

Femmes fatales: representation in the movies and the spectrum of modernity

ABSTRACT

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This essay analyzes the popular reception of the *femme fatale* in the 1920's, as well as their emergence and presence in the modernist period, approaching the female characters "Lulu", in *Pandora's Box* by G.W. Pabst (1928-9), "The Woman from the City", in *Sunrise* by F.W. Murnau (1927), and "Maria the Robot", in *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang (1926-7), and verifying how they fit the concept and can be addressed as "*femme fatales*" or "vamps". The *femme fatales* were modern-urban women whose stereotypes were constructed on a direct opposition to motherly-wife women of that period, and the cinema incorporated them as types of "commodities" due to their transgressive temper and sexual appeal.

KEYWORDS: *Femme fatales*. Modernist period. Representation in movies.



[...] that good and evil are both part of living, that our mistakes and our suffering need not ruin us, but that what these events mean to us and what we do with them is what matters, for they may indeed become the very means by which our tomorrow may prove to be a better day. (JONES, 1955, p. 262)

In this essay, I aim at analyzing the popular reception of the *femme fatale* in the 1920's, relating the emergence and presence of this figure to the modernist period by analyzing the female characters namely Lulu, in *Pandora's Box* by G.W. Pabst (1928-9), *The Woman from the City* in *Sunrise* by F.W. Murnau (1927), and Maria the Robot in *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang (1926-7), as well as to verify how they fit the concept and can be addressed as "*femme fatales*" or "vamps". My intention is to trace a root for the appearance of the *femme fatale* or vamp, beginning with an analysis of the term "flapper" and its origins as well as to trace a parallel among the female characters in the films under analysis to demonstrate how they [the flappers/ *femme fatales*] influenced and were influenced by modernity.

The Weimar Republic period in Germany, established between 1919 and 1933, was marked by a "twin identity around modernity and decadence, self-assured glamour and anxious descent into chaos" (ELSAESSER, 2000, p. 4). The "flapper" of the 1920's emerges precisely in this transitory and ambiguous period, where some Victorian modes, especially regarding female morale, still prevailed in society, while the advent of modernity was increasingly seeking "new modes of organizing view and perception" (HANSEN, 1999, p. 333). Thus, the dichotomy Virgin/Whore, frequently presented in theoretical essays on feminism, is a way to relate Victorian/Modernism, and this Western binary relation seems to be the "ground dichotomy" for all the subsequent ones.

I begin with an analysis of what actually the "flapper" was and the connotation the term acquired. Around 1920, women were granted with the suffrage and the consequences of this act could be clearly noticed since the

society changed in order to fit women in this new condition. Women no longer had to be housewives and began to be absorbed by the work force. They started to have more opportunities for careers and work: women became teachers, nurses, lawyers, mannequins, secretaries and so forth. They started to be more independent even though female professionals continued to be paid less than men for the same job. Therefore, with all these changes taking place, women changed their looks and lifestyle drastically. This new attitude includes sexual liberation and consumption of alcohol and cigarettes among other things. Besides such concerns, there are some topics about fashion in the 1920s that need to be addressed better to understand the world presented in the films under analysis, for instance, what the beauty standards were in the twenties, and how they were constructed. The body outline in this period was a very straight, curveless figure and, for women, face, figure, coiffure, posture and grooming became important fashion factors in addition to clothing. Glamour was then an important fashion trend due to the influence of the motion picture industry and the famous female movie stars. Thus, the term “flapper” was used in the 1920’s to refer to a woman that embodied all the aforementioned characteristics.

The concept of “commodity” as a phenomenon related to fashion, based on the explanations provided by Susan Buck-Morss, who closely analyzed a work by Walter Benjamin, is relevant to a deeper understanding of the flapper:

Benjamin opened up to philosophical understanding the phenomenon of fashion that is specific to capitalist modernity... Not only is fashion the modern ‘measure of time’, it embodies the changed relationship between subject and object that results from the ‘new’ nature of commodity production. In fashion, the phantasmagoria of commodities presses closest to the skin. (1989, p. 97)

Based on the previous idea, commodity can be seen as something useful or valuable, or better, someone or something that is subject to ready exchange or exploitation within a market. Therefore, the use of the body as a way of demonstration and exhibition configures it as a product and fashion is then a concrete evidence of capitalism.

Benjamin suggested the existence of “a particular elective affinity between the concept of allegory and the commodity form”, observed in the following excerpt: “[t]he commodity is the modern embodiment of the allegorical. With its emphasis upon exchange- and exhibition-value, the commodity is devoid of substance”. (GILLOCH 1996, p. 136). This argument comes to terms with the concept of the “working body”, proposed by Christine Buci-Glucksmann (DOANE, 1981, p. 1): the body which is “confiscated by the alienation of machines” and “submitted to industrialization and urbanization”. Mary Ann Doane goes on developing this point by arguing that “[t]he feminine body is insistently allegorized and mythified as excess in art, literature, philosophy. It becomes the ‘veritable formal correlative’ of an increasingly instrumentalized reason in a technological society” (1981, p. 2).

Regarding the spread of modernity, the culture of commodity, and the consequent appearance of the term “*femme fatale*” as referring to the figure of the flapper, Miriam Hansen has noted in her work “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism” that:

While the spread of urban-industrial technology, the large-scale disembedding of social (and gender) relations, and the shift to mass consumption entailed processes of real destruction and loss, there also emerged new modes of organizing vision and sensory perception, a new relationship with “things”, different forms of mimetic experience and expression, of affectivity, temporality, and reflexivity, a changing fabric of everyday life, sociability, and leisure. (1999, p.333)

Doane connects the *femme fatale* to modernism stating that “her appearance marks the confluence of modernity, urbanization, Freudian psychoanalysis and new technologies of production and reproduction (photography, the cinema) born of the Industrial Revolution” and it is not surprising that the *femme fatale* is linked to the notions of commodity stated above in Buck-Morss reflections on Benjamin as well as on capitalist modernity. The *femme fatale* is a representation of modernist and capitalist fragmentation and loss, and therefore she does not have an “aura” (borrowing the term coined by Benjamin), an essence, or a center any more. She is merely a “working body”. This inorganic condition is what Pabst’s precisely intentioned for Lulu’s figure: “Pabst’s concept of Lulu figure: to create a presence without an essence, heightened to the point of overexposed clarity solely by the play of difference and duplicity.” (ELSAESSER, 2000, p. 30)

In his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin gives his impressions of this new conception of society imposed by capitalism and modernity and he gives special attention to figures that might represent this movement such as the ragpicker, the prostitute, the gambler and the flâneur. According to him, “the flâneur is that character who retains his individuality while everybody around him are losing theirs, and derives pleasure from his location in the crowd, but simultaneously regards it with contempt”, being a figure who “heroically resists incorporation into the milieu in which he moves”. In addition, “the disappearance of the flâneur into the crowd, the instant in which they become one flesh is the moment of the extinction of the flâneur”. Benjamin presents the fact that, “as the city became more crowded, the flâneur was afforded less and less elbowroom in the city and was swallowed up by the crowd”, and considers the flâneur “the heroic pedestrian”. (WILLIAMS, 1974)

In this sense, the *femme fatale* is opposed to the flâneur figure, because she is not a heroine of modernity. Instead, as pointed out by Mary Ann Doane, she represents and incarnates the conceptualizations of history, temporality, and technology in modernity; she fuses and does not refuse modernity. Doane concludes that she is an indication of the “fears and anxieties prompted by shifts in the understanding of sexual difference in the late nineteenth century” (1991, p.2). The body then becomes overrepresented and is subject to processes of industrialization and commodification, thus “it is not surprising that the cinema, born under the mark of such modernity as a technology of representation, should offer a hospitable home for the *femme fatale*” (1991, p. 2).

The phrase *femme fatale* has entered into common discourse, signifying a woman deemed to be dangerous and attractive to men. Cinematically, the *femme fatale*’s most prominent period was during the cycle of *noir* films in the 1940’s. However, the precursor to this archetype is to be found—growing out of Victorian social modes—in the figure of the Vamp. During the 1910’s and 1920’s,

a new brand of anti-heroine was created by the studio system, drawing on traditions of gothic literature, gender typologies and the ancient Western binarism which establishes the Good Woman / Bad Woman dichotomy (Deconstruction criticism/analysis regarding *logocentrism* and binary relations¹ could well be applied to this essay, but it will deviate the focus from the initial proposal). As the term Vamp implies, the dangerous women of the silent era were parasitic in nature. In accordance with a long literary and cultural history, the villainous female is sexualized and her operations are inextricable from this excessive sexuality debilitating and draining their prey. The *femme fatale* is linked to styles as Decadence, Symbolism, and Art Nouveau, as well as popular Orientalism (the figures of Salome and Cleopatra as being her “precursors” not only in action but also in fashion).

The *femme fatale* emerges in the nineteenth century as a central figure and writers such as Baudelaire have invoked this figure in their writings; for Benjamin, Baudelaire's poetry directly expresses, and must be understood in relation to the commodity culture of the nineteenth century. Benjamin points out that “the allegorical poetics of Baudelaire are as intimately interwoven with the character and fetishization of the commodity” (GILLOCH, 1996, p.135).

In her introduction to the book *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, Mary Ann Doane discusses epistemology and film theory regarding the famous *femme fatales* in the movies. She argues that the *femme fatale* is an unstable figure, a disguised woman, who “never really is what she seems to be” (1991, p.1). This point is explicit in the three characters in the films, since Maria in Lang's film at first seems to be a kind, honest and pure, a simple woman of the people, identified with a mother figure, but later she is transformed into a figure almost like a devil creature, a highly sexualized robot. Lulu in Pabst also presents this characteristic of being unpredictable, we never know her subsequent actions, and we are lost trying to understand her behaviour; she embodies the dichotomy good/bad at the same time she deconstructs it (there are doubts regarding her guilty or innocence) and as Doane noticed on the *femme fatale* and what I regard as being crucial to grasp Lulu's ambiguity, “Her [*femme fatale*] power is of a peculiar sort insofar as it is usually not subject to conscious will, hence appearing to blur the opposition between passivity and activity” (1991, p.2). Lulu is always “in-between” people and spaces; she is a liminal figure (ELSAESSER, 2000, p. 20). In *Sunrise*, unlike the other two films, there is not a single character embodying dichotomies and opposite feelings. Actually, the dichotomies are more explicit since there are two female characters in different positions: The Woman from the City, and The Wife. The Wife is a farm girl, related to good, melodrama, Victorian female ideal, childlike figure, while The Woman from The City is nebulous, a figure tied to modernity, and her intentions are associated with pleasure and hedonism.

The three films under discussion present dichotomies, ambivalences, and ambiguities, not only regarding the female characters, but also the environment surrounding them. In *Sunrise*, for instance, there are several binary relations that are intrinsically connected with the major dichotomy Good (morale)/ Evil (modernity) such as country/ city, day/ night, labour/ leisure, toil/ pleasure, light/ dark, sun/ moon, found/ lost. The dual side of the city, seductive and chaotic, is “personified” by the sexualized woman, The Woman from the City, but the country is a dual-side place as well, since at one moment it is a site for a tourist

postcard, and at another, a crime scene. Murnau, as a modernist, is at the same time an enthusiast and an enemy of contemporary life. The Good Woman and the Bad Woman in Murnau are “not only universal stereotypes, but figures of a particular social/ historical nexus”; the Woman from the City is the flapper that symbolizes “the new consumer economy that became conspicuous in the twenties” and The Wife is the opposite, horrified with the flapper style, refusing to “shed her Victorian-style tresses” (FISHER, 1998, p. 45). For Doane the film is metaphorically linked to the film medium itself, since the vamp is associated with illusionism (1991, p. 39-40).

In *Metropolis*, the dichotomy involving environment resides in the distinction between two kinds of spaces: the Worker’s city and the Upper City. The Upper City is really just the tip of an iceberg; the world of air, glass, and steel. Below the ground lurks a complicated structure on which this Upper City rests. Above ground is the Upper City, and at the tops of the buildings there exist the pleasure gardens where Maria visits Freder. She leads him down directly below the surface, where lie the vast arrays of machines which power the Upper City. Below the Machine Level, connected by a series of elevators and rickety stairs, is the Workers’ City. Once the narrative shifts to the leader of the Upper City, Joh Fredersen, the viewer gets a glimpse of the lowest level: the Catacombs, where Maria the robot preaches her doctrine of rebellion and revolution (ELSAESSER, 2001).

Elsaesser argues that the false Maria is “the ‘other woman’, the femme fatale, whore and rabble-rouser. Centered on the absent mother, and thereby multiplying the father-son relationships, the intrigue transforms the woman into an object of desire without having to acknowledge her sexuality, a strategy typical of narratives constructed around male narcissism” (ELSAESSER, 2001, p. 54). And he cites Alan Williams’ Greimasian analysis on the importance of Maria and the meaning of her split into two different beings: “... she participates in several different transactions: so many in fact, that she has to be split in two, in order to fulfill all the symbolic tasks required...” (ELSAESSER, 2001, p. 53).

Elsaesser in “Lulu and the Meter Man” compares Lulu with Maria, the man-created robot, stating that “significantly enough, the figure of Lulu cannot be conceived as a mother. Her eroticism is constructed on the paradigmatic opposition to all the traditionally female roles, and yet, while the same is true of the femme fatale, with the latter [Maria] it is a sociological and biological paradigm to which she is contrasted rather than the technological-constructivist one that seems to underlie Pabst’s conception of Lulu” (2001, p. 32).

Perhaps, among the three films under analysis, *Pandora’s Box* is the most prominent and audacious, since it fully explores the concepts and contradictions of the *femme fatale* figure. The film adopts a position that “goes right to the heart of the film’s special interest within Weimar attitudes to sexuality, class and the representation of women in literature and the visual arts” (ELSAESSER, 2000, p. 5) and, according to Doane, “[a]t first glance, the ‘modernity’ of Pandora’s Box would seem to be more a function of its attitudes toward sexuality than of its textual strategies” (1991, p. 146). Pabst’s Lulu remains as a *terra incognita* “as to whether she is representative of a Weimar flapper, or anticipates the *femme fatale*, or neither, being a creature of another order altogether...” (ELSAESSER, 2000, p. 7). Elsaesser approaches Lulu existence arguing that she is “without family ties, without social obligations, without education or culture; her

psychological existence is free of guilt or conscience, her physical existence the very embodiment of beauty, youth and health, without any of the exertions one usually associates with their maintenance" (2000, p. 8). Still according to him, a relation between femininity and the "enigmatic", the "indecipherable", surrounds Lulu: "'Hiding in the light' and 'overexposure' seem to work as a form of empowerment for Lulu, a sort of masquerade of excessive visibility" (2000, p. 28).

The *femme fatale*, Doane points out, presents an image: she is a representation, she is not predictable, not easy to determine or to define, she preserves a secret nature which "must be aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered..." (1991, p. 1). The *femme fatale* is situated as evil and is frequently punished or killed. Lulu travels to England, degenerates into a common prostitute and is murdered by the mythologized Jack the Ripper, and although it is hard to assure whether she is active or passive, evil or innocent, Elsaesser seems to give an answer: "she is neither, ... she is a false dichotomy" (2000, p. 22). This narrative of punishment is significant, as a routine denouement employed to present a moral commentary on a sexualized woman. The Woman from the City, after a failed attempt to influence The Man to murder The Wife, is left behind alone since the happy ending between the couple actually happens, and Maria the Robot is burned at stake in an apocalyptic scene.

Regarding the issue of punishment, Michelle Mercure argued in her 2010 essay *The "Bad Girl" turned Feminist: The Femme Fatale and the Performance Theory*, that the femme fatale often falls to death, or she is punished through any other way, which is a crucial feature of film noirs. In her analysis, she states that these female characters seem to be regarded as extremely beautiful but deceitful as well, manipulating men using her femininity, usually leading them to destruction, thus (in her words) "epitomizing" evil. Moreover, she proceeds arguing that "the femme fatale challenges the expectations of the viewer who anticipates that she will be purely evil, by seeming simultaneously good and bad" (p. 113). According to the essay, this ambiguity is partially due to the fact that, within a patriarchal culture/structure, the male figure assumes the dominant status and holds the power, while women are merely objects designed to satisfy their desires: "she is more or less a powerless figure in this structure, one with little or no voice" (2010, p. 114). On being powerless or voiceless,

One way to hypothesize a solution to this problem of voicelessness is to create a unique voice for feminist theory—a language—that does not have any affiliation with the patriarchal structure. But this seems highly unlikely considering that *any* newly created voice (*any* newly created language) will inevitably be linked to the one conceived by the patriarchal structure, for it too must be conceived within it. Taking into consideration this inevitable link to the past, instead of rejecting the patriarchal structure as a source for change, feminists should embrace it and use it to their advantage. This is a much more feasible way to present a voice for feminist theory: to embrace the patriarchal language of the past and to revive the voice of feminist theory as it already exists there. (p. 114)

Mercure also relates these aspects, in which "roles" are involved, to feminist theory, as "she [femme fatale] voices feminist theory prior to its existence through her ability to perform, most expressively when she is seen as the

spectacle in a musical performance”; therefore, as the *femme fatale* objective is to create a seductive appearance to attract men, this could be seen as an example of “how film has constructed society to view women primarily as objects (or vice-versa—how society has constructed film to support this view of women”. (p. 115)

Doane reflects upon the “textual eradication” of the *femme fatale* by saying that it [her textual eradication] “involves a desperate reassertion of control on the part of the threatened male subject. Hence it would be a mistake to see her as some kind of heroine of modernity” and that “[s]he is not the subject of feminism but a symptom of male fears about feminism” (1991, p. 2-3). Therefore, I conclude that “*femme fatale*” and “vamp” are connotations that the flapper of the 1920’s acquired, a stereotyped modern-urban woman represented by beauty, transgression, and sexuality, in direct opposition to the housewife and mother. The cinema ‘swallowed them up’ and made them only one more commodity to be ‘consumed’. And as a commodity, “its fate in within the cycle of production and the contingencies of fashion is to become out of date, old-fashioned, obsolete” (GILLOCH, 1996, p. 136).

FEMMES FATALES: REPRESENTAÇÃO NO CINEMA E O ESPECTRO DA MODERNIDADE

RESUMO

Este artigo visa analisar a recepção popular das *femme fatales* dos anos 20, assim como seu surgimento e presença no período modernista, abordando as personagens femininas “Lulu”, em *Pandora’s Box* de G.W. Pabst (1928-9), “The Woman from the City”, em *Sunrise* de F.W. Murnau (1927), e “Maria, the Robot”, em *Metropolis* de Fritz Lang (1926-7), e verificar como elas se encaixam no conceito e são classificadas como “*femme fatales*” ou “*vamps*”. As *femme fatales* eram mulheres modernas e urbanas, cujo estereótipo foi construído em oposição a mulheres maternais e esposas da época, e o cinema as incorporou como tipos de “mercadoria” devido a sua natureza transgressiva e apelo sexual.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Femme fatales*. Período modernista. Representação no cinema.

NOTA

¹ The philosopher Jacques Derrida, in his literary criticism named Deconstruction, seeks to dismantle and challenge the *logocentrism* (the belief in the logos, in the repository of ultimate truth, the essential, the center) and the Western binary thinking/ hierarchies constructed through dichotomies.

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