially for the secret, and therefore fascinating, atomic bomb” (89). The concept of the bomb itself has a gaze: it stares at us and we contemplate the
manifestations of its awesome power. Shapiro, a film scholar, openly discusses his captivated ambivalence about the bomb in his book *Atomic Bomb Cinema*. Shapiro relays an extended personal anecdote in which he discusses the political tensions that developed at a conference on the Atomic Bomb and American culture in 1995 in Bowling Green, Kentucky. He asked prominent scholar, and anti-nuclear activist, Robert J. Lifton, how he reconciled the problem that the people at the conference had all built their careers on the suffering of others, and yet, they never talk about this fact (312). In asking this question, as someone struggling with his own ambivalent feelings about the bomb (fascination and horror), Shapiro demonstrates how the bomb produces a conglomerate of antinomic feelings.

The bomb’s assuming the position of *objet petit a*, plays out in Film Noir’s references to the bomb generally, and specifically in the way Rejected Women in Film Noir symbolizes the atomic bomb and its surrounding ambivalence. The atomic bomb’s gaze in Film Noir has been well documented, perhaps the most obviously in *Kiss Me Deadly*’s atomic dénouement. Silver and Ward’s *Film Noir* describes *Kiss Me Deadly* in atomic terms:

Much like Hammer’s fast cars, the movie swerves frenziedly through a series of disconnected and cataclysmic scenes. As such, it typifies the frenetic, post-atomic-bomb Los Angeles of the 1950s with its malignant undercurrents; it records the degenerative half-life of an unstable universe as it moves towards critical mass. When it reaches the fission point . . . a beach cottage in Malibu becomes ground zero. (157)

Schrader also comments on the way the bomb overshadows *Kiss Me Deadly*: “Hammer overturns the underworld in search of the ‘great Whatsit,’ and when he finally finds it, it

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1 My project only deals with the relationship of the atomic bomb and the hydrogen bomb in the few films on which I concentrate. Certainly nuclear bombs inform many Film Noirs. As I mentioned in the Introduction, I have chosen to sacrifice breadth for depth as I am more interested in conducting close readings of a few films than glossing a large number of films.
turns out to be—the joke of jokes—an exploding atomic bomb. The inhumanity and meaninglessness of the hero are small matters in a world in which The Bomb has the final say” (12). Paul Boyer documents the psychological fallout that occurs in a world where “The Bomb has the final say.” He writes: “Implicit in the fear of irrational mass death was a less tangible but perhaps even more unsettling source of anxiety: the sense that the meaning of one’s existence—at least in social and historical terms—was being radically threatened” (“By” 278). Darwin had claimed in Origin of Species that humanity had a “secure future” as long as evidence of our existence remained intact. That security “had vanished in a series of radioactive bursts” (Boyer “By” 279). In a world where total obliteration is possible, the mushroom cloud of the atomic bomb overshadows the notion that our lives could have meaning for future generations. We are left with what Lifton calls “a radical sense of futurelessness” (qtd. in Boyer “Fallout” 236). Mailer asserts in “The White Negro,” “We will never be able to determine the psychic havoc of [ . . .] the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years” (1). In his essay “Poets and the Bomb,” George Montecito quotes author Doris Kearns Goodwin’s describing the psychic havoc of the bomb: “Our generation was the first to live with the knowledge that, in a single instant, everyone and everything we knew—our family, our friends, our block, our world—could be brought to an end.” Goodwin even went so far as to find out how long it would take for an atomic bomb blast to reach her home in Rockville Centre if a bomb exploded in Manhattan—twelve minutes (qtd. in Montecito 150).

Norman Cousins called this type of fear “irrational death.” Cousins explains that the advent of the nuclear age brought about “a primitive fear, fear of the unknown, fear
of forces man can neither channel or comprehend [. . .] it is the fear of irrational death” (qtd. in Boyer “By” 8). Boyer observes that this “irrational death” is “death of a new kind, death without warning, death en masse” which was an “even more unsettling source of anxiety: the sense that the meaning of one’s existence [. . .] was being radically threatened” (“By” 278). The anxiety of the bomb created a sort of chaotic dichotomy: on the one hand there was a profound fear of death, on the other there was a profound fear of life; a life that existed in the shadow of the bomb; a life filled with fear that instantaneous annihilation is now a possibility. Historian and social critic Lewis Mumford believes that even if the atomic bomb is never used again, “the social order [still] becomes a prison and existence therein is punishment for life.” Life in the shadow of the bomb “turns out, in some ways, to be the most horrible of all: nothing less than a living death” (qtd. in Boyer “By” 287). In his novel The Second Coming, Walker Percy writes, “The name of the enemy is death . . . not the death of dying but the living death” (271). Journalist Robert Manoff states that as late as 1984 that “by merely existing,” nuclear weapons “have already set off chain reactions throughout American life” (qtd. in Boyer, “By” xv).

Shapiro disagrees with this notion that the bomb changed American life or even the world. He argues that the world always has had its apocalypses, and the bomb is one more: “In the human imagination, moreover, the bomb has not been the only destroyer of worlds” (10). He argues that the group of films he calls “atomic bomb cinema” manifests the “most recent” of the “ancient apocalyptic tradition of continuance” (10). Certainly, the world always has had evil and people bent on destruction, but nuclear bombs such as the atomic bomb and the hydrogen bomb, exist as great
levelers in destruction: you cannot outrun or outsmart them. If they come for you, they will get you and no amount of resistance, intelligence or will to survive will save you. In one of the last minutes of *Kiss Me Deadly*, a film, regretfully, that Shapiro does not discuss in his study, Gabrielle says to Dr. Soberin: “Never mind about the evil; what’s in it?” She refers to the “great whatsit” that she has delivered to Dr. Soberin. I want to use Gabrielle’s line in response to Shapiro. The evil is insignificant in that evil always has been with us. What the atom bomb brings into the world is a new monstrous way of delivering evil. Never mind the evil itself, how can it now reach me more readily and totally? The existence of the nuclear bomb throws us into a futurelessness previously unknown to humankind.

One way to chart the change in the world in the shadow of the bomb is by looking at the two Film Noirs that bookend what is considered the classic Film Noir cycle, *The Maltese Falcon* and *Kiss Me Deadly*. Comparing and contrasting the two films shows how the world changed during these fourteen volatile years in American history. The biggest historical change was the United States’ involvement in World War II, and the attendant horrors that accompany the war, such as the creation and use of the atomic bomb, the Holocaust and the fire-bombing of Dresden and Tokyo. The July fifth mentality of Post-World War II certainly exists in the darker *Kiss Me Deadly*. As Schrader points out, the last phase of Film Noir was very pessimistic, a “period of

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2 See Chapter Two for a summary of this film.

3 See Chapter Five for a summary of this film.

4 See my introduction in which I describe how the Post War period serves as July 5th in relation to the World War II period functioning as July 4th. The “hangover” from World War II is played out in the various literal hangover scenes in these Film Noirs: Norah wakes up with a hangover after her night with Prebble. Velda is sleeping off a hangover when Mike awakens her with the news of Nick’s death, and Sam experiences a hangover of sorts after Gutman drugs him.
psychotic action and suicidal impulse.” Kiss Me Deadly, he writes, is “a straggler” and “its time delay gives it a sense of detachment and thoroughgoing seediness—it stands at the end of a long sleazy tradition” (12). In The Maltese Falcon, Sam Spade refers to the quest for this eponymous bird as “the stuff that dreams are made of.” Over these fourteen years, the “stuff that dreams are made of” changes from the “dingus” (Sam’s nickname for the bird) to the “great whatsit” (the neologism Velda coins for the atomic bomb). The first atomic bomb to be tested, Trinity, was also given a nickname, “the gadget.”

The negativity and violence that percolated in the years that separate these films can be measured through the body count racked up by each of these objects. The dingus accumulates a body count of three. The great whatsit will have a body count that could reach thousands, perhaps millions. Both objects not only represent the quest for dreams, but also embody the “stuff that nightmares are made of.” Both function as dream and nightmare simultaneously. Whether dingus or whatsit, noir heroes Sam Spade and Mike Hammer pursue this object, even though neither really understands nor even knows what the object actually is they pursue. Sam knows a little about the dingus from Gutman’s description, but he has never seen it. Mike remains entirely in the dark in relation to the object he pursues until the film’s end, when Pat pronounces “a few words: Manhattan Project, Los Alamos, Trinity” The choker close-ups Aldrich uses to film this exchange intensifies the emotion of Mike’s admitting: “I didn’t know.” Soberin plans to sell the bomb to art collector, William Mist. Kiss Me Deadly intimates this fact through its major detective on the case, Velda. She has drinks with Diker and Mist, and she tells Mike that “This joker (Mist) says there’s a new kind of art in the world” and that
people will pay a lot of money to own it. If the bomb is to be brokered as art, we can assume Soberin recovers it from Christina and her friends who had planned to sell it to Mist. Once more, we have a plot that mirrors the earlier Maltese Falcon in which rival gangs of criminals are trying to capture a valuable art object. One (the dingus) turns out to be a fake; the other, the great whatsit, could not be more Real.

In this chapter, I look at the way Rejected Women in Film Noir operate as symbols of the nuclear bomb (both atomic and hydrogen) and how they remind the audience of the horror and fascination associated with the atomic bomb. I chose for my epigraphs, three poems by women authors that discuss the nuclear age. Cabral’s poem obviously deals with atomic bomb fears, but Waldman’s does as well. In her poem, the empty space is the space of the feminine; Avital Ronell notes, “Technology in some way is always implicated in the feminine. It is young; it is thingly. Thus every instrument of war is given a feminine name. The feminine, in whose way we are, does not arrive. She is what is missing. Constituted like a rifle, she is made up of removable parts” (207). Whereas Ronell’s thesis holds true in relation to the ways culture puts women generally in the place of weaponry, the technology of the bomb is implicated in the masculine. Nuclear bombs have boys’ names, like Fat Man, Little Boy, Mike and Joe. Perhaps the awesome power of nuclear bombs makes them beyond the thingly. Waldman’s poem speaks to the lack that is constituted as the feminine. She writes: “I bind uranium/I bind the uneconomical unrenewable energy of uranium/dash uranium to empty space.” The “Little Boy” atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 was a uranium-based bomb (McKay 99). Waldman’s anaphoric repetition throughout the poem of the word “bind” implies the intense fettering of the location of empty space to other objects,
such as uranium. The speaker of the poem also “binds” “the hanging night, the drifting night, the daughter of troubled sleep.” These “binds” seem made for Film Noir. The hanging night signifying, for example, the dark highway on which Mike first finds Christina, or the darkness that envelopes *The Chronicle* building as Norah enters it. The “daughters of troubled sleep” could also include the Rejected Women of Film Noir. Mike awakens Velda from a restless sleep, and Norah has a restless night as she listens to the radio for updates on the Blue Gardenia investigation with the covers over her head, or Lush never sleeps in her perpetual, nocturnal fettering (binding) to the bar stool, and Effie, who tells Sam to go easy on her because she had a rough (sleepless) night taking care of Iva.

Conflating Ronell’s ideas about the “thingly” and “missing” qualities of the feminine with (my interpretation of) Waldman’s poem, I see connections between Rejected Women in Film Noir and the atomic bomb. I am not saying the Rejected Woman is evil or that she is out to cause doom and destruction. What I am arguing is that we can make connections between the rejected woman and the nuclear bombs in four ways. First, her body stands in as a correlative for the bomb, as seen in Debby in *The Big Heat*, Norah in *The Blue Gardenia*, and Velda in *Kiss Me Deadly*. In *Kiss Me Deadly*, male bodies also embody injuries that represent the damage of the bomb, and the film in general, shows a valorization of the body, which, I will argue, exists in an effort to stave off nuclear fears, which is my second point. Third, I show that the rejected women’s invisibility, in both its opaqueness and transparency, can be understood in relation to the bomb. Fourthly, the rejected woman constantly “burns” throughout Film Noir, which serves as a reminder of her connection to the atomic bomb’s burning
qualities. In making this third point, I tie my reading into the “Father can’t you see I’m burning” dream that Freud discusses in his *Interpretation of Dreams*. Lastly, I end the chapter with a few final summarizing thoughts about the Rejected Women of Film Noir—how I read her and what this reading demonstrates. Before discussing these points, I will provide a (brief) history of the nuclear bombs’ development, testing, and use.

**Context: Brief History of Nuclear Bombs**

On July 16, 1945, the first atomic bomb, code named Trinity, exploded in Alamogordo, New Mexico at 5:45 am. Directly after the successful detonation of the plutonium-based bomb, Harvard physicist Kenneth Bainbridge said, “Well, now we’re all sons of bitches” (Schweber 3). One of the bomb’s main architects, Robert Oppenheimer quoted the *Bhagavad Gita*: “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds” (Gleick 53). Edward Teller, another creator of this bomb, recounted his experience of witnessing the event years later at the 1995 conference Shapiro also attended: “It was clear that something very important, very terrible was going to happen” (1). President Truman gave the order to drop “Little Boy” the uranium-based bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. Three days later, August 9, 1945, the United States released “Fat Man,” a plutonium-based bomb on Nagasaki. Japan surrendered unconditionally on August 14, 1945. About 120,000 people immediately were killed in Hiroshima, followed by 80,000 more deaths in the next five years. Fat Man initially killed 70,000 people, with an additional 70,000 deaths occurring in the next five years (Shapiro 51).

The United States announced in early 1946 it would conduct a series of atomic tests later that year on Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. On July 1, 1946, “Test Able” detonated above ground and proved to be a disappointment to the many spectators,
including the number of reporters invited to watch the blast. The bomb fell two miles off
target and on-scene observers heard and saw very little. One observer likened it to a
“blast of a giant firecracker,” another to a “sneeze in a windstorm” (Boyer “By” 83). The
second underground blast, “Test Baker,” was detonated on July 25 and was “far more
impressive visually and . . . far more ominous in its long-term implications” (Boyer “By”
63-4) in its legacy of contaminating marine life for many subsequent years. Yet, even
this second blast was viewed as unremarkable and the public began to rapidly lose
interest in the atomic bomb. It seemed that the lack of destruction at Bikini quelled the
public’s fears of atomic nightmares at least a little while. Boyer notes that one person
was dismayed that Test Baker did not uproot a single palm tree on land, and several
civil defense books noted that not a single person was injured from the blast (“By” 84).
This lull in concern over the atomic bomb is reflected in the number of bomb films made
from 1947 through 1949. Only six bomb films were made in 1947 and 1948, and only
three bomb films were made in 1949, for an average of five films per year.⁵ In contrast,
the number of atomic cinema films tripled to fifteen films per year in the period of 1950
through 1953. Although this increase cannot be reduced to one factor, a major change
occurred when the Soviet Union detonated its first atomic bomb, named Joe 1, on
August 24, 1949. The United States reported this successful launch on September 24,
1949. With Russia in possession of the atomic bomb, the world changed for Americans.
Shapiro reports, “Only after Joe I did Hollywood begin to produce a great number of

⁵ These figures are Shapiro’s. He lists these statistics in an index of all atomic cinema films made each
year (as well as total films made each year) from 1914 – 2001. See his “Filmography” chapter, pages 359
–378.
bomb films, and only then do we begin to see images of America truly at risk or under attack” (58-59).

After the detonation of Joe I, Truman “gave a green light to Edward Teller’s hydrogen bomb project, and the public overwhelmingly rallied behind that decision” (Boyer “Fallout” 172). Nicknamed “Super,” the hydrogen-based super bomb that was a “thousand times as powerful as the one [dropped] over Hiroshima.” (McKay 129). Oppenheimer, one of the chief architects of the atomic bomb was against the creation of the Super. In contrast, Edward Teller aggressively campaigned for its necessity. Oppenheimer, Teller and Fermi “worried about setting the whole atmosphere afire” with the testing of the hydrogen bomb, and the scientists’ testing of *Trinity* “fused the desert floor to a green glass” (Gleick 53), yet Teller still wanted them to make the super bomb. Teller got his way, and in the process, Oppenheimer lost his security clearance, and Teller became the father of the hydrogen bomb. The United States tested the first hydrogen bomb, nicknamed Mike, on November 1, 1952 at Eniwetok atoll (McKay 129-130).

Teller was not present; because of the polemic politics involving the hydrogen bomb. He watched the test from a seismograph machine at his laboratory in California. He recalled this event at the 1995 Bowling Green conference as well:

> The last shot I saw indirectly. It was the first test of a real hydrogen bomb. . . . I went to the basement of the building in Berkeley that had the seismograph. There was the apparatus showing a little green dot. If there were an earthquake, it would dance. . . . My eyes were not so steady. So I took a pencil, held it up against the green dot and then I could see that the dot was at rest. The time of the planned explosion came and passed.

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6 Teller’s talk at the Bowling Green conference also reflected this green glass effect. He mentions thinking the atomic bomb blast was disappointing, then he “looked down at the sand. . . . [and] was very impressed” when saw how it sand had fused into this green glass-like substance (1).
Nothing happen [sic]. Of course, the shockwave would take a quarter of an hour or a little longer to travel under the Pacific and reach Berkeley. Just about the time when it was supposed to arrive, I did see the point dance. . . . And there it was at the right time, at the right amplitude, just as predicted. (2-3)

Teller claimed he was “too busy” to attend the blast, which seems incredulous. Teller’s aggressive pursuit in getting Super made makes it difficult to believe he would be anywhere else. Still, the notion that one of the most deadly bombs on the planet ever tested was seen by its creator as a dancing green dot. Three years later, the Russians had successfully tested their own super hydrogen bomb on November 22, 1955. From 1956 through 1969, the years immediately following the Soviet’s hydrogen explosion, an average of 20 bombs films per year were produced, which reflects the cultural anxiety this explosion produced. “Futurelessness,” however, seems to have a shelf life in human consciousness. In the mid to late 1980’s Paul Boyer would note a drastic increase in nuclear war fear with the revving up of Cold War rhetoric and the development of the Strategic Defense Initiative, nicked named “Star Wars” of the Reagan Administration (“Fallout” 175). Not surprisingly, the late 1980s saw an upsurge in bomb films during that time period as well.

During the initial “atomic age” of the late 1940s and 1950’s, the same period that saw the flowering of Film Noir, Americans obsessed over all things atomic. For example, the Washington Press Club offered a new drink called the Atomic Cocktail. Department stores began running Atomic Sales. A jewelry company offered the “Bursting Fury,” an atomic inspired pin and earring set. There were new popular songs, such as “Atomic Cocktail,” “Atom Polka” and “Atom and Evil.” (Boyer “By” 10-12). If it is true that a picture represents a thousand words, the 1946 photograph of Vice Admiral “Spike” Blandy and his wife cutting into a cake shaped like an atomic mushroom cloud

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to celebrate the Bikini Island blasts speaks volumes as to the depth of atomic obsession (Boyer “by” 87).

In the years after the bomb exploded, the country had a whole new vocabulary of buzz words that reflected the people, places and products of the atomic age: Los Alamos, Trinity, plutonium, uranium, hydrogen super-bomb, Fat Man, Little Boy, Oppenheimer, Einstein, Fermi, Teller, and bomb shelter. Likewise, American culture was quick to conflate the female body to the bomb. Most obviously, with the delivery of “Little Boy” in a plane named after the mother of Colonel Paul Tibbets, Jr., Enola Gay, the pilot who flew the mission to Hiroshima. In September 1945, MGM introduced starlet Linda Christians as the “Anatomic Bomb” (Boyer “By” 85). A picture of Rita Hayworth was stenciled on the “Test Able” bomb dropped at Bikini (“By” Boyer 83). The bikini bathing suit itself was invented soon after the 1946 tests, and named “the bikini” in honor of the bomb site (Boyer “By” 11). In the film Rebel Without a Cause (Nicholas Ray 1955), Judy’s father slaps her when she tries to kiss him, because at sixteen, she is too old for such practices, according to him. When she exits the room in tears, her mother says to her father, “She’ll outgrow it, dear. It’s just her age.” Judy’s little brother Beau releases a round of lightening-like faux fire from a futuristic-looking gun and exclaims, “The Atomic Age!” Beau conflates Judy’s body and her budding sexuality to the nuclear bomb in a child-like way, based on his cultural conditioning that the word “age” goes with the word “atomic,” a joke perhaps, but also quite telling in the way children were indoctrinated into the atomic age. One thinks of the “Burt the Turtle” film short that urged children to “Duck and Cover” if they see a first flash of a nuclear bomb. Films also contributed to the atomic age, some subtly, like The Blue Gardenia and The Big Heat,
others directly, like *Kiss Me Deadly*. What these three films show, in their nuclear text (and subtext), is a connection between the nuclear bomb to the body of the rejected woman.

**Rejected Women as Nuclear Bomb**

*The Big Heat* and Atom Bomb Maidens

Maya Morioka Todeschini explores the position of a group of *hibakusha* (people with atomic bomb related injuries in Japan) called the “A-bomb Maiden(s)” (genbaku-otome) by analyzing two films produced by Japanese male filmmakers. Atom bomb maidens were the “young, female victims afflicted with bomb-related illnesses” which have “been singled out in such representations (popular literary and filmic) and in the journalistic literature that has grown around survivors” (222). Todeschini argues that the Japanese atomic-related trauma cannot be understood independent of women’s experiences with the bomb. In a thesis statement that is tangential to my own concerning ambivalence and the Rejected Women in Film Noir, she writes:

> the image of the ‘Maiden’ in the films is ambivalent: on the one hand, the young women are represented as particularly pathetic victims, whose purity and innocence is contrasted with the physical ‘corruption’ of fatal illness: on the other, they are seen as endowed with ‘typically womanly’ spiritual and psychological virtues which allow them to stoically endure their sufferings and even grow stronger in the process. (224)

The portrayal of these “strong” women may be “superficially empowering,” because the films she analyzes show the survivors in “a positive light,” but they “impose preconceived notions of ‘womanhood’ onto *hibakusha* women, and contributed to the estheticizing view of bomb-related illnesses and victimization” (Todeschini 224). The

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7 She looks at two films, one that ran on Japanese television, *Yumechiyo* and the critically acclaimed motion picture *Black Rain*. Both films feature *hibakusha* women with leukemia (Todeschini 225).
two films ultimately serve as “containment” in trying to suppress and reconcile the experiences of survivors “in a purely formal and symbolic manner” (Todeschini 224). She argues that this reconciliation is a “culturally biased tendency to avoid socially disturbing topics, referred to as ‘putting a lid on smelly things [kusai mono ni futa o kakeru]” (223).

The United States had first-hand knowledge of the Atom Bomb Maidens. In 1955, twenty five young hibakusha women arrived in the United States for reconstructive surgery. They were nicknamed the “Hiroshima Maidens” and were the subject of much publicity, which culminated in an appearance on the popular television show This is Your Life on May 11, 1955 (Boyer “Fallout” 232). While this visit predates the production of The Blue Gardenia, The Big Heat, and Kiss Me Deadly, Walter Metz notes that “Hiroshima trauma circulated within American culture throughout much of the early 1950s” (W. Metz 63). Paul Boyer’s two books By the Bomb’s Early Light and Fallout also document the fear of post-bomb “fallout” and its dismembering effects that circulated among Americans in the years after the war. Metz argues that Debby in The Big Heat 8 “is an American version of a Hiroshima Maiden after her city is immolated by Vince’s nuclear explosives” (63). He argues that Debby’s revealing her burned face at the film’s end [Fig. 3-27] aligns her with the hibakusha in general and the “Hiroshima Maidens” specifically. Like Todeschini, he argues that the trauma of the atomic bomb is tied to the bodies of women: “The Big Heat similarly pursues the gendered nature of atomic trauma by tracking the effects of radiation damage throughout the city as it is inscribed on women’s bodies” (63). Metz concentrates on Debby and Selma (he reads

8 See Chapter Three for a summary of this film.
her physical impairment as a metaphor for the somatic disfiguration of the *hibakusha*.

He does not mention how Lucy’s or Doris’ burns also allude to the burned skin of the *hibakusha* as well. Metz says the film “forces Vince and the audience to confront the effects of his violence in the final scene when Debbie rips off her bandages to reveal hideous scars. The burns . . . . suggest the consequences of radiation poisoning” (45).

Certainly, if Metz sees Vince as a metaphor for atomic destruction, then his violent, horrific and tortuous death of Lucy symbolizes the deaths of the victims of the atomic bomb as well. Doris’ burned hand, which Lang makes sure appears on screen [Fig 3-25], also represents the pain of the Atom Bomb Maidens.

**The Blue Gardenia and the Hydrogen Bomb**

*The Blue Gardenia*, ⁹ although filmed from late November through December 24, 1952 (“Blue” *AFI*), is set in the last week of October, 1952. We know this fact because Casey receives a plum assignment from his editor to attend and report on the first hydrogen bomb explosion on November 1, 1952 at Eniwetok. The scene in which Casey receives this assignment begins with a close-up of a typewriter. A page with “By Casey Mayo” centered at its top rests in its roll. The carriage moves and letters that do not form words appear on the paper. A hand (Casey’s) moves the carriage back to the left, and he types over previous letters, forming a palimpsest of nonsense over nonsense, which serves as a metaphor for the madness or “MAD”ness (mutual assured destruction) subtext of the nuclear arms race that accelerated with the hydrogen bomb test. The camera cuts to a long shot of Casey, taking the page out of the typewriter, crumbling it into a ball and throwing it in the trash. When Casey tells Sleepy that he

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⁹ See Chapter Three for a summary of this film.
needs an “angle” to “get that dame in here before the cops get to her,” Casey and Sleepy discuss how the Blue Gardenia murdereress is “hot copy,” a veiled reference to the next “hot copy” assignment he soon will receive. Casey, says, “She’s one of a hundred murder cases that broke all the wire services.” Casey picks up a large pair of scissors when he says “she” and juggles them end-over-end while talking about “the Blue Gardenia” and how he wishes he had a plan to “nail her.” His words emphasize both a sexual and violent image, which is not unusual in that slang for sexual involvement often has violent undertones—such as “nail” or the recent slang term for sexual intercourse—“hit.”

Casey’s juggling the scissors is visually striking, because of their large blades and his juggling attracts the eye. His actions are not necessary to the plot, yet they produce a visually arresting image. At one point, the scissors stand on end and resemble the shape of a mushroom cloud produced by a nuclear bomb explosion [Fig 7-1]. In the scissors we see the terror and fascination that is the nuclear bomb. He performs this task mindlessly as he tries to come up with a way of snagging the Blue Gardenia for his own, away from the police, at least until he gets what he wants from her (a story). The imbrication of sex and violence continues when Casey and Sleepy’s editor enters Casey’s office with Casey’s new assignment: “Front row seat at the next H-Bomb blast, on the house.”10 Sleepy responds with a “wolf-whistle” usually reserved for expressing sexual interest in a woman. Sleepy will repeat the same whistle at the film’s end, indicating his excited response in receiving Casey’s “little black book,” and all

10 The editor’s use of the word “next” is out-of-place. With the film’s production in November 1952, historically, he has to be referring to the first H-bomb blast. The editor might be using “next” because it is not the first nuclear bomb explosions that allowed reporters as observers. As mentioned above in this chapter, the 1946 tests at Bikini atoll of atomic bombs invited reporters.
the potential sexual encounters it may promise. The tying of the wolf whistle between the promise of sexual pleasure and the news Casey soon will be witnessing the dreadful potency of the first hydrogen bomb blast, once again confirms the uneasy relationship between sex and violence.

The film relates scenes of Norah and the bomb that suggest a connection between the two. For example, immediately after getting this assignment, Casey scripts his “Letter to an Unknown Murderess” which attracts Norah’s attention. Casey meets Norah that evening, first at the Chronicle and then at Bill’s Beanery, where they dine together. Casey plays the jukebox, choosing Nat Cole’s song “Blue Gardenia,” because it was the song playing when Norah’s “friend” blacked out at Prebble’s apartment. In Howl, Allen Ginsberg writes of how “The best minds of his generation” listened to the “crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox,” a reference to the “doom” rained upon them because of the hydrogen bomb. It pervaded even the modes of pleasure they enjoyed, like jukebox music. In this scene, the jukebox delivers death in that Casey plays it to summon memories of the dead Prebble. Prebble played the song during his attack on her, and now Casey plays it again to get her to remember details of the attack, so the jukebox becomes a reminder of death and trauma. It also presages his own (planned) upcoming trip to the South Pacific. Later that evening, Casey packs for his trip while talking to Sleepy. Casey tells him that he and Norah were making “beautiful jukebox music together,” an unusual way to frame their conversation and its background jukebox music as they both relate to death and trauma. And, Casey packs for death and destruction in his role as observer of the hydrogen bomb explosion. The

11 This refers to the popping meat incident that I describe in Chapter Six.
bomb represents the ability to kill millions of people, and Casey, by going, exposes himself to radiation poisoning.

Casey ultimately gives up his chance to see the hydrogen bomb explosion by choosing to rescue Norah. While at the airport, he hears the “canned” music of *Liebestod* and remembers that he heard this record playing when Prebble’s body was discovered, *not* the “Blue Gardenia” song that Norah remembers hearing before losing consciousness. Casey quickly leaves the airport and retrieves Captain Haynes. The two of them use this clue to trace the record back to the music store, and its employee, Rose, who actually killed Prebble. Casey’s attendance at Rose’s confession and Norah’s subsequent release from prison indicate that he forgoes the trip to Eniwetok. His adventure with Norah replaces his adventure with the hydrogen bomb. The *Blue Gardenia* also produces a strange visual image of Norah that suggests her connection with the disfigurement of the atomic bomb, thus positioning her, like Debby, as a “Hiroshima Maiden.” After Norah’s arrest, Lang focuses on a close-up of Norah’s fingers rolling in ink for her fingerprinting. The photographers ask the police officer to hurry because they have deadlines to make. He says, “OK, she’s all yours.” Bright lights flash in her face, and she puts her arm up to shield her. In this position [Fig 7-2] the dark ink on her fingertips blends into the dark background of the shot making her disfigured-looking fingers resemble the mutilation of the *hibakusha*. The repeated flashes of the photographers’ bulbs produce a correlative to the atomic bomb’s flashing blast. Norah’s shielding herself from them suggests a feeble attempt at “Duck and Cover.”

*Kiss Me Deadly* and “The House of My Body”

Nuclear anxiety informs *Kiss Me Deadly* in a direct way as opposed to the indirect references in *The Big Heat* and *The Blue Gardenia*. *Kiss Me Deadly* features
both male and female bodies as symbols for the effects of the bomb. When Mike first encounters Ray Diker, his face looks badly beaten, but it also looks burned, as if he has been exposed to the contents of the “great whatsit” [Fig. 7-3]. Diker also is consumed by anxiety, which is depicted through his chain-smoking cigarettes and his visibly shaking body. He represents the living terror that comes with living under the shadow of the atomic bomb. His face also evokes images of the *hibakusha*. Late in the film, Aldrich features a close-up shot of Mike’s burned wrist, the result of his opening up the box, if only for a second [Fig 7-4], which shows the power of the bomb to burn and maim. By the time *Kiss Me Deadly* went into production, nuclear anxiety was at a full pitch due to the hydrogen bomb explosions by the United States and the Soviet Union. Boyer writes: “Atomic fear, having diminished somewhat from the immediate post-Hiroshima level, increased dramatically after 1954 as hydrogen-bomb tests in the Pacific spread deadly radioactive fallout across parts of North America” (“Fallout” 96).

Carol Flinn’s essay on *Kiss Me Deadly* and the bomb contends that the politics of the bomb in the film have obfuscated the sexual politics at play. She argues that the film represents the oppression of women through its use of the bomb and this should be the major lens film scholars should use in reading the film because:

> [t]he film doubly associates woman with the destructive bomb; first through Christina’s lifeless body and second, through Gabrielle’s ambition and curiosity which lead her to open the box at the film’s end. It would seem then, that *Kiss Me Deadly*’s morbid conclusion successfully fuses the widespread fear of atomic destruction in the Fifties with the equally widespread fear of woman, effectively mapping the former onto the latter. (124)

In the previous chapter, I argued that Velda’s sweaty, shiny face reflects the shining of the atomic bomb. Velda and other rejected women symbolize the bomb throughout *Film Noir*. Christina’s torture by Dr. Soberin before her death represents the pain endured by
bomb victims and makes Soberin, like Vince in *The Big Heat*, a malevolent force equal
to that of the bomb’s potential destruction. Soberin plans to sell the bomb to art collector
William Mist whose name, ironically, conjures up an image of water, cooling or relief
from the bomb’s burning intensity. In a further irony, Mist renders himself unconscious
by drinking copious amounts of sleeping medications so that Mike will be unable to beat
the location of the great whatsit out of him. Mist’s choice to sleep represents a
disavowal in relation to the pain and destruction of the bomb. In this way, he becomes a
version of Bert the Turtle—he hides in his shell hoping this will prevent him from
experiencing violence and pain.¹² Mist stands in for the “psychic numbing” pointed out
by Lifton in regard to the way people in both Japan and the United States met with the
bombs potential destructive power – they became numb to it to avoid dealing with the
bomb (Boyer “Fallout” 233).¹³

Perhaps one way this psychic numbing becomes evident in *Kiss Me Deadly* is
through its valorization of the somatic. On one level, the film suggests that if we valorize
our bodies and their senses, we cannot imagine a world where these senses will no
longer have any significance, meaning, or power. *Kiss Me Deadly* makes various
references to smelling and tasting, in particular, almost as if through its fascination with
the corporeal, it staves off the threat of annihilation in a post-hydrogen bomb world. The
emphasis of the sensual fails as a talisman to ward off the doomsday scenario that

¹² One avenue I did not get to pursue in this project, which will perhaps make up a future paper, relates to
the unusual name of the art collector who wants to buy the great whatsit in relation to Žižek’s description
of the Lacanian Real as a “grey formless mist,” as discussed in Chapter One.

¹³ Boyer discusses Lifton’s book *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (1967) in which Lifton theorizes that
survivors of the Hiroshima bombing numbed themselves to its horrors as a coping mechanism. This
numbing expanded beyond those directly affected by the bomb: “The encounter of people in Hiroshima
with the atomic bomb has specific bearing upon all nuclear age existence... a better understanding of
what lies behind this word, this name of a city, might enable us to take a small step forward in coming to
terms with that existence” (qtd in Boyer 233).
plays out at the film’s end. The destruction of Soberin’s beach house serves only as the beginning in a chain reaction of death and sickness that will follow this explosion after the film’s conclusion. Early in the film, Mike speaks to an old man, the caretaker of Christina’s apartment building. The man is moving in a new resident, and Mike grabs the back of the heavy case the old man has tied onto his back. This temporarily alleviation of weight leads the grateful old man to thank Mike for becoming his “deep breath” for a moment, by lessening the load, meaning that Mike’s taking on some on the weight, allows the man to catch his breath. This act of kindness by Mike, leads the man to trust Mike enough to give him the new address of Christina’s roommate. The man also tells Mike about the house no one can vacate, “the house of my body”: “Move in when I’m born; move out when I die.” The old man’s words verify the film’s veneration of the body. Aldrich films the old man talking from behind an archway that resembles a church, replete with a stained glass window situated behind him. This reverence of the somatic is repeated throughout the text. Mike makes a “meal” of Velda’s upper arms, he dedicates himself to good health by doing push-ups every day to keep his belly hard, as Christina surmises at the film’s start, and he reads *Physical Culture* magazine. The keen respect and adoration of the body further is pronounced by the absence of the villain’s body, Dr. Soberin, whom we never see until the end of the film. As the film’s chimera and evil demon, he does not get to live in the house of his body—he is only a disembodied voice, until he appears and is soon dispatched, thus making a mockery of him, as Pascal Bonitzer points out, by having him murdered as soon as he goes from voice to body (qtd. in Silverman 62). In a film that loves the body, this man is punished
for his teasing, both the audience members and the film’s hero, by not revealing himself as a body.

The veneration of the somatic also registers in relation to bodily functions, such as smelling, tasting and sweating. The sense of smell, particularly, Mike’s, represents the importance of the corporeal. When he walks out of the hospital, he tells Velda, “I never thought I’d smell that again.” Two young women walk by, and Hammer says, “Ummm…look at all the goodies,” as his eyes follow the girls. We are left wondering if what he thought he would never smell again was the fresh air after being cooped up in the hospital or the smell of women. When Gabrielle wears Velda’s perfume, she puts her face up to Mike and says, “Wanna smell?”, thus using the line as a come-on to Mike and a way of torturing him, because she now smells like the kidnapped Velda. Friday, Evello’s randy sister, immediately kisses Mike upon meeting him, and then says, “You don’t taste like anyone I know.” Mike also sniffs at Carmen Trivago’s cooked pasta while interrogating the “poor man’s Caruso” about the death of his friend, Nicholas Raimondo. Mike wrinkles up his nose as if encountering something “smelly,” or something he would want to keep a lid on, in line with the Japanese phrase *kusai mono ni futa o kakeru* that Todeschini mentions. Mike too, is equated with a bad smell, when one of the federal agents says, “Open a window!” as he departs their interrogation room. This exclamation follows Mike’s admittance, “Yeah, I’m a real stinker.” And, as mentioned in Chapter Six, Pat, referring to Mike’s superior detective skills, says, “Got to say it, he’s got a nose. He can sniff out information like nobody I ever saw.” Ironically, as previously discussed, Velda “sniffs” out many of the clues for which Mike takes credit. And in the end, his body lets him down: his nose does not help him sniff out the potential dangers involved with
his search for the great whatsit, demonstrating that, “the house of my body” is no match for the power of the nuclear bomb.

**Invisibility, Rejected Women, and the Atomic Bomb**

Akira Mizuta Lippit describes two forms of invisibility related to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki through the example of a Japanese film produced shortly after the war, *The Invisible Man Appears* [Tômei ningen arawaru] (Akachi Shinsei 1949). In this film, two scientists propose two different types of invisibility:

One scientist proposes to contract the body’s molecular structure to the point of complete density: the opaque body will appear invisible through the paradox of absolute visibility, effecting a kind of human black hole. The other seeks to reorient the body’s cellular structure so as to allow light to pass through it like a sieve, making the body appear transparent and thus invisible to human sight (83).

The Japanese word for invisibility is *fukashi*, and the Japanese word for transparency is *tômei*. Lippit notes that a scientist in the film continually refers to invisibility as *tômei*, and by the film’s end “almost by default, *tômei* comes to mean invisible” (86-87). These two words have conflated invisibility into two dichotomous meanings, creating a “dialectics of invisibility,” in which invisibility can be defined both in terms of opacity and transparency. These two terms bring about two different meanings of the term “invisible: “invisibility is defined as both the absolute condensation of visible matter and, conversely, its diffusion” (Lippit 83). Lippit ties this double meaning of invisibility to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki:

At Hiroshima, and then Nagasaki, a blinding flash vaporized entire bodies, leaving behind only *shadow* traces. The initial destruction was followed by waves of invisible radiation, which infiltrated the survivor’s bodies imperceptivity. What began as a spectacular attack ended as a form of violent invisibility. (86)
In other words, both forms of invisibility, opacity and transparency, inform the atomic blasts of the two cities. Their opacity is seen through the shadow traces of bodies, like the one Shapiro mentions seeing in 1984. Boyer also accounts the 1946 JAMA article which reported that prisoners of war in Nagasaki had their names literally burned into their backs because their names were stenciled on their POW white undershirts” (“Fallout” 63). Invisibility also takes the form of transparency, evident in the invisible rays of radiation that continued to poison people long after the bombs were initially dropped. “In invisibly suggests a range of phenomenal states, from material dispersion to radical absence,” Lippit observes, “It implies a metaphysics of the body, an absence at the very core of one’s presence” (87). Lippit analyzes how Tômei ningen arawaru aligns transparency with “figures of cleanliness and propriety, while opaque density comes to exemplify those of obsessive ambition” (85). Lippit aligns invisible radioactive fallout among the transparent; the notion of the radioactive as “clean” perhaps can be understood in the way it works from the inside, and does not leave an outward messiness until it has exacted its damage. To be cynical, radioactivity becomes a clean way of killing, in that it leaves no bodily trace or blood. The dichotomy Lippit isolates in Tômei ningen arawaru in relation to invisibility can be applied to Rejected Women in Film Noir.

First of all, their invisibility is an opaque quality because they are present in the film, but through Lacan’s theory of the gaze, they serve as the stain in the picture, or to stretch Lippit’s metaphor, the shadow or trace of the film. In this way, they are reminiscent of the atomic bomb that left its trace on stone steps or the backs of prisoners. This type of invisibility is endowed with “obsessive ambition,” which could be
one way to describe the rejected woman’s romantic quest for the noir hero. For example, Yvonne, Effie, the Lush, Gaye, Debby and Velda pine for Rick, Sam, Steve, Frank, Dave and Mike respectively, despite each man’s disinterest. If transparency is cleanliness, then opacity is dirtiness, and Rejected Women are portrayed as dirty. Like, for example, the way Rick sees Yvonne (he turns his back; holds his nose), or the male characters in *Criss Cross* see The Lush (so dirty she sticks to the seat) or Dave sees Debby (he will not touch her with a ten foot pole). And of course, the dirtiness suggested in Velda’s often sweaty appearance. Opacity in invisibility aligns with my theory of rejected women as *objet petit a*, or the stain in the picture.

The way rejected women embody transparency aligns with my theory that Rejected Women in Film Noir exist as a locus of ambivalent power in line with the way Mulvey diagrams power politics through the male gaze. Rejected Women are transparent in the way they connote a “to-(not)-be-looked-at-ness.” They are invisible in the eyes of the patriarchy because they do not attract the male gaze. They seem invisible or transparent to it, because men do not see them. This transparency gives them an aura of cleanliness because they accomplish good (clean) deeds. Debby rids Kenport of the evil Bertha Duncan and maims Vince. Gaye takes the gun away from Rocco. Selma lures Larry to his door (and death), and Rose murders the wicked Prebble. Rejected women are transparent in their metaphorical “radioactive” status. They bring about death, so they are dangerous and deadly to certain characters in the text. Unlike the femme fatale, however, the rejected woman’s “radioactivity” never harms the noir hero; he only benefits from her actions, the way “good” radioactivity can benefit humankind through the its development of the x-ray, a major medical
breakthrough. Yet, the noir hero treats the rejected woman as if she were radioactive in the way he pushes her away, literally and figuratively. The clearest examples of this repelling behavior include Rocco’s pushing away Gaye, Casey’s disgust with the woman who went to Prebble’s apartment unescorted, Sam’s message that his body is off limits of Effie, and Steve’s cruel treatment of the Lush. Mike’s rebuffs of Velda’s come-ons could also be interpreted as Mike’s seeing her as “radioactive” or untouchable.

The rejected woman, therefore, metaphorically becomes the nuclear bomb. She is a profound site of ambivalence in relation to power. Her invisibility gives her power, yet because she has been so conditioned by the patriarchy, she can use it only for the good of the patriarchy, and not for her own benefit aside from the self-satisfaction she gets from helping other people. This stoic use of her “power” is commendable, but as Todeschini points out in her examination of the A-bomb Maidens, stoicism can be conflated with officiousness, and sacrifice, when we talk about oppressed persons, can become victimization. Rejected Women are sacrificed, metaphorically burned at the stake, for the “good” progress of the text. Yet, what does this burning ultimately signify? She burns, but for whom and why? A slight (and final) detour into the Imaginary of the dream world may help answer these questions.

“Spectator, Can’t You See We’re Burning? Final Thoughts on Rejected Women in Film Noir

In Seminar XI, Lacan returns to a dream that Freud had trouble interpreting. The dream euphemistically is referred to as the “Father, can’t you see I’m burning?” dream. In Chapter Seven of Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams, a patient tells Freud about a dream she heard about in a lecture on dreams. In the dream, a father, who had fallen
asleep in a room adjacent to the body of his recently deceased son has a dream that his son tugs on his arm and asks, “Father can’t you see I'm burning?” The attendant stationed in the room with the corpse has fallen asleep and did not notice that the candle had overturned, and the corpse’s arm is on fire (“Dreams” Freud 547 and “Four” Lacan 34 and 59-60). The father wakes up and puts out the fire. Lacan posits that Freud’s fascination with this dream was that he could not make it work in regard to his thesis of wish fulfillment. Freud tries to argue that the wish-fulfillment exists in the father’s staying asleep in order to spend a few more seconds with his dead son. Therefore, the father did not wake up on hearing the crash of the candlestick hitting the floor or the light from the fire. Yet, as Lacan points out, if this were true wish fulfillment, wouldn’t the boy have been alive in the man’s dream and not come to him as already dead? Instead, Lacan hypothesizes that the dream represents the working out of a trauma through repetition. By repeating the event of the boy’s death, the father gets the chance to fix the situation he could not remedy in reality. Perhaps the father did not attend to the boy’s high fever, which led to his death. Through the dream, the father can stop the boy’s burning body because the boy calls it to his father’s attention. Lacan hints that the sleeping attendant represents the father’s careless approach to the boy’s illness. He is not vigilant – like the sleeping attendant -- and allows the boy to burn. Through this repetition, he has the chance to correct this wrong.

We can read Lacan’s interpretation of the “Father” dream in relation to Film Noir in general, and Rejected Women in Film Noir specifically McGowan argues that no “medium places the subject in a position as close to that of the dream, a state in which the subject is lured into accepting the illusion it offers” (12. While in the dream state, we
have encounters with the Real, which manifest as terrors we cannot face in our conscious lives. In our dreams these terrors come to us in disguise. Our role as film spectators mirrors that of the dream state because “[a]s in a dream, while watching a film, we follow rather than lead. We don’t have the opportunity to turn away from the traumatic encounter” (McGowan 12). Our experience in watching films is like the dream-state in that we suspend our conscious mind for a few hours and allow ourselves, in the darkness of the theater, to experience a film as if in a dream. Often, we totally suspend our own reality to partake in the realities projected on the screen. This “Father” dream could possibly explain the great fascination that many people experience in watching Film Noir.

Watching these films is not a wish-fulfillment, for do we really want to enter a world like The Big Heat’s Kenport, where Lagana holds sway over an entire city? Or, the Los Angeles of Kiss Me Deadly, which ends with an atomic bomb explosion? In looking at Film Noir through this Freudian/Lacanian lens, I wonder if this dream can help us understand the world in the nuclear age. The United States collectively has a dream in which the world is on fire, as was the case in the nightmare of World War II, and its attendant fires, from the fire-bombing of Tokyo and Dresden to the Holocaust to the dropping of the atomic bombs. The United States wakes up, but only into another nightmare, the Real of a world with the nuclear bomb. By experiencing Film Noir, we work out, through repetition, our collective traumas regarding war, corruption, and fear of annihilation. We can also work out our personal traumas as well, as we each experience the way films look at us based on our own personal experiences. The gaze of the child in Freud’s story becomes the gaze overall in Film Noir; we stay asleep (in
the dream-world of the film) so that we, like the father, repeatedly work through the trauma of what occurred and imagine how we will avoid the nightmare world of Film Noir.

Imagine the “gaze of the child” in this dream as the gaze of the Rejected Women in Film Noir. They function as the gaze in Film Noir, looking out at the viewer, and metaphorically tugging at his/her sleeve, saying “Spectator, can’t you see we’re burning?” Perhaps Freud’s “Father” dream reflects the way Rejected Women in Film Noir burn in many contexts of the world. Rejected Women have been neglected in Film Noir scholarship, much like the boy in Freud’s story. Often times if we look at Film Noir straight on, with a disinterested view, we do not see her. Part of my project has been to point out how she can be seen (as she sees us) in these films. My analysis, I hope, provides the “awry” or interested position that makes seeing her possible. What we see through our seeing her seeing us is that she can teach us about how power functions in the world in relation to women. Particularly, in relation to women who are not traditionally valued by the patriarchy because they lack either the charm, beauty or charisma of the other two character types seen in Film Noir, the femme fatale and the virginal home girl. The Rejected Woman puts these two dichotomous positions into flux because she exists as a woman in Film Noir, yet she fits in neither category.

She is also paradoxical; she operates as an invisible agent, but with limited agency. She is on the screen, yet invisible. She can accomplish goals impossible for other characters in the text, yet she has no power to enjoy the rewards of these accomplishments. She longs for the noir hero sexually, but the films foreclose her sexual longing, almost insisting that even her possessing sexual longing is impossible.
She seems to want to follow the implicit rules of society in relation to gender roles, yet she disrupts these rules repeatedly. In short, she exists as a paradoxical and ambivalent locus of power. Her source of power seems to confirm her powerlessness. In the epigraph, I quote the last line of Adrienne Rich’s poem about Marie Curie, “Power.” The poem asserts that Curie, who won the Noble Prize in 1911 for discovering polonium and radium, ultimately died from the very thing that gave her the power she wanted. Curie died from a radiation-related illness in 1934. Curie could not acknowledge that the source of her power, her genius that led her to these discoveries, was also the source of her powerlessness. Rich sees Curie’s story as a metaphor for women in the twentieth century and the ways that power is bound inexorably with powerlessness because of the binds of the patriarchy society.\footnote{For example, women have more access to jobs beyond those of the telephone operator and secretary, the jobs occupied by the Rejected Women of Film Noir. Yet, women make only seventy cents for every dollar men make in the same position, and women are usually held responsible for most of the child-rearing responsibilities. The power of having a career, because of the way power operates in the system, leads to the powerlessness of doing the same work for less money, and working two full time jobs, as mother and career woman.} Rejected Women in Film Noir show the patriarchal power paradigms in play through their own ambivalent relation to power. Mulvey’s active/passive paradigm and its implications regarding how power circulates in texts shows us that the rejected women’s power and agency are fettered to impotence and immobility. In both cases, their pleasure is bound up with pain, what Lacan calls \textit{jouissance}. As the gaze that looks at us in the picture (or through her relationship with the gaze of objects that look at us in the picture), she reminds us of these same oxymoronic binds.

Rejected women’s pleasure in pain seems forever inscribed with the concept of burning. Rejected women symbolize the burned out ends of July fourth firecrackers the
day after the celebration. If the femme fatale and the home girl represent the “July fourth” that was V-J day, the Rejected woman represents the “July fifth” that is nuclear radioactive fallout. If the femme fatale, with her sky-rockets-firecracker-sex-bomb appeal, and the home girl, with her fresh-outdoorsy-ready-for-a-picnic appeal, represent the party that is July fourth, the Rejected Woman is July fifth, the day of reckoning, the hangover, the cleanup, and the regret. Also, rejected women burn with unrequited longing for the noir hero. They get burned through their many encounters with rejection. Often times, their bodies literally burn, like those of Debby, Lucy, Doris, and Velda (we cannot imagine she will escape the film without atomic-related burns). And, they burn in relation to the way Film Noir sets them up as correlatives to the atomic bomb, as seen in the cases of Norah, Debby and Velda. Often they are burned out, or past their prime, in terms of the way the patriarchy valorizes female youth, and therefore become mired in less-than-ideal circumstances, like Gaye, the Lush, or Selma. Like the father in the dream, the spectators and scholars of Film Noir have ignored the rejected woman for too long.

It seems fitting that we must liken ourselves to the father (the symbol of the patriarchy) in order to see the rejected women, because she exemplifies what is broken inside this system. The burning of Rejected Women in Film Noir alerts our society to the problems still facing women in a patriarchal society. By attending to her burning in this project, I hope to have shown a new way of seeing an already well-studied cycle of films through close readings of specific filmic moments, and that by using two well-established ways of studying films, Mulveyan Look Theory and Lacanian Gaze Theory,
we see that the issues that burned Rejected Women in Film Noir, her ambivalent relationship to power, still circulate as embers in present twenty-first century America.
Figure 7-1. Casey’s scissors look like the mushroom cloud of a nuclear bomb

Figure 7-2. Norah’s “disfigured” hand summoning up an image of the hibakusha
Figure 7-3. Ray Diker as *hibakusha*

Figure 7-4. Close-up of Mike's burned wrist after opening the “great whatsit”
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