Reassessing Noir in 'Mona Lisa': Race, Masculinity, and Noir's Affective Turn

Introduction

Neil Jordan's *Mona Lisa* opens peacefully, almost deceptively so, as we follow a man wandering through the streets of London cradling a bouquet of flowers. Nat King Cole's tender "Mona Lisa Smile" plays as the city transitions from dawn to day. This opening sequence, merely underscored with a melancholic sense of displacement and longing, is abruptly cut down by George's (Bob Hoskins) outburst at his ex-wife's doorstep. It is here we learn, if only externally, who George is and where he stands in the context of this world; a world that the film elucidates for us. The film signals for us a sharp departure from what is expected from the central idea of *film noir*—the detached mythos inherent to the genre has been substituted for one that centers affect.

Set against the backdrop of a Thatcherite Britain, a markedly unstable socio-economic era, *Mona Lisa* reframes noir's traditional conventions through a distinct national and contemporary lens. By forgoing the genre's American mythological foundation based off Post-War disillusionment, and additionally by renegotiating the genre's confrontation with race and disenfranchisement in a nationally contrasting context, the film emphasized further the precarious status of gender and race within an entirely different structure than the genre is known for more. In *Mona Lisa*, gender and radicalized violence is explored within this repurposed framework, wherein Jordan—while drawing on the formal codes of noir (urban decay, nocturnal spaces, figures of moral and behavioral ambiguity)—utilizes them in an entirely different way in order to tell a story about emotional displacement, misrecognition, masculine facade, and Black femininity.

This paper contends that Neil Jordan's *Mona Lisa* reconfigures classic noir conventions by centering its narrative around emotionally charged vulnerability rather than cynical detachment and, as a result, repositioning the noir protagonist as a figure defined by longing and disempowerment. Additionally, the film re-evaluates the *femme fatale* through Simone (Cathy Tyson), a woman operating in a structure marked by convergence of racial and gendered violence. By placing a working-class British man and a racially marginalized woman within Thatcher-era England, the film explicitly critiques the cultural myths of masculinity, race, and national identity typically obscured and abstracted within the annals of canonical *noir*. Finally, this piece posits that *Mona Lisa*, through its narrative architecture, reflects a transformation of *noir* from a genre preoccupied with personal morality colored by societal factors into one capable of <u>true</u> cultural critique. In doing so, Jordan's film operates as a prototypical "post-*noir*", a successor to the *neo-noir*, where genre conventions no longer point towards a nostalgic reimagining but exist as sites of interrogation.

Reframing Noir Masculinity

Canonical *noir* has long leaned on the masculine ideal—one of stoicism, cynicism, and a hard-boiled aesthetic that offers its protagonist a distance and disaffection—and often centers around its fallibility, brought about by factors out of its control. In contrast, George is introduced to us not as a calculating cold man but a visibly broken figure who, more so than by his morally ambiguous nature, is defined by rage and sense of displacement. His first action in the film is an emotional eruption: when his ex-wife refuses to let him see his daughter, George yells and causes a scene in their neighborhood, right before picking a fight with a group of Black teenagers sitting on the sidewalk. This moment, illustrative of his lack of Sam Spade's 'coolness', or Phillip Marlowe's sardonic wit, makes apparent George's powerlessness. He is unequipped to process

rejection and defines himself, ostensibly, by the approval of others (or at least the semblance of it). The film narrates a more naturalistic representation of the loss of control shown through rage or fantastical ideation. George's emotional vulnerability is what drives him towards every action he takes, and Simone's entanglement offers an alternative subjectivity through which to observe the noir protagonist. Most of his awkward efforts of romantic chivalry towards Simone, his thinly veiled insecurity, and his unpredictable brashness all challenge the myth of the genre's canonical male leads. This becomes central to the film's interrogation of where *noir* masculinity ended up in a post-industrial society characterized by economic hardship. Andrew Spicer describes this representation, and others like it, as being exemplary of a "sense of the intolerable pressures placed on individuals by a hypocritical Establishment in a rapidly changing society," wherein working-class men, whose traditional roles have been eroded, face a crisis of masculinity (Spicer 180; 184). George embodies this very erosion, presenting bare his masculinity not as unwavering or ideal but, as revealed through failure, as fragile.

This class-specific quality of George's inner struggle is especially acute in his initial scenes with Simone, a high-class sex worker, who he is tasked with chauffeuring as his first job out of prison. He waits for her at the bar at an upscale hotel, entrusted with providing cover for her as she engages with a client. After Simone walks back out, we finally see truly how stark of an oddity George looks here: his brightly colored shirt, covered with a brute leather jacket clashes with the black-and-white-beige classiness of the surroundings. Simone confronts him outside and admonishes him in the car for "being cheap" and even worse, "looking cheap." George awkwardly, yet brashly, hits back at Simone. He says: "Some women are whores. Some whores are black. You take what you're given". In this moment, superficially about taste and presentation, exposes George's precarious place in society as it relates to class mobility, and his

perceived emasculation. Moreover, his response to Simone's challenge is rooted in racial and gendered bias. Critically, *Mona Lisa* attempts to bridge two subjects of socio-political repression, not by outwardly comparing the two, but by putting the two in conversation. After this exchange in the car, Simone leaves in the middle of the street. George, perhaps afraid of the consequences of this by his boss, Mortwell (who also appears to be Simone's pimp), attempts to reconcile the fight and bring her back. The unspoken power dynamic becomes visible here, manifestly as George's longing and inability to be rejected—something we are presented with in the opening scene. Here, working for Simone as she visits multiple high-end locations throughout the night, George's class struggle and perceived emasculation is highlighted by the two's conversational relationship. During the fight, George retorts to Simone that "you were given me, I was given you"; while true, this may not be the source of his inner conflict. Despite being the one who drives Simone, he is not in control. Simone guides him, corrects him, and reshapes him into what she needs.

Another illustrative moment comes when George begins to show paternal concern for Simone that veers into misrecognition. He presumes her vulnerability early on and inserts himself into her situation as a protector. When Simone first takes him to drive through the King's Cross area, her motives are unclear but George tries to draw her out emotionally so as to become her protector. His efforts, though, are uninvited as Simone remains elusive in these matters, but she does reciprocate some form of warmth in the form of deflection. This, too, destabilizes his self-image as he is not being drawn into Simone's world as he wishes to be, but is shown the limits of his entitlement to it. George's gaze simultaneously puts Simone on a pedestal while also mystifying her further.

Julian Murphet's analysis if *noir*'s "racial unconscious" elucidates this tendency. Murphet

contends that canonical *noir* often relegates radicalized subjects to the margins, where, differing

from the centered White characters, their presence is signified only via disruption, the

'underworld', or exoticism. As he notes, "the progressive realization of white maleness in

narrative representation [is] mediated through negative figures and tropes of blackness"

(Murphet 24). In *Mona Lisa*, though, Simone does not merely create this disruption of George's

world and actions, rather she redirects his masculine saviors. When George does finally push

past her guardedness and is required to help her look for Cathy (Kate Hardie), he becomes

subject to social illegibility beyond his frame of reference. His descent into the morally

disillusioned underworld of London is not guided by a quest for truth because, as it becomes

clear, George's efforts to reconcile his masculinity with Simone's resistance to his gaze guide

him through this, unconsciously.

His journey through the streets of London surrounded by women, subject to sexual and

gendered violence, and the men who carry out this violence, decided confronts and challenges

what Murphet describes as "noir's excessive sexism…[that] suggests and illegitimate subtext of

racist polemics, which…is alluded to by the absence of women in the spatial seme of the street"

(Murphet 27). He further spells out his contention that women in noir are often allegorical of

Black citizens who are systematically erased from representations of the 'outside'. He notes that

canonical *noir* structures maintain their emotional and narrative coherence by displacing and

surrogating broader anxieties onto an invisible "Black quotidian sphere," which, he says, "is

necessarily seen…then repressed from view" (36). *Mona Lisa* destabilizes this repression by

characterizing Simone not as a token or shadowy figure opposite to our protagonist, but as a

central character who irrevocably disrupts the genre's "racial unconscious", as posited by

Murphet. George's inability to centralize himself—his failure to reconcile his longing for Simone, or to reassert control over the unfolding events—signals the genre's dependence on a radicalized invisibility that Murphet claims it cannot ultimately sustain (31). Simone forces a contradiction to that view. In this way, *Mona Lisa* restores the urban sphere typically displaced by genre convention that frames its male protagonist as disappearing within the underworld. Simone, as both a Black woman and a sex worker, inhabits these very historically excluded margins, and does so with agency. George's movement through these spaces represents an accidental confrontation with this exclusion, challenging and accosting his masculine projection as being an inaccurate way to appraise urban life. The spaces in the film become sites for true exposure, where gendered and racialized violence is not abstracted, but legible and seemingly indomitable.

The Deconstructed *femme fatale*

Where George's disorientation with London's underworld exposes the limits of noir's masculine ideal, Simone's presence confronts its gendered one. The *femme fatale* has historically been a figure of both allure and threat, and her position within canonical narratives often represent sites for male anxiety about female autonomy, sexual agency, and narrative control. In *Mona Lisa*, that figure is neither neutralized nor punished. Simone is never reduced to a cipher for George's transformation; her opacity, her agency, and her refusal of emotional access all mark a significant disruption of the genre's conventions. Its alignment with white femininity, voyeuristic pleasure via the gaze, and its intrinsic confinement within the narrative is challenged and commented on. The intersecting violences of race, gender, and class emerge within Simone and are reflected in her refusal to fully reveal herself. She uses distance, silence, and ambiguity as means of control that defy the genre's traditional configuration with positions its female

characters as having to offer seduction in exchange for power. Simone preserves her autonomy by remaining unreadable. She escapes her inexorable position by the end of the film, defying *noir* conventions, and ostensibly faces no punishment.

Jordan places Simone just out of reach—both narratively and visually—which establishes a motif of stance that constantly reconfigures her relationship with George, and by extension, to us. One of the most important images mirroring this is that of Simone reflected in the rearview mirror of George's car. In various scenes, she is positioned in the backseat, framed by the mirror in constricted and limited view. We see her as George does, in a fracture and finite sense, symbolic of his understanding of her. Her presence exists in fragments and highlights George's power to look, but defies his ability to *know*.

bell hooks' theory of the "oppositional gaze" offers a compelling framework through which to address this refusal of clarity, as it relates to Simone. She notes that "spaces of agency exist"," under the umbrella of which "we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at, one another, naming what we see" (hooks 116). Her seminal contention that historical resistant struggle can be deciphered through the politics of "looking" applies here, through Simone. In the car, she occupies the space behind George, both literally and figuratively, but refuses passivity and watches him as much as he does her. Due to the fact that her gaze is centered throughout the film, offering resistance to objectification and victimization, her power arises not from spectacle but her inability to be read and coded. Simone's visual withholding constitutes a political act. As a result, George is overwhelmed and is left 'watching'. The act of driving, a conventional signifier of masculine authority and narrative agency, especially in *noir*, is rendered unimportant and futile. The mirror may try to reveal Simone to us, but in turn distances her; in that distance is where her agency lies.

Richer Dyer, in *Women in Film Noir*, writes on the construction of whiteness in film and arranges his argument surrounding the male protagonist's familiarity with the *femme fatale*. He contends that in *noir*, men are positioned as stable points of identification who are often subjected to a disruption of that very identification by women, or the *femme fatale*. "Women [in *noir*] are above all else unknowable," Dyer argues; they are constructed in a way that makes this unknowability their threat (Dyer 116). *Mona Lisa*, though, resists this contraction by characterizing Simone's "unknowability" as her instrument of survival. She is not coded as a threat that needs to be neutralized or escaped, and her unraveling does not point towards betrayal or seductive manipulation. Her significance throughout the narrative and departure is illustrative of her power, evident in her refusal to collapse into the roles offered to her. Simone is an enigmatic figure who slowly reveals her victimhood to George, the 'savior', who fails in fixing or containing her.

In this way, *Mona Lisa* frames feminine transparency as narrative driving force, not as an antagonistic structure through which the male protagonist must endure. Simone's queerness and blackness further destabilize noir's expectations by resisting traditional power dynamics. Her search and the need for Cathy is initially signaled to be one of platonic love, but the coding of queerness exists. This queerness unsettles generic suppositions that feminine desire should exist simply to anchor and motivate male transformation and devolution. George's misreading of her orientation—presuming that her guarded warmth signals romantic and sexual interests—highlights the idea that his savior complex is what centers him as the emotional driving force of the narrative, but is ultimately disempowered. Simone's care and liking towards him is not erotic or driven by sexual desire; it is measured, moral, and contingent. Her intimacy with Cathy, by contrast, is direct and emotionally clear by the end of the film. Her motivations

become fully transparent only as a result of her reuniting this queer coding. As a result, it is clear that George's reading of her subjectivity is not only flawed but narratively irrelevant; in turn, this too points a mirror at the audience by unraveling the genre's emotional scaffolding, revealing a framework no longer stabilized or reinforced by heterosexual male fantasy.

Jordan's refusal to eroticize Simone deepens this claim. Unlike the glamor of *femme fatales* of the past, be it Brigid O'Shaughnessy or Phyllis Dietrichson, Simon is not framed through her allure of sexual vigor. Her body is rarely sexualized and we are given scarce information regarding her ongoing relationships with clients behind closed doors. Moreover, her appearances in George's mirror do not point towards her being an object of desire or a site for seductive manipulation, but toward her agency in observation and silent power. George's longing for her is consistently rendered futile, not by a solid refusal, but by Simone's lack of response. When we finally get a look at Simone's work from an inside perspective, it is through George, who barges in while she is bound to the bedpost by an old man. Prior to this, George succeeds in finding Cathy at a church, learning that she is being trafficked and exploited by Anderson, Simone's pimp. After waiting at the hotel where Simone is currently engaged, he barges into the room to find her near naked body restrained and exposed. This moment marks a pivotal rupture in the film's emotional economy. Rather than eroticizing this encounter, Jordan renders it uncomfortable and shocking, especially for George. The scene is framed so as to emphasize Simone's vulnerability without the viewer having to consume it voyeuristically. There exists no noir-ish seduction by candlelight, colored with long, silky dresses, and no charming music that accompanies this moment—only Simone's exposure and startlement. She meets George's brashness with frustration and anger, but not shame. The fact that we witness this scene not through Simone's subjectivity, but through George's uninvited entrance and skirmish with the

man in the room, emphasizes the power imbalance at play. He may think he is intervening, or even rescuing by loosening the shackles and rushing her out of the hotel, but he eventually confronts the reality of the situation—his savior fantasy begins to crack here, one that was reinforced and reignited by his meeting with Cathy earlier.

After this, the two head back to her apartment, never acknowledging the moment, but it is clear that George feels the need to talk about it. Simone's diversion toward Cathy and not her body creates a clear boundary that George must not cross. This omission, oxymoronically, reveals more of her to us than before—the facade of *noir*'s typical coding of the temptress has shattered. Even when viewed at her most vulnerable, Simone is not rendered powerless. Her labor, seen through George's eyes, is no longer an abstraction, but a reality. The discomfort coded into the scene shifts the emotional value George associates with Simone from longing to guilt to unease. In this sense, Jordan redirects our gaze: instead of positioning Simone's status as a sex worker into intrigue, he involves us with George's complicity in misreading her. The futility of his emotional projection and desire is later completely clear when Cathy is revealed not only to be Simone's close friend, but lover. As the two share an intimate moment after Cathy's rescue, George descends into a quiet rage that culminates in a violent confrontation with Simone about his sense of betrayal. On the boardwalk, this moment evinces an upsetting redressal of our own characterization of her, forcing us to confront the *femme fatale* in a new light.

As Dyer points out, "once the woman is not the eternal knowable, the hitherto concealed inadequacy of the hero is liable to become evident" (Dyer 116). George's misreading of Simone that finally shatters and results in a feeling of betrayal—his assumption that her vagueness must be only to mask dormant vulnerability eventually—completely erodes. Under the weight of

Simone's actual subjectivity, his fantasy collapses as she refuses, quietly, to participate in the fantasy he wrote without her. Throughout the film, we see George speak to his mechanic friend Thomas (Eddie Coltrane) about a murder mystery novel. Through these conversations, we learn that George often finds it within himself to write his own narrative, complaining that the stories are far too easy to solve. The moment his assuredness is challenged and altogether destroyed, he spirals into a crisis of masculinity within a structure that de-centers his masochistic authority over her. bell hooks' theory deepens the meaning of this subversion. For hooks, black women are often denied not just visibility, but clarity and true agency. Their presence in images, yet absence from narrative centrality, illustrates this point. She describes a form of "cinematic negation" that refers to films often pushing past erasure into pure misrepresentation by flattening Black womanhood intro tropes designed to affirm white male coherence (hooks 119). Here, it is not merely tropes of Black womanhood, but tropes of the *femme fatale*, the seductress, conjoined with Simone's blackness, that pushes against this. She does not offer George the tools through which to stabilize his image, and neither does her vulnerability come at the cost of her power. His intrusion and eventual departure from her life signals the significance of the Black woman's retention of subjectivity and agency in the face of endangerment.

National Context: British Neo-Noir, Thatcherism, and the Politics of Race in *Noir*

While *Mona Lisa* draws heavily from the aesthetic and narrative tradition of canonical American noir, as well as its offshoots, its ideological function as a British neo-noir is far more rooted in collective national disillusionment than a generic homage meant to gesture towards nostalgia. The 1986 film emerged during the height of Thatcherite Britain—a period defined by economic degradation, growing individualism, and an overall collapse of the post-war social consensus. London's representation in the film as shadowy, unstable, and splintered not only

function as hackneyed signifiers of noir, but signal a specific structure of urban decay, class disenfranchisement, and racial segregation unique to British society. George's stumbling navigation of this chaos mirrors traditional noir protagonist's descent, but also reflects a national context that makes this exploration more specific. As Andrew Spicer notes, British neo-noir films often "combine the observational, quasi-documentary aesthetic of social realism…with noir conventions," ultimately producing a form that is "highly critical of British social mores," that are less invested in *noir*ishness and more in critical confrontation. He qualifies these films as "striving to capture the dynamism of American films," while simultaneously recognizing the heterogeneity of the genre, and so, reflect a more societally conscious device.

Andrew Higson's seminal essay "The Concept of National Cinema" is an important tool for investigating the ways in which the film maneuvers through the cracks in Britain's projected image of cultural unity during this time. Higson contends that discourses of national cinema often operate "not as a descriptive category but a prescriptive one"," highlighting their efforts to uphold myths of homogeneity and national identity through film (Higson 37). This, he says, requires "repressing internal differences, tensions, and contradictions," those of class, race, and gender (Higson 43). *Mona Lisa* centers precisely these disunities by placing an incarcerated working-class white man with a queer black woman navigating sexual exploitation. Together, their traversal through the narrative and the city, instead of confronting alienation, leads them into a crisis of reconciliation.

Higson is critical of what he calls the "internal cultural colonialism" of national cinema in the way it tends to centralize one vision of identity while marginalizing the 'others' (Higson 44). This, he says, creates a muddled idea of cultural consensus about certain aspects of life in the nation. George, as a representative of disenfranchised white working-class men, is consistently

denied the coherence that classic noir protagonists are lent. His character, instead of being an enigma, is almost too transparent. Simone, in contrast, is the enigmatic one, providing fuel for the narrative beyond what George sees of her. The film presents, transgressively, what Higson elucidates as a "contradictory unity," a space within which national coherence is constantly undermined by the presence of marginalized perspectives (Higson 44). Simone's movement within society may be parallel to George's in certain ways, but restricts his access into her subjectivity by way of her blackness. As Murphet notes, noir's racial politics often operate through the absence of the "other", reflecting a conjecture that claims to create surrogates for marginalized people, often being the *femme fatale* (Murphet 27-28). Simone is not a surrogate. The subtext *noir* claims to contain is foregrounded in *Mona Lisa* through her material presence, marked by sexual violence, racialized labor, and social immobility. She retains agency, though, through resistance and unclear interiority. Her ability to remain unknowable is the critique in the narrative, one that reflects Richard Dyer's contention that the *noir* woman's objectification as sites of sex and control can be subverted through her concealment (Dyer 116).

In order to investigate further the extent to which Simone provides a critique to this convention, it is essential to situate Blackness in Britain not as parallel to African-American experience, but as a historically distinct formation. The legacy of colonialism, post-war migration, and Britain's self-conception as a liberal democracy produced a racial polity that was, in many ways, more reminiscent of erasure than being overtly violent. While American civil rights movements foregrounded systemic oppression through high-profile legal and political activism, Black Britons in the 1970s and 1980s contended with an insidious denial of racism itself. Within this landscape, to be Black in Britain was to be structurally excluded while being discursively erased. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite et al. point to Paul Gilroy's written work on Black

British activism rejecting the paternalism of the liberal state and embracing a global vision of Black liberation—pushing against contemporary racist narratives as characterizing Black Britons as always foreign and peripheral (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite et al. 297). *Mona Lisa* reflects that erasure not through Simone's absence, but through her refusal to explain herself. She is present but not assimilated, seen but not legible. Her identity is not offered for clarification or narrative resolution, which itself operates as a resistance to both national inclusion and cinematic consumption.

Moreover, the film must be read in the light of the ideological realignment that prefigured and later enabled Thatcherism—a cultural shift Sutcliffe-Braithwaite et al. argue was a move toward "popular individualism". Far from being a creation of Thatcher, they argue, this method was already popular by the time she came to power, with its origins in the 1970s, especially in communities traditionally associated with collective politics such as the trade unions and the left-wing ideological sect (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite et al. 271-272). This version of individualism, pre-dating Thatcher, the note, had "multiple political and cultural valences" and was not inherently associated with conservatism or neo-liberalism. It demands personal autonomy and dignity, particularly in relation to classes, gendered, and racial identities (269). Simone, whose quiet refusal to conform to either George's projected or idealized fantasy, or the typical *femme fatale* signals a desire for self-definition based in her lived experience as a Black woman navigating sex work. She does not seek rescue, but looks for vindication from the structures that oppress her, and her narrative agency arises from the very conditions of that oppression. In becoming a reflection of resistant individualism that aligns more closely with what Sutcliffe-Braithwaite et al. associate with self-assertions than with neo-liberal self-interest exploited by Thatcher, Simone mirrors the frictions within Britain's cultural myth-making in the

1980s. By making visible the limitation of a unified national subjectivity through her marginalized perspective, *Mona Lisa* subverts the reading of *noir* as being an American conception.

Mona Lisa turns *noir* inward. The film is not placed in an exotic underworld, rather it situates itself within the contradictions of a post-Colonial, post-war Britain that manifest as ideological trigger points. The film's refusal to reconcile these contradictions challenges the idea that noir's appeal derives from a single nation or cultural context. Higson's emphasis on national myth-making within cinema "preventing the potential proliferation of other meanings" stands out when looking at *Mona Lisa* (Higson 37). The film gestures a push back against these forms of idealized or unified identities, dramatizing the nation's internal fractures manifestly, not through abstraction as is often the case in historical *noir*. Those fractures are examined through Simone's resistance to legibility and control, George's obviously shattering self-image, and the city's coextensive landscape. As a British noir, it is not concerned with securing cultural consensus or providing a patriotic image of Britishness; rather, it weaponizes the genre's form to excavate those myths that British cinema as a whole sought to uphold. Ultimately, by illustrating an examination of different national and cultural myths, it illuminates the possibility and potential for noir to cross borders and be inclusive with its form.

Emotion and the "Post-Noir"

In this light, noir's transatlantic migration reveals the genre's plasticity. The tropes are signaled towards, but their functions are altered. *Mona Lisa*, as British neo-noir, repurposes these tropes by resisting the melancholic of many American neo-noirs—films like *Chinatown* (1974) or *Body Heat* (1981) which aestheticize generic baroqueness and revel in pastiche—and instead

offers a psychologically volatile character study, steeped in emotional immediacy. British neo-noirs of this era in particular, as Andrew Spicer notes, were more interested in critique than in nostalgia. "The polarizing ideology of Thatcherism," he says, lent "neo-noir [the opportunity to] offer itself as an apposite vehicle to analyze its social and psychological impact" (Spicer 188). The film's formal choices mirror this divergence, manifesting itself in the visible departure from the genre's conventions. Chiaroscuro lighting and surreal mise-en-scène is substituted for stark social realism reflected in the film's simplicity.

This simplicity and transparency—free of perversion—reflect George's affective porousness. His emotions are worn plainly, not masked as most noir protagonists are characterized. This openness, often played against Simone's controlled reservedness, draws the viewer into a reconstituted emotional palette. George is neither a hero, nor the tragic anti-hero, that often fit into the noir mold. He is motivated by care, sentiment, a desire for connection, and misplaced rage. The film boasts a lack of ironic distancing, forcing the viewer to feel for him. The viewer's affective investment in Simone's reunion with Cathy exposes how *Mona Lisa* cultivates emotional alignment not through masculine cynicism, but through fragility. Spicer underscores this turn towards affective openness by quoting Jordan's presentation of George as "the mug who is lost in a maze of guile, the big heart with the slow brain" (Spicer 190-1). Ultimately, his failure is not a function or consequence of fatalistic hubris, but of emotional dissonance—his misunderstanding of Simone's intimacy and the unrequited revelation within her situation. His final retreat back to life, after a violent climax, into makeshift domesticity with Thomas, undercuts the noir myth of the hero walking off into ruin. His survival, while subversive, renders no narrative closure.

This alternative to noir fatalism thus points to a shift from the hard-boiled detachment to emotional saturation. More characteristic of the "post-noir", this turn toward affect resists the American neo-noir tendency to stylize or ironically recreate the genre. In performing a blend of social critique and expressive intensity, *Mona Lisa* portrays a departure from both canonical noir and its American neo-noir counterparts, and in doing so, captures the dissolution of identity, masculinity, and black femininity without any mythology or nostalgic reminiscence. This signals movement away from noir's mythic past toward something more socially and emotionally immediate. By fracturing noir, and showing how race and gender disrupt the genre's usual dynamics, it creates a rupture that post-not of contemporary cinema runs away with.

Conclusion

Mona Lisa confronts noir not through homage, but fracturing and deconstruction. It disassembles the genre's core assumptions about masculinity, race, femininity, and politics of space, by introducing affect where there was once detachment, and ambiguity where there was once staunch archetype. George is not the stoic hero of canonical noir. Simone, positioned neither as *femme fatale* nor a redemptive comforting figure, through her blackness, queerness, and opacity expose noir's structural dependence on both the invisibility of and control over figures like her. Set within a specific cultural context, the film uses the precarious structures of that society in order to reconfigure the genre's socio-political and emotional logic. The film, unlike many neo-noirs, does not collapse into, or even point towards, nostalgic reimagining or stylized pastiche/parody. Rather, it reforms the genre into a site of reckoning and articulates the outline of "post-noir," where the genre no longer functions as a vessel for melancholic myth and reimagined politics, but as a platform for unabashed critique and revision.

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