

**Making the Unknowable, Knowable:
The Femme Fatale's Collapse in *The Grifters* and *Jackie Brown***

Krish Chopra

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The classical femme fatale carries her power as a kind of darkness on screen: smoke, mirrors, fragmented framing, a woman who never quite resolves into a knowable image. Her threat operates through concealment. Further, what her sexuality hides is exactly what makes her dangerous. Mary Ann Doane, in the introductory chapter of *Femme Fatales*, names this cogently when she writes that the femme fatale is “the figure of a certain discursive unease, a potential epistemological trauma,” whose “most striking characteristics, perhaps, is the fact that she never really is what she seems to be.”¹ She harbors, in Doane’s view, “a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable.”² Noir masculinity is structured around this illegibility of the *femme* figure. The male hero’s authority depends less on knowledge of the world than on his entitlement to pursue the knowledge of the woman, even as that pursuit destroys him.³ Stephen Frear’s *The Grifters* (1990) and Quentin Tarantino’s *Jackie Brown* (1997) both restage this figure, and each refuses to narrate the dependency that the noir genre uses to hold her in place. Lilly Dillon in *Grifters*’ opacity is collapsed inward, absorbed into the maternal, where it ceases to function as mystery and becomes pathology. Jackie Brown’s opacity, however, is dissolved outward, into legibility, labor, where it ceases to function as opacity at all. Each film leaves noir’s characteristically masculine architecture in a rather precarious position, one where it can no longer possess its prior texture.

The femme fatale’s textual eradication, Doane argues, “involves a desperate reassertion of control on the part of the threatened male subject.”⁴ Elisabeth Bronfen adds to this claim by contending that the noir hero treats the femme fatale “as his double, to which he surrenders the

¹ Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (Psychology Press, 1991), 1.

² Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 1.

³ As Yvonne Tasker observes, Doane’s argument has become foundational to the critical reception of the figure, and feminist scholarship has long traced how noir’s gendered economy depends on the woman as a site of “mystery, sexuality, and danger.” See Yvonne Tasker, *A Companion to Film Noir*, ed. Andrew Spicer and Helen Hanson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013), 367.

⁴ Doane, *Femme Fatales*, 2.

fatal enjoyment he cannot himself sustain,” and so destroys her in order to “purify himself of the desire she inspired and the guilt this entailed.”⁵ Her ability to seduce the hero into his own ruin, Bronfen writes, “renders visible a radical fallibility of the masculine subject.”⁶ By this synthesized framework, the genre requires the woman to remain unreadable long enough for the hero’s self-conception to organize itself around her. The 1990s noir cycle inherits this requirement without examining or illuminating, in large part, due to what Kate Stables finds in her survey of the decade’s femme fatales. She finds a flat repetition of the classical figure, “the postmodern fatal woman [who] is a creature of excess and spectacle, like the films she decorates” essentially recycled into mainstream erotic thrillers that recover noir’s iconography without retrospective interrogation.⁷ James Naremore’s account of noir in the 1990s as a critical and commercial construct contextualizes as much.⁸ *The Grifters* and *Jackie Brown* operate within that construct he illuminates, wherein each respective film pressures the figure, in the demand that she stay legible.

The Grifters collapse the femme fatale’s illegibility into the body of the mother. Lilly Dillon arrives at Roy’s apartment after eight years away and immediately occupies the position the genre reserves for the femme fatale, the older woman whose knowledge of the word exceeds the protagonist’s, whose desires are indecipherable to him. Peter Stanfield’s elucidation and historical account of the Jim Thompson revival suggest an aesthetic reading of this collapse. *The Grifters*, he notes, exists in a “tawdry *déclassé* world” of racetracks and “leased-by-the-week officers,” and is, in critic William Johnson’s phrase, “a movie about the virtue of having low

⁵ Elisabeth Bronfen, “Femme Fatale: Negotiations of Tragic Desire,” *New Literary History* 35, no. 1 (2004): 107, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2004.0014>.

⁶ Bronfen, “Femme Fatale,” 113.

⁷ Kate Stables, “Women in Film Noir,” in *The Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing the Femme Fatale in 90s Cinema*, ed. Ann E. Kaplan (London: BFI, 1998), 164.

⁸ James Naremore, “The History of an Idea,” in *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Univ of California Press, 1998), 37.

aspirations.”⁹ Within such a diegesis, the film strips the figure of her usual glamour, leaving in the wake of that loss only her structural function. That function, however, cannot operate, because Lilly is Roy’s mother. The classical stories of *noir* past, where the hero’s desire for the unknowable woman becomes the engine of his self-formation or destruction, is precluded by incest. Roy, in his status as a ‘son,’ never really sees Lilly as a separate person, which makes him vulnerable to Bronfen’s diagnosis of every noir hero.¹⁰ However, here, the misrecognition has no ordinary erotic resolution available to the characters. When the final, disconcerting erotic confrontation arrives in the hotel room, the genre’s eradication mechanisms flip on its own head. Lilly is the one who survives, killing Roy and preventing him from “purify[ing] himself of the desire she inspired.” Murdering him, she takes the briefcase of money and walks out. Doane’s “desperate reassertion of control,” as a result, cannot occur. The figure of illegibility, Lilly, is also the origin of the subject who would need to assert. The genre cannot resolve this tension in its usual ways.

Jackie Brown refuses illegibility from a different direction. Chris Holmlund describes and reads Jackie’s introduction into the film with vivid detail. After a night in jail, she walks toward Max Cherry (Robert Forster) “in long shot, head bowed, hair a mess, feet slightly splayed,” to Bloodstone’s “Natural High.”¹¹ The shot resists the visual codes that organize and dictate the figure of the femme fatale, mystery, fragmentation, the controlled reversal, and instead depicts a worn, recognizable woman whose interior life is accessible to both the viewer and Cherry. Tarantino, in effect, de-romanticizes Pam Grier. This a structural choice that Holmlund notes becomes apparent by his substitution of sexual iconography for genuine sincerity. “Replacing the

⁹ Peter Stanfield, “‘Film Noir Like You’ve Never Seen Before’: Jim Thompson Adaptations and Cycles of Neo-Noir,” in *Peter Stanfield*, ed. Steve Neale (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 261

¹⁰ Bronfen, “Femme Fatale,” 107.

¹¹ Chris Holmlund, “Wham! Bam! Pam! Pam Grier as Hot Action Babe and Cool Action Mama,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 22, no. 2 (2005): 105, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509200590461819>.

repetitive shots on tits and ass in those earlier flicks, in *Jackie Brown* the ‘chemistry’ between Grier and Robert Forster, is, to quote Roger Ebert, ‘at the heart of the movie.’”¹² Jackie is ostensibly readable and accessible to Max from their first scene together and becomes more readable as the film proceeds. The men around her, however, cannot harmonize with this readability. Ordell, specifically, misreads her by virtue of his masculinity, in that it requires her interiority to be available to him on his terms. The ultimate heist of the film succeeds because Jackie allows him to keep believing he can read and decode her interior while she orchestrates a plot to steal his money and get him caught by the authorities. Moreover, the film continues this unreadability by forgoing a happy ending for the previously concordant coupling. The moment where the woman, whose knowability has destabilized the hero, is eradicated, never arrives. Jackie, like Lilly, drives away with the money, and all the male hero can do is watch her go.

Both films expose and retool the structural fragility of noir’s masculine economy. The femme fatale’s ‘unknowability’ was always a demand the genre’s conventions placed on her, so that the male protagonist’s self-conception had somewhere to anchor. *The Grifters* refuses this demand by complicating it with the implication of incest, a site where it ultimately concludes with violence upon the male protagonist himself, an inversion of the classical resolution between the two figures. *Jackie Brown* resists it by replacing unreadability with purported, selective transparency, one that the male protagonists around Jackie overlook by mistaking it with weakness. In both films, the male protagonist is left stranded inside a noir that no longer highlights him. Naremore’s account of 90s noir as a “rich discursive category” the industry could “expand and adapt in countless ways” gestures toward this very potential for the genre to be

¹² Holmlund, “Wham! Bam! Pam!,” 105.

portable.¹³ *The Grifters* and *Jackie Brown* ultimately make clear how little of the genre survives when the figure upon whose unknowability it depended on is rendered knowable.

¹³ Naremore, *More Than Night*, 37.

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