

Femme Fatale as Icon: An Iconological Reading of the Female Character in 1940s Hollywood Film Noir

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Abstract

Problem Statement: The iconological method, which privileges the semantic content of visual works over their formal dimensions, has long been associated with the study of the visual arts; its application to cinema, however, is methodologically defensible and analytically productive. Film noir — a genre defined by a stable repertoire of formal and thematic conventions and by a remarkably fixed representation of women — offers particularly fertile ground for such an approach. Scholarship on the genre has extensively documented its distinctive characteristics, yet the recurring female character has rarely been examined systematically through the three stages of iconological analysis.

Objective: To demonstrate the applicability of the iconological approach to cinema and to investigate the influence of masculine identity on the formation of the recurring female character in 1940s Hollywood film noirs.

Research Question: What factors produced the recurring female character in Hollywood film noirs, and what influence has patriarchal social identity had on its formation?

Method: Qualitative and descriptive-analytical, combining close visual and narrative analysis of five representative films with Panofsky's three-stage iconological method and relevant historical scholarship.

Conclusion: The female icon in Hollywood film noirs is the product of the visual and narrative traditions of its period, and its formation constitutes a reaction on the part of the dominant masculine identity of the social milieu.

Keywords: Iconology; Panofsky; Film Noir; Cinema; Female Character.

1. Introduction

In the early 1940s, a group of Hollywood films, later designated *film noir* upon their exhibition in France, introduced significant changes to the conventions of the crime genre. Among their most recognizable features was a recurring female character: seductive, enigmatic, treacherous, and frequently associated with the destruction of the male protagonist. Although these characteristics have been widely discussed, the formation of

this female type has received less systematic iconological examination. This article therefore asks what produced this recurring character and how her representation reflected the social and cultural position of women within the films' contexts of production. Five representative films are examined here, each selected on the basis of its documented significance within the genre. *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) is widely regarded as the first film noir. *The Big Sleep* (1946) is notable for its presentation of Philip Marlowe, one of the genre's most iconic characters, and for the direction of Howard Hawks, a prominent figure of classical Hollywood cinema. *Double Indemnity* (1944), adapted from James M. Cain's novel of the same name, was scripted by Raymond Chandler, a leading author of hard-boiled detective fiction, and directed by the Austrian-German filmmaker Billy Wilder; it is consistently identified in the scholarly literature as a consolidating work of the film noir genre. *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947) owes its significance to the presence of two major Hollywood stars, Rita Hayworth and Orson Welles. *Out of the Past* (1947) is likewise distinguished by the prominence of its cast and is, alongside *Double Indemnity*, frequently cited as one of the works that consolidated the genre's defining conventions. Collectively, these five films present a sufficiently consistent female type to sustain comparative iconological analysis.¹

2. Methodology: The Iconological Approach

Iconology is a branch of art history that directs its attention to the content of an artwork rather than its form (Panofsky 1955, 26). The unit of meaning-production within this approach is the icon -- in visual texts, one or more elements of the image that are indebted to the cultural and social context of the work's production and created to convey a concept, theme, or reference.² The repetition of such an element across different works, while retaining a recognizable field of meaning, gradually establishes a visual tradition

¹ On the significance of these films to the development and definition of film noir, see Park 2011; and Krutnik 2001.

² While the iconological approach has been applied infrequently to cinema, precedents include Christian Metz on Hollywood performance styles, Mark Hendrykowski on gangster-film iconography, Lawrence Alloway on hard-boiled crime films, and Ed Buscombe on the western.

and contributes to the formation of an icon (Etemadi 2019, 60). Panofsky regards iconological interpretation as so self-evident that cinematic understanding -- and in particular the understanding of cinematic genres -- draws on it whether consciously or not, and proposes that it may serve to describe the visual language of film and the elements through which it communicates with its audience (Mahdavinejad et al. 2013, 80).

Panofsky divides the process into three stages. Pre-iconography describes the outward appearance of the represented elements. Iconography identifies them through established visual and textual conventions, while iconology interprets the cultural values and historical conditions that made those conventions meaningful. The final stage therefore moves beyond description. As Etemadi argues, visual presentation cannot be taken at face value because its content emerges through a negotiation among the context of production, the visual frame, and the context of reception (Etemadi 2024, 4-5). Her later comparative reading of Sani' ol-Molk similarly demonstrates how apparently familiar compositions may acquire different meanings when visual details are reconsidered through local gender conventions and the expectations of their intended viewers (Etemadi 2026a, 6-8). Cinema can be examined through the same process, provided that its recurring visual patterns are interpreted in relation to the conditions in which they were produced and recognized.

3. Iconological Reading of the Female Character in Film Noir

The three-stage iconological reading that follows proceeds in accordance with Panofsky's framework. Pre-iconography describes the female characters across the five selected films in terms of their outward visual and narrative properties, reserving stylistic elements for subsequent stages. Iconography re-examines the established conventions associated with this icon through a comparative reading of cinematic and scholarly texts, identifying the metaphorical meanings conventionally attributed to the female

Panofsky himself, in 'Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures,' regards iconographic understanding as essential to cinematic comprehension (Grant 2017, 29).

figure in film noir. Iconology, the concluding stage, analyses the cultural, economic, and social conditions that gave rise to this icon with reference to the symbolic values of 1940s American society — addressing not what the icon looks like or what meanings it carries, but why those meanings were produced and reproduced.

3.1 Pre-iconographic Stage: Visual Description

At this stage, the female characters in the five selected films are described in terms of outward appearance and narrative role, without semantic interpretation. Stylistic elements such as mise-en-scene, lighting, and colour are reserved for subsequent stages.

Across all five films, the female protagonist presents a strikingly consistent visual profile. In *The Maltese Falcon*, Brigid O'Shaughnessy -- played by Mary Astor -- appears throughout in heavy make-up, styled hair, expensive clothing, jewellery, and a corsage. In *The Lady from Shanghai*, Elsa Bannister -- played by Rita Hayworth -- similarly appears in expensive clothing and jewellery, and her figure is prominently displayed in the film's poster and in several sequences. In *The Big Sleep*, Vivian Rutledge -- played by Lauren Bacall -- wears expensive clothing and jewellery and drives her own car throughout, while her sister Carmen (Martha Vickers) appears in heavy make-up, vivid lipstick, and short clothing. In *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis Dietrichson -- played by Barbara Stanwyck -- is first introduced partially undressed, and subsequently appears consistently in expensive, well-groomed attire. In *Out of the Past*, Kathie Moffat -- played by Jane Greer -- is similarly adorned with expensive clothing and jewellery, and appears predominantly in dark areas of the frame.

In deliberate contrast, Ann Miller in *Out of the Past* -- the narrative's positive female figure -- appears throughout without make-up, in plain clothing, and without jewellery. This binary is significant: the visual grammar that codes the femme fatale is precisely inverted for the acceptable woman.

Table 1: Woman Style in Film-noir

Visual characteristics of female characters across the five selected film noirs

Character	Jewellery	Styled make-up	Styled hair	Expensive clothing	Varied clothing
Brigid O'Shaughnessy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Elsa Bannister	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Vivian Rutledge	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Carmen Rutledge	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Phyllis Dietrichson	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kathie Moffat	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ann Miller	X	X	X	X	X

Table 1 summarises these findings. The female character in film noirs thus conforms to a remarkably stable visual type: a woman wearing varied and expensive garments, with styled make-up, carefully arranged hair, and jewellery and accessories -- a visual profile that recurs consistently across the five films despite minor variations.

3.2 Iconographic Stage: Recognition of the Icon

At this stage, the established visual traditions and textual conventions associated with the female icon are examined -- analogous to Panofsky's identification of the Salome icon in Francesco Maffei's painting of Judith. The key question is whether an icon with the characteristics described above is unique to film noir or draws on broader cinematic and cultural conventions.

Janey Place argues that the figure of the dark, dangerous, demonic woman who tempts and destroys the male protagonist is among the most ancient themes in Western art, culture, literature, and mythology. She contends that film noir represents a male (specifically heterosexual white male) fantasy, and that the image of woman within it does not depart from these themes. The central transgression of the liberated woman in such works is her refusal to be defined according to her sexual desire; film noir presents paradigms in which women are 'active' -- yet this activity is equated with destruction (Place 2012, 47).

Despite the differences in the female characters in these films, recurring patterns among them are confirmed by the five films. In each case, the female character exploits sexual attractiveness as a means of deception, and her activity ultimately leads to the destruction of herself and the male protagonist. In *The Maltese Falcon*, Brigid manipulates Sam Spade from her first appearance; at the film's conclusion, the image of her face enclosed by lift-shaft bars in a dark corridor renders her imprisonment visually manifest. In *The Lady from Shanghai*, Elsa's systematic seduction of Michael O'Hara -- established through point-of-view shots that position the viewer as male voyeur -- directly causes his downfall. In *The Big Sleep*, despite their differing personalities, both Vivian and Carmen embody variants of this model: Vivian through bold deception, Carmen through pathologised hypersexuality explicitly identified as illness by the film's conclusion. However, it is evident that in the case of Carmen, these traits are portrayed with greater intensity and also play a role in her ultimate fate. In *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis's introduction in a state of semi-nudity -- described in detail by Walter Neff's voice-over -- is subsequently confirmed as calculated seduction; she is killed at the film's end. In *Out of the Past*, Kathie's appearance in the first restaurant scene -- rendered through Jeff Bailey's narration and the visual contrast between her luminous figure and the dark background -- establishes the template: a woman who leads the man to ruin.

Table 2: Woman Character in Film-noir

Moral and narrative characteristics of female characters across the five selected film noirs

Character	Deception	Sexual seduction	Ambition	Destroys male protagonist	Bitter end
Brigid O'Shaughnessy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Elsa Bannister	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Vivian Rutledge	✓	X	✓	✓	X
Carmen Rutledge	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Phyllis Dietrichson	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kathie Moffat	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 2 systematises the moral characteristics across the five films. The conclusions are consistent: the female character in film noirs is a relatively stable type whose essential properties -- sexual seductiveness, deception, ambition, destruction of the male protagonist, and a bitter end -- are preserved across the genre. As Park observes, the presence of a femme fatale who brings about the man's ruin or collapse constitutes part of the identity of film noir itself (Park 2011, 70).

This image stands in sharp contrast to the representation of women in the preceding decade. Haskell notes that until the Production Code³ was fully enforced in 1933-34, 'women were depicted as having sexual desire without being coded as strange, evil, or even necessarily European' (Haskell 2016, 65). In the dark melodramas of the

³On 13 June 1934, Hollywood enacted the Production Code, requiring films to obtain a certificate of approval prior to release.

1940s, by contrast, the woman 'fell... into the depths of the criminal and thrilling world of film noir,' dragging her lover down with her (Haskell 2016, 138). Bordwell confirms that the women of film noir were 'typically sexually attractive but treacherous, drawing the hero into danger or exploiting him for their own selfish ends' (Bordwell and Thompson 2009, 303), and Grant identifies the invariable narrative core of film noir as 'a man who, through deception and error, is drawn by an attractive but dangerous woman into a criminal venture... that ultimately leads to mutual destruction' (Grant 2017, 57).

3.3 Iconological Stage: Cultural and Social Conditions

The third stage examines why the female icon took the form it did: specifically, the cultural and historical conditions that explain both the 'active-destructive' model of femininity and the stylistic shift in the representation of women.⁴ Three interconnected factors are addressed: the social atmosphere of film noir, the transformation in the visual representation of women, and the influence of the Great Depression and Hollywood studio system.

The atmosphere of film noir. Film noir renders urban space as a site of alienation, isolation, danger, moral decay, and suppressed sexuality -- an atmosphere consistently linked to feelings of masculine anxiety (Conrad 2006, 92; Mennel 2008, 52). The cold, lethal urban environment and the dangerous woman of film noir function analogously: both are threats to the male protagonist, both express a masculine anxiety rooted in the social conditions of their time.

The transformation in female representation. In the years before and during World War I, feminist movements secured women's suffrage, and the war itself produced significant social and material freedoms for women -- including new fashions, greater access to public spaces, and expanded economic roles. Lorien Pratt observes that

⁴It is self-evident that the causes of stylistic change may be examined separately from economic, social, and political perspectives. Given the plurality of relevant viewpoints, the present study does not confine itself to any single domain.

American women during this period may have experienced greater happiness than at any other point in the twentieth century (LeGates 2019, 441-444). However, as LeGates notes, the end of the war produced a powerful desire in both sexes to return to traditional gender roles; in the 1920s and 1930s 'the ideology of family life was in full bloom' (LeGates 2019, 446). Feminist activity reached its inter-war minimum precisely because patriarchal society, having experienced the expansion of women's social roles, exerted counter-pressure to re-consolidate traditional arrangements. The threatening image of the active woman in film noir may be understood partly as an expression of this historical memory — a sign of masculine alarm at the prospect of female agency. The outbreak of World War II, arriving while the collective memory of the First World War, the subsequent Great Depression, women's active participation in public life, and their growing distance from established traditional roles remained vivid in cultural consciousness, sounded a renewed alarm within patriarchal society — a warning that those dark conditions might yet repeat themselves.

The Great Depression and the Hollywood studio system. The economic depression of 1929 produced a dramatic increase in unemployment in the United States (Hazhir et al. 2020, 106). Its coincidence with the introduction of sound also transformed film production. Hollywood's oligopolistic structure developed into the studio system, while new possibilities in sound, lighting, and camera movement strengthened the differentiation of genres (Bordwell and Thompson 2009, 281-286). The unemployment crisis also had a direct bearing on the representation of women: popular inter-war magazines actively promoted marriage and domesticity, and the consolidation of the housewife stereotype may be understood as an effort to exclude women from the labour market and protect male economic standing (LeGates 2019, 471). The studio system should therefore be understood as more than a neutral structure of production. Institutions participate in determining which forms become visible, legitimate, and repeatedly circulated, even though the mechanisms differ across historical contexts (Etemadi 2026b, 4-7).

Masculine identity and abjection. Oliver and Trigo, drawing on Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection -- the psychological process whereby identity is formed through the expulsion of what threatens its boundaries -- argue that film noir is the visual expression of the formation and consolidation of masculine identity. Threats to this identity are manifested in film noir in multiple forms: the femme fatale, fatalism, racial stereotypes, and so on. Each of these produces, in addition to the consolidation of masculine identity, an anxiety that pervades the genre in the form of a phobia or fatalism (Oliver and Trigo 2019, 304). The fatalistic unconscious of film noir could serve to consolidate masculinity within social identity; by rendering all forms of femininity threatening, it reinforces for the viewer the boundary between active masculinity and passive femininity. The analysis of Elsa Bannister in *The Lady from Shanghai* illustrates this mechanism: as a woman raised in Shanghai -- coded as 'the most wicked city in the world' -- she simultaneously embodies the threatening stereotype of the dangerous Oriental and the classic femme fatale pattern, while the passivity of the male voyeur in the face of her activity represents the deviance that brings punishment (Oliver and Trigo 2019, 114).

4. Conclusion

The question driving this research was the influence of masculine identity on the formation of the recurring female character in 1940s Hollywood film noirs. The three-stage iconological analysis undertaken here yields the following conclusions. At the pre-iconographic stage, the five films examined reveal a strikingly consistent female visual type: expensive, varied clothing; styled make-up and hair; jewellery and accessories -- a profile sharply contrasted with the plain, unadorned positive female figures in the same narratives. At the iconographic stage, re-examination of scholarly and cinematic texts confirms that this visual profile is inseparable from a consistent set of moral characteristics: deception, sexual seductiveness, ambition, destruction of the male protagonist, and a bitter end. This icon is specific to film noir and its period, without precedent in other Hollywood genres, though it draws on ancient Western archetypes of the dangerous woman.

At the iconological stage, the formation of this icon is shown to be overdetermined by several intersecting historical conditions. The social atmosphere of film noir -- its urban paranoia, nihilism, and moral ambiguity -- reflects the economic devastation of the post-depression years and the anxieties they produced. The stylistic shift in the representation of women from the 1930s to the 1940s reflects the patriarchal backlash against women's expanded social roles in the inter-war period. The Great Depression and the development of the Hollywood studio system created genre-specific conditions in which audience preferences directly shaped the films' iconography. And, as Oliver and Trigo demonstrate through Kristeva's concept of abjection, film noir may function as a defensive mechanism that consolidates the dominant masculine identity of American society by rendering active femininity as inherently destructive and threatening.

The female icon in Hollywood film noirs is thus the product of the visual and narrative traditions of its period, and its formation constitutes a reaction -- encoded in the aesthetic conventions of a popular genre -- on the part of the dominant masculine identity of the social milieu. This analysis also demonstrates the applicability of the iconological approach to cinema as a legitimate and productive methodological framework for gender studies within the discipline.

The author wishes to express sincere gratitude to Dr. Elham Etemadi, without whose guidance and support this article would not have reached its present form.

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