Girl Power: Female-Centered Neo-*Noir*

William Covey

Women-centered neo-*noir* films of the 1980s and 1990s showcase tough women cops and detectives operating with action, clarity, and decisiveness in a male-centered world. There were very few female investigators and no female detectives in classic *film noirs*. Two central roles, the strong-willed, femme fatale versus the bland but moral wife or girlfriend at home dominated classic *noir* films. With the lone exception of Ida Lupino, there were also no female directors of classic *noir*. These limitations have altered some since the 1980s. In neo-*noir* women usually fill three roles: the femme fatale, the female investigator/detective, and though still marginalized, the female director or writer. A short list of contemporary women directors of neo-*noir* includes: Kathryn Bigelow, Lizzie Borden, Tamra Davis, Mary Lambert, Sondra Locke, Dorothy Ann Puzo, Katt Shea Ruben, and Lili Fini Zanuck. Two key contemporary hardboiled detective writers are Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky.

Woman-centered neo-*noirs* intermingle both new and old *noir* themes within new critiques of patriarchy and analyses of female identity. Complex psychoanalytic points including androgyny, sexuality, voyeurism, and women's physical strength compete with political issues concerning women as professionals. Each of these sociopolitical topics is presented from a woman's perspective. Further, female-centered neo-*noir* films proffer integrationist, separatist, and backlash positions for their women's roles. These elements taken together illustrate that there is no essential woman's neo-*noir* film. The best approach then is to map the parameters for female-centered neo-*noir* by analyzing as many female-driven neo-*noirs* as possible.

While most neo-*noirs* directed by a woman and/or featuring a woman in their lead roles are positive both in aesthetic/cultural terms, for expanding the parameters of neo-*noir* discourse, and also in economic terms, for providing employment for women into spaces that have been dominated by white men, there still remain retrograde women's neo-*noirs*. Thus, not every woman's neo-*noir* intends a message of female empowerment or resistance to the male-dominated status quo. In fact, a mainstream Hollywood-friendly trade magazine like *Premiere*, which featured two cautious "special issues" about "Women in Hollywood" for both 1993's Year of the Woman and 1996, reveals how slowly the Hollywood system has changed since the times of classic *film noir*. In a statistical chart on directors in the

1993 issue one learns that, of the 7,332 feature films released from 1949-79, there were 7,318 directed by men and 14 films directed by 7 different women. From 1983-1992, of the 1,794 feature films released, 1,713 were directed by men and 81 were directed by women.[1] "Year of the Woman" or not, these numbers make clear that, as recent as in 1993, women were still marginalized forces in United States filmmaking. Ironically, despite such numbers, the female audience for movies continues to increase. The first "Women In Hollywood" special issue of *Premiere* makes clear that, "Women 25 and older...control more movie-ticket dollars than any other segment of the audience. If this group likes a movie, they will go again and again."[2] Whether these viewers will also pressure companies to add female directors, especially if producers listen to demographics as much as the popular press implies, remains to be seen. As more and more female detectives populate neo-*noirs*, the jury is similarly out on whether a larger female audience for characters and films born of male-centered pulp novels will also continue to grow.

Women's neo-*noirs* in the 1980s first called for changes in depicting the gender of criminal investigators, and then began uncovering women's crime issues such as discussions of female violence. As Elayne Rapping makes clear in her summary of the politics of women's issues, "Feminism assumes that society itself needs to change in important, democratizing ways."[3] Analyzing a selection of current films proves seminal for neo-*noir*'s continuing redefinition, opening up neo-*noir* discourse away from the singular concerns of male-centered classic *film noir*. Female-centered neo-*noirs* carve out a niche for tough investigators, expand cultural roles for women, and paradoxically, in backlash films, may also reinscribe traditional gender roles.

In other words, is a film technique like voiceover discourse challenged or altered when a woman narrates instead of a man? Additionally, one might inquire whether we are able to read classic films like *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *D.O.A.* (1950) differently once we have seen Mary Lambert's *Siesta* (1987). Does Diane's (Ellen Barkin's) nightmare narrative in the latter film, told from her moments both before and after death and spoken in voiceover, add the "woman's voice" to *noir* filmmaking? *Siesta* may do just this. Diane's voice over at least offers a subversion of the theory of voiceover as "generally male"[4] and Diane's strong character both updates and responds to the parallel male characters in the two classic films just mentioned. In its similar plotting and narration devices, the viewer recognizes the *noir* pattern of the dying protagonist trying to make sense of her/his life once it is already too late. However, whether Diane's discovery that Dell (Martin Sheen) is exploiting her daredevil, skydiving skills for personal monetary gain, or that she still loves her trainer Augustine (Gabriel Byrne), is more essentially feminine than Walter Neff's (Fred MacMurray's) male confession about falling for Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) or Frank Bigelow's (Edmond O'Brien's) explanation to the cops about his poisoning is debatable. Still, a film which allows a woman to

narrate the demons of her inner psyche, all the while confessing her true romantic feelings in a voiceover stream-of-consciousness style over the entire length of a feature film, is certainly startling, perhaps overtly feminist, compared to typical *noir* films. Diane is defined neither as a femme fatale nor as a long suffering girlfriend for the male protagonist. Rather, she is the protagonist, complete with a host of contradictory feelings and impulses. Therefore, Diane is long suffering in that she is compelled to return to Augustine to try to reclaim his discarded love. Yet, in a way, she responds to and redefines other traditional *noir* female roles–she remains a dangerous woman toward Augustine and his new, lawful wife as well as a rebel to the legal bonds of her marital relationship with Dell.

A female protagonist who narrates a film is powerful because, "Ways of looking are inevitably linked to ways of speculating, of theorizing...and...to ways of representing oneself"[5] In *Siesta*, Diane controls the narration and the plot by her voiceover and actions, representing herself more accurately because she controls these technique. Discourse analysis is most convincing when it reveals how subtle variations on gender roles, within a film such as *Siesta*, revise classic *noir* thematics and narrative patterns.

Consequently, Diane's control of filmic technique also focuses critical analyses on thematics that reflect her perspective. The connection between love and money, the hopelessness of romantic love in contemporary society, and the use of flashback in order to try to redeem a doomed life all work together to undercut the assumption that these are "essentially" male thematics of *film noirs*. In Diane, a strong woman on a mental and psychic quest, *Siesta* reveals neo-*noirs* aesthetic discourse as constantly shifting and open to issues of women's identity. Mary Ann Doane argues that when a woman-centered film "insistently and sometimes obsessively attempts to trace the contours of female subjectivity and desire within the traditional forms and conventions of Hollywood narrative...certain contradictions within patriarchal ideology become more apparent"[6] Even though a male-identified formalistic *noir* narrative device is retained by the use of voiceover in *Siesta*, gender identity and cultural codes are illustrated as shifting and fluid. This neo-*noir* woman's film reveals that the voiceover device is no more owned by the male than the female. *Siesta* decenters the paradigm for analyzing *noir* voiceover, proving that the aesthetic device is not a fixed mechanism, but rather just another site where new discourses may contest the old. In *Siesta*, Diane's existential journey, mirroring but also differing from the male narrative pattern, is coded as specifically female, demonstrating that stylistics and thematics are malleable terms in neo-*noir* and they should, therefore, always be discussed in conjunction with surrounding cultural influences.

Katt Shea Ruben's *Stripped to Kill* (1987) offers an additional unusual challenge for neo-*noir* criticism. The director co-wrote the screenplay with her husband about a female cop named Cody (Kay Lenz) who must go undercover and pose as a topless dancer in order to locate the criminal inhabiting the world of nightclub

stripping who is brutally murdering various dancers. The film is challenging to analyze in at least two ways. Firstly, it is a hybrid genre film. Titled as it is and produced by Roger Corman, the film was made cheaply and carried the imprimatur of an exploitation film. Yet, the film is also teeming with *noir* elements. Secondly, the movie problematizes the assumption of the camera as essentially phallic, a crucial element of the "male gaze" theory. The film levies its critique by its consistently pro-women's community stance and by the fact that the gaze watching these strippers is most often constructed as female. Together, the gaze and the composition of *Stripped to Kill* work to oppose Laura Mulvey's theory that "mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order."[7] While the film is far from a radical feminist tract, it is also more than simple sexploitation images presented for the enjoyment of male adolescent viewers.

Katt Shea Ruben seems to be arguing that the conventions of "realism" are not as important as getting her ideas of the thematic and creative aspects of each woman's dance sequence shown in a proper manner. The film de-emphasizes stripping's economic relationship to men in order to emphasize erotic dancing as a profession where women, who may have entered the club out of various economic needs, instead develop a subcultural resistance to their profession's traditional meaning. The dancers develop strong bonds amongst themselves and a deep appreciation for the creativity of their fellow workers. The impetus that drives these dancers is impressing other women with one's own creativity, rather than the clientele or male owners who are concerned more with flesh, money, and the economics of dance. Despite the contradiction of satisfying the male heterosexual gaze for cash, the women actually develop and improve their professional skills for the approval of their own subcultural women's community.

Because we are introduced to the individual strippers, rather than to their club audiences, Katt Shea Ruben allows the viewer's sympathies to favor the women's growing empowerment and skills in place of the leers and money of the men in the club's audience. Therefore the typical relationship between stripper and voyeur is broken down. By demystifying the strippers, the movie turns the women into human beings. Viewers who are looking for a traditional sexploitation film are asked to rethink their responses to female nudity. The female director constructs an antihegemonic mise-en-scene that emphasizes how much athletic and creative ability these dancers possess. In fact, the one dancer named Cinnamon who uses drugs and tumbles off stage during her overtly vulgar routine is looked down upon by the other dancers as a "has been." She even loses her economic support when she is fired by Ray because of her lack of discipline. In *Stripped to Kill*, topless dancing is a profession neither rudimentary nor inherently degrading.

In contrast, by roughing up local street criminals and labeling a local guy named Pocket both a "pervert" and his prime suspect because he watches every topless show with his left hand in his pocket and gifts some girls with paper flowers he makes, Heineman (Greg Evigan) gets nowhere with his part in this murder investi-

gation. Repeatedly, he strikes macho poses, is caught snooping in apartments, or follows false leads. On the other hand, his female partner Cody begins to make friends with the other dancers, discovers that Pocket is not masturbating at shows but rather is missing his hand, which is why he always hides his stub in his pocket, and she becomes obsessed with mastering both her undercover dancing and solving this case. When Heineman tells Cody that "the brass" has found out what she is doing and has ordered her to "hang up [her] G-string," Cody yells angrily at Heineman for tricking her into breaking police rules and dancing in the first place. She then decides to perform a final dance both in order to get closer to solving the case and to provide a kind of answer to Heineman's trick on her. For the first time in the film, Cody demonstrates for Heineman both her sexual power and her ability to do good work. Heineman busts back stage afterwards, flustered and angry. He yells, asking her what the hell she is doing and pulls rank on Cody–"You were ordered NOT to come back here. You are a COP", and, in frustration, begs her, "Don't flake out on me."

Cody's response shows how this film often attempts to construct male/female attraction differently than standard Hollywood fare. As Laura Mulvey has made clear concerning classic Hollywood narrative, "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 fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly."[8] Cody points out that Heineman has only gotten romantically interested in her because he subconsciously accepts Mulvey's theory that Cody has value because other men sexualized her body when she was dancing on stage, and sharing her sexuality with others makes him jealous. Heineman also seems to realize that her good dancing and investigating has freed her from her mentee position under him.

But, Cody's intentions do not buy into the binary relationship implied by Mulvey's theory. Cody strips as a professional obligation, in order to solve a murder case. Her dancing deconstructs the active/passive binary. She strips (acts) in the capacity of female investigator solving a crime and she improves her dancing in order to be appreciated professionally by her fellow female dancers, not merely to "turn on" the male crowd. Despite the fact that the crowd responds to her, Cody's active pleasure in her power to both arouse Heineman and be complimented by her female cohorts complicates the lone male sexual fantasy of gazing at women that Mulvey's theory argues for. Unsure of how to react to this new kind of subject positioning, Heineman can only respond as a passive voyeur and ineffectual male action hero.

Throughout *Stripped to Kill* Cody is the more professional of the two cops. While arguing with Heineman, she continues to do her job, discovering that Pocket is innocent by getting to know him and, even though she is ordered out of the club, announcing she has to go back and finish solving the case. Because Heineman stalks off in disgust to find the killer on his own, he potentially jeopard-

izes his partner's life. Obviously, the film would have had a more clearly female-empowered ending had Heineman remained out of the picture. Cody would have survived on her own, ready to solve future cases. Still, the film makes clear that Cody is the better professional investigator, able to handle cases without a man's help. Cody's mastery of stripping offers rebellion against status quo women's roles, establishing "performative pleasure based on the satisfaction of maintaining a sense of subcultural difference, a social identity that is *not* constructed by and for the interests of the dominant"[9] as a kind of sex positive feminism. Without becoming friends and being respected by her fellow dancers, Cody could never have learned the information about this subculture that allows her to solve the case. Cody's ability to capture and contain the male murderer ultimately proves she has even learned how to knife fight and is no longer dependent on Heineman's guidance.

In the way that one woman gets initiated into crime investigation originating from some other walk of life, *Stripped to Kill* is very much in line with other woman-centered neo-*noirs* of the 1980s. The following women all become *noir* investigators even though they begin their films defined in other ways: Judith Singer (Susan Sarandon) in *Compromising Positions* (1985), and Katie Phillips/Cathy Weaver (Debra Winger) in *Betrayed* (1988) are housewives; Alex Sternbergen (Jane Fonda) in *The Morning After* (1986) is an actress; and Katya Yarno (Diane Lane) in *Lady Beware* (1987) is a window designer.

To use the last film as an example, Katya Yarno (Diane Lane) goes from a lonely fashion designer with a low self-esteem to a hardened crime investigator no longer fearful of the city in Karen Arthur's *Lady Beware* . Katya's improving investigative skills parallel her growing confidence and daring with her "day job" as a window display artist. As her window displays become more daring and risqué, she is first terrorized by a stalker who has fetishized her work and then empowered by her pursuit and capture of the stalker.

No longer a "small-town girl," Katya ends the film excelling at both of her jobs, an accomplished professional able to take care of herself. As neo-*noirs* move into 1990s, a confluence of competing issues concerning female employment and identity continue to be worked out within woman-centered movies.

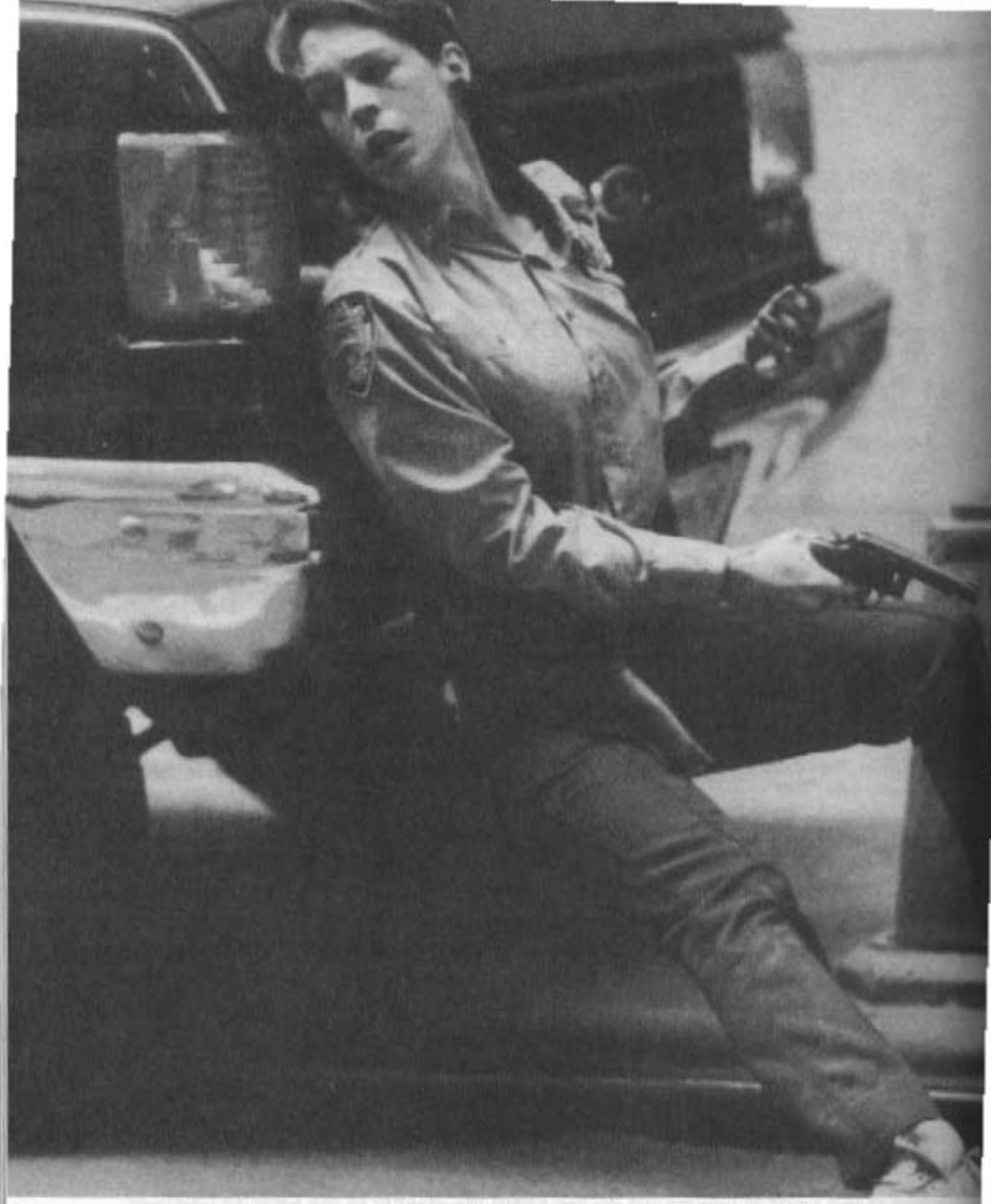
For example, there are plenty of recent films like *Impulse* (1990) that seem more intent on reversing this trend toward female independence found in 1980s neo-*noirs*, in order to return women to more traditional roles. For example, in Sondra Locke's *Impulse*, Lottie (Theresa Russell) plays a working-class undercover vice cop who acts as either a prostitute or escort in order to make vice squad busts. Because of problems Lottie has had before the film opens, she is forced to see a psychiatrist once a week, who will decide whether Lottie should be allowed to continue working. Lottie reveals what attracts her to vice to her uptight, black female shrink, admitting, "Working in vice. Strangers. The way they look at you. Feel all that power over them. Make 'em pay. It excites me." Lottie's experience

with vice customers has made her cynical about any kind of romantic relationship in her own life, paralleling Bree Daniel's (Jane Fonda's) feelings about heterosexual romance in the sur-text about murder mysteries and prostitution, *Klute* (1971). In fact, later in the film, Lottie claims that she really only wants a man who has a lot of money.

She spends the movie being pursued by two men with whom she works: Morgan (George Dzundza), an overweight and crude working-class cop who is her boss, and Stan (Jeff Fahey), a thin and refined lower middle-class, assistant district attorney. When Stan is assigned to her precinct, he immediately recognizes the harassment Morgan inflicts on Lottie. During their first meeting, Stan prods her with questions about her job, asking "It must be difficult working for a man like Morgan." Lottie replies casually, "I think I can handle him.... Friction is normal." Stan counters with, "Is it 'normal' police procedure for a male officer to frisk a female?," referring to Morgan's actions toward Lottie on an earlier faked bust where he did not want to give away her real identity to the crook. Lottie says, "Morgan just likes to harass people, I don't take it personally."

In a surprising moment where the male has to define sexual harassment for the female perhaps because, as a middle-class person, he has more "knowledge" of legal argot than the working-class woman, Stan tells her she should take it personally because Morgan's actions are wrong. Stan's ethics lesson allows Lottie to offer her first impression of Stan, saying she thinks Stan is an unhappy, tight-assed reactionary who will spend the rest of his life spitting into the wind. He accepts Lottie's summary of himself, but her nerve and toughness also helps him to become romantically infatuated with her. Perhaps Morgan is only treating Lottie like "one of the guys," expressing his appreciation of her good work through sarcasm and contempt. Yet, because of Morgan's fondling of her, the viewer is supposed to take Stan's side and see him as an unethical cop. In contrast, Stan's respectful treatment of women is "sophisticated" and more appropriate for the workplace. As the film continues and he becomes increasingly jealous of Stan and Lottie's blooming relationship, Morgan is made to look more and more like a bad guy who may even be responsible for the film's primary murder.

The film builds up suspense near the end when the audience questions whether Lottie, once she discovers she holds the key to the million dollar stash of a government-protected witness named Peron, will take the money and run away from both her low-paying job and the kind of men with whom she is surrounded. Also at this point in *Impulse* we do not know the identity of the killer or whether he will discover that Lottie was in Peron's place during the murder. Morgan quickly figures out that Lottie was the mystery woman with Peron, and leaks the information to Stan. Lottie confesses what happened to Stan, and, because they each now share romantic inclinations, she weeps her way into admitting that she did not have sex with Peron stating, "I didn't. I stopped because I don't know what the hell I was doing there in the first place." While Stan warns her that she



Above, a wounded Officer Megan Turner (Jamie Lee Curtis) in *Blue Steel*.

should be worried because the killer knows there was a survivor, Lottie says, "Right now, I'm more scared about us than anything." Lottie switches from a loner detective to a desperate lover, placing her against the grain of hardboiled detectives and in line with the typical Hollywood damsel in distress. Still, in the cli-

max, Lottie shoots the killer Vic (another government witness who needed to shoot Peron to get off the hook), and Stan gives her a chance to leave the country with the million dollars he now knows she has confiscated.

In *noir* fashion, Lottie quits the police force with the intention of leaving town. Stan and Morgan have another confrontation as Morgan is now also sure that Lottie has Peron's money, though he can not prove it. He yells at Stan, "she'll fuck you over for that money," setting up a unique ending for the movie where the female cop may become a femme fatale worthy of a character like Matty Walker in *Body Heat* (1981). Instead of heeding Morgan's advice, Stan follows Lottie to the airport and gives her a chance to leave alone. She walks off, perhaps thinking about what her life will be like as a rich woman, only to return to him in the bar a few minutes later. She returns Peron's key and money, saying "Turn it in." Stan finishes the film with a toast and seals Lottie's new life as an ex-cop and his new lover. The film ends with a Kim Carnes song whose refrain repeats "Everybody Needs Someone to Lean On...To Love" which encourages viewers to assume that this female detective has handed in her badge for a solid heterosexual relationship with a successful and honest young man.

Impulse, contains all the elements of the neo-*noir*, including the provocative addition of a tough white female cop, only to reinscribe patriarchal gender relations by film's end. The unhappy, wild-willed woman is merely redomesticated. The cultural message of the film implies that women should only work at a profession until the right man comes along and asks them to give up their careers for a domestic home life.

Still, there are also recent neo-*noirs* that celebrate independent women. Certain 1990's female detectives and investigators advance the possibilities for women's representation in neo-*noirs*. The following female-centered films expand the acceptable parameters for the hardboiled detective character in neo-*noir*. Women, however, do not have a similar cinematic history of tough action heroes, or detectives to build upon as males. Consequently, much of the professional anxiety expressed by the female-centered neo-*noirs* of the 1980s may have to do with the pioneering status of those women portraying such detective roles.

Many critical circles champion *Blue Steel* (1990) as perhaps the key contemporary female neo-*noir*. While it is truly a fine action thriller, its critical reception may have been aided by Kathryn Bigelow's strong script and the fact that she has been educated at Columbia college by film scholars like John Belton and Sylvère Lotringer. Her knowledge of film and genre history is clear in her comments on making this film. In an interview just before *Blue Steel* was released, Bigelow admits that she intended to do a "woman's action film," and that she was fascinated by *film noirs* because "they delve into a darkness and talk about the demons that exist in all of us."[10] Critics have responded to *Blue Steel* with almost universal admiration and also from a wide array of critical perspectives, including: psychoanalysis (Cora Kaplan,[11] Nickolas Pappas,[12] and Bob Self[13]), feminism and

institutional critique (Linda Mizejewski[14]) and identity politics (Pam Cook). Like Mizejewski, I see *Blue Steel* as illustrating a cultural moment, marking both a continuation and improvement upon the shifting placement of female professionals as representatives of the law and as enemies to misogyny.

Robert Self makes a case for *Blue Steel*'s status as neo-*noir*, uncovering ambiguities and disturbances in its narrative pattern: "The representation of the woman as the law constitutes a major destabilization of the symbolic order in which gendered subjectivity is a central project."[15] In other words, like most classic *noirs*, the story has an uneasy relationship with institutions like the justice system, yet, unlike those older films, this story does not end happily nor resolve the gender and sexuality contradictions it posits. In fact, typical femininity is altered in the film in terms of the cultural construction of femininity and desire. Megan (Jamie Lee Curtis) is androgynous-looking, but markedly heterosexual even though many critics have tried to use her "butch" look to find a lesbian subtext within the film–with her short slicked-back hair and, wearing a uniform and hat, "hiding the breasts with the uniform,...[designating the] disappearance of the woman into the law, of her positioning as subject to the law and the subject of its enforcement."[16] Megan uncovers double standards within the milieu of typical law enforcement when she forces the law to examine women's issues. While *V.I. Warshawski* (1991)talks tough, still she captures the most attention from her red high heels and sexy legs. In *Blue Steel*, Megan scares off potential suitors by either dressing androgynously or admitting to men that she is a cop. None of Megan's working-class male friends have any use for such an apparent "butch femme." The lone exception in the film is Eugene (Ron Silver), the homme fatale and psychosexual deviant, who fetishizes and identifies with phallic women. The viewer may also see Megan as attractive and heroic, based in part on Curtis's previous film roles, even though this role marks a break with her previous mainstream depictions of standard female beauty.

Beyond these issues of identity politics, Cora Kaplan reads this film through a lens that combines social class with gender issues. Megan, detective Nick Mann (Clancy Brown), and most of Megan's New York world is ethnic and working-class. Part of her initial attraction to Eugene the stock broker are his class markers (they dine in elegant restaurants and take helicopter rides over the city as part of their dates) and his ethnic difference from the men she has grown up around. Eugene is Jewish, dark-skinned, and successful–quite the opposite of her Catholic, overweight, and unhappy father as well as her working-class male friends in her neighborhood, each of whom are embarrassed that Megan has become a cop. Her father stays home and slaps around his wife to relieve his almost constant depression. As Cora Kaplan makes clear, while Megan is aggressive and independent around men of her own kind (at one point handcuffing her father and taking him toward the police station after one of his spousal abuse incidents), she is "both feminine and deferential"[17] around Eugene. Thus, *Blue Steel* introduces a female

detective who acts differently according to people's social class. Because Megan represents the law, this implies the law may also be preferential. In other words, preferential treatment of people of economic advantage is an important subtext within *Blue Steel*.

In terms of neo-*noir* as a changing generic category, "the nihilism of the ending"[18] with Megan staring off into space alone in a squad car, as well as the emphasis on social class and detection, and the positioning of women's issues as key criminal issues, each work together by using gender to redefine classic neo-*noir* concerns. Because traditional *noir* criticism privileges men, the use of male/female role reversals place women within general neo-*noir* discourse. In other words, *Blue Steel* illustrates that when a woman is the hero of the film and the man is evil, the assumptions that we normally make about detectives and dangerous adversaries no longer match traditional gender assumptions.

Linda Mizejewski labels these newest neo-*noirs* as "female dick" movies. Despite contrary mainstream generic and cultural pressures, Mizejewski believes *Blue Steel* delineates "the feminist fantasy of woman as powerful within the law and the male fantasy of the law-woman as fetish."[19] Mizejewski implies sarcasm in her label, but I believe Megan's character illustrates how altering *noir* discourse is influential, allowing concerns like domestic violence to be her ethical and woman-centered guide for law enforcement . *Love Crimes* (1992) continues this cultural dialogue begun in *Blue Steel*, as another tough investigative cop forces the law to discover the existence of women's issues as legitimate criminal issues.

As director Lizzie Borden makes clear in her 1992 *Cineaste* interview, the version of *Love Crimes* she intended for release can only be found on the unrated videocassette. Borden explains that the disastrous theatrical reception resulted from the company's intentionally edited theatrical release of the film because various scenes in the film "made some of the executives feel uncomfortable."[20] Borden also admits that her pledged audience is always "women over thirty" but that "I'm not a separatist. I hope that men can see my films through eyes colored by female characters they have to identify with–just as women have had to do in watching film with male characters."[21] *Love Crimes* is intended as a female-empowering neo-*noir*.

In the film, district attorney Dana Greenaway (Sean Young) discovers a legal "gray area" when she begins to look into her case against "David Hanover" (Patrick Bergin), a man who poses as a famous soft-core fashion photographer whose photographic style is not unlike real-life photographers Herb Ritts or Helmut Newton. Hanover uses his alias, with its accompanying baggage of his abilities to construct beautiful images of women, to "con" various everyday women into posing for him. When they do pose, he gets pleasure by forcing them into taking more and more of their clothes off, often leading to some sort of physical assault and usually culminating in consensual sex. Because the women agree to his actions and because he comforts them afterwards, telling them how "great" they were in

Above, District Attorney Dana Greenway (Sean Young) is terrorized by serial rapist "David Hanover" (Patrick Bergin) in *Love Crimes*.

the photos, even though each woman feels violated, Hanover has broken no law. Borden claims in her interview that *Love Crimes* plays on women's need to feel beautiful, it "presents women who think that they are going to be legitimized by a fashion photographer."[22] Dana's anger at this loophole in the legal system is the just cause she needs to anger her fellow male DAs. As the case intensifies, Dana is warned by her ex-lover boss that "it's not your job to write the laws, it's to uphold it (sic)"–something Dana can not comply with until she feels the law begins to take woman's issues more seriously.

Typical of other strong women investigators in contemporary neo-*noirs*, Dana is presented early on as asexual and androgynous, with slicked-back short hair, gray business suits, and the lifestyle of a loner who adopts such a serious business-like tone with people and is so aggressive that she develops no romantic relationships. Neo-*noir* films continue to struggle with what the proper "look" is which can represent a tough female investigator. Dana's effeminate male secretary admires her attitude and look but, at one point, Maria (Arnetia Walker) a black, fellow female detective advises her to remember, "I'm your only friend."

Dana's appearance is important because most of the film deals with various female fantasies, identifying the cultural importance that female beauty and sexual appeal impose on all men and women. David recognizes this power and uses it for his own distorted psychosexual pleasures. Dana, on the other hand, has to learn about her feelings through her captivity by David. Borden's intention, according to her interview, is that the film be troubling, "it's about someone who's so unconscious about herself that she puts herself in a dangerous situation."[23] Though lack of self-knowledge has been used many times in many classic and neo-*noirs* about males, many female critics feel that when a male jeopardizes a strong female, the resulting film sends out anti-feminist messages. The challenge for Lizzie Borden was to avoid such a message.

The combination of Dana's strengths and unconscious weaknesses manifest themselves during her captivity in David's cabin in the woods. Once David has seen her unclothed and still has not tried to have sex with her, Dana admits in the general depression and confusion of her captivity, that she has never had an orgasm, does not like to be touched, and has slept with her boss though she did not like it. The film builds to this point where it focuses equally on both Dana's psychosexual makeup and on David's sex crimes. Through flashback, the viewer discovers that Dana's father used to lock her in a closet after Dana caught him in the midst of one of his many affairs with various women while her mother (his wife) was at work. The movie suggests that Dana is troubled by Hanover because she sees in David's photographs the kind of erotic ecstasy she saw on her father's and his lover's faces during his infidelities.

At one point when Maria and Dana are investigating some of David's Polaroids of various women, Maria says to Dana, "This joker is shit as a photographer.... The women are enjoying the hell out of themselves. [This is] more than a simple

con going on here. It's some sort of mutual fantasy. Can't you see it?.... Damn straight you can see it!" While the art film aspects of this film such as the use of flashback and the skipping around in time of the narrative seem to have turned off a popular audience, the fact that Dana begins fantasizing about David offends most of the usual independent film and feminist audience. Neither satisfying the erotic thriller crowd in its depictions of sexuality nor the art film crowd in its non-traditional women's politics, *Love Crimes* has been almost universally dismissed. Yet, Borden's thematic obsessions are worth examining and her technical innovations signify Dana's scattered psyche in this brave film.

For example, when Dana is put on extended leave of absence for not dropping the "Hanover thing," she is told by Maria that he has been caught. At home later, Maria calls to tell Dana that the cops got the wrong guy and suddenly Dana's phone goes dead. The suspense builds, she gets hold of her gun, and David confronts her in the darkness of her living room, whispering "We were close to something." He admits they were building a mutual erotic fantasy and asks, "Don't let [your] gun come between us." He then flashes his photographer's bulb as a weapon, recalling Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), by using its light to temporarily blind Dana's eyes in her attempt to get a "bead" on him. The bulb's flash triggers another psychic flashback for Dana where it is revealed that her father accidentally shot her mother during a domestic fight. In anger, Dana breaks a heavy glass object over David's head. While he lies in her living room bleeding, his flashbulb continues to flash like a weapon, and the police arrive to apprehend him.

Maria (the black detective) finishes the film as it began, being taped and interrogated by two white Internal Affairs men. They tell her that David is calling his bust entrapment–Hanover has claimed, "she invited him in. She wanted it." But Maria sides with Dana against these claims. She responds with a classic *noir* line, now marked as different because it is used to justify a feminist ideology, accomplishing critic Griselda Pollock's call for a flip-flopping of conventional ideas to show their ideological power.[24] When Maria says, "Who cares what line she [Dana] crossed, she caught him," a defense that has been used by countless males to justify all sorts of activities in detective thrillers, the line now resonates with female empowerment. For this one time, a woman espouses bending a law in elucidation of the ethics of a woman's issue. Maria next assures the men that Dana is not hiding anything from them.

The film ends with Maria and Dana, in secret friendship, burning the lone compromising nude photo of Dana standing in a bathtub that David took while he was harboring her. Maria has confiscated the photo earlier from the abduction sight and never turns it in as evidence. The audience is meant to see this as a small victory for women against a still unfair and still patriarchal justice system. Dana and Maria break the law, concealing evidence, compromising their positions as law officers in order to more surely get a bust against David's "love crimes." Dana learns to express her sexuality by reliving the nightmares of her father's love

crimes through the erotic consequences of David's twisted view of sexuality. For the first time in neo-*noir*, a feminist detective expresses confused sexual fantasies and unconventional views of male and female-centered fantasies throughout the length of a feature film.

While this essay necessarily de-emphasizes the neo-*noir* femme fatale movies, because her character has not changed much since the classic period, she remains a key player in neo-*noirs* which emphasize sexuality, particularly in: *Body Heat* (1981), *Against All Odds* (1984), *The Hot Spot* (1990), *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Gun-crazy* (1992), *Poison Ivy* (1992), *White Sands* (1992), *Blown Away* (1993), *Body of Evidence* (1993), *The Crush* (1993), *Point of No Return* (1993), *True Romance* (1993), *The Wrong Man* (1993), *China Moon* (1994), *Disclosure* (1994), *Dream Lover* (1994), *Love and a .45* (1994), *Romeo is Bleeding* (1994), *Jade* (1995), *Heaven's Prisoners* (1996), *Palmetto* (1998) and *Wild Things* (1998). Despite the femme fatale's increased display of nudity, fluid sexual interest in either men or women, and the occasional substitution of teenage girls in roles originally designed for "experienced" women, these film's stories continue to center around how an innocent, unintelligent, lonely, or desperate man gets caught up in the spider's web spun by the black widow. The conventionalized film character of the femme fatale continues to provide non-traditional roles for strong women and garner lots of popular attention. Hence, Sharon Stone was literally invented as a movie star based on her "controversial" role in *Basic Instinct*. Within the world of the new *noir* films, the femme fatale remains dangerous by knowing how to both tote and use the latest weaponry. In just the past few years, characters like Lane (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio), Maggie (Bridget Fonda), Alabama (Patricia Arquette), Zoe (Julie Delphy), Starlene (Renee Zellweger) and Mallory (Juliette Lewis) are willing and able to take an active role in murder either for themselves or for their men in their respective films, *White Sands* (1992), *Point of No Return* (1993), *True Romance* (1993), *Killing Zoe* (1994), *Love and a .45* (1994) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994). Yet, most femme fatale movies continue to reinscribe patriarchy. Thus, the easiest way to tame aggressive women in conserva-

Below, Ellen Barkin as Diane in *Siesta*

tive femme fatale films is to kill them off. *Mortal Passions* (1989), *The Grifters* (1990), and *Consenting Adults* (1992) also make the destruction of the transgressive female the main point of their films. The recent crop of neo-*noir* women outlaws on the run, including such films as *Mortal Thoughts* (1991), *Guncrazy* (1992), *Thelma and Louise* (1992), *Kalifornia* (1993), *Love and a .45* (1994), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), and *Jackie Brown* (1997) also differ from older outlaw films concerning heterosexual couples in their "projections of masculine arrogance and contempt [as arousing women] to physical violence."[25] The toughest, least sentimental outlaw may just as easily be the woman as the man in these neo-*noirs* and they add further variations for cultural analysis when one ponders what such female fantasies reflect about contemporary women's feelings and frustrations with traditional heterosexual romances. A critical supposition of this essay, that "the drama of sexuality and [gender] difference...[is a]...primary text for cultural interpretation"[26] has guided my mapping of the history and cultural issues surrounding woman-centered neo-*noir* films of the 1980s and 1990s.

Since the emergence of female directors in the 1980s and 1990s, films that have concentrated on women detectives and thematics have become more acceptable to the genre. Unlike classic *film noir*, women can inhabit lead, investigative roles and pursue various women's cultural, legal, and political issues. That such cultural issues have become a larger part of neo-*noir* discourse, illustrates that many neo-*noir* movies will remain women-centered, shifting, "the epistemic problem of crime films from that of a subject eager to know, chasing his prey, to that of a subject already possessing all the facts, needing rather herself to be known–acknowledged as a subject."[27] Women are finally being depicted as tough professional investigators who welcome danger and solve tough mysteries. The growing number of woman's neo-*noirs* builds an argument against the overgeneralized summary of labeling all contemporary *film noirs* as anti-woman, backlash movies. The various films discussed here also problematize basic views of detective films as essentially male gendered. Critics need no longer ignore woman-centered neo-*noir*, but instead should further describe and expand issues of female identity, professionalism, and violence that have been introduced here. Neo-*noir* is an everchanging and vibrant cultural discourse that can also point out both theoretical problems and role limitations in viewing hardboiled detectives movies as merely male-centered identity films.

Notes

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4. Christine Gledhill, "*Klute* 1: a contemporary *film noir* and feminist criticism." in ***Women in Film Noir.*** Ed. E. Ann Kaplan, Ed. (BFI, 1978), p. 16.

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7. Laura Mulvey, ***Visual and Other Pleasures***, (Indiana, 1989), p. 16.
7. Ibid., p. 19.
8. John Fiske, ***Reading the Popular***, (Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 118.
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12. Robert T. Self, "Redressing the Law in Kathryn Bigelow's *Blue Steel*." *Journal of Film and Video*, 46.2 (Summer, 1994), pp. 31-43.
13. Linda Mizejewski, "Picturing the Female Dick: *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Blue Steel*," *Journal of Film and Video*, 45.2-3 (Summer-Fall, 1993), pp. 6-23.
15. Self, p. 33.
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17. Kaplan, p. 57.
18. Ibid., p. 66.
19. Mizejewski, pp. 16-17.
20. Cynthia Lucia, "Redefining Female Sexuality in the Cinema: An Interview with Lizzie Borden," *Cineaste*, 19.2-3 (1992), p. 7.
21. Idem.
22. Ibid., p. 9.
23. Ibid., p. 10.
24. Griselda Pollock, "What's Wrong With 'Images of Women'? ***The Sexual Subject***," (Routledge, 1992), pp. 135-45.
25. Kathleen Murphy, "Only Angels Have Wings: Women in Revolt," *Film Comment*, 27.4 (July-August 1991), p. 26
26. Kaplan, p. 59.
27. Pappas, p. 24.