Femme Fatale—Negotiations of Tragic Desire

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Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/nlh.2004.0014

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ONE OF THE OLD THEMES OF TRAGEDY, Stanley Cavell argues in his reading of Shakespeare’s King Lear, is “that our actions have consequences which outrun our best, and worst, intentions . . . the reason consequences furiously hunt us down is not merely that we are half-blind, and unfortunate, but that we go on doing the thing which produced these consequences in the first place.” If Cavell thus locates a repetition compulsion at the heart of the tragic theme he is concerned with, he does so because at stake for him is not simply the moral lesson we are to learn from tragedy but also the question what leaving the scene of tragedy might imply. For this reason, he goes on to claim that “what we need is not rebirth, or salvation, but the courage, or plain prudence, to see and to stop. To abdicate. But what do we need in order to do that? It would be salvation.”

By distinguishing between a salvation which results from seeing and stopping and one that results from rebirth, Cavell raises two interrelated questions. Firstly, what exactly is it that we keep on doing to sustain tragedy? And, secondly, what would putting a stop to the repetition compulsion underlying tragic desire imply? For Cavell both questions revolve around the human proclivity to avoid attending to the specificity of the person before one, as this comes to be coterminous with failing to attend to one’s own specificity. “Recognizing a person,” thus his claim, “depends upon allowing oneself to be recognized by him” (AL 279) in a dialogic gesture where self-revelation implies self-recognition as well. If, for Cavell, tragic action serves to prevent one from seeing the other (and thus oneself), then the knowledge being staved off is, furthermore, precisely that referring to one’s humanity—in the sense of acknowledging one’s fallibility and imperfection, which is to say, one’s mortality. For what is being avoided, as a perpetual sustenance of tragic misrecognition prevents one from stopping to see the world at hand, is an acknowledgement of one’s irrevocable limitedness.
Implenitude thus comes into play in the sense that one can never know the other, but only acknowledge her or him as embodying precisely the limit to one’s knowledge, and thus one’s existence; as marking an obstacle which can only be overcome by recognizing it as such. At the same time, the refusal to acknowledge the other brings a further aspect of mortality into play. For the tragic corpses, whose production is the inevitable conclusion of a refusal to put a stop to a narrative of avoidance, only cement the fact that not seeing the other is tantamount to denying his or her humanity. The logic of denial at work can be formulated as follows. A recognition of one’s own mortal implemitude is staved off by virtue of turning the other into a figure whose function is to sustain an illusion of self-empowerment. Yet, as Cavell claims, tragedy not only enacts the fatal consequences of refusing recognition of the other and of the self, but also comes to be the place where the heroes and heroines—and, implicitly, we as the audience—are not allowed to escape these consequences. For if the dead bodies at the end of a tragic text give evidence of the denial of the other’s humanity, they also signify the death of our capacity to acknowledge, which is to say, the denial of our own.

In what follows I want to take the theme of fatal misrecognition, the consequences this entails, as well as the possibility of putting an end to their haunting, as a way of discussing a genre—film noir—which is usually ignored by tragic theorists. In so doing, I follow the proposal made by Rita Felski for this volume, namely, to think of tragedy not just as a narrowly defined dramatic genre, but as a mode, sensibility, or structure of feeling.

As Vivian Sobchack notes, “It is now a commonplace to regard film noir during the peak years of its production as a pessimistic cinematic response to volatile social and economic conditions of the decade immediately following World War II.” Indeed, the heroes of film noir repeatedly find themselves penetrating into the darkness of a fascinating, and at the same time threatening, counterworld of corruption, intrigue, betrayal, and decadence from which they can escape only by death. Yet the sense of a paranoid world transmitted in film noir need not be conceived exclusively as a cinematic refiguration of the political instability of the postwar period, especially when one takes into consideration its transformation since the 1980s into neo-noir. Rather, the fantasy scenarios film noir celebrates, with its protagonists fatefully entrapped in a claustrophobic world and unable to master their destinies, can just as fruitfully be understood as an example of the resonance tragic expression continues to maintain, particularly in the realm of popular cinema. Indeed, if one follows Felski’s suggestion that tragedy be thought of less as a genre than as an attitude which addresses the limits of modern dreams of perfectibility, then the femme fatale can
be understood as a particularly resilient contemporary example of tragic sensibility. For in the world of a *film noir* like *Double Indemnity*, where actions occur “accidentally on purpose,” she functions both as the screen for fantasies of omnipotence and as the agent who, by ultimately facing the consequence of her *noir* actions, comes to reveal the fragility not only of any sense of omnipotence that transgression of the law affords, but, indeed, of what it means to be human.

At issue for me in tracing the question of tragic sensibility in Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* (1944) is the way the *femme fatale* emerges as the figure who comes to perform tragic acceptance in the manner Stanley Cavell understands it, namely, as “an enactment not of fate but of responsibility, including the responsibility for fate” (AL 310). For a character like Phyllis Dietrichson, this means insisting to her lover that, once they have embarked on their transgressive action, “it’s straight down the line for both of us.” Insofar as it was fate that they should have met, to play their criminal game (killing her husband, cheating his insurance company) to the end ultimately means acknowledging that each is responsible for the fatal consequences their transgression will have. What is, however, particularly significant about Wilder’s *femme fatale* is that, in contrast to the lover she ensnares, she chooses destruction at every turn, and in so doing draws attention to the question of inevitability in a tragic sequence. Given that she is radically and continuously free to make a choice against sacrificing others and, ultimately, herself, her embrace of death calls upon us to ask why, if one could avoid death, should one choose it. Following Cavell’s suggestion that “tragedy grows from the fortunes we choose to interpret, to accept, as inevitable” (AL 318), my own interest in the *femme fatale* is a two-fold engagement with the vexed interface between agency and fate. For even if in the classic *film noir* Phyllis Dietrichson chooses to interpret her demise as inevitable, significantly she comes to discover her freedom precisely in her embrace of the inevitability of causation.

To focus on the *femme fatale*, of course, also means introducing the question of gender difference into a discussion of tragic sensibility, in the sense that, while she comes to acknowledge her responsibility for her fate, the hero she involves in her transgressive plot is characterized by the exact opposite attitude, namely, a desire to stave off knowledge of his own fallibility at all costs. In the classic *noir* plot, the hero quite coincidentally meets the alluring *femme fatale*—in *Double Indemnity* he happens to pass by her villa and enters to ask her husband to renew a car insurance policy. Yet their meeting follows the fateful logic of a love at first sight. As Mladen Dolar notes, what seemingly happened unintentionally and by pure chance is belatedly recognized as the realization of an innermost wish: “the pure chance was actually no chance at all: the intrusion of the unforeseen turned into necessity.” From the moment
the hero catches sight of the *femme fatale*, both find themselves caught in a sequence of events which can go only one way. Both are tragically framed within a narrative of fate and can only come to accept the law of causation. Yet if the contingent turn from free choice to inevitability is aligned with a masculine gaze appropriating a seductive feminine body, one must not overlook the fact that as bearer of the hero’s look, it is the *femme fatale* who manipulates the outcome of their fatal meeting. It may be a coincidence that this particular man has caught her in his field of vision, but she has been expecting someone like him to do precisely that. She knows all along that she is fated and can, therefore, turn what is inevitable into a source of power. Indeed, the classic *femme fatale* has enjoyed such popularity because she is not only sexually uninhibited, but also unabashedly independent and ruthlessly ambitious, using her seductive charms and her intelligence to liberate herself from the imprisonment of an unfulfilling marriage. Furthermore, though she gains power over the *noir* hero by nourishing his sexual fantasies, her own interest is only superficially erotic. She entertains a narcissistic pleasure at the deployment of her own ability to dupe the men who fall for her, even as she is merciless in manipulating them for her own ends. Duplicity thus emerges as her most seminal value, insofar as she is not simply willing to delude anyone in order to get the money and the freedom she is after, but because she will never show her true intentions to anyone, especially not the hero she has inveigled, even if this entails not only his death but also her own.

One can speak of tragic sensibility in conjunction with the *femme fatale* in part because she inevitably comes to recognize that her radical insistence on independence is a delusion, which was meant to stave off a recognition of her own fallibility. As Paula Rabinowitz notes, “she is false, a double-crosser, so even if she is after the goods, they will elude her.” Indeed, she becomes fully tragic at the moment of *anagnorisis*, because it is here that she can recognize her desire for freedom as attainable only in death. At the same time, in that she uses her seductive powers to lead the *noir* hero from the sunlit exterior into a nocturnal world of transgressions, betrayals, and, ultimately, his demise, she also embodies the death drive, albeit in a highly ambivalent manner. On the one hand, one could speak of her as a figure of male fantasy, articulating both a fascination for the sexually aggressive woman, as well as anxieties about feminine domination. As Joan Copjec argues, in order to indemnify himself against the dangers of sexuality, the *noir* hero treats her as his double, to which he surrenders the fatal enjoyment he cannot himself sustain. On the other hand, the *femme fatale* is more than simply a symptom of the hero’s erotic ambivalence. She sustains his self-delusion, but also gives voice to a feminine desire that may include him
in order to attain its aim, but also exceeds his fantasy realm. In her insistence that “it’s straight down the line for both” of them, she can be understood as moving towards an ethical act meant to radically undercut the blindness of self-preservation her lover seeks to entertain at all costs.

Owing to this function of duplicity within noir narratives, Slavoj Zizek suggests that the femme fatale functions as a symptom of the noir hero’s fatal enjoyment in such a way that, by destroying her—Walter Neff will shoot Phyllis Dietrichson in the heart—he hopes to purify himself of the desire she inspired and the guilt this entailed. In so doing, however, the noir hero not only does not recognize her as separate from him (thus denying her humanity), but also remains blind to the encrypted message about the fragility of his existence that she embodies for him. However, as a feminine subject taken by herself, the femme fatale assumes the death drive in a “radical, most elementary ethical attitude of uncompromising insistence, of ‘not giving way.’” The retreat of the noir hero from the femme fatale, Zizek adds, “is effectively a retreat from the death drive as a radical ethical stance” (156). For the femme fatale to fully assume the death drive is ultimately to show that the pursuit of power and money is inevitably thwarted, as it also means acknowledging that we can never purify ourselves from the consequences of our actions by shifting guilt onto the other. My point is that both in her function as a symptom within a male fantasy, as well as in her function as a subject beyond male fantasy, the femme fatale emerges as a figure of tragic sensibility. In the first case, she is denied humanity in the fantasy scenario of the hero, whose aim is to avoid an acknowledgment of mortality and guilt by transferring death exclusively to her body. In the latter case, she is the figure who accepts her death as the logical consequences of her insistence on a radical pursuit of personal freedom—the money and death of her husband at all costs. As such, she embodies tragic sensibility in the manner Felski proposes, namely, in opposition to a strand of American optimism that sees individuals as masters of their own destiny, with a right to pursue happiness at all cost without paying the price.

Double Indemnity has come to figure as the prototype of film noir, not least of all because it performs the rhetorical duplicity connected to the femme fatale, staging Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) both as the symptom of Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) and as a female subject who will not give way and thus exceeds his narrative of the fatal consequences of their mutual transgression. We only hear the confession he makes to his superior Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson) after having shot his partner in crime; a self-justifying narrative, establishing the tragic code of failure. It begins with the statement, “I killed Dietrichson. I killed him for money and for a woman. I didn’t get the money and I didn’t get the
woman. Pity isn’t it,” and continues as a voice-over throughout the film. Yet, at key moments in the fatal sequence resulting in the production of two corpses, Wilder also offers close-ups of Phyllis’s face, visually articulating a different perspective than that of her noir lover. In so doing, Wilder brings a further duplicity into play. By encouraging Walter’s vain narcissism for her own ends, willingly acting as his fetish object of desire, Phyllis is complicitous with his refusal to acknowledge her. The initial scene of seduction is staged in such a manner as to set the tone for the fatal misrecognition that subtends the entire noir tragedy. Wilder foregrounds the fact that, because each treats the other as though they were a character in the play they are living, even while the two fantasy scenarios do not coincide, the protagonists are not actually in the presence of each other. As Walter walks through her front door, Phyllis emerges at the top of the staircase, clad only in a towel. The erotic banter that follows signals to us not only that she has been cast by him into an object of prey he will seek to win for himself, but also that she knows this and will use the fact that she, in turn, has hooked him with the way she looked at him, in order to introject her scenario of death into his romantic one. Once she walks down the stairs, Wilder’s camera zooms in on her feet to highlight the bracelet around her left anklet, before we see her entire body, now fully covered by a white dress, walking toward him, as she teasingly closes the top button. They have come together on a stage where each will ultimately seek to double-cross the other, because their desire was always at cross-purposes. As Walter Neff will explain to her during their final confrontation, “We were talking about automobile insurance, only you were thinking about murder, and I was thinking about that anklet.”

By focusing on Phyllis’s anklet, the camera invokes the code of fetishism, and in so doing offers an image of this body part as a transition between the glance at her almost naked upper body and the fully dressed woman Walter can visually enjoy without a staircase between them. This visual fragmentation foregrounds the noir hero’s willful blindness. As Laura Mulvey notes, “Fetishism is born out of a refusal to see, a refusal to accept the difference the female body represents for the male. These complex series of turnings away, of covering over, not of the eyes but of understanding, of fixating on a substitute object to hold the gaze, leave the female body as an enigma and threat,” as a symptom of anxiety, a figure on the viewer’s mind screen. For the question of tragic sensibility at stake in my own argument, one might add that the ambivalence of feeling Wilder establishes with this initial scene of seduction is that his noir hero wants the thrill of transgression, even while refusing to understand the woman inspiring this desire as another person, rather than assuming her to be an enigmatic figure of fantasy who will dupe and elude him. “How could
I have known that murder can sometimes smell like honey-suckle,” his voice-over asks, as we see him driving away from the house, “I didn’t. I felt like a million.” The self-blindness he thus articulates need not only be read as a belated attempt at exoneration. The fact that he has been tragically caught in the *femme fatale’s* trap also indicates his desire to be deluded, which, put in other terms, means his desire—at all costs—not to look at her, to fixate on a substitute so as not to put himself in her presence. Even when, several days later, he comes to accept her proposition, he does so because it supports his vanity. Again Wilder’s mise-en-scène makes visual the tragic aspect of his *noir* couple in the way they do not share a fantasy space. Phyllis has come to Walter’s apartment, using her seductive powers to win him over. After an initial kiss, Walter quite expressly disentangles himself from her arms and sets a chain of narratives in motion. He tries to assure her that if someone who has accident insurance with his company suddenly dies, his supervisor Keyes will do everything to vilify the surviving wife. After Phyllis has responded by sketching her fantasy about a fatal accident happening to the husband who mistreats her and has written her out of his inheritance, Walter takes her into his arms, suddenly smiling as he presses her face against his shoulder. In doing this, significantly he avoids looking at her. So as to underline once more that these two fated lovers are not, in fact, present to each other, Wilder has the camera draw back cutting to the frame narrative, with Walter speaking his confession to Keyes into his Dictaphone. Here he explains that he accepted Phyllis’s proposal not because of any erotic desire for her, nor out of pity, but rather out of professional vanity. All these years he had been wondering how he could “crook the house,” but “do it smart.” Phyllis’s entering his apartment that night was simply an embodiment of the opportunity for which he had been waiting.

The kiss that seals their pact is nothing other than an empty gesture that allows them to deny their avoidance of the other, because Wilder has also shown us that on the one hand, Walter’s fetishism covers over any understanding of Phyllis’s situation in favor of his hubris, while on the other hand, the *femme fatale*’s game of seduction is all about actually seeing something. After their first kiss, while Walter is telling her about a woman who ended up in prison after the death of her husband because his insurance claim was investigated by Keyes, Wilder includes a brief close-up of Phyllis’s face as she mournfully replies, “Perhaps it was worth it to her.” This is the first of a series of close-up shots we get of the *femme fatale*, visually expressing that while she is playing with Walter, she also stands emotionally apart from him. While Stanwyck’s skillful performance of Phyllis’s contrived gestures of seduction calls upon us to notice how ruthlessly she manipulates Walter, these close-ups invoke our pity in a way her narrative about domestic malaise does not. They transmit a
tragic sensibility not only by foregrounding how utterly alone she is, but also by insisting that we must do what Walter avoids doing, both in his dealings with her, as well as in his frame narrative. We must look at her, and then, because we never see the object her thoughts are directed at, we follow her gaze into an abstract realm. In so doing we move away from treating her as a fetish image and instead share her mental space as one of conjectures about the inevitability of her fate. While Walter’s fetishism allows him to go on doing something—hatching the perfect plot to kill Mr. Dietrichson and then, when faced with the fact that he may be found out, devising a scheme to have Phyllis take the fall for his own fallibility—these close-ups call upon us to take the opposite course. In each case we are shown Phyllis as she stops and looks, but—and therein resides the tragic sensibility of her side of the story—not at her noir lover, rather, prophetically at the consequences her deeds will have.

If one follows these close-ups and, in so doing, reads *Double Indemnity* against the grain of Walter’s self-justifying confession, the entire film can be read as a tragic scenario transforming a question of free choice—my husband’s death and his money—into a recognition that all choices are forced ones, where the issue is assuming the responsibility for one’s fate. After watching her husband sign the accident insurance policy, thinking it is simply a car insurance renewal, we see Phyllis leading Walter to the door, and for a brief moment, after he has left her, Wilder shows us her face, glowing with anticipation at the thought that a train accident will mean twice the insurance sum. At the supermarket, where she complains to Walter how hard the waiting is for her (explaining, “It’s so tough without you, it’s like a wall between us”), he simply walks away from her, averting her eyes, with his own eyes covered by the shadow of his hat. We see her looking after him mournfully, aware that he is avoiding her. Most significantly, the actual murder of Mr. Dietrichson is presented indexically, by virtue of the changes in her facial expression. While Walter, hiding in the backseat of the Dietrichson car, strangles the husband, Wilder offers us a close-up of Phyllis’s face, tracing her subtle shift in emotion, as determination initially turns to a sad acceptance of the death she has provoked and then becomes a quiet joy that indicates her own satisfaction at the completion of her plan. Finally, the night after the inquest, where the coroner confirms her husband’s death to have been an accident, she goes to visit Walter in his apartment. Realizing that Keyes is there with him, she waits behind the door. As Walter opens it so Keyes can leave, she takes hold of the doorknob to indicate her presence to him. If, in the supermarket, she had tried to make Walter recognize the emotional wall separating them, the door, now literally between them, confirms her suspicion. Walter wants to put her behind him, turn his back on her. As she overhears Keyes confessing
how he wants to send the police after her, we see her face registering, for
the first time, a certain astonishment at the risk she has taken. Read as a
sequence, these close-ups of Phyllis indicate the gradual unfolding of
her tragic reading of the chain of causation she has set into motion,
which is to say, her reading these events in relation to an inevitable tragic
outcome.

Walter arranges another meeting at the supermarket to convince her
that, because Keyes has figured out their scheme, he wishes “to pull out.”
Now she responds by taking off her sunglasses. Looking at him directly
with a sober and determined gaze, she insists, as we once more see her
face in close-up, “We went into this together and we’re coming out in
the end together. It’s straight down the line for both of us, remember!”
This time she is the one to turn her back on him. If Walter’s apartment
door had shielded them from each other, she now shows him that such
a turning away is impossible, even if the end she is speaking about is not
a life with money, but death. My intuition is to read the gesture of
removing sunglasses as a moment of true, if tragic, self-recognition
along the lines proposed by Jacques Lacan. He argues that it is precisely
in situations of false choice, with the subject forced to make a choice
that is inevitable, that she or he acknowledges their irrevocable fallibility.
One prototypical scene would be that of a hold-up, where, faced with the
choice of one’s money or one’s life, one can choose only the latter.
Another, more poignant, scene is that of a revolutionary action, where
the choice between freedom or death inevitably requires one to choose
death, “for there, you show that you have freedom of choice.” For a
discussion of the tragic sensibility embodied by the *femme fatale*, this
formulation is particularly fruitful, for she consciously introduces a
lethal factor into the question of choice, and, in so doing, undertakes an
ethical act that allows her to choose death as a way of choosing real
freedom by turning the inevitability of her fate into her responsibility.

To prepare herself for her last confrontation with Walter, Phyllis
places her revolver under the living room sofa, correctly assuming that
he, too, will come armed. When, after implicitly threatening to kill her,
he goes to the window to close it, she fires her first shot. If she had
initially turned to Walter because she wanted an unencumbered life and
her husband’s money, she now makes a different choice. The freedom
she so relentlessly pursues emerges as an assumption of the death drive
in its purest form, with all endeavors of avoidance dropped. As the
wounded Walter walks toward her, she lowers her gun and embraces him
one last time, choosing not to fire the second shot that would save her
life. Once more we see a close-up of her face as she explains, “No, I
never loved you nor anybody else. I’m rotten to the heart. I used you just
as you said, until a minute ago, when I couldn’t fire that second shot. I
never thought that could happen to me." One could read this as a
gesture of abdication, because at this moment she actually stops her
seductive game to see both her lover and herself. She acknowledges him
by directly acknowledging how she had used him, and, in so doing, she
asks for him to attend to her. Walter, however, responds laconically,
“Sorry, I’m not buying.” While she suggests an exchange, which is not
about economic gain but mutual recognition— “I’m not asking you to
buy, just hold me close”— he holds onto his fetishistic avoidance to the
end. By killing her rather than putting himself in her presence, he
hopes to repress both his own desire for destruction as well as his
complicity with her. That she, in turn, willingly accepts the death he is
giving her not only renders visible the incompatibility of their two
fantasy scenarios. It also allows us to decide whether we will privilege
Walter Neff’s misogynist description of the femme fatale in his voice-over
narrative, or recognize her as a separate human being, exceeding his
appropriation of her and, in so doing, exhibiting an agency of her own.

On the one hand, the self-justifying narrative Walter offers corre-
sponds to a gesture of psychic and moral relief. Sacrificing his partner in
crime allows him to abdicate both his sense of guilt as well as his
responsibility for their mutual transgressions. If, upon seeing her the
first time, he had come to recognize that he could not escape his fate,
her sacrifice allows him to relieve himself of his desire for an erotically
encoded death. Instead, he can now give himself up to a symbolically
encoded death drive—the death penalty of the law. On the other hand,
Phyllis Dietrichson emerges as a subject of radical tragic sensibility
precisely because she directly accepts the death drive inscribed in the
noir narrative she has been performing throughout. She explicitly gives
a name to the obscene kernel at the heart of her being (“rotten to the
core”), while refusing all moralizing excuses for her transgressions. By
choosing not to shoot a second time, Phyllis Dietrichson performs an act
in which she actively and consciously accepts her own fallibility. As the
culmination of all the close-ups of Phyllis Dietrichson, we see first a look
of astonishment and then pain, before we hear the two shots Walter fires
straight into her heart; her death, like that of her husband, is registered
only indexically, as a facial expression. We are, thus, left with a two-fold
sense of tragic sensibility. On the one hand, the incompatibility between
their fantasies has become cemented in her corpse, and with it Walter’s
tragic avoidance of self-recognition. On the other hand, it is precisely
the way her facial expression at the moment of death captures her final
tragic acceptance that evokes our pity for Wilder’s femme fatale and
endows her last image with an affective power that resonates beyond the
end of the film. For she has undermined the fetishistic quality of Walter
Neff’s fantasy, has rendered it groundless, and offered something else—
a relentless acknowledgment of her own vulnerability—in its place. It is this gesture of seeing and stopping that we ultimately remember.

According to Janey Place, film noir should be read as a “male fantasy” and the femme fatale, as the mythic “dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction” and who has been haunting our image repertoire since Eve and Pandora. Yet Place stresses a poignant contradiction. Even while film noir offers a stage for the dangerous woman, embellishing her seduction and her desire for power, it also relentlessly plays through her demise. This is because “the myth of the strong, sexually aggressive woman first allows sensuous expression of her dangerous power and its frightening results, and then destroys it, thus expressing repressed concerns of the female threat to male dominance” (WFN 36). Yet one might also say that even though, in the course of each cinematic narrative, the femme fatale loses her power both on the diegetic level (she dies) and on the visual level (she falls into shadows, diminishes in size, has no voice-over of her own), the disturbing power she embodies remains through the end. The restitution her sacrifice is meant to bring about is inevitably riddled with fissures. After all, the femme fatale successfully undermines the hegemonic morality of family values prevalent in the postwar period. So that, even though she is punished in the end, her transgressions against masculine authority—killing her husband, cheating the insurance company, bringing about the demise of her disloyal lover—is what tarries in our memory. As Sylvia Harvey notes, “Despite the ritual punishment of acts of transgression, the vitality with which these acts are endowed produces an excess of meaning which cannot finally be contained. Narrative resolutions cannot recuperate their subversive significance.”

Within feminist film criticism, the femme fatale has thus emerged as a fundamentally unstable figure. Not only will she not allow herself to be dominated by the men who fall for her charms, but also the meaning she assumes in any given text refuses to be fixed. In the same manner that she will not assume an unequivocal place in the fantasy life of the noir hero, no single interpretation can be imposed on the disturbance posed by her resilient feminine power. Mary Anne Doane understands the fact that she is usually declared to be an embodiment of evil, and punished or killed, as a “desperate reassertion of control on the part of the threatened male subject.” Her ability to seduce the noir hero into undertaking actions that undermine his self-interests renders visible a radical fallibility of the masculine subject. For this reason, Doane claims that the femme fatale should not be read as a modern heroine, endowed with an agency of her own, but rather as a “symptom of male fears about feminism” (2–3). Yet given the duplicitous manner in which Billy Wilder stages a prototypical femme fatale like Phyllis Dietrichson in Double
Indemnity I would offer a counter claim. The *femme fatale* has resiliently preserved her position within our image repertoire precisely because she forces the spectator to decide whether she acts as an empowered modern subject or is simply to be understood as the expression of an unconscious death drive, indeed, whether we are to conceive of her as an independent figure or merely as a figure of projection for masculine anxiety. Given that she has no fixed place and no unequivocal meaning within the narratives of the classic *films noir*, a film like *Double Indemnity* can be read either as misogynist nightmare scenario (Walter Neff’s narrative of how he was ensnared by an evil woman) that re-empowers a masculine subject in crisis, or as an ironic demontage of such masculinist anxieties (Phyllis Dietrichson’s gaze) that renders visible to us that the *noir* lover only wanted to use the *femme fatale* and will frame her so that she can take the fall for him. Indeed, as Elizabeth Cowie notes, the *femme fatale* has come to serve as “a catchphrase for the danger of sexual difference and the demands and risks desire poses for the man. The male hero often knowingly submits himself to the ‘spider-woman’—as Neff does in *Double Indemnity*—for it is precisely her dangerous sexuality that he desires, so that it is ultimately his own perverse desire that is his downfall.”

Yet the problem with reading the *femme fatale* as a stereotype of feminine evil, as a symptom of male anxiety, or as a catchphrase for the danger of sexual difference is that it treats this tragic feminine heroine as an encoded figure who exists only as the phantasmic emanation of others, who is acted upon and, when necessary, extinguished, rather than treating her as a separate subject who has agency and is responsible for her decisions. In so doing, feminist critics unwittingly imitate precisely the gesture of fetishism performed by Walter Neff at the very beginning of *Double Indemnity*, when he fixes his gaze on the golden bracelet Phyllis Dietrichson is wearing around her ankle, rather than acknowledging her as a separate human being. For they, too, find themselves caught in a complex series of turnings away, of covering over, not of the eyes but of understanding, when in reducing her to a symptom or a catchphrase they read the *femme fatale* either as an embodiment of threat or as a textual enigma and, in so doing, avoid actually seeing her as separate not only from the fantasies of the *noir* hero, but also from any critical preconceptions informing one’s reading of a given text. Using the resilient power of the tragic sensibility embodied in the *femme fatale* as a point of departure, however, one might ask: what if, rather than treating her as a fetish, projection, or symptom, one were to treat her instead as the subject of her narrative? What if one were to follow the cue Wilder offers and read the confession his *femme fatale* makes about her own “rottenness” as a self-description we should take seriously? This would mean ascribing feminine agency to the *femme
fatale, seeing her as an authentic modern heroine, and insisting that in her actions she is everything but blind. For, if fetishism, as Laura Mulvey claims, consists in a refusal to see, Phyllis Dietrichson in her final confession pits against such self-delusion an unmitigated gaze at the destructive power of her desire.

The decision is thus ours as to whether we want to follow Doane and other feminist critics in reading the femme fatale as a symptom of patriarchal anxiety about feminism, or whether we want to follow Zizek and read her as a symptom for the ambivalence in feeling on the part of the noir hero and his retreat from the death drive. Another option would be to treat her as a prototypical instance of modern feminine subjectivity. This would lead one, along the lines Stanley Cavell proposes for tragedy, to acknowledge her precisely by recognizing that, far from being a victim who is punished for her transgressions or for the desires she elicits, the femme fatale chooses to accept the tragic consequences of her actions. In so doing, she becomes the figure par excellence for the recognition of human fallibility which, according to Cavell, tragedy teaches us. Yet recasting her in this sense not only affects our semantic encoding of her as a protagonist in a narrative, but also foregrounds the way we are implicated as viewers of films like Double Indemnity. For, as Cavell notes, in tragedy, “people in pain are in our presence, but we are not in their presence. Tragedy shows we are responsible for the death of others even when we have not murdered them” (AL 332). With this description of tragedy in mind, a film like Double Indemnity could be seen as posing the following question. What would it mean for us to put a stop to the series of turnings away which revolve around the femme fatale, to abdicate the gesture of fetishism, which supports the refusal to see her as a separate human being and the refusal to accept her difference?

As I have proposed in my reading of the sequence of close-ups of Phyllis Dietrichson’s face, looking first at her and then with her implicates us in our viewing, in the sense that we find ourselves called upon to put our own avoidance of seeing her aside. We can put ourselves in her presence on the level of an aesthetic response—in the affective third space that opens up between what occurs on the film screen and the emotions this elicits in the audience—precisely by refusing a refusal to see her, which is what reducing her to the status of a symptom or a catchphrase amounts to. To acknowledge her as a subject of her actions means no longer being blind to the way she is anything but a victim, and, in her conscious choice for death, gives voice to the way suffering, loss, and fragility are inescapable. It also means overcoming a critical prejudice which, by treating her as a symptom of masculine anxieties and not as a subject of feminine desire, allows us as critics to avoid the tragic message she relentlessly embodies. As Cavell notes, tragedy is about a particular death that is neither natural nor accidental. Even
though death is inflicted, “it need not have happened. So a radical contingency haunts every story of tragedy.” At the same time, he continues, a radical necessity also haunts every story of tragedy, so that it is precisely the murky interface between contingency and necessity, which produces “events we call tragic: necessary, but we do not know why; avoidable, but we do not know how” (AL 341). If the perseverance of the final image of Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* resides in the fact that she has come to accept as her responsibility the fate of a death she did not know how to avoid, this is so precisely because she has recognized that to be hidden, silent, and not in the presence of the other is a question of choice. One can also abdicate this illusory safety, even if this means accepting the death one has been courting all along. It is her mode of salvation.

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NOTES

1 Stanley Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 310; hereafter cited in text as AL.

2 As Cavell, in “Avoidance,” argues, an acceptance of human limitedness implies recognizing, “There is nothing and we know there is nothing we can do. Tragedy is meant to make sense of that condition” (330).


