

GETTING AWAY WITH IT:
THE EROTIC THRILLER AND ITS
FANTASIES

By

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INTRODUCTION

Like Slavoj Žižek, “I never feel guilty about enjoying films that are generally dismissed as trash” (“Guilty Pleasures” 12). Erotic thrillers are definite candidates for the trash category, so that writing a PhD thesis on such a contested genre was a great challenge. I realized early on that unless I were very careful about the way I handled my topic, the fate of my thesis would be similar to that of many of my films; it would be dismissed as lacking academic seriousness, but without the alternative to come out in a Direct-to-Video version. So, here I was, trying to balance the same forces as my films and *get away with it*. That is how my title was born. But get away with what? What is it about erotic thrillers that renders them unworthy, according to some film critics and theorists, of “serious” exploration? And why is the erotic thriller recorded in the popular consciousness as “a blanket term for unchallenging sleaze” (Linda Ruth Williams, “Erotic Thrillers and Rude Women” 12)?

Being part of New Hollywood escapist, formulaic, genre cinema is bad enough, but overlapping with soft pornography takes erotic thrillers to the very edge of acceptability (or disreputability). Part of what Linda Williams in her influential essay “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess” calls “gross” movies, erotic thrillers (or “exotic thrillers”, as they have more recently been called in the DVD market),¹ like the three genres that Williams discusses – pornography, horror films, and melodramas – “display [. . .] sensations that are on the edge of respectable” (2). Inserting a pornographic depiction of the sexual body and its vicissitudes into mainstream Hollywood cinema, erotic thrillers introduce the excess of the sexual body into the domain of the suspense thriller, being the only Hollywood genre not only to show the sexual act but also to become structurally dependent on its portrayal.

As I argue in my generic discussion of the erotic thriller, in erotic thrillers sex merges with murder, offering the unification of the two in one; the sexual act and the murderous act

¹ See Linda Ruth Williams’ *The Erotic Thriller* 26.

give flesh to *The Act*. It is significant that erotic thrillers are missing from Linda Williams' table of gross film bodies where she offers an anatomy of the films that exhibit what are considered to be "gratuitous" forms of bodily excess (9). Bringing together the "ecstatic sex" of pornography and the "ecstatic violence" of horror, the erotic thriller incorporates in its thematics "the spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation" (Williams 4). Thus, it manages both to belong and not to belong to Williams' gross body genres at the same time. Offering lingering images of the sexual body and the disintegrating body and engaging the audience's bodies in pleasure and fear (Linda Williams 4), erotic thrillers *are* gross body films at the same time that they veil their excessive elements behind the convoluted plot of a suspenseful enigma which transforms the body from a site of sensation into a crucial aspect of the narrative. Turning *The Act* from an object into a signifier, erotic thrillers manage to have it both ways, providing legitimate film narratives while at the same time offering images of body sensations and eliciting desirable bodily responses from their audiences.

Those that do not manage to veil their threatening bodily element, or even worse flaunt its prevalence, end up at the video/DVD end of the market, where gross genres prove highly successful in private viewing. Being both part of mainstream cinema and DTV (Direct-To-Video) markets, the erotic thriller as a filmic category is split from within, torn between its respectable face and its seedy other. Where the former incorporates the body in the narrative as the site where the enigma of the crime is to be resolved, the latter uses the narrative as mere titillation.² It seems that it is this shameless flaunting of the sexual act that dooms the video erotic thrillers to critical oblivion. Meanwhile, the huge popularity of the erotic thriller in the '90s makes the exploration of the pleasures it circulates crucial for the study of the cultural Imaginary.

² As Linda Ruth Williams writes, "On video, erotic thrillers are basic stories of sexual intrigue that use some form of criminality or duplicity as the flimsy framework to support on-screen sex which is as explicit as possible" ("Erotic Thrillers and Rude Women" 12).

In their shift from unmediated contact with viewers who watch them in their own time in the privacy of their living-room or bedroom to the institution of cinema, erotic thrillers need to sacrifice their direct access to pleasure and sublimate it through the signifiers of the film's narratives. That is, theatrically released erotic thrillers are part of the Symbolic rendering of the cultural Imaginary that video erotic thrillers reflect through their compulsively repeated formulaic plots and lists of sexual numbers. Establishing this link in her influential essay "Erotic Thrillers and Rude Women", Linda Ruth Williams contends that "[v]ideo erotic thrillers are [. . .] the disavowed but influential underbelly of the current spate of sexy blockbusters" (14). Expanding on her 1993 essay, Linda Ruth Williams has recently explored both the Hollywood and the DTV erotic thriller in her prototypical study of this uncharted film genre, *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema* (2005). Setting off from a generic exploration, Williams announces her interest in the formulas that are repeatedly employed in erotic thrillers not in order to "set in stone a picture of generic hallmarks", but as indication of the viewing pleasures that these films circulate (18).

This thesis also invokes viewing pleasures; however the focus lies particularly on the pleasures that spring from the sexual patterns erotic thrillers repeat. A highly conservative family entertainment institution squeamish about explicit sex, Hollywood can only show the act by transforming it into fantasy. European cinema has a tradition of depicting sex with all the awkwardness and "grossness" that is part of the act's reality. Hollywood, however, exhibits a highly aestheticised image of harmonious bodies and movements that celebrate the fantastic, romanticised version of the sexual act.

Any discussion of fantasy unavoidably brings one to the territory of psychoanalysis. Especially as my interest lies in exploring the sexual fantasies that erotic thrillers promote in their particular configurations of the sexual act. Traditionally deemed male fantasies, owing to their focus on male anti-heroes who hold roles of authority in the films' investigative

narratives, erotic thrillers stage the sexual act in its patriarchal guise, keeping the female character locked in suspicious doubleness, both *femme* and *fatale*, lover and possible murderer, half demonised and half subliminal. This dynamic accords with the Lacanian graph of subject positions, which I shall use as reflective of the patriarchal heterosexual economy in which the prioritisation of the male subject (position) stems from a misrecognition of the penis as the phallus. Raising the male reproductive organ to the level of what in the Lacanian economy is the Signifier of all signifiers, the sexual act is misperceived as the act *par excellence* that leads to phallic unity, the union of the two – male and female (subject positions) – in One.

By compulsively staging and restaging the sexual act, erotic thrillers offer spectators the core fantasy of the sexual act, the “primal scene” fantasy. For Freud, the primal scene involves the child looking in on the parents having sex, unobserved by them.³ Looking at the act it cannot understand, the child sees it as violence unleashed on the mother by the father. So, when during the act it is allowed to have a good look at the parents’ genitals, presumably as the parents perform sex *a tergo, more ferarum* (from behind, in the mode of animals), it perceives the mother as castrated. Terrified by the image of the castrated mother and the violence while simultaneously aroused by watching the sexual act, the child, either by actually witnessing the act, which it can only grasp retrospectively in a *deferred action*, or by fantasising about it (having already seen animals copulate) as if it had actually happened, is deeply affected by it. Sexual arousal is forever linked to anxiety, pleasurability to aggression, and fear of castration to the sexual act. The primal scene also establishes the absence of the desired organ as object and its substitution by fetishistic supplements; the mother’s body or some part of it, the sexual act and the child’s transgressive gaze are among the most common fetishes employed by the child in its effort to avert the threat of anxiety. Preserving the

³ See Freud’s “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis (The ‘Wolf Man’)” and especially parts IV and V 259-95 and his “Lecture 23” on primal phantasies. See also Laplanche and Pontalis’ *The Language of Psychoanalysis* 335-36.

spectacle of the act as pleasurable by staving off its threatening part, the subject's sexual pleasure is bound in a double structure where the experience of pleasure is always already dependent on the fending off of unpleasure. This is what the Lacanian *objet a* is all about, the partial object which is resorted to in order to avert the threat of absence, activating the subject's desire for its replacement by plenitude, a desire that lies at the core of the Symbolic subject's reality.

Offering the camera's transgressive eye as the keyhole through which spectators can repeat the viewing of the parental coupling, erotic thrillers present the sexual act as both the pleasurable, arousing scenario of fulfilment and the fearful castrating one that leads to disintegration through "deadly penetration". The primal scene fantasy, represented in part by pornography and horror film, is repeated in its doubleness by the erotic thriller. In their screening of sexual fantasy as both desirable and fearful, and the act of sex as the Lacanian *objet a*, erotic thrillers function both as sexual narratives and as objects. Split in their doubleness like the act that signifies both their own existence, as well as that of their staple, the *femme fatale*, erotic thrillers function as the fantasy-frame through which spectators look at the heterosexual union of the two and see the One, the ultimate fantasy of the barred Lacanian subject.

As *objets a*, erotic thrillers offer pleasure in its structural dependence on unpleasure. Since, as Gallop points out in her reading of the Lacanian Mirror Stage, the image of the perfectly whole self always already includes the fragmented image in relation to which wholeness has been experienced as constitutive of the "I" (*Reading Lacan* 81), fantasies of disintegration are as pleasurable to the viewing subject as those of wholeness as long as they remain on the level of fantasy. The erotic thriller's transgression of Symbolic boundaries in search of the Real remainder that can only ever be retrieved through Imaginary scenarios of

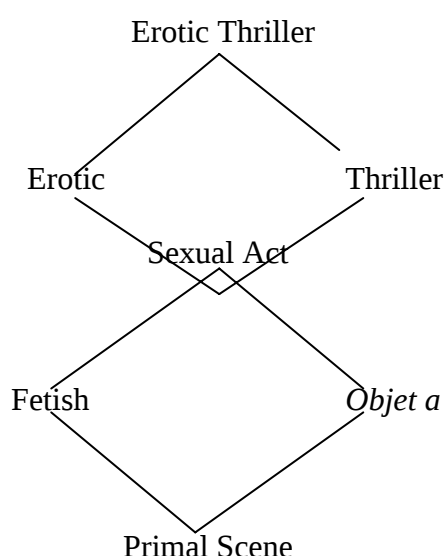
orgasmic plenitude offer the spectator the pleasure of repeating fantasies constitutive of the self.

This thesis will focus on the theme of triangulation as a crucial erotic thriller motif, incarnated in the *ménage-à-trois*, which adds to the plot's suspenseful enigma and the film's sexual scandalousness. Meanwhile, in terms of fantasy, three is sacrificed for the sake of the two that will lead to One, the ideal-I of the Lacanian Mirror Stage. To explore the erotic thriller's obsession with Oneness, I will use Lacan's theory of the gaze. It is in the misperception of the lover as the subliminal object that the erotic thriller subject is allowed access to the Real wholeness of the gaze. Freezing the spectators' eye/I on the transgressive gaze before it has the chance to establish the primal scene as object, the gaze in the primal scene fantasy is always suspended, covering the object with the veil of the looking subject's desire, as that desire is itself covered behind the spectator's look on the cinema screen. Hollywood erotic thrillers sustain the illusion of the perfect coupling by giving the eye what it looks for and misidentifying it with what the eye sees. Through staged fantasies of desired sexual unity, the spectator's eye and gaze are misidentified, making the gap between them invisible.

Veiling, I shall be arguing, comes into the erotic thriller picture as a crucial mediating term supporting the misperceptions that allow the Symbolic subject a glimpse of Imaginary wholeness where Real fragmentation lies. In the same way that the sexual act becomes the veil through which two people are seen as one, sexual fantasy becomes the veil through which the two parts of the erotic thriller narrative merge into an indefinable one, and the erotic thriller becomes the veil through which the spectator looks at the film's narrative and sees the various fantasies of wholeness it carries.

It is my contention that the erotic thriller proves pleasurable because it doubles in its structure what I shall be calling the Lacanian rhombus of fantasy, both in its generic make-up

and in the sexual fantasies it promotes. Using the Freudian model of fantasy and its re-reading by Lacan and his followers, I prove that triangulation, the schema *par excellence* of the erotic thriller and the Lacanian Symbolic, gives flesh to the Lacanian rhombus of fantasy as the erotic thriller's structure. In the following schema I illustrate how the erotic thriller ingredients formulate Lacan's rhombus of desire: as the erotic thriller consists of the erotic and the thriller united through the act of sex, the latter functions both as fetish and *objet a* signifying the primal scene fantasy as the core erotic thriller sexual fantasy.



In this schema, the two rhombuses are joined through the sexual act as their mediating term, veiling and revealing that erotic thrillers, just as their *femmes fatales*, are always already doubled, split between the symbolic narrative they play out and the fantasies of plenitude they promise. Hovering incessantly around the lack on which the act of sex is constituted as the partial object that activates desire for unity, erotic thrillers compulsively repeat the formulaic narratives that obscure the nauseating repetitions of the drive. My assertion is, therefore, that erotic thrillers are pleasurable in their stupefying narrative simplicity only because they trigger our basic fantasy which invokes a retrieval of the always already lost I. It is not the story *per se* that offers pleasure but rather the fantasy-frame it offers, on which spectatorial desire can flow through various subject-positions, while the drive is satisfied through the

repetition of the sexual act which as an *objet a* functions in a double way; it fuels the narrative as it hovers around the lack it Imaginarily fills. This is why erotic thrillers prove so pleasurable at the same time that they are distinguished by narrative triviality. They have to do not with stories, but rather with *basic instincts*.

This takes me to the main film treated in this thesis, which could be no other than Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct* (1992). In my reading, *Basic Instinct* is the ultimate erotic thriller both in its generic make-up and in its operation as fantasy-machine. The success of the film is dependent upon its merging of the sexual and the criminal, so staging the longest and most explicit sexual scene in the history of the Hollywood genre. At the same time it embodied the absolute fantasy machine, which is how it managed to offer a glimpse of what was not supposed to be there (in its infamous crotch-flash scene) and get away with it. *Basic Instinct* was the film which attracted my attention to the "guilty pleasures" that erotic thrillers offer and activated my desire to decode these pleasures.

In this thesis, I limit my discussion to the Hollywood erotic thriller, by this term meaning mainstream, widely-released productions, mainly for reasons of practicality. The video and DVD versions of widely released films are much easier to find than small, low-budget productions, especially since my interest was in films of the early nineties (more than a decade away now), which is when the erotic thriller category blossomed. Although I agree with video erotic thriller producer Andrew Garroni that it was the video market that solidified the genre, it was cinema that signified the existence of the erotic thriller on the Symbolic map of film genres. *Basic Instinct* inserted the erotic thriller in the public consciousness as the most expensive story ever produced (Eszterhas received the largest fee ever received until then in Hollywood for a script) and the biggest sexual scandal (rumours around the explicitness of the sex scenes and the film's picketing by gay activists offered the film great publicity) in '90s Hollywood, underlining the genre's double nature. In the absence of any

lengthy study at the time when I began my thesis, the theatrically released erotic thriller seemed like the best place to start my exploration of an uncharted filmic category.

Linda Ruth Williams' comprehensive study of the genre came out less than a year before the completion of my thesis putting an end to my loneliness and frustration and providing a constant dialogue with my own findings as well as a wider context for me to work with and against in my own research pursuits. Reading in her preface that "*The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema* is [. . .] in part the history of a fantasy" (xi), was the cue for my own psychoanalytic exploration of the genre. Through the analysis of popular (sexual) fantasies as they are projected onto the Hollywood erotic-thriller screen, we gain access to our culture's fantasmatic kernel of being and its relation to *jouissance*. That is, by identifying the stock of fantasies that Hollywood erotic thrillers offer spectators as the lost object of their desire, we can examine some of the historically and culturally specific aspects of these drives.

To provide this sense of history, I have used as many film reviews and interviews with the films' directors and actors as I could find (Linda Ruth Williams' interviews with the mainstream erotic thriller's key-directors were invaluable). Sometimes, when a film was theatrically re-released or came out in video or DVD years after its original release, I have tried to accommodate the gap in time and critical reaction. Reading these texts as reflective of the critical reception and production sensibilities of their times within the postmodern, media-saturated milieu of (sexual) spectacles, I have attempted to offer a multiple perspective on the mainstream erotic thriller and the fantasies it breeds. Theories of spectatorship which focus on the specificity (gender, race, age, class) of the viewer are not addressed due to the fact that my focus in this thesis lies on the level of fantasy-production, that is on delineating the way the erotic thriller functions as a fantasy machine and the fantasies it produces. Addressing the particular ways in which different spectators experience these fantasies and/or testing them with actual audiences would be a very interesting next step. However, since I begin my

theoretical exploration from the dark auditorium and the relation developed between the spectator and the big screen, I assume a silent obscured spectator watching; I should therefore explain what kind of spectator this is supposed to be. In accordance with Elizabeth Cowie's use of fantasy as a structure that offers a multiplicity of possible subject positions and a variety of pleasures, I assume my spectator to enjoy both active and passive fantasies of the sadistic and masochistic pleasures that erotic thrillers offer in the heterosexual images they show and the homosexual ones they repress. That is, I presuppose a state of spectatorship that reflects the Freudian polymorphous perversity of infancy, which is in accordance with the sexually liberal '90s during which the erotic thriller category was solidified.

In the first part of my thesis I attempt a definition of the erotic thriller as a genre, recognizing the risks that any first attempt necessarily involves. In chapter one, I depict the difficulty of defining the erotic thriller in the slipperiness of the terms that are employed to distinguish the borders of the three relative-genres: the *film noir*, the neo-*noir*, and the erotic thriller, focusing on the overlapping between the three. Striving for some stable ground, which is necessary at every outset of a generic exploration, I inevitably sacrifice variety for the sake of consistency and keep my generic focus on *Basic Instinct* and its like as the nucleus of the erotic thriller genre. Moving from the heart of the erotic thriller to its generic roots, in chapter two I attempt to restore the variability of the erotic thriller by delimiting its boundaries in negotiation with all the generic categories that run through its territory. Then in chapter three, having established the importance of the sexual act, I give a concise history of the problematic relation the Hollywood mega-screen has always had with sexual imagery.

In the second part of the thesis, I investigate the psychoanalytic frame of fantasy and the fantasizing subject. Both the wish-fulfilling aspect of fantasy and its structural make-up need to be established theoretically in their relation to the medium of cinema before I proceed in the third part to investigate the way the erotic thriller has incorporated the mechanics of

fantasy to appeal to spectators. To offer a cultural context to the psychoanalytic depiction of the sexual fantasies that erotic thrillers activate, in chapter four I depict the image-saturated postmodern milieu of Baudrillardian trans-sexuality as the cultural context in which the erotic thriller lives and breathes its fantasies. In chapter five, I set off from the fantasy-state in which spectators are placed while watching films, then move inside their psyche to explore the mechanism of (sexual) fantasy. By the end of the chapter, back in the dark auditorium, I present the erotic thriller as doubling the Lacanian rhombus of fantasy in both its generic and its psychoanalytic make-up. In chapter six, I deal with triangulation as constitutive of the Symbolic subject's reality and fantasy, conditioning all the relations which any man or woman formulate on and off screen. Claiming the sexual act to be the ultimate fantasy of unity (of the two in One), in chapter seven I present the different veils under which Hollywood stages the sexual act in its film genres.

Then in the third part of the thesis, I bring the previous two parts together to show how erotic thrillers film their fantasies, focusing both on the films' thematics but also on the cinematic techniques that contribute to the transformation of erotic thriller reality into fantasy. In chapter eight, I explain how erotic thrillers are transformed into the absolute fantasy machines. In chapter nine, I investigate the *femme fatale* as the *fatal(e)* figure *par excellence*, contrasted to the *homme* and the *homo fatal(e)s*, employed by erotic thrillers as both part of their machinery of fantasy and as the ultimate fantasy they offer. Finally, in chapter ten I explore the basic fantasies of Oneness that erotic thrillers project onto the Hollywood screen and the veils through which they do so. Having already announced *Basic Instinct* as my main text, all my filmic examples are arranged in relation to this Hollywood mega-hit. Spreading *Basic Instinct* all over part three, I want to stress its importance for the genre and recreate for my reader the nauseating effect that erotic thrillers create, circling their spectators in a maze of hovering on-screen pleasures. Finally, in the afterword to this thesis I take a brief look at

what I call a “fake” erotic thriller, Michael Caton-Jones’ 2006 *Basic Instinct 2*, and attribute its failure to its violation of what I have defined as the erotic thriller fantasy directives.

Consumed by how erotic thriller fantasy focuses on the unification of the two in One with the Symbolic third term obscured, I have inadvertently reproduced its structure in the structure of my thesis: three parts, the third a unification of the previous two in One. As with the two rhombuses I have drawn on page seven of this introduction, the common element that unites the two parts of the thesis in the third One is the sexual act, discussed in the final chapter of each of the two parts. As Catherine Tramell tells Nick in *Basic Instinct*, “Funny how the subconscious works!”

PART I

GENERIC CONCERNS

CHAPTER 1

Slippery Terms: (Neo)-Noir Erotic Thrillers

In *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema*, the first book-length study of a controversial hybrid, Linda Ruth Williams employs the notion of generic instability and mutability – a notion I will also be addressing in my own effort to approach the erotic thriller – to discuss the generic overlapping between *noir*, the most contested and debated generic category in the history of cinema, and its progeny: the neo-*noir* and the erotic thriller. As Williams puts it, “This adaptable (perhaps unstable) notion of genre is useful for thinking about the fluid mutation of *noir* into neo-*noir* into the erotic thriller, an interconnected chain of categories which, through the 1980s and 1990s, fed in and out of each other” (21).

The interrelation between these three generic categories is apparent in Foster Hirsch’s discussion of the term’s history. According to Hirsch, terms such as “erotic thrillers”, “suspense films”, “thrillers”, “crime movies” and “psychological thrillers” have been employed in the absence of a more appropriate term before the early 1980s. Once the labels “post-noir noir”, “postclassic noir”, “nouveau noir” and “neo-noir” were established as the “correct” terms for the films that came out after 1958 and proved the generic status of the “true” (referring to the classic) *film noir*, the older terms were only used afterwards in casual discourse (*Detours and Lost Highways* 4). Hirsch is so eager to solidify the existence of neo-*noir* and through it verify the generic status of *film noir* that he chooses not to see the rough edges of his neat classification. Having subsumed the erotic thriller under the neo-*noir* without further distinctions, he then falls back on it whenever it becomes convenient. In chapter six of his book, Hirsch characterises as neo-*noir* those films which launch deadly or faux *femmes* and *hommes fatal(e)s*, stressing in all cases the importance of the transgressive figure whose uncontrollable desire and unleashed libido turns pleasure into threat and *Eros*

into *Thanatos*.¹ However, Hirsch often switches to the use of the casual term “erotic thriller” when he wants to stress the deadly, graphic and violent sexual images these films present. So when he refers to these films’ function as “metaphors for the dangers of sex in the time of AIDS” (189), he chooses to speak about “*erotic thrillers* of the 1980s and 1990s”² instead of *neo-noirs*. Also, when he speaks about the sexual politics of Adrian Lyne’s *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and the prevalence of the unleashed deadly sexual impulses it portrays, Hirsch again turns to the “erotic thriller” label and to what he calls “noir as a kind of designer porn” (196). Although in his analysis of films he calls neither *Jagged Edge* nor *Basic Instinct* “erotic thrillers”, he calls Joe Eszterhas – the screenwriter of both films – “meister of porno noir” (202) and “kinky-sex neo-noir specialist” (208), presumably to indicate the dominance of the sexual element both in the depiction of the central characters and also in the make-up of Eszterhas’ stories. Using the two terms (erotic thriller, *neo-noir*) not exactly as interchangeable labels, as he announced in his first chapter, and driven by the homogenizing force of generic order, Hirsch by the end of the sixth chapter, integrates the erotic thriller into the *neo-noir* category, breeding a new hybrid term to talk about the *noir* of the 1980s and 1990s: the category of “noir erotic thrillers”.

Linda Ruth Williams has a different story to tell. In her book she writes that the adjective “erotic” was used as a modifier to the thriller category during the early 1980s but it is the DTV (direct-to-video) industry that claims to have solidified the concept and the term in the 1990s after the success of *Night Eyes* (Jag Mundhra, 1990) (*The Erotic Thriller* 15). As Andrew Garroni, one of the two founders of Axis Films International,³ the company created in the early ‘90s to supply the mainstream video market with erotic thrillers, told Linda Ruth Williams: “We were in a groove for about three years or so, [. . .] Because truly with very,

¹ See chapter six “The Wounds of Desire” 179-209.

² My emphasis

³ The other being Walter Gernert.

very little ego, you know, we solidified the genre. I don't think we created it, but we certainly made it more pronounced" (*The Erotic Thriller* 72).

Part of the '90s American cinema vocabulary, the term "erotic thriller" now appears in various books, journals, magazines, Internet citations, and publicity posters and is widely used by cinemagoers, reviewers, and those involved in the production and circulation of films. Naturally the wide use of the term creates the illusion of consistency, but the range of meanings it carries and the diversity of films it is employed to signify betray the flimsiness of the signifier, which can only fake unity through physical uniformity at the same time that it is exchanged for other, no less slippery, signifiers: *neo-noir*, *nouveau noir*, *après noir*, *new noir*, postmodern *noir*, sex thriller, pot-boiler, bunny-boiler etc. On the other hand, the overlapping of different terms to signify a film reflects its generic hybridity, a condition that has always – though in different degrees – been integral to Hollywood Cinema.⁴

The Hollywood industry has always been synonymous with genre, the latter being the language that producers and viewers share (R. B. Palmer 2).⁵ Discussing Hollywood genres, though, it is important to remember their function "as frameworks for mediating between repetition and difference" (Krutnik 11), since variation is as much part of generic constitution as familiarity.⁶ As Linda Ruth Williams puts it, "the audience seeks the same but wants it differently encapsulated" (*The Erotic Thriller* 17). Therefore, hybridity is not oppositional to but vital for the preservation of genres and as Altman contends, "Genre mixing has long been a standard Hollywood practice" (141), reflected also in the language used to signify these mixtures. "Generic hyphenation" is nothing new.⁷ As Richard Maltby observes, musical-

⁴ See Janet Staiger's "Hybrid or Inbred" in which she first rejects the "purity hypothesis" regarding classical (what she calls Fordean) Hollywood and then proceeds to problematize the use of the term "hybridity" in reference to Hollywood's genre-mixing.

⁵ As Richard Maltby remarks, "The rules of a genre are thus not so much a body of textual conventions as a set of expectations shared by audiences and producers alike" (109).

⁶ See also Steve Neale quoting Barry Keith Grant in *Genre and Hollywood* 9.

⁷ I'm borrowing the term from Maltby's discussion of "generic hyphenates". See his *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* 108.

comedies and western-romances are long-known to us, only currently they have given their place to “generic mutants” that are getting more and more complex in their aim to “give potential viewers quite a full description of what they might expect” (108). The 1979 description by *Monthly Film Bulletin* of *Nocturna* (Harry Hurwitz) as “the first soft-porn-vampire-disco-rock movie” illustrates Maltby’s point (Maltby 108).

Hybridity has always secured saleability.⁸ As Steve Neale points out in his discussion of classic Hollywood, “the regular production of hybrids was another means by which the studios tried to hedge their bets” (*Genre and Hollywood* 238). Genres were very important for classic Hollywood but, once established and shared by the studios, they were not profitable any more. Rather, each studio aimed at tradeable exclusiveness that guaranteed substantial profit through the creation of new cycles “by associating a new type of material or approach with an existing genre” (Altman 62). Once the cycle got copied by the other studios or reached genre-status, it stopped being profitable so the studio would try a different mixture of generic elements to establish one more successful cycle, giving one more spin to the Hollywood genrification machine (Altman 59-62). Evidently, classic Hollywood (as well as New Hollywood) abided by the rule that “[w]ithout the ability to ensure a significant measure of product differentiation, studios cannot expect a substantial economic return on their investment” (Altman 62). Hiring many different screenwriters to work on each film “in order to combine their known talents for different genres” (Altman 141), Hollywood clearly didn’t share the critics’ preoccupation with “strong genres and single genre affiliation” (Altman 128).

⁸ Even the establishment during the Depression of the double-bill, or “dual” as it was called, which involved the showing of “two features for the price of one” (Gomery 72) was a kind of elementary exhibitors’ genre-mixing bringing together longer, costly A-features and shorter, cheaper B-films of variable generic constitution. The double feature was one of the transformations introduced in the 1930s to save exhibitors from going out of business, the other two being the installation of air-conditioning and the selling of food in the theatre lobbies. See Gomery’s “The Popularity of Filmgoing in the US, 1930-50” 71-79.

Hybridity has also proved an important denominator in a film's promotion. In the attempt to sell their film to as many people as possible, classic Hollywood studios avoided using any specific generic terms in the film's publicity. Rather, they would use allusions to multiple genres according to the following strategy: "tell them *nothing* about the film, but make sure that everyone can imagine something that will bring them to the theatre" (Altman 59).⁹ Instead of clear-cut genres, generic mutants and high-concept phrases are used today to signify variation, while titles of successful films are used as examples of similarity.¹⁰ The four different concept descriptions that were presented to audiences for the promotion of *Cocktail* (Roger Donaldson, 1988) illustrate New Hollywood's promotion techniques. As Altman points out, the "Tom Cruise / Romantic Drama" description indicates the film's genre, the "Saturday Night Fever" label invokes the John Travolta film and the "*Bildungsroman* / Horatio Alger tradition underlying *Saturday Night Fever*'s plot", the "Success Is Not Enough" concept, suggests a link to '50s melodramas, while the "Like Brothers" label invokes the '80s buddy films (133-34).

Of course compared to its postmodern version, classic Hollywood genre-mixing seems "rudimentary at best, typically involving a small number of genres combined in an unspectacular and fairly traditional manner" (Altman 141). The spirit of the postmodern demand for experimentation with any possible mix-making, combined with audience cine-literacy and "popular culture consciousness"¹¹ leads Hollywood film-makers to a wide spectrum of choices; allusions, inter- and extra-textual references, self-referentiality, generic deconstruction or revision, parody, pastiche etc. are employed on many different levels as contemporary decoys to attract spectatorial attention. Critical mediation between the film

⁹ For publicity examples of classic Hollywood films see Altman 54-59.

¹⁰ The same promotional trick was also used in classic Hollywood. See for example 20th Century Fox's publicity for *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* (1939) in Altman 59. On the film's poster a list of their competitor's, Warners', best-known biopics are included in the studio's effort to capitalize on their success by relating its film to them.

¹¹ The term is taken from Neale's *Genre and Hollywood* 248.

market and audience reception, drawing on popular culture, adds to postmodern multi-mixing. A very good example comes from R. Barton Palmer's analysis of Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct*, in which he discusses the film's *femme fatale*, Sharon Stone's Catherine Tramell, as illustrative of "the postfeminist woman" and evocative of "popular culture icons – particularly Madonna, the celebrity who obviously served as the model for Stone's performance" (184). Interestingly, when Uli Edel's *Body of Evidence* came out a year later with Madonna as its female lead, it was read against *Basic Instinct* as its failed sister,¹² and Madonna's Rebecca Carlson was received through Sharon Stone's Catherine Tramell while the film's sex scenes were read through Madonna's soft porn S&M book *Sex*.¹³

The demise of the studio system in the early 1950s,¹⁴ the New Hollywood practices of production and distribution,¹⁵ as well as the changes leading to the cultural-technological scene of the '90s, have further complicated things, establishing poly-mixing and allusive intercultural referencing.¹⁶ The wide use of the VCR, DVD, cable and satellite TV, TV monitors displaying multiple channels at the same time, and the Internet repository of images which any user can download, offer today's spectators a direct access to images which they can choose, mix, fast-forward, or repeatedly consume in regular or slow motion. Furthermore, the wide circulation of more and more titles in video and DVD, often accompanied by extras (interviews with the director and actors, additional redundant scenes cut in the final editing of

¹² Marcia Degia in her review of the film wrote, "In a nutshell, it is simply *Basic Instinct II* with a different blond but an equally gullible legal man who just can't seem to say 'No'" (25).

¹³ For more details see my discussion of *Body of Evidence* in the next chapter.

¹⁴ For information on the studio system see Gomery's "Hollywood as Industry" 21-23 and Hayward 363-66. For information on the transition from the studio era to New Hollywood practices see Schatz 8-36.

¹⁵ In his essay "Post-Classical Hollywood", Peter Kramer investigates the historical trajectory of the term "New Hollywood" from one of its earliest uses, signifying a re-evaluation of Classical Hollywood, to its '70s use signalling what is widely known as the "Hollywood Renaissance" of 1967-1975 and its post-'70s use referring to the years after 1975 and the unprecedented rise of the blockbuster generation of Hollywood film-makers. Quoting Tasker, Kramer concludes that depending on the critical context, the term "New Hollywood" can refer both to "Hollywood Renaissance" and to the post-1975 period, although the latter use of the term seems to have displaced the former in the critical debates after the mid-'70s. Indeed Kramer supports Tasker's suggestion that we view the New Hollywood in terms of the postmodern landscape of multi-media conglomeration (Kramer 69-79). For further references to the use of the term see Neale's "Hollywood Blockbusters: Historical Dimensions" 54n1.

¹⁶ See Collins 245-48. For information on the relationship between television and Hollywood in the mid-1970s see Thomas Schatz 21-22.

the film for reasons of time-economy, and real-time shooting scenes), the re-release of classical films with reworked image and sound to comply with current quality-demand, and the release of director's cuts offering a longer and often "juicier" version of the film by allowing spectators to see the scenes which have been censored, create a synchronic multi-media image universe where the old meets the new, production becomes part of the final filmic product, dividing borderlines blur, and the viewing experience is informed by a cultural repertoire of images ready to coalesce and create "new" sites of visual pleasure.¹⁷ As Collins points out:

If the genre texts of the 1960s are distinguished by their increasing self-reflexivity about their antecedents in the Golden Age of Hollywood, the genre texts of the late 1980s–early 1990s demonstrate an even more sophisticated hyperconsciousness concerning not just narrative formulae, but the conditions of their own circulation and reception in the present, which has a massive impact on the nature of popular entertainment. (247-48)

Discussing "genericity in the nineties", Jim Collins distinguishes between two types of genre film: "the 'eclectic irony' hybrids" and "the 'new sincerity' films". While the former category reflected postmodern multi-hybridisation, the latter sought to retrieve the lost unity of generic purity (Collins 242-43). Critics' assessments of Hollywood genre films, as opposed to market forces, often reflect a "new sincerity" mentality as the multiplicity of generic terms and film titles used in the promotion of New Hollywood films is frequently addressed by a homogenizing critical voice that seeks to ultimately obscure variability for the sake of generic purity. However this purity is non-existent, as, according to Altman, it depends on veiling the genrification process through which any adjective used turns in time from a variant into a

¹⁷ For the effect of the DVD on film as work of art and viewing process see Terrence Rafferty's "Everybody Gets a Cut" 44-48.

substantified generic noun.¹⁸ Setting New Hollywood hybrids against naturalized and stable classic Hollywood genres makes us forget that “[l]ike the novel, which Bakhtin labels ‘the genre of becoming’ [. . .], film genres are perpetually caught up in the process of becoming”(Altman 140). Within this frame of generic mutability, let us now examine the relation between the *noir*, neo-*noir* and erotic thriller.

1.1. Erotic (Neo)-Noir Thrills

In his influential study of *film noir*, *Hollywood's Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir* (1994), Robert Barton Palmer recognizes the close linkage between ‘90s erotic thrillers and classic *noirs* when he says that “perhaps the most popular genre in the 1990s, the so-called erotic thriller [...], is a direct descendant of the classic film noir” (168). Focusing on the double nature of *noir*, Palmer concludes that the dark narratives of *films noirs* have always formed part of American cinema either as entertainment fare – harmless adventures and action films full of elaborate displays of violent confrontations and nasty sex (made possible after the demise of the Production Code in 1968 and its replacement by a more accommodating ratings system) – or as part of an “alternative” art-cinema’s attempts to deconstruct the norms of conservative narrative pleasure,¹⁹ or as both. All these films combine and interchange the artful with the commercially pleasurable (169). Along these lines, “because an enthusiasm for dark cinema has never disappeared [. . .] American filmmakers, who must address an audience divided to some degree along the lines of cultural politics, have found the neo-noir thriller both an artistically and commercially viable form” (R. B. Palmer 169). Responding to the ‘80s and ‘90s demand for non-stop thrills of sex and violence and informed by the AIDS

¹⁸ “When cycles become genres, adjectival genre labels are substantified” (Altman 61).

¹⁹ Film *noir* was a major influence in the development of the modernist French New Wave cinema of the ‘60s (Palmer 168); and then from the late ‘60s to the early ‘70s it was an important part of Hollywood’s integration of European art film in what is widely known as “Hollywood Renaissance”. Both John Boorman’s *Point Blank* (1967) and Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976) are examples of a modernist exploration of *film noir*. See Palmer 172-82.

threat of sex as potentially lethal, the dark thrillers of the studio era transform into erotic thrillers “designed both to excite and arouse” (R. B. Palmer 183, 187). Through his analysis of Paul Verhoeven’s *Basic Instinct* (1992) as “the most interesting example of this neo-noir type” – which brings together the titillation of sex with the doom of “universal venality and degradation” (187) – Palmer concludes that “[l]ike other erotic thrillers, *Basic Instinct* demonstrates that the film noir is still an important part of our national cinema” (187).²⁰

Critically-born (as opposed to industry-related terms like the western) to become the most debated generic category in the history of cinema,²¹ *film noir* with its riotous heterogeneity turns into “a ‘bad girl’ category which has become all things to all critics, refusing fixed definitions along the way” (Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 28). Elizabeth Cowie takes the topic of *noir* fluidity even further in her essay “*Film Noir* and Women” when she describes it as “the genre that never was” (121). Referring to the fact that the term originated in France and was never used in America either by the studio people, reviewers or audiences of that time, Cowie asserts that “the claims for the category lie in a *post hoc* analysis of similarities and in a set of elements that provide a ‘core’ of characteristics that are identified in certain films” (121). The non-existence of *noir* in the classic Hollywood industry, matched by a *post facto* critical tenacity in its use, leads Cowie to the conclusion that “[f]ilm noir as a genre is in a certain sense a fantasy” reflecting the critics’ and the *noir aficionados*’ desire that the category exist “in order to ‘have’ a certain set of films all together” (121).

James Naremore seems to corroborate Cowie’s point when he says that “it [*film noir*] can describe a dead period, a nostalgia for something that never quite existed, or perhaps even a vital tradition” (39). In his insightful book *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (1998), Naremore discusses *film noir* as “an idea we have projected onto the past” (11) so that

²⁰ For Palmer’s analysis of *Basic Instinct* see 183-87.

²¹ The *film noir* tradition is presented in detail in the next chapter.

we can recall it in the present as art or commodity (38). In Naremore's words, "a concept that was generated ex post facto has become part of a worldwide mass memory; a dream image of bygone glamour, it represses as much history as it recalls, usually in the service of cinephilia and commodification" (39).

Steve Neale answers both Cowie and Naremore's postmodern argument about the non-existence of *noir* by pointing towards the palpability of its offspring, the neo-*noir*. "[I]f in Cowie's words *noir* is a 'fantasy', or if an attachment to the term can in Naremore's words mark 'a nostalgia for something that never existed' [. . .], the phenomenon of neo-*noir* – itself vehicle for this fantasy – is much more real, not only as a phenomenon but also as a genre" (*Genre and Hollywood* 174). It is through the generic status of neo-*noir* that the "fantasy" of classic *noir* has turned into a present generic reality and "*film noir*" as a term is now freely used in reviews and in listings magazines to describe more or less any new crime film on the one hand, and more or less any crime film made in the 1940s and 1950s on the other. As a result, '*noir*' is now an established generic term" (Neale 175).²²

Contrary to *noir*, the neo-*noir* is as much an industry as it is a critics' term indicating "those films which, from the mid-1960s on, relate to or draw upon the notion, the image and the putative conventions of *film noir*, and, directly or indirectly, on some of the films featuring centrally within most versions of the basic *noir* canon" (Neale 174). However, once the existence of *noir* is solidified through the establishment of the neo-*noir* category, which in its turn draws its conventions from its controversial ancestor, the continuum between the two groups encourages their merging into the homogenizing category of all-time *noir* that abolishes all differences under the banner of *noirness*. On the other hand, neo-*noir* as defined by Neale is already a vast umbrella term inclusive of films as diverse as Ridley Scott's "future *noir*" *Blade Runner*, John Woo's action *noir* *Face/Off*, Jonathan Demme's horror *noir*

²² See also Richard Martin 4.

The Silence of the Lambs, David Fincher's police-procedural *noir* *Seven* and Lawrence Kasdan's *femme fatale noir* *Body Heat*, amongst hundreds of other titles. Furthermore, the early '90s and especially 1990-1995, the years that according to Richard Martin consolidated the generic status of *film noir* and "marked one of the most prolific periods in film noir history, comparable in quantity (if not necessarily quality) to the heyday of the genre in the late forties" (116), is also the time when a particular sub-group of neo-*noir* films portraying sexual darkness became so prevalent on the Hollywood scene that they established their own category: that of the Hollywood erotic thriller.

Sex has always been one of the main classic *noir* obsessions.²³ But the directives of the Production Code were clear in relation to the on-screen handling of sex. Founded in July 1934 as a result of pressures from the Catholic *Legion of Decency* which threatened nationwide boycotting of movies, and presided over by Joseph I. Breen, the Production Code Administration (PCA) was responsible for enforcing the 1930s code of "specific directives regarding the depiction of crimes against the law, sex, dances, religion, vulgarity, 'repellant' subjects, and other potentially objectionable material" (Belton 136).²⁴ According to the code:

1. *Adultery*, sometimes necessary plot material, must not be explicitly treated or justified or presented attractively.
2. *Scenes of Passion*
 - a. They should not be introduced when not essential to the plot.

²³ See Linda Ruth Williams' *The Erotic Thriller* 29 and Naremore 7.

²⁴ The reason behind the industry's tolerance of self-censoring boards was the desire to avoid any outside political and legal interference. These committees – the first one being the National Board of Censorship (NBC) established as early as March 1909 – did not aim so much at censorship but rather functioned as intermediary forces between the industry and society aiming at compromises that would retain stability and coherence and would therefore promote the movie industry's escapist, entertaining and therefore money-making goals. (See Lea Jacobs' "Industry Self-Regulation and the Problem of Textual Determination" 87-101 and especially 88; for a historical account of early censorship in America see Garth S. Jowett's " 'A Capacity for Evil': the 1915 Supreme Court *Mutual* Decision." 16-40). As R. Barton Palmer points out, "The business the studios were in was entertainment [...] Hollywood was not in the business of instructing or exhorting. 'If you want to send a message, call Western Union' was not just an industry joke; it was a precept as well"(5).

- b. Excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces, suggestive postures and gestures, are not to be shown.
- c. In general passion should so be treated that these scenes do not stimulate the lower and baser elements.

3. *Seductions or Rape*

- a. They should never be more than suggested, and only when essential for the plot, and even then never shown by explicit method.
- b. They are never the proper subject for comedy.

4. *Sex perversion* or any inference to it is forbidden (qtd. in Belton 139-40).²⁵

Therefore, anything forbidden had to stay under cover, implied behind dissolves,²⁶ closed doors, and allusive language. As Billy Wilder, the director of *Double Indemnity* (1944), told John Allyn, “Well, there was Production Code. Naturally, we could not have overt sex, so we did it kind of by innuendo. When she comes to his apartment . . .” (120). “[S]ubstituting wicked innuendo in place of [James M.] Cain’s smash-mouth sex, and stressing that the moral of the story was that even the ‘perfect crime’ will not go unpunished”, Wilder and Raymond Chandler managed to get the PCA approval for the script of *Double Indemnity* (Muller 56). After eight years on the studio’s shelves due to Breen’s (the president’s of PCA) warnings that no Cain story would ever reach the screen (Muller 56), *Double Indemnity* came out in 1944 as the first on-screen conflation of sex and death.²⁷ Two years later, Tay Garnett directed

²⁵ For a short historical account of the passage from the Production Code to the more permissive Ratings System see Belton 135-38. Also, see the Production Code in Belton 138-49.

²⁶ *Dissolve* as opposed to *direct cut* involves “[t]he end of one scene fad[ing] out while the beginning of the next scene fades up, so that the two are on the screen simultaneously for a few seconds”. Dissolves are often used to imply a jump in time with the in-between part omitted (Jackson 74).

²⁷ Fred MacMurray’s line to Barbara Stanwyck, the film’s *femme fatale*, – “It’s just like the first time I came here, isn’t it? We were talking about automobile insurance, only you were thinking about murder. And I was thinking about that anklet.” – nicely illustrates the blending of sex and murder through language.

The Postman Always Rings Twice, the film adaptation of Cain's first novel, the rights for which MGM had been holding for the past twelve years, waiting for the circumstances to become favourable for its turning into a film (Krutnik 36). By that time Cain-copycats had begun to proliferate the screen, establishing the sexually-motivated crime story as a mainstay of the *noir* world.

What was only possible through lurid innuendos²⁸ gave way to visually explicit sex in the '80s when the Cain-type vein of storyline was reinvigorated through the remaking of the two Cain stories. Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* (1981) and Bob Rafelson's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981) recast the *noir* stories of murderous passion in a postmodern milieu with scenes of steamy sex between the partners-in-crime visually conjoining sex and death. Kasdan's and Rafelson's re-reading of the classic *film noir* through a screen of explicit sex was possible due to the substitution of the Production Code by the more permissive Ratings System in the late '60s, which has allowed directors to experiment with on-screen sex.²⁹ However, there have always been limits to this experimentation since the Hollywood industry has been in the business of "G" ratings,³⁰ that is wholesale family-entertainment, and has never had any desire to be in any way linked to pornography. Dreading the "X" rating of pornography, directors have been forced by their production companies to make whatever

²⁸ One can find some very provocative lines in the classic *noirs* such as the ones Linda Ruth Williams offers as the classic equivalent to Sharon Stone's crotch-flash, coming from Tay Garnett's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. In the film a female character invitingly tells the John Garfield persona from her car: "It's a hot day and that's a leather set, and I've got a thin skirt" (*The Erotic Thriller* 59).

²⁹ The new ratings system, which appeared in November 1968, was established and operated by two associations: the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO). Instead of demanding changes in the film's content to make it suitable for all ages, the new system marked films "in an attempt to identify [sic] the particular age group for which a film had been deemed appropriate" (Belton 137). As Wyatt points out, "one of the primary functions of the ratings system was stated as offering advice to parents on the appropriateness of movie content for viewing by their children" (238).

³⁰ "G" addressed a general audience of all ages. "M" – later changed to "PG" – indicated a mature subject, which commanded parental guidance when it came to children as potential audience. It was the release of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* in 1984 which brought about the division between "PG" and "PG-13", the latter indicating that the film contained material inappropriate for children under 13 (Belton 137-38).

cuts necessary to secure a borderline “R”, which has proved lucrative as well, since “underage patrons still could attend with parent or adult guardian” (Wyatt 244).³¹

The prominence of sex in the neo-*noir* scene marks its overlap with the erotic thriller. The New Hollywood’s shift to a ratings system and a fragmented audience with different demands as well as the rise of television created, according to Yvonne Tasker, a market for “adult” genres such as the erotic thriller, the horror / crime genre and neo-*noir* (*Working Girls* 123). Kasdan’s *Body Heat*, the film that along with Bob Rafelson’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is considered by most critics as the solidification of the neo-*noir* genre, was promoted through the coupling of “*noir* references with the promise of an explicit portrayal of sexuality” (Tasker, *Working Girls* 124).³² Graphic sex, signified by the new *femme fatale*, “the fatally alluring, often naked body of the female star point[ing] both toward and away from its noir antecedents” is, according to Thomas Leitch, the reason why “the films are less accurately called neo-noirs than erotic thrillers” (147). By contrast, the prioritisation of sex after the subtraction of its noir elements leads Geoffrey Macnab in his TV review of *Body Heat* to identify the film as part of Gregory Hippolyte’s DTV erotic thriller tradition (159); meanwhile, Linda Ruth Williams contends that were *Double Indemnity* to be released today it would be definitely marketed as an erotic thriller (*The Erotic Thriller* 29).³³ On the other hand, according to Tasker, “Marketing a new release with reference to *noir* elements and antecedents now serves as industry shorthand for an arthouse ‘quality’” (*Working Girls* 118). This leads many low-budget productions and direct-to-video films to include *noir* elements in the same way that small studios in the 1940s adopted the Expressionist style aspiring to a quality designation for their films (Krutnik 21). Therefore, an “erotic thriller” takes up the

³¹ An “R” forbade anyone younger than sixteen – later to become seventeen – to watch the film in question if not accompanied by an adult, while the “X” indicated pornographic material and denied admittance to anyone younger than sixteen – later to become seventeen (Belton 137-38).

³² See also Jack Ryan 45-49 and David Chute 49-52.

³³ In her seminal 1993 essay “Erotic Thrillers and Rude Women” Linda Ruth Williams calls *Double Indemnity* “the grandmother of all erotic thrillers” (12).

noir attire to manifest quality, while a neo-*noir* exposes its sexual substratum to obtain a more commercial look and thus ensure a profitable sale. The overlapping between these two categories is nicely illustrated in the case of *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992). As Linda Ruth Williams writes, Verhoeven called *Basic Instinct* an erotic thriller during production while “he deployed *noir* and anti-*noir* strategies as an exercise in intellectual play as well as generic branding” (*The Erotic Thriller* 27).³⁴ As the film’s box-office proved, “*noir* sells, particularly when used in conjunction with (and in justification of) sex” (Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 27).

But isn’t there any difference between the neo-*noir* and the erotic thriller? According to Naremore, the “erotic thriller” belongs singularly to the DTV world of “soft-core, white male pornography that fills the average video store” (161). Highlighting the Playboy-ethos of the erotic thriller and its masturbatory preoccupations, Naremore claims that the erotic thriller addresses “lonely men with VCRs [since] [s]uch films often feature former *Playboy* models like Shannon Tweed or Shannon Whirry, and their plots usually involve some combination of voyeurism, striptease, lesbian sex, two-on-one sex, and mild bondage” (162). Referring to theatrical releases such as *Basic Instinct*, *Sliver* (Phillip Noyce, 1993), and *The Color of Night* (Richard Rush, 1994), Naremore views them as the studios’ effort to cash in the success of its poor video sibling “in an era when videotape has become the dominant form through which people see feature films” (162).³⁵ However it seems that for Naremore these costly productions can never be called “erotic thrillers” since their financial extravagance places them in the caste of the “feature film” as opposed to the cheap, made-for-video category of “erotic thrillers”. On the other hand, one is more likely to find “safe” sexual images and the “Playboy ethos” in the up-market film-fare since there sex must be toned down to avoid an X

³⁴ See his interview in *The Erotic Thriller* 241.

³⁵ According to Naremore all three films along with *Showgirls* (Paul Verhoeven, 1995) and *Striptease* (Andrew Bergman, 1996) have been DTV copies (162), but he never names the originals. The idea of the theatrically released erotic thriller copying the DTV film market was first explored by Linda Ruth Williams in her 1993 essay “Erotic Thrillers and Rude Women” 12-14.

rating. Talking about the images of vanilla lesbian sex in *Basic Instinct*, Linda Ruth Williams observes how the spectacle of Catherine and Roxy (Leilani Sarelle), her lover, resembles “that of a pair of entwined Playmates of the month” (“Erotic Thrillers and Rude Women” 14).

Financial strenuousness is synonymous with the erotic thriller genre, according to Barbara Savitz, president of Prism Pictures, who sees the erotic thriller as a cheap way to satisfy the public demand for voyeuristic pictures (qtd. in Naremore 162).³⁶ Coming from the low-budget video market, the “erotic thriller”, according to Kate Stables, shares with the film *noir* its B tradition of low funds, tight schedules, smaller names,³⁷ and “high-impact” genre-mixing of simplified plots, in which visceral “instantly recognised” spectacle-based genres are embodied (170).³⁸ However, once the “erotic thriller” video trend reached the mainstream (and in order to reach it) it was enriched with *noir* imagery and conventions (Stables 169) and was transformed into what is widely known as the Hollywood “erotic thriller” with the *femme fatale* as its emblem and Paul Verhoeven’s *Basic Instinct* as its motherland.³⁹

Coming from different cinematic strata, the neo-*noir* and the erotic thriller meet in their common exploration of sex and crime. Their difference lies in their focus. That is, as Linda Ruth Williams says, “neo-*noir* and the erotic thriller are mirror-images of each other. Each deals in sex and crime but prioritises one over the other, and each chooses differently” (*The Erotic Thriller* 37). Where the erotic thriller chooses the sexual arena as the locus where the crime story takes place, the neo-*noir* on the contrary presents sex as part of the deceit that characterises or leads to the underworld of crime. That is, sex becomes criminal in the erotic thriller and crime gets sexy in the neo-*noir*, but the mirror-image of the generic choice made

³⁶ Prism Pictures is the company that produced *Night Eyes*, the film that put Andrew Garroni and Walter Gernert in the “erotic thriller business” and established the erotic thriller niche in the video market. See Linda Ruth Williams’ interview with Garroni and Gernert in *The Erotic Thriller* and especially 62-63.

³⁷ In the studio era it was a common phenomenon to have the same contract-bound actors and actresses used to produce both the A features and the cheap double bills. In Lyons’ words: “[s]ince the studio’s stars were under contract and had to play in whatever productions the studio heads mandated, in the early years of B production, even the bottom half of a double bill might star some of a studio’s A talents.” (30)

³⁸ Regarding the simplified plots of B films and the hybridisation of B *film noir* see Lyons 30 and 41.

³⁹ According to Stables, *Basic Instinct* is “the mother of all 90s *fatale* movies” (165).

both in the erotic thriller and the neo-*noir* continues to feed the subtext with a supplementary force. Therefore, it is not that in erotic thrillers sex “subordinates crime to the minimal status of sub-plot or narrative pretext” (Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 36) but rather that it incorporates it, instead, in the transgressive affair that the typically male anti-hero has with the *femme fatale* crime suspect. On the other hand, it may be that “For neo-*noir*, as with its 1940s and 1950s antecedents, sex might be a tributary traversed on the route to criminality, crime’s vehicle rather than its object” (Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 36) but the disruptive sexuality, though unseen, also reflects the darkness it provokes.

The critics themselves may also be held responsible for the degree of overlapping between the two generic categories. As Linda Ruth Williams contends, many films deemed by the film industry to be erotic thrillers are then re-read by critics as neo-*noirs*, demonstrating the critical prejudice against the erotic thriller, which only becomes worthy of serious academic examination after being re-named as something more respectable. In Williams’ words, “Despite the significant overlaps and exchanges between the two forms, and despite the fact that some films can be interchangeably deemed both neo-*noir* and erotic thriller, neo-*noir* remains the generic respectable big sister” (*The Erotic Thriller* 34-35). The choice between neo-*noir* and erotic thriller resembles the difference between film *noir* and its American equivalents that Naremore discusses in the Introduction of his book-length study of *noir*. Using the opening scene of Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*, Naremore presents us with the discussion of two hit men regarding the difference between a “Cheese Royale” and a “Big Mac”. According to the gangsters the difference between a cheeseburger in France and one in the US is its name. It’s the French word, which sounds better, that attributes a quality to the cheeseburger that the American word denies it. Along these lines, Naremore argues that it is because “film noir” sounds better than other American terms used to indicate the same body of films that it has prevailed in our perception. The same goes for the term it has

gestated; neo-*noir* is as art appealing as its precursor *film noir*. No wonder that the erotic thriller doesn't stand a chance!

Finally, the overlapping between the neo-*noir* and the erotic thriller is also encouraged by film-promoters who are ready to use any label for profit. Titles of successful films are thus copied without any generic considerations. Linda Ruth Williams gives the example of *Fatal Attraction*'s (Adrian Lyne, 1987) success, which established the word "fatal" as a generic staple and "a metonym not for 'fate' (the inevitability of destiny), but deadly sex" (*The Erotic Thriller* 9). In the following years many films copied the "fatal" adjective for their title without necessarily sharing the generic constitution of Lyne's film, capitalizing on the proven profitability of the term and showing no care about their "subsequently disappointed customers, who discover that *Fatal Deception* – a biopic of Lee Harvey Oswald's wife – is *not Fatal Attraction*" (Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 10). The re-packaging of the same film under different generic categories in the production company's effort to maximise profit adds to the generic confusion. James Naremore presents the case of John Dahl's *Red Rock West* (1992), a low-budget *film noir*-western hybrid which was sold to the video market as an erotic thriller once its production company feared that it would not do well in theatres (165), although, as Linda Ruth Williams points out, *Red Rock West* was the least sexually explicit of the Dahl neo-*noir* trilogy of *Kill Me Again* (1989), *Red Rock West*, and *The Last Seduction* (1994) (*The Erotic Thriller* 8).

1.2. Sexual Thrills

Once the erotic is disengaged from the whodunit or the latter exists as an excuse for soft-core on-screen sex-numbers, then we are in the domain of erotica. At its high end the Zalman King cycle with films such as Adrian Lyne's *9 ½ Weeks* (1986, produced by Zalman King) and King's own *Two Moon Junction* (1988), *Wild Orchid* (1990) and *Wild Orchid II: Two Shades*

of *Blue* (1992) revised for the eighties Just Jaeckin's *Emmanuelle* (1974) story-line of female sexual self-discovery and experimentation in what Linda Ruth Williams calls "the universe of the zipless fuck" (*The Erotic Thriller* 391).⁴⁰ Transgressive, sadomasochistic sex and a dark sexual man who arouses the female protagonist into the mystery of her repressed desires combine, according to Linda Ruth Williams, with popular romantic fiction concerns of the "'will she/won't she' female sexual quest tale" type (391). The threat emanates from sex in these late '80s-early '90s films and the heroine's risk lies in the darkness she's exploring, an aspect totally missing from *Emmanuelle*, where the eponymous heroine (Sylvia Kristel) celebrates her initiation into unconventional sex by saying how much she detests the constrained lovemaking of ordinary people. The thrill of soft core sex, "flirting" on screen with the darkness of unleashed forbidden desires (informed by the AIDS threat) soon moved to the TV screen – Zalman King's TV feature *Red Shoe Diaries* aka (also-known-as) *Wild Orchid III: Red Shoe Diaries* (1992)⁴¹ spawned a successful TV series – and the video and DVD market, hybridising with other genres such as the DTV erotic thriller.

The sexual *noirishness* of these "erotic dramas"⁴² is supplanted by its criminal equivalent as the background force that supports the exhibition of soft-core images in DTV erotic thrillers. "Erotic thrillers are *noirish* stories of sexual intrigue incorporating some form of criminality or duplicity, often as the flimsy framework for on-screen softcore sex" (1) writes Linda Ruth Williams in the introduction to her seminal study, a definition I find highly appropriate as far as the DTV erotic thriller is concerned, though not for its up-market sibling. While for many DTV erotic thrillers sex is allotted more screen-time than the thriller part of the story (Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 25) thus joining forces with the soft-core

⁴⁰ Just Jaeckin's *Emmanuelle* is the film which established the Hollywood majors' presence in the porn market, pushing soft-core to the mainstream.

⁴¹ "aka" signifies a second title under which the film came out in certain markets.

⁴² This is the industry label assigned to this type of films although, according to Linda Ruth Williams, the term "erotic melodramas" is more appropriate in recognition of the female point-of-view these films foster. See *The Erotic Thriller* 390.

spectacle,⁴³ this is not the case in the Hollywood erotic thriller. Rather, in the premises of the theatrically released big-budget erotic thrillers the two terms “erotic” and “thriller” are of equal value for the film’s plot. As Martin Rubin argues in his discussion of *Basic Instinct* as a paradigmatic erotic thriller:

Rather than simply embellish a thriller plot with explicit sexual interludes, *Basic Instinct* seeks to merge sex and suspense, as exemplified by the frenzied bedroom scenes in which Stone is riding astride the vulnerable Douglas and seems at any moment about to reach for the fatal ice pick that will provide the ultimate thrill. (177)

In her description of the dynamics between its two parts, Linda Ruth Williams gives us what I consider the blueprint for the erotic thriller genre; “In the erotic thriller the thrills are *in* the sex, the sex drives the thriller action, but the more traditional sense of the term ‘thriller’ strings it all along. Sex and crime are often interdependent, such as in the genre staple when the cop fucks the suspect” (*The Erotic Thriller* 26). Although Williams uses Harold Becker’s *Sea of Love* (1989) to illustrate the erotic thriller’s “marrying” of the erotic with the thriller elements (*The Erotic Thriller* 26), the film that fits perfectly Williams’ master-plot is Paul Verhoeven’s *Basic Instinct*. The sexual crime, as the generic staple with which these films open, hovers in the background of all the sexual scenes between the cop and the suspect, which we are shown in greater detail than in *Sea of Love*. Meanwhile, the whodunit storyline is eroticised and identified with the sexual details that drive the investigation. The contamination of the scene of investigation with sex is epitomized in the famous crotch-flash scene where Catherine’s interrogation about her lover’s murder is filled with titillating details of sex habits and preferences while her uncrossing legs reveal the real object of investigation (a psychoanalytic reading of the scene is offered in chapter nine). As opposed to the *Sea of*

⁴³ In her 1993 article, Linda Ruth Williams wrote that video erotic thrillers “operate with a constant awareness of masturbation as a prime audience response and index of the film’s success” (“Erotic Thrillers and Rude Women” 12).

Love's closure according to which Helen (Ellen Barkin), the film's *femme fatale*, is redressed as one of Spicer's "good-bad girls" (to be further discussed)⁴⁴ and the cop's future wife-to-be *Basic Instinct* offers an open ending instead. The film's final shot of the ice pick lying under Nick's bed re-opens the probability of one more crime similar to the one which activated the film's investigative narrative, re-instigating the criminal potential of the sexual act between Nick and Catherine.

To this plotline I would also add the *noir*-born triangulation of *Double Indemnity*, reborn-into-*Body Heat*, in which the *femme fatale* uses sex to find a partner-in-crime who will murder her wealthy husband.⁴⁵ The thrill of illicit sex overlaps with the thrill of murder and the thrill of investigation fuels and threatens the union of the murderous lovers. The former plotline's whodunit question is here replaced by the "will they get away with it?" one, which is always answered by the development of the illicit affair. When the lovers "stick up for each other" as Corky and Violet do in Wachowskis' *Bound* (1996), they manage to get away with both murder and theft. On the contrary if they betray each other, either they end up dead like Walter and Phyllis in *Double Indemnity*, or (usually) the *femme fatale* outsmarts the film's "dumb lug"⁴⁶ and turns him into a fall-guy who pays for their crime while she escapes with the loot. This is what happens to Ned (William Hurt), Walter's progeny, in *Body Heat*'s re-reading of *Double Indemnity*'s finale, which allows Matty (Kathleen Turner), Phyllis' postmodern sister to get away with it. Or (rarely) the duped-lover-turned-murderer punishes the *femme fatale*'s betrayal by murdering her, which is what Dr. Alan Paley (Jurgen

⁴⁴ In his illuminating *Film Noir*, Andrew Spicer recognizes among the character types of film *noir* that of the good-bad girl. It involves females who combine sexual activity with what Spicer calls "the fundamental decency of the homebuilder" (92). The good-bad girls are usually employed as what turns out to be *faux fatales*, seemingly fatal but actually loyal to the film's hero. See 92-93.

⁴⁵ In the *Basic Instinct* plotline we also have sexual triangles but the third term is always pushed to the background for the sake of coupling. In the final chapter of this thesis both types of triangulation will be examined in terms of the different fantasies they bear.

⁴⁶ I borrow the term from B. Ruby Rich's essay on neo-*noir* "Dumb Lugs and Femmes Fatales" 130-36.

Prochnow) does to Madonna's Rebecca in *Body of Evidence* when he realizes that she's been playing sex-games with her attorney.

In any case, whether the erotic thriller follows the "cop-fucking-the-suspect" or the "murderous-sexual-triangle" plotline, it is in the fusion between sex and crime that the erotic thriller is born, launching sex as criminal and crime as sexy. That is why Linda Ruth Williams suggests that no hyphen should be used to divide the "erotic" from the "thriller" as the two no longer "play out separate stories and styles in parallel across their ninety minutes of shared screen time" (*The Erotic Thriller* 22). On this point I would contest Williams when further on in her book she suggests that Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction* "can be seen as the perfect erotic thriller blueprint, hinging on sexual obsession and ending in murder" (51). *Fatal Attraction* is clearly divided into two parts: the first deals with the erotic indiscretion of Dan (Michael Douglas), a married man, who embarks on a steamy one-night-stand with Alex (Glen Close). What Dan considers a safe excursion into the wild side of sex activates the thriller part of the film when Alex, obsessed with Dan and the idea of having a family with him, stalks him and his family, determined to dispose of anything coming in the way of their union. However, once her rage is completely unleashed and Alex realises her monstrous potential, the dynamics of the horror film, the stalker film and the slasher film are fully operative while Alex is transformed into a psychotic *femme*⁴⁷ who stalks Dan and his family, kidnaps Dan's little girl and tries to slash Dan's wife, Beth (Anne Archer), into pieces. The nightmarish persecution of Dan by Alex as part of Alex's sexual obsession with Dan, inflamed by the sink-and-elevator-sex-numbers they share, supply *Fatal Attraction* with the erotic thriller ingredients, only the thriller part prevails as the sublimation of spurned sexual desire which is kept only as the nucleus of the film's nightmarish world. In this sense *Fatal Attraction*

⁴⁷ More details on psycho-femmes in the next chapter.

qualifies as a hyphenated erotic-thriller, the hyphen serving, according to Williams, “to divorce the two terms, as well as marry them” (*The Erotic Thriller* 22).

Of course, in today’s Hollywood of “generic promiscuity” of which the erotic thriller is paradigmatic in its readiness to “slid[e] into bed with any and perhaps all of its neighbours” (Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 23), we do not expect an austere adherence to any generic conventions but rather the opposite; a continuous re-shifting of borders and players in all possible directions as the erotic thriller infiltrates and is informed by other genres adding to the erotic thriller blend of sexual thrill and deadly sex. Notwithstanding the hybridisation, promiscuity lies at the core of the erotic thriller, which demands that the erotic and the thriller do not just co-habit the same film but rather “copulate” to produce one out of two. Making One out of two is also the main fantasy that erotic thrillers circulate (to be analysed in the third part of this thesis). The only film that manages to fully realise this generic fantasy of oneness and thus qualifies as the quintessential erotic thriller is Paul Verhoeven’s *Basic Instinct*.⁴⁸

1.3. Beginnings . . .

It is difficult to distinguish the birth of a genre from the time of flirtation between its parental elements. In the case of the erotic thriller the overlapping between the theatrical and video markets further complicates the coupling of pornography and *noirish* thrillers to produce erotic thrillers. However, for the needs of my study I will attempt to establish a beginning, however provisional or contested it may prove to be.

It is my contention that the theatrically released erotic thriller was born twice as a pair of twin-sisters; William Friedkin’s *Cruising* (1980) and Lawrence Kasdan’s *Body Heat*

⁴⁸ The fantasies of unity that *Basic Instinct* offers will be analyzed in the third part of this study.

(1981) take after their (neo)-*noir*, suspense thriller and pornographic parents.⁴⁹ *Cruising* was the first big Hollywood film launching a big American star at the centre of a sexually transgressive and criminally transgressed world of homosexual sadomasochism. Al Pacino plays Steve Burns, an undercover cop who penetrates the gay subculture of S&M to catch a murderer. His investigation demands his immersion in places – both geographical and sexual – he’s never been before, gradually transforming him into a charmed follower of the erotic darkness he investigates. Having caught the murderer and thus realized his investigative function, Steve turns from a subject of investigation into its possible object – a potential murderer – once the domineering boyfriend of his gay friend is found murdered. Meanwhile, transgression turns sexual as in the film’s final scene Nancy (Karen Allen), Steve’s fiancée, tries on his S&M gear and Steve gives himself blank looks in the mirror in front of which he coquettishly stands as the background fills the room with music from the underground gay bars he used “to cruise”. The openness of its final scene, combined with the film’s pornographic nature as well as its complete merging of erotic darkness and suspenseful thrill qualify *Cruising* as an erotic thriller and a precursor to *Basic Instinct*. The projection of outside darkness on the private sphere of sexual being, an important erotic thriller trait, began with *Cruising*; as Williams points out, “what has since become a heterosexual genre staple had a homosexual origin” (*The Erotic Thriller* 80). Only, the threat that homosexuality signifies in *Cruising* is then taken up in the heterosexual realm by the *femme fatale*, whose talent lies in providing threat and titillation at the same time. The experiment of *Cruising* proved that homosexuality is not a good choice for the erotic thriller, as the images and fantasies it provokes are too threatening for the patriarchal cultural fantasy (to be analysed in chapter nine). In his interview with Linda Ruth Williams, Friedkin said, “audiences were very upset when the film came out – they didn’t know *how* to take it. It’s easier to reject it and

⁴⁹ Linda Ruth Williams suggests *Cruising* as “arguably the erotic thriller’s clearest starting-point” (*The Erotic Thriller* 80).

denounce it than to embrace it. *Cruising* scratched something in audiences that was disturbing and disgusting” (*The Erotic Thriller* 138). It is this something that I will explore in the third part of my study. Here I’ll only focus on the generic attributes that *Cruising* first laid out.

The sex scandal that *Cruising* provoked became an integral part of theatrical erotic thrillers. The scandal was two-fold. On the one hand, the film attracted furious attacks by gay activists, who saw the film as aligning gays with the S&M netherworld and murder, leading the panicked studio to insert a disclaimer at the beginning of the film announcing that “this film is not intended as an indictment of the homosexual world”. As Paul Burston claims in his *Sight & Sound* piece on *Cruising*, the latter was the first film to be thus picketed by gay activists during production – usually they waited to see a film finished before expressing their opposition – “pre-dating the *Basic Instinct* furore by more than a decade” (24). On the other hand, *Cruising* created a huge scandal around the provocative sex scenes it included. In its review of the film, *Variety* wrote about the R rating *Cruising* finally received, after Friedkin cut forty minutes of graphic sex, “If this is an R, then the only X left is actual hardcore – [. . .] To put it bluntly, if an R allows the showing of one man greasing his fist followed by the rising ecstasy and pain of a second man held in chains by others, then there’s only one close-up left for the X” (16). Friedkin discloses that Richard Heffner, the head of the ratings board, after seeing the uncut version of *Cruising* exclaimed “This thing would need 5 billion Xs!”(qtd. in Kermode 23). Talking about those cut forty minutes, Friedkin reveals their pornographic nature but as he tells Linda Ruth Williams, “*Cruising* was not pure pornography” (*The Erotic Thriller* 134) as those scenes served the plot’s thriller part, establishing Pacino’s cop figure getting hooked on the excesses of the sexual netherworld he had penetrated. In Friedkin’s words:

A lot of it [the cut material] had to do with the Pacino character’s genuine fascination with what was going on in the clubs – you get a sense of it now,

but what you've lost are the real excesses. We had a graphic fist-fucking scene in which you could see a fist visible in somebody's stomach, golden showers, that sort of thing. But what's important is that you saw Pacino starting to participate (qtd. in Kermode 23).⁵⁰

Interestingly enough Friedkin made *Cruising* out of his desire to experiment with transgression (in the form of the inclusion of graphic sex in mainstream American cinema), driven by his desire to see if he could *get away with it!* He told Linda Ruth Williams: "When I made *Cruising* I was still very much enamoured of trying things out. Getting away with stuff in a way that most people at the time weren't getting away with. I wanted to see how far I could push the envelope" (*The Erotic Thriller* 134). Getting-away-with-it is a major theme in *Basic Instinct*, on both the level of plot as well as the film's sexual and political agenda. Sharon Stone's Catherine Tramell is addicted to murder, urged by her perverse desire to see if she can get away with it, and the film's homicidal anti-hero, Michael Douglas' Nick Curran, dares her in his own attempt to see if he can get away with it. In an indicative dialogue they have, as part of their flirtation period, Catherine gives Nick one of her books entitled *The First Time*

Nick: What's it about?

Catherine: It's about a boy who kills his parents. They've a plane. He makes
it look like an accident.

Nick: Why'd he do that?

Catherine: To see if he could get away with it.

Later on, leaving his apartment she tells Nick,

Catherine: You're not gonna stop following me around now, are you? Just
because you're on leave.

⁵⁰ See also Friedkin's interview with Linda Ruth Williams in *The Erotic Thriller* 135

Nick: Absolutely not.

Catherine: Glad, I'd miss you. You can get in trouble, though. You're not really a cop any more.

Nick: I'll risk it!

Catherine: Why take the risk?

Nick: To see if I can get away with it!

The film's graphic sexuality also gets away with it. Verhoeven gets to show a penis on condition of its flaccidity, being part of a dead body (Bouzereau 202), and he does get away with the nudity and length of the basic sex scene between Stone and Douglas (which is between three and four minutes long) on account of its serving the film's thriller plot (this point is discussed in detail in the third part of this thesis).⁵¹ *Basic Instinct* even outsmarts the gay activists' protests in their interruption of the film-shoots and picketing the cinemas with placards, giving out the film's ending. No disclaimer was included before the film's opening credits and none of the changes to the plot or characters that Eszterhas proposed to the queer organizations in his making-peace effort were accepted by Verhoeven or Carolco, the film's production company.⁵² Eventually, all the gossip and scandal around the gay and lesbian community's protests against the film's homophobia as well as the problems *Basic Instinct* had with the MPAA in securing the company-awaited R once more proved the financial power of bad publicity.⁵³ According to William Friedkin, *Basic Instinct* managed to get away with its sexual politics through sex-as-spectacle; "whatever protests there were against *Basic Instinct* were far overwhelmed by the very famous shot of Sharon Stone, which drew people to the cinema as never before" he said (qtd. in Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 138).

⁵¹ See Verhoeven's interview with Linda Ruth Williams in *The Erotic Thriller* 243-44.

⁵² For an account of the queer outrage against *Basic Instinct* see Bouzereau 182-87.

⁵³ *Basic Instinct* initially received an NC-17, a rating introduced by the 1990s to distinguish between adult themes and X-rated pornography, which forbade anyone younger than 17 to see the film (Belton 138). After being submitted to the MPAA seven times *Basic Instinct* finally got an R (See Bouzereau 187-88). For the cuts administered to the film see Bouzereau 188-97.

Body Heat, on the other hand, consolidated the neo-*noir* but gave it a sexual spin, such that the sex became *noir* as the film's neo-*noirish* story and atmosphere were saturated with sex. In two scenes in the film, Kathleen Turner's Matty Walker foreshadows Madonna's Rebecca Carlson, the first *femme fatale* to "fuck her lovers to death". The deadly potential of Matty's sexual voraciousness is underlined both by her husband and lover. As she pleads with her husband to go on with their lovemaking after almost two hours of action, exhausted he asks her "Are you trying to kill me?" Similarly, lying exhausted in the bathtub with her, Ned, Matty's lover, tells her, "You are killing me. I'm red, I'm swelling".⁵⁴ *Body Heat* employs the titillating side of sex, which it merges with the classic *noir* story of the illicit lovers planning to murder the rich husband. Visually the merging of these two elements is signalled by a low-angle close-up shot of Matty's sweaty naked body from behind, the camera slowly moving all the way up to reveal Ned lying naked by her side (presumably after the act of sex) discussing their murder plan. As the film opens, we see Ned in front of his window watching a big fire. Ironically this fire foreshadows the one that Matty will kindle inside him, not only of sexual desire but also of financial greed that will lead him to murder. The fire, the heat, the sweaty bodies in heat and the basest of instincts are all aligned as *Body Heat* turns to the land of the erotic thriller, a turn missed by most reviewers of the time, who were mostly busy assessing *Body Heat* as a successful (or otherwise) offspring of *noir*, which of course it is. The film's ending is also very relevant to the erotic thriller. As opposed to the *noir* tradition where the *femme fatale* is usually punished with death (see the *Double Indemnity* ending), in the erotic thriller territory she gets away with it.⁵⁵ Matty is the first one to do so, leaving Ned instead to "take the heat" in her place. Catherine Tramell refines the legacy she inherits from Matty; she not only manages to get away with it by having someone else (Beth) get the blame and be dispatched in her place, but also succeeds in getting acquitted and keeping her sex-toy

⁵⁴ The fantasies this voraciousness activates are examined in the final chapter in my analysis of triangulation in *Body Heat*.

⁵⁵ See Linda Ruth Williams' *The Erotic Thriller* 116.

too (both Nick and the ice pick). The ambivalence of *Body Heat*'s final scene where a possibility is raised that maybe Ned will in one way or another go after Matty, who seems too bored and dissatisfied for her own good, overshadows the finality of the investigative narrative and allows potential space for a supplement in the same way as *Cruising* and then, a decade afterwards, *Basic Instinct*.

1.4. . . . and Endings

Reaching its ultimately basic form in the early '90s with *Basic Instinct*, the film which solidified the transformation of a cheap-thrill video genre into a high-class neo-noir sibling of enormous box-office potential,⁵⁶ the erotic thriller ran its course in the terrain of theatrical release through the '90s with films which in one way or another tried to cash in on the niche market that *Basic Instinct* had established. Phillip Noyce's *Sliver* (1993) was presented in the studio's Production Information as a "psychosexual mystery" that "reunites Sharon Stone and screenwriter Joe Eszterhas following their collaboration on the international boxoffice phenomenon 'Basic Instinct'" (1). Moreover, the film's producer, Robert Evans narrating the extraordinary story of how he got Sharon Stone to sign up for *Sliver* refers to it as "Basic Instinct 2" (qtd. in Cooney 99). Meanwhile, the film's poster picks up a *Basic Instinct* plotline with its strapline "You like to watch, don't you", placing spectators in the place of Roxy, Catherine Tramell's lesbian girlfriend who witnesses "the fuck of the century" between Catherine and Nick.⁵⁷ Coincidentally, *Sliver* is the story of a mysterious man who watches the Sharon Stone character all the time, even in the privacy of her bathroom.⁵⁸ Similarly, although Barry Levinson's *Disclosure* (1994) is a film about sexual harassment, the misleading strapline "Sex is power" that appeared on the film's publicity poster re-echoed the sexual

⁵⁶ As Linda Ruth Williams remarks, *Basic Instinct* "is the nearest the erotic thriller gets to blockbuster status" (*The Erotic Thriller* 93).

⁵⁷ "She wanted to watch me all the time", Catherine tells Nick about Roxy.

⁵⁸ Roxy, in *Basic Instinct*, was watching Catherine and Nick *from* the bathroom.

power-games that Douglas played with Stone two years earlier, adding one more notch in Michael Douglas' agenda of guy-falling-for-the-wrong-woman type.

Both *Sliver* and *Disclosure* capitalise on Sharon Stone's and Michael Douglas' *Basic Instinct* personas while at the same time moving in different directions.⁵⁹ On the surface *Sliver* appears to push Stone to the opposite terrain. As Carly Norris, a single publishing editor, she moves to a luxurious Manhattan block where tenants are getting murdered and becomes involved with the building's owner, Zeke (William Baldwin), an *homme fatal* of voyeuristic desires and questionable homicidal impulses. Presenting her character as a Nick-Curran-alike, the investigative force of the film's narrative, Sharon Stone said in an interview: "I think she [Carly] moves into that building because strange things are happening and she wants to discover how or why or what" (qtd. in Johnstone 8). However, according to the film's plot, it is after Carly moves in that she finds out about the woman in her flat being murdered and even then she seems more interested in having sex with Zeke than finding out if he's responsible for the murders. Although Stone is supposed to play the damsel-in-distress who can't resist Zeke's dark sexuality, (and in this sense the film touches on "the paranoid woman's film" tradition, a link discussed in the next chapter), the *fatale*-overtones that Stone (intentionally or not)⁶⁰ brings from her *Basic Instinct* incarnation of Catherine Tramell – "[t]he ultimate male nightmare of the castrating heroine to date" (Leitch 154) – hinder her establishment as potential victim and rather create an excess of fatality in the film, which is only employed to make the sex scenes more effective. Actually, it seems that this is the film's

⁵⁹ *Double Indemnity* has a similar story to tell about the effect it had on the career of its leads, Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray. Their subsequent roles were inescapably reminiscent of *Double Indemnity*. See Elizabeth Ward's "The Unintended *Femme Fatale*: *The File on Thelma Jordon* and *Pushover*" 128-35.

⁶⁰ In his review of *Sliver*, Iain Johnstone claims that since Eszterhas penned the film's script he almost certainly had Stone in mind who's already been typecast as a *femme fatale*, a fact which Stone denies (8).

basic priority.⁶¹ The film's thriller part remains undeveloped, a mere background to the film's real topic, voyeurism, the fantasy of watching and being watched preferably while watching.⁶²

Disclosure, on the other hand, as Todd McCarthy contends, put Michael Douglas “[b]ack in the familiar ‘Fatal Attraction’-‘Basic Instinct’ arena with a predatory female” (n. pag.), played by Demi Moore this time. In *Disclosure* Douglas plays Tom Sanders, a family man who finds himself in trouble when he resists – instead of succumbing to – the wrong woman, the company's new vice president and former lover of his, Meredith Johnson (Demi Moore). Although Tom's character is mainly informed by Douglas' *Fatal Attraction* persona in his desperation to get Meredith first, before she frames him and destroys him professionally, during the harassment hearing when Meredith's lawyer portrays Tom's past affair with Meredith as highly sexual and kinky, Tom becomes more reminiscent of *Basic Instinct*'s visceral Nick who succumbed to all of his urges. Although *Disclosure* was largely packaged as an erotic thriller with its title, poster, and tagline implying a sexually charged film, sex in this film is only part of corporate power games. By standing up for his choice not to give Meredith the sex she orders him to deliver, Tom finally manages to re-position himself in the firm and get Meredith fired. Therefore, I agree with Lizzie Francke's assessment of

⁶¹ According to Jess Cagle, Phillip Noyce declared that “there would be unprecedented scenes of rumpy-pumpy in *Sliver*” (96) and made sure that the notorious crotch-flash scene of *Basic Instinct* had an equivalent one in *Sliver*, as Carly removes her panties underneath a table in a restaurant while dining with Zeke.

⁶² If one forgets about the film's budget and the recruitment of A-list players (Sharon Stone was at that point “the hottest news” in Hollywood), *Sliver* seems more like a DTV erotic thriller with a check-list mentality of sex-scenes. Eszterhas' way to bind the sex with the crime story was to offer Zeke as the psychopathic murderer who gets away with it. However as the test audience hated the ending, Eszterhas fell back on the already-tested recipe of *Basic Instinct* where, after flirting throughout the film with the idea of Catherine being the icepick murderess, he finally formally attributed the murders to Beth (Jeanne Tripplehorn), the police psychologist. The difference between *Basic Instinct* and *Sliver* is that Beth was gradually constructed as an ambivalent figure, both sexually and criminally (she slept with Catherine at least once, she was sleeping with Nick and her ex-husband was mysteriously murdered), whereas Jack Landsford (Tom Berenger), a crime novelist who utters Catherine-Tramell-like lines such as “You don't like sex and violence? It sells you know”, but is more of a crude harasser to Carly than a sexy and mysterious *homme fatal*, is employed as a decoy to such a degree throughout the film (he's jogging in the park with the exact same clothes the murderer was wearing in the opening scene when the first victim was thrown off the balcony) that when he is disclosed as the murderer no disclosure is involved. In his effort to repeat his stunt a second time, Eszterhas failed.

Disclosure as an “average conspiracy thriller” (36) of yuppie sensibilities with sex a background issue to the prioritised topic of corporate manipulation and corruption.

The erotic thrillers that came out until the end of the ‘90s (mainly in the erotic-thriller boom of the first half of the decade) were of two kinds, justifying the claim that the genre had a double birth. *Basic Instinct*-like stories of deadly passion between representatives of the law and sexy suspects of murder with bends and twists that led the hybrid to further hybridisation were the one side of the ‘90s story. The other followed on the *Body Heat* tradition of sexual triangles and murderous conspiracies, carrying the erotic thriller through the neo-*noir* landscape of heist, betrayal and postmodern irony.⁶³

By the turn of the century everything had changed. As Linda Ruth Williams remarks, “Hollywood doesn’t do sex like it used to. A pervasive puritanism infiltrated the industry in the new century, particularly after the election of George W. Bush, putting the erotic back in the closet along with a range of other so-called ‘progressive’ cinematic concerns” (*The Erotic Thriller* 417). Only without sex there is no erotic thriller, which is why the last instances of the genre are Europe-bred. Brian De Palma’s 2002 *Femme Fatale*, an American-directed film written, shot and financed in Europe, and Jane Campion’s 2003 *In the Cut*, an American Independent production directed by a New Zealand art-film veteran, signify the genre’s double death. . . until its inevitable resuscitation later on when, as Verhoeven claims, “it’ll cycle back” and sex will re-appear in Hollywood when George W. Bush steps off the presidential chair (qtd. in Linda Ruth Williams, “No Sex Please” 20).⁶⁴

In the Cut, Campion’s first genre film, is an interesting erotic thriller / woman’s film hybrid which reverberates with art cinema’s preoccupation with character over plot. Based on Susanna Moore’s book of the same title, the film adopts the heroine’s, Frannie’s (played by Meg Ryan), point of view throughout, merging her nightmarish world of suppressed desires

⁶³ See Stephen Hunter’s discussion of *The Last Seduction* (John Dahl, 1994) as an example of “ironic *noir*” in his “Kill Me Again: The Rise of Nouveau Noir” 147-48.

⁶⁴ The whole title of Linda Ruth Williams’ essay is “No Sex Please We’ Re American”.

and fears with the thriller plot of serial murders of women.⁶⁵ Commenting on the structure of her film, Campion said, “The film has a complex structure where ‘the thriller’ is initially very much in the background and the relationship is the focus. And by two thirds into the story it changes so that the thriller has come to the front and really stokes up the intensity of the relationship” (15). Coupling sex and death – the first victim is shown fellating the murderer before getting decapitated – Campion inserts in the dyad the element of romance as the murderer’s routine includes a marriage proposal to his victim-to-be. Re-reading female *angst* through Pauline’s, Frannie’s half-sister (played by Jennifer Jason Leigh), desperate desire to get married and Frannie’s recurrent nightmare of the deadly potential of romance (she dreams about her parents ice-skating joyfully until her father runs over her mother’s legs cutting them with his skate blades), Campion enriches the erotic thriller landscape as conventionally female fantasies of fulfilment merge with the cynicism of the wise-cracking male cop-world of sex where everything is about dominance and submission. As much as *In the Cut* is what Amy Taubin calls “a fractured fairy tale” (51), it is also a dark and lurid one which transforms the *thrilling-because-threatening* sex of the mainstream erotic thriller into the *thrilling-because-guilty* sex of this deeply psychologically-driven film,⁶⁶ in which Frannie’s sexual repression underlies her overwhelming attraction to the raw sexuality of Malloy (Mark Ruffalo), the cop who investigates the murders and whom she suspects as the killer. In accordance with the erotic thriller tradition, sex is graphic and Campion delivers to Hollywood the first image of an erect penis – albeit prosthetic – to appear in a mainstream film with A-list actors.

If *In the Cut* re-reads the dark tale of sexual transgression and death in the thriller milieu that *Crusing* set up and *Basic Instinct* solidified, *Femme Fatale*, on the other hand,

⁶⁵ Ironically, when reviewing Moore’s book for the *New York Times* Michiko Kakutani underlined suspicions of Joe Eszterhas’ and Paul Verhoeven’s influence on Moore and predicted that the book’s film version would have Sharon Stone or Linda Fiorentino in the lead role (qtd. in Fuller n. pag.).

⁶⁶ See Graham Fuller’s reading of *In the Cut* as a dark journey in female masochism.

traces the genre's *noir* roots. Revisiting the *noir* world through a dream sequence, De Palma applies the *Woman in the Window* (Fritz Lang, 1945) trick to his own film⁶⁷ and offers us a *femme fatale*'s dream of film *noir*. The film opens with a conscious generic self-reflection, presenting the film's *femme fatale*, Laure (Rebecca Romjin Stamos), lying half-naked in bed watching *Double Indemnity* on French television. And so we watch with her Stanwyck shooting MacMurray and declaring her *femme fatale* rottenness. Watching Laure watching Stanwyck with her own reflection projected on the TV screen to mingle with Stanwyck's image is De Palma's visual symbolism of what is going to follow. Minutes later we see Laure in action as she executes a diamond heist during a film premiere in the Cannes film festival, naturally double-crossing her partners in crime and escaping with the loot. Talking about the film's opening, De Palma explained that it functions as a symbol for the whole film: "For me it sets out a schematic of where the film's going. You're telling the audience, 'You are going to see a *film noir* dream'. It's late at night, you're watching *Double Indemnity* in bed, you fall asleep, and you *dream Double Indemnity*!" (qtd. in Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 142). The whole *noir* story takes place in the dream Laure has, soaking in a bathtub after the heist. In that dream all her *femme fatale* potential is materialised in the *noir* world that her unconscious stages. It is in this world that she does what she knows best; she uses her sexuality to manipulate men whom in the end she betrays for money. But while in her *noir* dream Laure gets punished with death, in De Palma's film she is given a second chance, a fresh start. Talking about his finale De Palma said, "I was interested in trying to turn noir around. You don't have happy endings, that's going against the dictates of the noir form. I thought, Maybe [sic] I can get away with this" (qtd. in G. Smith 31). De Palma tries to get away with revising the *noir* canon by redeeming its staple, the *femme fatale*, setting her up for who-knows-what

⁶⁷ See Gavin Smith 28. In Fritz Lang's film the hero's implication in an accidental murder that progressively leads to his suicide is in the end revealed to be a dream the hero has while dosing off in the men's club.

as she walks into the sunset with Antonio Banderas and a suitcase full of the diamond-heist money.

If I were asked to use one phrase to define the erotic thriller, I would call it the getting-away-with-it genre, which manages to exercise transgression while covering it up under the validity of genre-cinema, plot preoccupation, or art-house auteurism. In the same way, it exchanges fantasies of fragmentation and unity always projecting them through the lens of pleasurable (to be discussed in the third part of this thesis). Like its staple, the *femme fatale*, the erotic thriller is duplicitous and manipulative, showing one face while obscuring the other. Veiling the sexual act as something other, sex – even in its most transgressive form – can appear safely on the Hollywood screen. Being the only Hollywood genre that gets away with showing the act that all the rest omit or disrupt, the erotic thriller is crucial in any study of the Hollywood-made fantasy, which at its core is (as I will establish theoretically in the second part of my thesis) always already sexual.

To locate the erotic thriller on the general map of film genres, I will now proceed with an examination of the generic lines that have contributed to the establishment of the erotic thriller hybrid and those which in overlapping with it have solidified its core while supporting its further hybridisation.

CHAPTER TWO

Groping for the Erotic Thriller . . .

Trying to define the territory of the *erotic thriller* in an era of high cinematic hybridity, the only valid thing to do is to explore the area of the erotic thriller in its interaction with the generic past and hyper-generic present. Setting off from its compound name, we find ourselves inhabiting the area of the *thriller*. Thus, we encounter in the erotic thriller the basic structural characteristics of the thriller genre: “the hero” and “the conspiracy”. As Jerry Palmer says in his book on thrillers, “There are only two elements which are absolutely indispensable: the hero, who is intrinsically competitive; and the conspiracy, which is intrinsically mysterious. With these two we have reached the definition of the thriller as a genre” (82). Of course Palmer is talking about novels but it is there that the cinematic version of thrillers is born, with the works of Fleming, Spillane, Chandler, Woolrich and Hammett (to name but a few) being transferred to the big screen. The world of cinema eagerly capitalised on figures like James Bond, Mike Hammer and Philip Marlow, and television followed to such a degree that they became axiomatic figures, almost identified with the actors that have repeatedly brought them to life. As Palmer says, “Ian Fleming was among the most successful thriller writers – in the late 1960s James Bond was a household word, even if there was a tendency to associate him more with Sean Connery than with Fleming” (70).

Jerry Palmer distinguishes between two kinds of thrillers: the *positive* and the *negative*, both of which contain a hero who is offered to the readers as the obvious point of entry to the novel’s world. In the *positive thriller* the hero is glamorous and sexy but above all a professional who can resist temptation,¹ an “insider-outsider”, a “lone wolf” who is clearly distinguished from the villain and who is the only one capable of averting the threat that

¹ “In Spillane the hero never seduces a woman: they always offer themselves to him, and he may or may not accept. He may refuse because he is too busy, or because he just doesn’t fancy it right now” (J. Palmer 30).

hangs over the fictional world.² On the contrary, the *negative-thriller* hero is doubtfully heroic, prone to fallibility, lonely and equivocally capable of carrying out his task. In the end, he also averts the threat but we don't get the cathartic triumph that the positive hero achieves. In Palmer's words, "The aversion of the conspiracy ought to resolve all the conflicts that threatened the order of the world the hero was defending. In the positive thriller it does, in the negative version one is left with the sense that they will crop up again somewhere else, and soon" (51).

It is the negative version of the hero that we find in erotic thrillers, men weak and unprofessional, with compromised morality, unable to resist the films' *femmes fatales*, who embody the element of conspiracy in the classical structure of the thriller. Instead of facing a social threat, a rupture in the public world against which the hero is pitting himself so as to prove his heroic dimension by reinstating the disturbed order, in erotic thrillers the social overlaps with the private through the hero's transgressive affair with the *femme fatale*, who literally embodies the threat by being the primary suspect for the crime that shatters social coherence and thus initiates the plot of the film. Although erotic thrillers always open with some crime (usually one of a sexual nature), the transgression of the crime is only validated once doubled by the fatal female who adds suspense of a sexual nature to the initial whodunit core. Therefore, although the crime comes first, it is only after the hero meets with the film's *femme fatale* and becomes sexually involved with her that suspenseful action begins. The action as well as the enigma of the crime(s) is of a double nature, projected onto both the outside world as well as the hero's private life; the social and the personal converge into one, the hero's nightmarish world. Therefore the *erotic* adds to the *thriller* at the same time that it diversifies it by inserting the element of sexuality as the primary ground where the film's initial enigma is played out.

² See Jerry Palmer's "The Hero: Alone, Sexy, Competitive" in his *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* 24-39.

However, the passage from *thriller* to *erotic thriller* isn't a smooth and clear-cut one. We reach the erotic thriller in its multi-faced hybridity only after following the trajectory through detective films, suspense thrillers and the celebrated Hitchcock tradition, *films noirs* and their neo-*noir* progeny, police-procedurals, courtroom dramas, women's films, gothic melodramas, serial-killer and slasher horror flicks and entering the arena of on-screen sex both as a thrill and threat. Having already touched in the previous chapter on the erotic thriller's affinity with the neo-*noir* and its relation with soft pornography, in this chapter I want to follow the other generic lines that lead to the heart of the erotic thriller and give a sense of the genre's hybridity.

2.1. The Hitchcock-De Palma *Psycho*-Sexual Tradition

Alfred Hitchcock, the master of suspenseful psychological thrillers, is considered by many as the father of the erotic thriller. In his interview with Linda Ruth Williams, William Friedkin called Hitchcock "the master of the erotic thriller" and *Psycho* "*definitely* an erotic thriller" (qtd. in *The Erotic Thriller* 141). According to my perception of what constitutes an erotic thriller (presented in the previous chapter), *Psycho* is definitely not an erotic thriller, in spite of the fact that the whole Hitchcockian tradition of suspenseful thrill is obviously very important. Talking about suspense as one type of "cinematic fear", differentiated from terror in terms of the audience's knowledge of things that the characters ignore, Hitchcock explained that it is more effective than the momentary shock that terror induces,³ as the audience, "fearing" for the character(s), sits on edge, waiting for the climactic moment, to see if the imminent threat will ultimately materialize or not.⁴ Obviously, Hitchcock had a very deep understanding of the pleasure that cinematic fear confers to spectators. He knew that it is

³ Hitchcock considered the genre of horror as inferior to thriller and doomed to failure due to its exploitative nature of "*unnatural* excitement". See his "Why 'Thrillers' Thrive" 111-12.

⁴ See the example Hitchcock gives to illustrate the difference between suspense and terror in his essay "The Enjoyment of Fear" 118-19.

the very fantasy of the filmic threat that transforms it into a pleasurable danger experienced vicariously through the safe distance of the auditorium. Should spectators feel that safety compromised, the experience would immediately become unpleasant and ultimately rejected.⁵ On the other hand, Hitchcock knew that for the fantasy to be effective, it had to be as realistic as possible, so that it would entangle the spectators in the thread of his films' suspenseful nightmares ("Hitchcock Talks About Lights, Camera, Action" 313-14). The negotiation between closeness and distance which is crucial to the structure of fantasy, both on and off screen (the core subject of this thesis), is expressed by Hitchcock in terms of "knowing" and "forgetting". That is, spectators must "know" that what they see on screen is a fantasy, but then must "forget" it so that they can be thrilled by its "reality", since "[i]f [they] didn't *know*, [they] would be genuinely worried; if [they] didn't *forget*, [they] would be bored" (Hitchcock, "The Enjoyment of Fear" 120).

Hitchcock's experimentation with perversion at the heart of the everyday inaugurated new sensibilities in the thriller genre. His coupling of horror elements with sexual pathology in *Psycho* (1960) extended the boundaries of what was permissible on the big screen. As is well known, the shower scene in this film was unprecedented for its graphic violence, resulting in ambivalent critical and audience reception.⁶ For one and a half minutes, Hitchcock had Janet Leigh's naked body being stabbed, the blood squirting all over the place while the sound of the penetrating knife was audible through the scene's music score.⁷ It was because of the blood that Hitchcock decided to film *Psycho* in black and white, to tone the scene down; as he says, "[w]ith all the blood in that bathtub, I knew very well I'd have had the whole sequence cut out – [. . .] It just couldn't have been done" ("Hitchcock Talks About

⁵ For an example of unpleasant thrill based on the undermining of the audience's feeling of safety see Hitchcock's "Why 'Thrillers' Thrive" 110.

⁶ Young people loved it, making *Psycho* a box-office hit, while Hitchcock's older audience found it annoying and sickening and critics were torn. See Robert E. Kapsis 60-64.

⁷ Talking about the montage of the shower scene, Hitchcock explained how he used slow motion and editing to give the illusion of nudity and stabbing when actually "[n]o knife ever touched any woman's body in that scene" ("On Style" 288).

Lights, Camera, Action” 311). Sexual explicitness was also an issue and part of the controversy the film generated. As Robert E. Kapsis points out, the film’s daring sexual presentation was to be seen even in its publicity posters “featur[ing] Janet Leigh in bra and half-slip and John Gavin stripped to the waist” (58). Hitchcock claimed that he intentionally pushed at the sexual barriers to address the younger generation, who “would yawn” at what used to be the way to depict sexual intimacy in American cinema; “I was conscious of making the lovemaking scenes a little more risqué than I normally would, only because I felt that modern manners had changed, to some extent” he declared. (“A Redbook Dialogue” 147).

The sex-slasher tradition of *Psycho* bled into John Carpenter’s horror film, *Halloween* (1978), and the vogue for gory horror teen-flicks the latter initiated in the late 1970s,⁸ while at the same time in the hands of Hitchcock’s most loyal disciple, Brian De Palma, the thriller overlapped with pornography, helping open up the territory that the erotic thriller would inhabit.⁹ In this sense, I agree with Linda Ruth Williams’ reading of De Palma’s sexual-thrillers as “proto-erotic thrillers” (*The Erotic Thriller* 82). On the other hand, although De Palma explores the dangers of sex (informed in the late 1980s by the threat of AIDS), he does so by sexualizing death. For De Palma, “Sex is out of control”, a fact that terrifies and fascinates him. “I don’t like to be out of control”, he has said (qtd. in Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 84), fixing instead his controlling camera-eye on the fearful site this lack of control generates. This is probably the reason why in De Palma’s universe sex is dangerous only for the amateurs who let themselves get absorbed by it and thus lose control, but never for the professionals.¹⁰ Sex is important not as an act, but rather for the forces it unleashes, so the sexual act is obscured by elaborate depictions of murder (a mode of handling sex on

⁸ For the promotion and critical reception of *Halloween* as Hitchcockian see Kapsis 160-61.

⁹ See Linda Ruth Williams’ *The Erotic Thriller* 82-87.

¹⁰ The call girl in *Dressed to Kill* and the female porn-star in *Body Double* both survive in the end.

screen I will be talking about in detail in my seventh chapter), whereas for the erotic thriller the depiction of sex is crucial as it is in the sexual act that the thrill of threat lies.

De Palma's experimentation with soft-core pornography as part of the slasher's preoccupation with penetrated bodies signifies an effort in American filmmaking of the 1980s to challenge the *status quo* by pushing mainstream sexual representation into a more adult form. De Palma's pronouncements in relation to *Body Double* (1984) demonstrate his defiance of his detractors, who declared him a "brilliant sicko",¹¹ and illustrate the use of provocation as part of the film's publicity; "This is going to be the most erotic, surprising and thrilling movie I know how to make" (qtd. in Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 86), he stated at the pre-production stage of *Body Double*. "If they want an X, they'll get a real X. . . . They wanna see suspense, they wanna see terror, they wanna see sex – I'm the person for the job" (De Palma qtd. in Kapsis 211). De Palma's directorial audacity parallels William Friedkin's shooting of actual (as opposed to simulated) sex acts for *Cruising* (Linda Ruth Williams, "No Sex Please" 19), Lawrence Kasdan's voracious lingering on Kathleen Turner's newly-discovered body in *Body Heat* (1981), and Bob Rafelson's use of raw sex as the distinctive mark of his remake of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981).¹² As directors got more daring, Reaganite conservatism of the '80s struck back and picketing by various groups (feminist, gay etc.) became a common phenomenon, establishing scandal-raising as an aspect of the films that introduced sex and violence under the wrapping of suspense thrillers garnished with terror.¹³

2.2. From Thrillers to Noirs

¹¹ I borrow the term from Kapsis. For the critical reception of *Dressed to Kill* and *Body Double* see Kapsis 202-8 and 211-12 respectively.

¹² See Richard Gertner's review of Rafelson's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* 77, 80.

¹³ For information on the protests against the misogyny of *Dressed to Kill* see Linda Ruth Williams' *The Erotic Thriller* 83-84.

In his book *Genre and Hollywood*, Steve Neale discusses the suspense thriller based on Charles Derry's taxonomy of six major suspense thriller sub-types: "the thriller of murderous passions", "the political thriller", "the thriller of acquired identity", "the psychotraumatic thriller", "the thriller of moral confrontation", and "the innocent-on-the-run thriller"(82). The erotic thriller is represented in Derry's classification by "the thriller of murderous passions" category, consisting of a classic *noir* and two postmodern *noir* homages – *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Blood Simple* (1984) and *Body Heat* (1981) – all of which launch murderous sexual triangles.

Derry's definition of "the thriller of murderous passions" which appeared at the end of the '80s is similar to James Damico's provisional model of "FN [film *noir*] plot structure and character type" (137) given at the end of the '70s. According to Derry, "the thriller of murderous passions ... is organized around the triangular grouping of husband / wife / lover. The central scene is generally the murder of one member of the triangle by one or both of the other members. The emphasis is clearly on the criminal protagonist ... [and] ... The criminal motive is generally passion or greed" (Derry qtd in Neale 82). Damico, on the other hand, based on Frye's, Wellek's and Warren's work on literary genres adjusted to film, suggested the following master-plot for *film noir*:

Either because he is fated to do so by chance, or because he has been hired for a job specifically associated with her, a man whose experience of life has left him sanguine and often bitter meets a non-innocent woman of similar outlook to whom he is sexually and fatally attracted. Through this attraction, either because the woman induces him to it or because it is the natural result of their relationship, the man comes to cheat, attempt to murder, or actually murder a second man to whom the woman is unhappily or unwillingly attached (generally he is her husband or lover), an act which

often leads to the woman's betrayal of the protagonist, but which in any event brings about the sometimes metaphoric, but usually literal destruction of the woman, the man to whom she is attached, and frequently the protagonist himself. (137)

What Damico calls *film noir* Derry names as thriller, and what Damico recognizes as the full body of *noir* Derry sees as only part of the thriller. Notwithstanding, the importance of Damico's and Derry's overlapping lies in the link their definitions establish between the darkness (of classic *noir*) and the thrill (of suspense films) joining forces under the banner of sexual transgression. Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* and Bob Rafelson's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* – both re-readings of classic *noirs*: *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) and the homonymous *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946) – either viewed as *neo-noirs* or thrillers both present crime as part of a sexual arrangement, thus dimly setting the scene for erotic-thriller hybrids in the 1980s and 1990s such as Joel Coen's *noirish Blood Simple* (1984), Richard Marquand's court-roomish *Jagged Edge* (1985), Bob Rafelson's investigative *Black Widow* (1987) and Adrian Lyne's horrific *Fatal Attraction* (1987), all of which will transform the erotic-thriller term from adjective to noun, leading in the 1990s to Paul Verhoeven's prototypical *Basic Instinct* (1992).

2.3. Back to the Hardboiled Tradition

2.3.1. James M. Cain

Damico's delimitation of the *noir* storyline is clearly influenced by James M. Cain's 1930s novels, *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, both made into very successful *films noirs*.¹⁴ In these stories "the hero becomes so obsessed sexually by a woman, that he is persuaded to murder her husband, and the *noir* world which he enters is

¹⁴ According to Walker, the importance of James M. Cain's contribution to *film noir* is obvious from the fact that Damico's demarcation of the *film noir* "master plot" is based exclusively on Cain's stories (12).

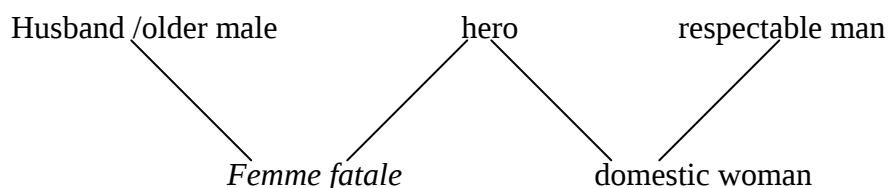
psychological rather than physical, characterised above all by corrosive guilt and the fear of discovery” (Walker 12). In the Cain stories, which inform *noirs* such as Fritz Lang’s *Scarlet Street* (1945) and *The Woman in the Window* (1944), Robert Siodmak’s *The File on Thelma Jordon* (1949) and *Criss Cross* (1949), and Orson Welles’ *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), the *femme fatale* plays a key role by turning into the villain who seduces the “victim-hero” into succumbing to his repressed desires. By controlling him sexually, she turns him into a victim of her own needs and desires, pushing him into crime, most often to murder.¹⁵ The figure of the husband as a physical or Symbolic entity, always hovering there between the illicit lovers, stands in the story as the reminder of the impossibility of the lovers’ union and the threat this union poses to the clearly marked Symbolic world. The same function is also performed by the *nurturing woman* (wife or girlfriend),¹⁶ “who is in opposition to the *femme fatale*, associated with the home and offering the hero love, understanding and nurturing” (Walker 13). The “domestic woman”, as Walker calls her, represents the safe world the hero abandons for the sake of the *femme fatale*, or his way out from the lurid underworld he inhabits under the *femme fatale*’s spell. The presence of the *nurturing woman* creates a triangle analogous to the *victim hero – femme fatale – husband* one, which is the *wife/girlfriend – victim hero – femme fatale* triangle. A feature specific to *noir* is the existence of a third triangle created by the appearance of one more character, that of the “respectable man”, who is there to ensure that after the demise of the hero the domestic woman will not be left free and dangerous but will have her sexual potential contained under the supervision of another man.¹⁷ All three sexual triangles have the figure of the film’s hero as their meeting point, while three pairs of oppositional doubles are produced: husband – hero, hero – respectable man, and *femme fatale*

¹⁵The tagline chosen for the marketing promotion of Billy Wilder’s paradigmatic *Double Indemnity* – “She Kisses Him So He’ll Kill” – subsumes Cain’s storyline and echoes Damico’s definition of *noir*. See Pierre Duvillars essay of the same title, “She Kisses Him So He’ll Kill”, 30.

¹⁶ See Janey Place’s “Women in film noir” in Mary Ann Doane’s (ed.) *Women in Film Noir* 50-54.

¹⁷ See Walker 12 and 23.

– domestic woman. This interchange between coupling and triangulation is also the basic erotic thriller fantasy-structure, as we’ll see in the final chapter of this thesis.



(Walker 23)

The difference between the *femme fatale* and the domestic woman is marked in the sexuality that is let loose or kept under control, exposing the puritanical undercurrent of classical Hollywood, which declares that “sex is dangerous and destructive, and the figures who are defined as sexual, however alluring and exciting, are ultimately discredited” (Walker 13). The *femme fatale* incarnates evil in her sexual domination over the hero who becomes her victim, and her “actual or symbolic destruction” is, according to Janey Place, the way the *noir* world answers her threat (54). However, it is not only *femmes fatales* who get punished for their sexual energy. *Femme fatale* copycats, who parade their sexuality and activate the bleakness that the *femme fatale* incarnates (although they are proved in the end to be what Walker calls “sexual women” – more dangerous to themselves than to the heroes they surround)¹⁸ are nevertheless punished for their overt sexuality and contained through marriage, or physically exterminated. For example, in Fritz Lang’s *The Big Heat* (1953) Debby (Gloria Grahame), who proves to be a pseudo-*femme fatale*, is punished for her sexual energy by getting her face burnt when her mobster boyfriend throws boiling coffee over her; and later she’s killed for helping Detective Sergeant Bannion (Glenn Ford) disclose his wife’s murderers. On the other hand, in Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* (1944), Lola (Jean Heather) is spared Debby’s fate since her sexuality is contained in her relationship with Zacchetti (Byron Barr). So from a sexual woman who attracts Walter’s attention, she is

¹⁸ See Walker 13-14.

transformed into a “good girl”, Zacchetti’s girl. Obviously, the only female character that avoids the fate of womanhood is the a-sexual “domestic” woman, who has already willingly placed her sexuality under male control.

Damico’s proposal of what constitutes a *film noir* gives the impression that all *films noirs* follow the narrative pattern of sexually motivated crimes. Similarly, Ronald Schwartz in his own study of *noir* refers to those “black films” “made between 1940 and 1959 on black-and-white film stock, in which a male protagonist is usually led to his destruction by a femme fatale and winds up getting neither the money nor the dame” (xi). This description, however, is not inclusive of all *noir* stories. Even the language that Schwartz uses comes from a major Cain story, Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity*, when Walter, confessing Mr. Dietrichson’s murder, says “I killed him for money and for a woman. I didn’t get the money... and I didn’t get the woman”.¹⁹

2.3.2. Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler

In fact, the James M. Cain plotline is the second of the three major noir story types that Walker defines in his study of *noir*.²⁰ Preceding “the victim-hero”, is what Walker calls “the seeker-hero” *noir*, which echoes the Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler tradition (Walker 10). Walker, citing John Cawelti, contends that Hammett in the ’20s and Chandler in the ’30s move away from the classical tradition of “whodunit” detective fiction by introducing in their texts the figure of the hard-boiled detective who is emotionally and morally involved in the solution of the crime. The sophisticated detective becomes a rough big city investigator who discovers the darkness that hovers under the respectability of the upper-class and has to immerse himself in the darkness he aims at dispersing (Walker 9). In his search, which “takes the form of a quest into a dangerous and threatening world, the *noir*

¹⁹ See the IMDb section of “Memorable Quotes from *Double Indemnity* (1944)” in <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0036775/quotes>

²⁰ Krutnik calls the James M. Cain type of *noirs* “criminal-adventure thrillers”. See 136-63.

world”, the hero becomes confused as to whom to trust but manages to unravel the mysteries of criminal deeds and escape the *noir* world unharmed due to his “intelligence”, “incorruptibility”, cynicism and deep misogyny (Walker 10). Filmic examples fitting this category are: John Huston’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1941),²¹ Howard Hawks’ *The Big Sleep* (1946), Robert Montgomery’s *Lady in the Lake* (1947) and Robert Siodmak’s *The Killers* (1946).²²

Moving away from the detective tradition, the hero in this first cycle of *noir* stories is the prototypical “negative thriller hero”, distanced from the “positive” thriller tradition of Fleming and Spillane.²³ The hardboiled anti-hero is an isolated character whose sole interest lies in the solution of the criminal act that initiates the *noir* narrative (Krutnik 92). He moves between the worlds of respectability and crime without belonging to either (Krutnik 39) and his worth is proved by his “ability to withstand any challenges to his integrity” (Krutnik 92). He is of ambivalent morality and fights evil mechanically “because that is what he’s there for” and not out of personal desire (J. Palmer 43). He is standing alone out there, set apart from and often against social institutions (Krutnik 25), fighting not because he’s the only one who can do it but because “he is the only person stupid and weak enough to get himself caught in the crossfire” (J. Palmer 42). Therefore although in the end he scotches evil, he doesn’t get satisfaction out of it and he cannot inspire security and optimism for a fresh start,

²¹ This is the third cinematic version of Dashiell Hammett’s homonymous novel. The earliest version was directed by Roy Del Ruth in 1930 failing to attract people’s attention. Then in 1936 William Dieterle re-filmed it under the title *Satan Met a Lady* still failing to make a success. Finally in 1941 John Huston’s version of *The Maltese Falcon* became a hit, “launch[ing] the private-eye *film noir*” and according to many critics and reviewers initiating the whole *film noir* tradition (Walker 9).

²² Both Howard Hawks’ *The Big Sleep* (1946) and Robert Montgomery’s *The Lady in the Lake* (1946) adapted to the big screen Raymond Chandler’s homonymous novels, introducing to the audience the persona of Philip Marlowe “soon to become *film noir*’s most enduring private eye” (Walker 9).

²³ Michael Walker, drawing the line between the “seeker-hero *film noir*” and the tradition of the classical detective story, reminds us of Jerry Palmer’s distinction between positive and negative thriller heroes when he says that the moral safety net present in the classical detective story recedes in the *film noir* for, even though in the end order is reinstated through the hero’s solving the case, “there is usually the sense at the end that little good will come of this, or that the cost has been absurdly high” (12).

but rather arouses a sense of bleakness and flatness as to what is going to follow (J. Palmer 43).²⁴

Most of the temptations the *noir* anti-hero has to face come from women, whom he views with cynicism and distrust.²⁵ Especially in Raymond Chandler's fiction, the hero is always alone and unattached, while women and sexual entanglement signify the contamination of the hero's integrity (Krutnik 96). As Chandler himself said, commenting on Hollywood's obsession with fusing love stories with investigative narratives, "the real distinction of the detective's personality is that, as a detective he falls for nobody. He is the avenging justice, the bringer of order out of chaos, and to make his doing this part of some trite boy-meets-girl story is to make it silly" (qtd in Krutnik 97).

The only exception to the line of '40s unstable detectives who fail to live up to the ideal of male potency (*Out of the Past*, *The Dark Corner*, *The Killers*) and who become the victims of Fate, circumstances, and their own apathy and debility (*Detour*),²⁶ is Sam Spade (played by Humphrey Bogart) in John Huston's 1941 *The Maltese Falcon*, the ultimate and sole realisation of the all-powerful tough detective in the *noir* cosmos. According to Krutnik, *The Maltese Falcon* is not representative of the 40s "*noir* 'tough' thrillers" in the way it depicts its hero, but rather exhibits its affiliation to the "detective film" (93), and Sam Spade approaches the "positive" thriller-hero in his absolute control of the situations and himself. As Krutnik observes, "Spade is emphatically controlled in his relations with women: he is the master of his feelings and thereby can resist any danger of contamination and debasement through love" (123). He regards marriage with scorn, has a casual affair with his dead partner's wife and has no second thoughts about prosecuting his sweetheart once she proves to be guilty of treachery and murder.²⁷

²⁴ For more details on the characteristics of the negative thriller hero see J. Palmer 41-50.

²⁵ See Krutnik 97 and 42, Walker 10 and J. Palmer 29.

²⁶ See Krutnik 100-24. For a discussion of *Detour* see 125-27.

²⁷ See Jerry Palmer 35 and 38-39.

The male *noir* anti-hero gets more and more pathetic as he is divested of narrative agency and from “investigative ‘subject’” turns into “‘object’ of suspense” (Krutnik 129).²⁸ This entails the transformation of the story of investigation into a story of suspense, and the “‘tough’ investigative thriller” becomes, what Krutnik calls, the “‘tough’ suspense thriller”. This conversion is the case in many erotic thrillers once the hero or heroine becomes involved with the film’s *femme / homme fatal(e)*. In Paul Verhoeven’s *Basic Instinct* (1992), Nick Curran (Michael Douglas) goes gradually out of control after he meets and becomes involved with the film’s *femme fatale*. He resumes smoking and drinking, becomes violent, date-rapes his former lover, Beth (Jeanne Tripplehorn), is accused of murdering an Internal-Affairs officer who was investigating him, and is finally suspended from the force, losing his badge. In Alan J. Pakula’s courtroom-drama/erotic-thriller hybrid, *Presumed Innocent* (1990), a district attorney, Rusty Sabich (Harrison Ford), is forced to take up the case of his colleague and former lover, Carolyn (Greta Scacchi), who was brutally murdered. Gradually, different pieces of evidence start pointing towards Rusty and from investigator he turns into the main suspect of Carolyn’s murder. Four years later, Bonnie Bedelia, Rusty’s murderous wife in *Presumed Innocent*, appeared in the female version of Harrison Ford’s role in William Bindley’s DTV *Judicial Consent* (1994). In the film, Bedelia plays Gwen Warwick, a successful woman judge in a dysfunctional marriage who has an illicit affair with a younger man, and who comes to preside over the murder case of her colleague and friend. During the case she realises that she’s being framed when her personal items parade through her courtroom as evidence from the murder scene.²⁹ Finally, in Harold Becker’s *Sea of Love* (1989) when Frank Keller (Al Pacino), the film’s detective, becomes involved with Helen (Ellen Barkin), the film’s *femme fatale* and prime suspect for the serial murders of men, his friend and partner in the case teasingly asks him “Should we dust your dick for prints?” Once

²⁸ See Krutnik’s chapters seven and eight.

²⁹ For a discussion of *Judicial Consent* in its relation to *Presumed Innocent* see Tasker’s *Working Girls* 127-30.

no distance between the investigator and the world of crime is preserved, the hero's investigative power and (narrative) agency recede, leaving the hero totally powerless and pathetic, the perfect victim.

This shift is also reflected in the structure of the narrative. As the hero loses his narrative agency and from the instigator of events turns into a passive observer victimised by the events he tries to understand, the unified linear investigative narrative of the detective tradition becomes convoluted, full of gaps, inconsistencies, and time lapses, while the resolution of the enigma is suspended.³⁰

2.3.3. Cornell Woolrich, David Goodis and Dorothy B. Hughes

Krutnik's "'tough' suspense thriller" overlaps with Walker's third character-type of *noir* based on the stories of Cornell Woolrich (mainly), David Goodis, and Dorothy B. Hughes.³¹

In these "'paranoid' *films noirs*" the victimization of the hero is complete and everything becomes enmeshed in absolute darkness, paranoia and "a sense of ultimate impotence in a world suddenly full of danger, of nothing but danger" (O' Brien qtd in Walker 14).³² In this paranoid world the hero becomes the victim of fate and/or somebody's murderous intentions; he is framed, even double-framed for some murder he did not commit, and led to destruction and death once involved in criminal situations he cannot control (Walker 15, Krutnik 132).³³

Often the hero victimises himself; he's an amnesiac, uncertain of his involvement in the crime

³⁰ See Krutnik's discussion of narrative structure in relation to masculine authority in 113-14 and 129.

³¹ See Walker 14-16.

³² See also Walker 16. The inescapability of doom that this storyline reflects is exemplified by Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* (1956), where although the misunderstanding is revealed things can never get to the way they were. Even after Manny (Henry Fonda) is finally exonerated for the hold-up he's wrongly accused of, his wife (Vera Miles) remains hospitalised in a mental institution as a result of what happened and it's two years until the family is reunited at a new locale.

³³ That is the case in films such as Edgar G. Ulmer's *Detour* (1945) and Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* (1947), in both of which the film's hero finds himself overwhelmed by circumstances he cannot handle and is led to a gradual loss of agency and finally death. The same fatalistic universe is activated in Rudolph Maté's *D.O.A* (1950); when the film's hero finds out that he's poisoned and he can no longer escape death he uses the time left until his death in a futile search for his murderers.

that spins the *film noir*'s world (Krutnik 132-33),³⁴ or discovers that he is doomed (Walker 15).³⁵ In other cases the hero is imprisoned for a murder he did not commit and a race-against-time begins to prove his innocence (Krutnik 133).³⁶

Although this type of *noir* storyline, in which the nightmare is everywhere engulfing everything, does inform the erotic thriller anti-hero as to the degree of his victimization, it is, however, always the *femme fatale* who causes the hero's downfall in the erotic thriller world. Both Ned (William Hurt) in Kasdan's *Body Heat* (1981) and Mike (Peter Berg) in Dahl's *The Last Seduction* (1994) end up behind bars, Kyle (Ed Harris) in John Bailey's *China Moon* (1994), Caesar (Joe Pantoliano) in Wachowskis' *Bound* (1996), Tony (Antonio Banderas) in Peter Hall's *Never Talk to Strangers* (1995) and Sam (Mat Dillon) in John McNaughton's *Wild Things* (1998) end up dead while Jack (Gary Oldman) in Peter Medak's *Romeo is Bleeding* (1993) is left in the middle of nowhere, a living dead, feeding on hallucinations. In all cases it is the *femme fatale* who has in one way or another provoked the hero's doom.

The shift from the film's investigative narrative to the hero's monstrous love affair with the *femme fatale* is, according to most film theorists, including Krutnik, symptomatic of the widely spread post-World-War II male anxiety against social female prominence.³⁷ Classic Hollywood, on the other hand, needed to address women as the new force in the market (and thus potential ticket-buyers), incorporating them in its narratives. This translated into the love-story becoming an aspect of all Hollywood films. Frank Krutnik, following

³⁴ This is the case in Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) in which a female psychoanalyst tries to help the amnesiac hero remember his involvement in a murder. According to Walker, Hitchcock's *Spellbound* differs from the rest of the *films noirs* which present amnesiac heroes in its clear focus on psychoanalysis. Walker views the particular film as initiating a cycle of, what he calls, "psychological melodramas" in which mainly female psychologically disturbed characters are analysed by male psychoanalysts as to the cause of their disturbance (15). An interesting observation is that in *Spellbound* the gender situation is reversed and it is the female character who psychoanalyses the male amnesiac and potentially duplicitous murderer.

³⁵ In Roy William Neill's *Black Angel* (1946), the amnesiac hero realises that he is actually the murderer he's looking for.

³⁶ In Robert Siodmak's *Phantom Lady* (1944), the victim's girlfriend tries to prove his innocence while he's in jail whereas in Alfred Hitchcock's *Young and Innocent* (1937), the wrongly accused hero escapes prison and with the police constable daughter's help tries to prove his innocence.

³⁷ See Krutnik 57-65.

David Bordwell and John Ellis, remarks that classic Hollywood structured its narratives in two directives: the generic viewpoint through which the hero's story is narrated, and the love affair, blending the two in different dosages to make different films (4). Pierre Duvillars corroborates this when, in his discussion of the deadly vamps of *Double Indemnity* and its like, he says that "[t]hese films always elaborate on the theme of 'boy meets girl,' a sacrosanct point of departure without which it seems no films are possible, particularly ones from Hollywood" (30). Therefore, when from 1944 onwards Hollywood studios systematised the production of "hard-boiled" thrillers, the only way to insert in these hardboiled narratives a love story involving the hero and running parallel to the evolution of the investigative storyline was by "shift[ing] the emphasis from the story of a crime or investigation to a story of erotic obsession" (Krutnik 97). This evolution compromised the phallic image of the distant film hero (in accordance with the post-war maladjusted veterans) and shifted the focus from the public sphere of the crime to the private world of the hero's obsessive involvement with some dangerous female. As Christine Gledhill points out, "Woman becomes the object of the hero's investigation" (15), affecting its course. The hero is no longer objectively distanced from the crime he investigates, using his deductive capacities to solve the crime, but is now personally involved in the enigma he tries to answer through his attachment to some mysterious female who is somehow related to the crime and "it is the vagaries of this relationship that determine the twists and turns of the plot" (Gledhill 15). The ingredients of the erotic thriller are already in place, waiting for the particular twist they were to receive in the '80s and '90s.

To give an overall impression of the route that evil has followed in *noir*, during the phase of the investigating eye, evil is "out there" somewhere, taking the form of a man or a woman, and although the threat posed both to the hero and to society is great, it is almost always averted in the end, however provisionally. In the second phase of *noir* the threat gets

closer and thus stronger; from “out there” it moves “around here”, appearing on the streets, surrounding the familiar world. As the threat moves closer and takes the form of the duplicitous *femme fatale*, maintaining control becomes more difficult (Walker 13). In the third and final phase, darkness floods everyone; from “all around” it moves “inside” and becomes inescapable, distorting, and disfiguring. In this deeply abject world there are no heroes, only villains and victims unable to escape their almost-always unjustified victimisation. Inside that total darkness the threat is everywhere, in every form possible, incarnated even by the self turning against itself. In this world, there are no *femmes fatales* only *personnes fatales*. The “paranoid” hero of the ‘40s either viewed as “the dark underside of the *noir* victim” (Hirsch qtd in Walker 15) or as its “extreme version” (Walker 16) marks the split between *film noir* and the thriller milieu as, according to J. Palmer, “If the ‘hero’ literally fails entirely, then we are not in the presence of a thriller” (40).³⁸

2.4. From *Noir* to Erotic Thriller Anti-Heroes

Obviously, the main antecedent of the erotic thriller anti-hero comes from the classic *noir*, but he didn’t enter the neo-*noir* scene of Kasdan’s *Body Heat* and Rafelson’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* almost thirty years later, ready to take up his new role in the erotic thriller milieu, untouched by time and cinematic and cultural changes. Let me, therefore, give a brief account of his development from a *noir* to an erotic thriller fall-guy.

As we have already seen in our discussion of the *noir* tradition, moving from the classical detective figure to the *noir* investigator, the upper-middle-class ratiocinating hero who is completely detached from the crime he investigates turns into the working-class

³⁸ Matching more or less Walker’s and Krutnik’s categorization, Paul Schrader in his seminal study on *film noir* divides *film noir* into three broad phases: the wartime period of “the private eye and the lone wolf”, the postwar phase dealing with “crime in the streets, political corruption, and police routine”, and the third one being the period “of psychotic action and suicidal impulse” (161). The case of murderous triangles and male victimisation coming from fatal dames is missing from Schrader’s taxonomy, while it is included in Foster Hirsch’s study of *noir* in which he divides *noir* protagonists into investigators, victims and psychopaths (*The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* 167).

private eye who becomes more physically implicated in the case he works on (Walker 9). Gradually he loses control over himself and circumstances, becomes weak, is outwitted by the *femme fatale* and proves to be completely pathetic (Krutnik 128).³⁹ At this point the hero has turned into an anti-hero, who battles against his foul desires that draw him to the deadly female.

According to Krutnik, “the rogue-cop thriller” at the end of the 1940s and beginning of 1950s continues in a sense the course of the “‘tough’ thriller”, transforming the private eye into a cop, who is however corrupt and unable to draw any distinctive line between law and desire, thus exploiting the power he’s delegated for his own personal gain (193). The “rogue-cop” is transformed into a “supercop” in the police-thrillers of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s. Modelled on the figure of the superspy, the supercop sets himself apart from the police force and takes the law into his own hands to secure the elimination of the criminals and the safeguarding of society (Rubin 137). However, he lacks the refinement in physical appearance and manners of a Bond-like figure.⁴⁰ He’s crude, even animalistic, and similar in method to the criminals he’s chasing. Clint Eastwood as “Dirty Harry”, the title-hero of Don Siegel’s 1971 film, is the prototypical 1970s supercop “who uses illegal but effective methods” to catch criminals (Rubin 142). Carrying the ambivalence of the anti-heroes he embodied in Sergio Leone’s westerns to the urban streets of the police thriller, Eastwood’s anti-hero detective forms part of the netherworld of illicit action – most usually set in what Rubin calls “the thriller trinity of New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco” (175-76) –⁴¹ on which he enforces order. Therefore, although he finally detains the criminal, the ultimate effect of the

³⁹ Talking about the gradual loss of control as we move from the hard-boiled detective film (Krutnik’s tough investigative thriller and Walker’s seeker-heroes) to what Rubin calls “purer forms of film noir”, Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) transforms into “more noir-shaded gumshoes such as Jeff Markham (Robert Mitchum) of the moodily masochistic *Out of the Past* (1947) [...] and Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker) of the demythicizing *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955)” (Rubin 93).

⁴⁰ Steve McQueen as the title-persona of *Bullitt* (Peter Yates, 1968) is the exception to the line of harsh seventies supercops in that “[l]ike Bond, Bullitt is a stylesetter [. . .], leading a chic life-style” (Rubin 138).

⁴¹ Incidentally most erotic thrillers are situated in the same trinity of locales.

film is not cathartic (as with all negative thriller heroes) and the initial bleakness of locale and circumstances is retained.

Moving to the '80s and the Reaganite icon of the potent masculine body encapsulated in the figures of Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Chuck Norris, the superhero "wears" his investigative effectiveness and strength on his body, his toned muscles turning into "the most fulfilling form of spectacle", conjoint with action sequences of explosions, car-chases, shoot-outs etc. (Jeffords, "Can Masculinity Be Terminated?" 344). Lieutenant Marion "Cobra" Cobretti (Sylvester Stallone), Captain Ivan Danko (Arnold Schwarzenegger), Colonel James Braddock (Chuck Norris), cop John McClane (Bruce Willis) and Sergeant Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) are all killing machines *par excellence*.⁴² Heroism is externalised on the hard bodies of these '80s "muscular action movies" heroes,⁴³ becoming the visible insignia of social safety since "[w]hen all else fails, [. . .], it is the body of the hero and not his voice, his capacity to make rational argument, that is the place of last resort (Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies* 65).⁴⁴

By the '90s the Rambo-like figures of the '80s superhero-cops have already run their spectacular course and have started "to verge on comic representations of themselves" (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 176) in police comedies such as *Kindergarten Cop* (Ivan Reitman, 1990) and *Stop! Or My Mom Will Shoot* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1992). In both films Schwarzenegger and Stallone respectively parody their '80s tough-guy personae, letting their soft side emerge from underneath the toughness of their muscular body, in accordance with

⁴² The films these superheroes come from are respectively *Cobra* (George P. Cosmatos, 1986), *Red Heat* (Walter Hill, 1988), *Missing in Action* (Joseph Zito, 1984), *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988), and *Lethal Weapon* (Richard Donner, 1987).

⁴³ I borrow Tasker's term from her book *Spectacular Bodies*. See her chapter "Action Heroines in the 1980s: The Limits of 'Masculinity'" 132-52.

⁴⁴ Susan Jeffords presents the example of Mel Gibson's Martin Riggs whose body in *Lethal Weapon* withstands torture and puts an end to criminal activities reminding us that "if there is anything heroic left in American culture, it rests in male bodies like these" ("The Big Switch" 198).

the '90s prototype of the Bushean New Man.⁴⁵ It is through parody, Nicola Rehling contends in her reading of *Terminator 2*, that Schwarzenegger's white male heterosexual body inserts the "all[ness]" of the strong muscled '80s body in the "nothing[ness]" of the '90s emptied out body which *performs* its toughness (170).⁴⁶ These '90s heroes are still the same '80s well-built men but changed, who instead of to their bodies now owe their invincibility to the strength of their hearts (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 176-77). The lack of sentiments and the effort to hold on to violent physicality signifies derangement and monstrosity in the '90s. Therefore the violent supercop in *Unlawful Entry* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1992) is totally disturbed and terrorises the middle-class couple when he becomes sexually obsessed with the young wife. On the contrary, Mel Gibson, Mr. *Lethal Weapon* himself, is transformed in the '90s into a loving family man, ready to become a father.

The flip side of the '80s superhero and the '90s family man is the weak, fragmented, dim-witted erotic thriller fall-guy, a broken man, who is often addicted to substances, is of ambivalent morality and cannot separate work from private life. He is obsessive, cynical, violent, and suicidal in getting implicated with the *femme fatale* who is way out of his league. In *Body Heat* Matty marks Ned's ineptitude with her famous line "You're not too smart, are you? I like that in a man". In *Sea of Love* Frank (Al Pacino) is registered as an alcoholic insomniac cop and a bad husband, who still harasses his ex-wife. When he starts dating Helen (Ellen Barkin), who is a suspect in his homicide case, Frank acts unprofessionally as he compromises his murder case and risks his life. Similarly, in *Basic Instinct* Nick is a fallen cop nicknamed "shooter" for the innocent tourists he shot down in a police operation during which he was allegedly under the influence of cocaine. In *Jade* assistant district attorney David Corelli (David Caruso) is a loner, having lost the only woman he's ever loved (who

⁴⁵ According to Jeffords " [w]hile eighties men may have muscled their way into our hearts, killing anyone who got in the way, nineties men are going to seize us with kindness and declarations that they are changed, 'new men'" ("The Big Switch" 198). For a more extended discussion of the transition from the Reaganite '80s to the Bushean '90s see Jeffords' book *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*.

⁴⁶ Performativity and masquerade are examined in the third part of the thesis in relation to the *femme fatale*.

incidentally is the film's *femme fatale*) to his best friend, while Mike in *The Last Seduction* is what Charlotte O'Sullivan calls a "wimpy hick" who sees Bridget/Wendy (Linda Fiorentino) as his way to "a new set of balls" (173). Referring to male anti-heroes and *femmes fatales*, Stella Bruzzi points out that "these men are shown to embody lack, and so function as Symbolic opposites to the films' images of feminine sophistication" (130). The lack the erotic thriller anti-heroes signify and the fulfilment the *femmes fatales* offer them will be examined in the third part of this thesis.

As these erotic thriller investigators turn more and more anti-heroic and self-destructive, a deteriorating version of what Nick in *Basic Instinct* calls the "average healthy totally fucked up cop", they are offered partners who become their guardian angels and represent common sense in the film's universe. Bequeathed to the erotic thriller by the 1940s cycle of "the 'semi-documentary'/police-procedural thriller",⁴⁷ these partner-figures accompany the heroes in the whodunit quest, making the "lone wolf" version of the *noir* story redundant (Krutnik 204). Also, they complicate the hero's doomed love affair with the dangerous female suspect. Instead of replacing the love story, as was the case in the semi-documentary/police-procedural thrillers (Krutnik 204), the bond between the two investigative partners signifies one more sexual dynamic, usually of a homoerotic nature, picking up on the 1970s "buddy movie" and its "covert exploration of the homoerotic possibilities of male bonding" (Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies* 45). In the '90s erotic thrillers' homo- or hetero-sexual partner-eroticism adds to the films' sexual provocation. So when Gus (George Dzundza), Nick's loyal partner, realizes that Nick is having an affair with Catherine, fearful about Nick's life, he explodes: "You fucked her! God damn dumb son of a bitch, you

⁴⁷ According to Krutnik, the semi-documentary / police-procedural thriller appeared before "the rogue-cop thriller" and paved the way for it. Developed between 1945 and 1948 this cycle of films was influenced by the war newsreel form, the factual basis of which it retained, departing from the fictive aspect of the *noir* world both in terms of content and form. The stories these films told were pulled out of factual sources such as FBI files, newspapers etc. and the ways in which they told them adhered to realist techniques (202).

fucked her! God damn you are one dumb son of a bitch!", to which Nick coolly answers "Next time I'll use a rubber".⁴⁸

2.5. From *Noir* Thrills to Erotic Thrill(er)s

Obviously the erotic thriller has its roots in the Cain stories, which fuelled the first *films noirs* of murderous passions, uniting for the first time sex and death on the Hollywood big screen. As Eddie Muller remarks, "If you want to hold one man responsible for screwing up Hollywood's master plan for matrimonial harmony, blame James M. Cain. In his tales the sacred conjugal bed is soaked with the sweat of illicit sex. Before long, the gleaming white kitchen tiles will be spattered with blood. For Cain, death and sex were inseparable" (56). Talking about the launching of sex instead of love in *Double Indemnity* (the first Cain story that came to the Hollywood screen), Walker remarks that "it is patently sex, not love, that attracts Walter to Phyllis, and it is after *Double Indemnity* that the twin *noir* concerns of murder and desire become focused" (14). Walker observes how important the function of the crime is in these films using the example of another Cain story to illustrate his point. In the filmic version of *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), he claims, it is a murder which doesn't occur in the novel that spins the film's narrative. This murder is united with the sexual dimension that the film's *femme fatale* signifies to formulate one more instance of *noir* fatal desire. As Walker argues,

the film begins with the murder of Monte (Zachary Scott), and an important thread to its narrative is the question of whodunnit. And when the murderer is finally identified, the film may readily be recast as – in part – another

⁴⁸ In a heterosexual context but still as an exchange between two men, a similar dialogue takes place in *Bodily Harm* (James Lemmo, 1995), a DTV erotic thriller. As detectives Rita (Linda Fiorentino) and her partner J.D. (Gregg Henry) arrive at the crime scene at the film's beginning, Oscar (Troy Evans), a colleague of theirs, asks them why it took them so long to get there. J.D. casually answers, "Well, we stopped for a little, you know . . .", to which Oscar asks, "How was it?", and J.D. answers "Great for her, it was O.K. for me".

femme fatale film noir, in which Monte becomes the victim of his passion for Veda (Ann Blyth), the *femme fatale*. (14-15)

The shift from the whodunit detective film tradition to the bleak suspense thriller universe leads us right into the “dark” world of the contemporary erotic thriller. Nino Frank, the man to whom the naming of the *film noir* is attributed, observed back in 1946 that in the passage from the mystery-solving of the detective film to the crime-adventure of the *film noir*, the question of “who committed the crime” shifted to “how the protagonist handles himself” (22).⁴⁹ Once the focus shifts from the crime to the hero as its investigator or instigator (Krutnik 24) or both, the public sphere of crime and the private sphere of the in(ve)stigator merge to produce a filmic universe where “the generic story (of the crime or investigation) and the love story are often (con)fused” (Krutnik 4). Talking about this merging Cain has declared, “Some of the characters in my novels commit murder [. . .] They do it for sex or money or both” (qtd. in Shearer 13). In the case of the erotic thriller, the whodunit mystery is retained and amplified by the dangerous affair between the hero and the *femme fatale*. The mystery of the crime (she’s suspected of) overlaps with the dark sexual desires she awakens in him until sex turns mysterious and potentially criminal as the crime with which these films usually open is sexual. Nino Frank’s question becomes, then, “how the protagonist handles himself against the *femme fatale*”. In 1951 Pierre Duvillars answered this question in relation to *Double Indemnity* and other similar films of the time. The answer we could give regarding contemporary erotic thrillers remains the same: “ ‘She’ [the *femme fatale*] has only to appear for the man, now subjugated, to lose all his vitality, all his will, all his personality”, “The man is trapped like a fly in the spider’s web”, “The man is reduced to silence and is now only a robot. This vamp is a hypnotist” (30).

⁴⁹ James M. Cain, commenting on the popularity of the “so-called hard-boiled crime pictures” led by his own *Double Indemnity* at the expense of the classic detective films, claims that “[t]he public is fed up with the old-fashioned melodramatic type of hokum. You know, the whodunit at which the audience after the second reel starts shouting, ‘We know the murderer. It’s the butler. It’s the butler. It’s the butler’” (qtd. in Shearer 12).

Discussing *Double Indemnity* and the crop of “ ‘dark’ films” that come from similar novels and indicate the resurgence of a new vamp who is more diabolical than ever, Pierre Duvillars writes about the stronger and more lethal version of the vamp to be found in *films noirs* (although he never uses the term *noir*) compared to her thirties ancestor. Marlene Dietrich as Lola Lola in Josef Von Sternberg’s *The Blue Angel* (1930), the paradigmatic vamp of the ‘30s, possesses a sexual energy, characterised by Duvillars as animalistic (31). She destroys men, reducing them to clowns, powerless humiliated patsies.⁵⁰ However, Lola is not portrayed as evil, intent on their destruction. It’s more like their demise is the unavoidable consequence of her active sexuality, signified by her disreputable profession. On the contrary, the sexual strength of the new vamp, embodied by Barbara Stanwyck, is ice cold and calculating and she is characterised by Duvillars as the perfect hypnotiser of men turned-into-murdering puppets (31). According to Duvillars’ essay and the plotline of the prototypical Cain story, *Double Indemnity*,⁵¹ the film’s fatal female uses her sexuality to manipulate her victim into murdering another man (usually her husband) for money. Sex is a weapon in her hands which she uses on her lover, as he afterwards will use some weapon against her husband. Therefore sex is aligned with murder; in Duvillars’ words: “she kisses him and he kills” (32).⁵²

2.6. Women’s Pictures, Fatal Women and Erotic Thrillers

In his study of *film noir*, Eddie Muller distinguishes between male-dominated “crime dramas” located in the public sphere of the city, and female “murder dramas” taking place in the

⁵⁰ When Professor Immanuel Rath (Emil Jannings) decides to marry her he loses his teaching position, his money, and social status and ends up selling her provocative pictures to drunken customers. By the film’s end he’s transformed into an alcoholic bum, forced to go on stage as a clown in front of everyone who knew him as a respectable professor, while Lola has already found a new victim.

⁵¹ According to Duvillars, *Double Indemnity* signposts “the crowning moment of the vamp’s new career in film” (32).

⁵² In the third part of this thesis, the generic overlapping between sex and murder will be investigated in the *Eros-Thanatos* coupling of sexual fantasy that erotic thrillers generate.

private domain of the home. Exhibitors, according to Muller, would classify this latter category of “murder dramas” as “women’s pictures” (55). The leading lady in the ‘40s crop of “murder dramas” was Barbara Stanwyck, the epitome of the devious temptresses, Phyllis Dietrichson, in *Double Indemnity* (1944) (Muller 63). Two more fatal women in two more Cain stories followed Phyllis’s path; Joan Crawford as Mildred in Michael Curtiz’ 1945 *Mildred Pierce* and Lana Turner as Cora in Tay Garnett’s 1946 *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Both scheme their way up the social ladder, each sacrificing (the former metaphorically, the latter literally) a husband to achieve her goal. The strength of both heroines (a Cain-story characteristic), combined with the fact that the heroines are the films’ focus, explain, according to Muller’s study, the label of “women’s pictures” the films were granted (Muller 59).

Investigating the woman’s position in the *noir* narratives, Krutnik claims that once we find a female in the role of the detective – a rarity in the ‘40s *noir* – or the film shifts its focus to the woman and her perception of the world so that “the story of the hero is problematised by the disruptive prominence of the ‘woman’s story’” we find ourselves in a “‘women’s-picture’ / ‘tough’-thriller hybrid” (194-97).⁵³ The few female detectives of the 1940s who were amateurs and acted out of love for their wrongly accused sweethearts have turned professionals in the ‘80s and ‘90s, breeding lots of different women’s investigative hybrids. Rita (Linda Fiorentino) in *Bodily Harm* (1995), Megan (Jamie Lee Curtis) in *Blue Steel* (1990), Clarice (Jodie Foster) in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Alex (Debra Winger) in *Black Widow* (1987), Lottie (Theresa Russell) in *Impulse* (1990), Catherine (Ellen Barkin) in *Mercy* (2000), Amelia (Angelina Jolie) in *The Bone Collector* (1999), M. J. (Holy Hunter) in *Copycat* (1995), and so many others are all officers of the law and the films’ focus, turning the films into women’s film hybrids. On the other hand, following Krutnik, the woman’s film

⁵³ On the 1940s female detectives see Krutnik 194.

enters the erotic-thriller picture every time that the investigated *femme fatale*'s story becomes the male – or female – anti-hero's aim of investigation, or, drawing on its classic *noir* tradition, every time the *femme fatale* gives some story to her lover to push him to murder. Moreover, once the *fatal* story is viewed through female eyes because narrative agency is given to the *femme fatale*, as is the case in John Dahl's *The Last Seduction* (1994), or to the female detective who is attracted to the *fatal(e)* suspect, the erotic thriller turns into a woman's erotic thriller.

The woman's film category is, therefore, important for the study of the erotic thriller since the classic *femme fatale* owes much of her evolution into her stronger, sexier, deadlier and now conventionally getting-away-with-it progeny to the development and hybridisation of the woman's film. Discussing the category of "the woman's film" in relation to drama and melodrama, Steve Neale emphasises the elusiveness of the term in *Genre and Hollywood*. He quotes Basinger's '90s definition of "what consists a 'woman's film'": "A woman's film is a movie that places at the center of its universe a female who is trying to deal with emotional, social, and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that she is a woman" (189). Basinger breaks up the '80s identification between "melodrama" and "woman's film", extending the latter to overlap with any possible genre, even those considered clearly masculine such as the western and gangster films, as long as the result provides a female version of the genre in question (qtd. in Neale 189). Tracing the history of the term in the Hollywood industry and film-criticism, Neale locates the first traceable use of the term "woman's film" in the 1924 review of George Archainbaud's *Christine of the Hungry Heart*, published in the *Film Daily*. Both the film and its review point towards the fact that in the Hollywood industry of the time the term "woman's film" was used to address films "about women whose roles and whose lives were defined in domestic or familial terms" (192). Neale continues by pointing out that it was the term "drama" that was identified with "woman's

film” to describe *Christine of the Hungry Heart* and all the films of the time that dealt with familial issues and the concerns of a married woman’s life (193). On the other hand, the term “melodrama” was employed in reference to the 1910 “serial queen films” which focused on the figure of the active and independent “New Woman” (191).⁵⁴ Neale claims that there is yet no proof of whether this latter type of film has ever been termed a “woman’s film” by classic Hollywood (191).

The term “woman’s film” disappeared in the 1960s (Neale 195) but was revived during the seventies and eighties by feminist film scholars as part of their effort to re-examine female issues in classical Hollywood films of the ‘40s and ‘50s. Molly Haskell in 1974 defined the “woman’s film” as “a film that has a woman at the centre of its story” and established four critically-generated subgenres which extended over already existing genres (qtd. in Altman 73). Haskell’s work, which found a lot of followers among the feminist film scholars of the ‘80s on both sides of the Atlantic, gave the “woman’s film” cycle generic status, and thus led to the dropping of the scare quotes in the late ‘80s when, in her book-length study, Mary Ann Doane solidified the “woman’s film” category around a female audience (Altman 74-76).⁵⁵ In her influential book *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s*, Mary Ann Doane defines the “woman’s film” in the following words:

The label “woman’s film” refers to a genre of Hollywood films produced from the silent era through the 1950s and early ‘60s but most heavily concentrated and most popular in the 1930s and ‘40s. The films deal with a female protagonist and often appear to allow her significant access to point of view structures and the enunciative level of the filmic discourse. They

⁵⁴ Neale claims that scholars have misidentified “melodrama” with “women’s films” although throughout the classic times melodrama was used to signify “action, adventure, and thrills; not ‘feminine’ genres and the woman’s films but war films, adventure films, horror films, and thrillers, genres traditionally thought of as, if anything, ‘male’” (qtd. in Altman 72).

⁵⁵ Altman specifies that it’s not that Doane “was by herself capable of turning a motley assortment of old films into a widely recognized genre” but rather he recognizes in her book her own desire to establish the generic status of the woman’s film (75).

treat problems defined as ‘female’ (problems revolving around domestic life, the family, children, self-sacrifice, and the relationship between women and production vs. that between women and reproduction), *and, most crucially, are directed toward a female audience.* (3 emphasis added)

The female audience became the link leading to a misidentification in the ‘80s between family melodrama – misperceived as coterminous with “melodrama” – and the woman’s film, “eventually styling the woman’s film and family melodrama as the very core of melodrama as a genre” (Altman 77).⁵⁶

Meanwhile, Annette Kuhn extended the classical woman’s film into the “New Women’s Cinema” to talk about contemporary Hollywood. Examining a group of 1970s films revolving around strong and independent women-characters that were not conventionally attractive but were striving towards self-discovery, Kuhn related the “new women’s film” to the women’s movement and presented both the films and their audience as sharing, at least partly, feminist sensibilities (*Women’s Pictures* 135, 139). Through the link of feminism the ‘70s independent working woman turned into the ‘80s new career woman and the ‘90s action heroine⁵⁷ and psycho-*femme*, driving the new women’s cinema back to its melodramatic heritage of the “serial queen films” at the same time that melodrama in its – now conventional – form of family-melodrama has also been informed by feminist concerns in films such as Ridley Scott’s *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and Alan Rudolph’s low-budget *Mortal Thoughts* (1991) where women stick up for each other and respond to male assault with murder.⁵⁸

The icon of the independent woman who is in command of her sexuality and reproductive ability, bequeathed from the second wave of feminism and reflected in the ‘70s

⁵⁶ In her 1984 *Screen* article, “Women’s Genres”, Kuhn examines the woman’s aspect of film melodrama, as inclusive of the “woman’s picture”, and the TV soap opera by dividing the feminine spectator these films address and constitute from the socio-economical body of the female audience that pleasurably consumes them. See *The Sexual Subject* 301-11.

⁵⁷ For the rise of action-heroines in the late ‘80s and ‘90s Hollywood cinema see Tasker’s *Spectacular Bodies* 132-52 and *Working Girls* 67-88.

⁵⁸ For the relation between feminism, melodrama and the woman’s film see Tasker’s *Working Girls* 139-60.

“women’s films” such as Alan J. Pakula’s *Klute* (1971) and Richard Brooks’ *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977),⁵⁹ is grafted on to the classic figure of the ‘40s *femme fatale*, adding to her strength.⁶⁰ The ‘80s answer to the ‘70s independent working girl is twofold; on the one hand we have films that depict the ‘80s backlash against women.⁶¹ Charles Shyer’s *Baby Boom* (1987) and Adrian Lyne’s *Fatal Attraction* (1987), both huge financial successes, are Reaganite cautionary tales of what happens to career women who ignore the ticking of their biological clock.⁶² Simultaneously with Hollywood’s blatant backlash declaration that “the best single woman is a dead one” (Falludi 152), a new crop of strong, sexy and deadly-as-ever *femmes fatales* began to populate the ‘80s. Matty (Kathleen Turner) from *Body Heat*, Cora (Jessica Lange) from the remake of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and Catherine (Theresa Russell) from *Black Widow* are representative of the ‘80s new breed of fatal women. Moving to the ‘90s, the new *femme fatale* proliferated on the contemporary New Hollywood screen. So, Janey Place’s “spider woman” of the ‘40s is back to stay and she doesn’t only dwell in crime films or “weepies” any more.⁶³ As Helen Birch announces, “In recent years, the rampaging female has become a new cliché of Hollywood cinema, stabbing and shooting her way to notoriety in a range of popular films from *Thelma and Louise* to *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, *Basic Instinct* and *Single White Female*” (1). She is what Julianne Pidduck has termed the “fatal femme”,⁶⁴ *femme fatale*’s evolved offspring, sexier and deadlier than ever

⁵⁹ Although a woman’s film in the sense that the film revolves around the existential drama of a female character, I agree with Roger Ebert’s view of *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* as “a cautionary lesson” of what happens to promiscuous women who sleep around with strangers. See Ebert’s review of the film at <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19770101/REVIEWS/701010309/1023>

⁶⁰ In *Klute* Jane Fonda impersonates a call-girl and aspiring actress, Bree Daniels, who acts her sexual performances. In *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* Diane Keaton plays Theresa, a schoolteacher who works with mute-deaf kids during the day, while at night she cruises the bars looking for a good time. Having had her ovary tubes blocked so that no pregnancy can occur, Theresa enjoys carefree sex with no emotional attachments and experiments with alcohol and drags.

⁶¹ As Falludi attests “Hollywood in the 1980s was simply not very welcoming to movie projects that portrayed independent women as healthy, lusty people without punishing them for their pleasure” (165).

⁶² In *Baby Boom* a career woman, J. C. Wyatt (Diane Keaton), discovers the pleasures of motherhood, while in *Fatal Attraction* another career woman, Alex (Glen Close), turns psychotic when refused these same pleasures.

⁶³ “Weepies” is another term for melodrama, indicating the emotional excess created in the spectator.

⁶⁴ See Julianne Pidduck’s “The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme: (Dis)Figuring Feminism, Family, Irony, Violence” 64-72.

before. Having given birth to numerous hybrids, she is everywhere. Even the comforting maternal figure of the average suburban householder (played by Kathleen Turner) in John Waters' black-comedy-crime hybrid *Serial Mom* (1994) has turned fatal, killing anyone who threatens her picture-perfect family.⁶⁵ Similarly, Vivica A. Fox impersonates an agent-mom in Quentin Tarantino's 2003 *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*. While waiting for her little girl to come home from school, she engages in a lethal fight with another trained murderer (played by Uma Thurman) who seeks revenge. Female fatality becomes part of the contemporary film's narrative and/or its twist or is simply part of the film's *mise-en-scène*, a hovering potential used as a successful marketing ploy.

2.7. Action-Heroines Turn (*Femmes*) *Fatales*

Fatality is the core of the action heroine of the '80s and '90s, whose sexual portrayal "compensates", in Tasker's words, for her activity and aggression (*Spectacular Bodies* 19), so the deadlier she gets the sexier she needs to become. Within this frame, it doesn't seem so coincidental that all the female agents in *Charlie's Angels* – a highly successful TV action series played in the US from 1976-1981 – were models.⁶⁶ Likewise, another ex-model, Lindsay Wagner, played Jessie in another popular action TV show, *The Bionic Woman*, running on American television around the same time as *Charlie's Angels* (1976-1977). Jessie was a beautiful-woman-turned-superwoman after having bionic implants to replace her

⁶⁵ Incidentally, Kathleen Turner has incarnated the paradigmatic *femme fatale* of the '80s in Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat*, the first postmodern *neo-noir* and predecessor (as already seen in the previous chapter) along with Bob Rafelson's re-make of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* of the '90s erotic thrillers.

⁶⁶ Jaclyn Smith as Kelly, the only one to stay for the entire five seasons of the show, was a shampoo model. Kate Jackson as Sabrina, a former Max Factor and Revlon Model, was replaced in 1979 by another model, Shelley Hack as Tiffany. Hack only lasted a year and in 1980 gave her place for the show's last season to another ravishing model, the green-eyed Tanya Roberts in the part of agent Julie. Finally, Farrah Fawcett, who impersonated Jill in the first triad of the show, was only selected by the show's producers, Aaron Spelling and Leonard Goldberg, after posing for a sexy poster. The poster sold around 8.000000 copies and Fawcett got signed up for the show. Her replacement in 1977, Cheryl Ladd as Kris, was like everyone else an ex-model. For information on the series see the IMDb database in <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073972/>

damaged – due to an accident – body-parts.⁶⁷ The bionic limbs were the perfect excuse for zooms on Jessie's body as she was preparing for action. The sexy-look of the '80s action-heroines gets sexier and deadlier in the '90s as the figure of the action-heroine turns *fatale*.

It was Sigourney Weaver's Ripley in the *Alien* series that gave birth to the numerous Hollywood sexy action heroines that populated the '90s. As Hal Hinson remarks in his review of *Alien*³ (the third in the series), "the butch glam queen she [Sigourney Weaver] inaugurated in 'Alien' has by now become a familiar type; like the Great Mother Alien in the second film, she has spawned a whole generation of Terminator dames" (n. pag.). The tomboy heroine of Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) whose femaleness we need to be reminded of by seeing her in underwear, turns maternal in James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986) when she cares for a little girl who's lost her mother to the aliens, and then in David Fincher's *Alien*³ (1992) she turns sexual by implication when she discovers that she's pregnant with a queen alien embryo. Another '90s action-player, Linda Hamilton's Sarah Connor in James Cameron's *Terminator 2* (1991), presents us with what Tasker calls a "muscular" body in accordance with the demands of the '90s body-culture that exchanges soft curves for muscles (*Spectacular Bodies* 141). Hamilton's toned-up body, accentuated by the tight sleeveless tops she's wearing, marks its status as weapon. Meanwhile her long hair and her role as mother further eroticise her body as stiff and youthful, untainted by the vagaries of pregnancy. A '90s example of the action-heroine overlapping with the *femme fatale* is Geena Davis' Samantha/Charlie in Renny Harlin's *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996). When Samantha, the low-profile schoolteacher and suburban mom, experiences a blow on the head, flashes of another life come to her. Gradually she gets her memory back, realizes her past identity as Charlie, a government agent/assassin, and sets out to revenge her "death". In her investigation of her past she's assisted by Mitch (Samuel L. Jackson), a private investigator she's hired to help her. Her identity transformation

⁶⁷ For information on the series see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073965/>

– from Samantha to Charlie – involves a physical transformation as well to mark her as both deadly and sexy. Thus, the warm, earthy and motherly brunette with the long casual skirts and sweaters turns into her *femme fatale* double: blonde, sexy and deadly. As Tasker points out in her analysis of the film, “In her aggressive, confident Charlie persona, Davis’ character bleaches her hair, wears heavy make-up, and indulges in hard liquor and smoking before making a pass at Mitch in their hotel room” (*Working Girls* 86). Finally, one should not forget the sensual Angelina Jolie and her sexy Bond-like title-agent in Simon West’s *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) and its sequel, Jan de Bont’s *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life* (2003). Jolie’s strong athletic body of perfect proportions, her cat-like eyes and her luscious lips, blended with her agent skills, are all part of her weaponry against evil. This combination of the hot agent is parodied in Doug Liman’s *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* (2005) where Jolie impersonates Jane Smith, a secret assassin juggling a double life. She is a sexy wife who orchestrates hits between dinner parties and ordinary family life. In one of these hit-operations she appears in the conventional *femme fatale* attire to be seen also in the film’s poster: sexy black long dress, gun inside garter.

Obviously, there is no room for the action heroine in the erotic thriller, since her direct narrative agency would immediately turn her into one of the boys, the male anti-hero(es) who are involved in cat-and-mouse games with the film’s scheming *femmes fatale(s)*. This is why, when there is a female investigator, there is immediate need for an *homme fatal* for the erotic thriller to exist. In James Lemmo’s *Bodily Harm* (1995) Linda Fiorentino, only a year after her impersonation of Bridget, the ultimate contemporary self-conscious *femme fatale*, in John Dahl’s *The Last Seduction* (1994), and months away from her Trina/Jade persona, the “unintended” *femme fatale* of William Friedkin’s *Jade* (1995),⁶⁸ crosses to the other side to

⁶⁸ I borrow the term from Elizabeth Ward’s essay: “The Unintended *Femme Fatale*: The File on *Thelma Jordon* and *Pushover*” where she discusses the impact of *Double Indemnity* on the *noir* films of the time by showing how the subsequent films that both Stanwyck and MacMurray made only resounded their *Double Indemnity* roles.

play detective Rita Cates. Rita is the anti-heroine detective who is torn between her duty to investigate impartially the murder cases she's been assigned and her irresistible attraction to the murders' prime suspect and an old flame of hers, Sam MacKeon (Daniel Baldwin), the film's sinful and sexy *homme fatal* (Sam as a paradigmatic *homme fatal* is analysed in chapter nine).

Another reason why no action heroine can become an actual *femme fatale* is because the main difference between the two is the means through which they get what they want. They both finally do, but where the action heroine uses her body muscles and her skill in martial arts or gun firing, the *femme fatale* uses her sexual prowess. On the other hand, the *femme fatale* is a very efficient killer herself; Phyllis (Barbara Stanwyck) shoots and lethally wounds her lover in *Double Indemnity*, Barbara (Bonnie Bedelia) murders her husband's mistress in *Presumed Innocent*, Catherine (Sharon Stone) is a masterly user of ice-picks in *Basic Instinct*, Bridget (Linda Fiorentino) poisons her husband to death with a spray in *The Last Seduction*, while Rebecca (Madonna) murders her lover by getting him to have sex on cocaine and a heart condition. However, sex is always part of the murder picture. Phyllis gets Walter to kill for her through sex, Barbara stages the murder as rape, Catherine ice-picks her lover during ejaculation, Bridget uses sex to find her fall-guy on whom she'll pin her husband's murder, and Madonna, the new *fatal femme* of the '90s, is herself the weapon of murder as it is through strenuous sex that she murders her rich lover.

Finally, the summoning of the same players for both types of roles corroborates the fact that despite their differences, the action heroine and the *femme fatale* are overlapping figures that both inform the formulation of the deadly female of contemporary Hollywood cinema. Angelina Jolie is a prominent example of this. In between the two *Lara Croft* films and her action heroine title persona, she played a classic *femme fatale* in Michael Cristofer's

Original Sin (2001), a remake of François Truffaut's *La Sirène du Mississippi* (1969).⁶⁹ Then in 2004 in D. J. Caruso's *Taking Lives* she played a detective who, in search of a serial killer, is lured by a psychopathic *homme fatal* (played by Ethan Hawk). To capture him she has to turn *fatale* herself, so she uses her sexuality, pretends to be pregnant as a result of their affair and thus frames him. It is this overlapping of agent and *femme fatale* that is spoofed in her subsequent title role in *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* a year later. And Sharon Stone, two years before she turned into the quintessential erotic thriller *femme fatale* in Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct* (1992), incarnated a *femme fatale*-action heroine hybrid playing Lori, Arnold Swartzenegger's wife in Verhoeven's sci-fi action-thriller *Total Recall* (1990). Lori is an agent who is paid to play wife to the film's hero, a former agent whose memory has been transplanted so that he forgets things that could bring down the Mars government. It is only when her sexual charms are not enough any more to keep him in place, as he starts getting his memory back, that she becomes an action heroine and tries to stop him with physical violence. As the *fatale* look and the transgressive sexuality it implies have become part of the action heroine persona, the latter's strength and talent for survival have also been incorporated in the new *femme fatale*.

2.8. Psycho / Avenging *Femmes Fatales*

When asked what is a *femme fatale*, Rebecca Romijn Stamos, the leading actress of Brian De Palma's *Femme Fatale*, answered, "It's a woman with balls",⁷⁰ reiterating the image of the *femme fatale* as a phallic female whose standard pearl-handled revolver inside her garter, or purse, redeems her castrated status (Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine* 157).⁷¹ In opposition,

⁶⁹ Truffaut's film was based on a novel of the hardboiled tradition, Cornel Woolrich's *Waltz Into Darkness*.

⁷⁰ Interview with Rebecca Romijn Stamos in the extras of the DVD form of *Femme Fatale*.

⁷¹ The female equivalent of the Byronic Hero, the Fatal Woman, becomes established as a form much later than her male counterpart in the works of Gautier and Flaubert, reaching full development in Swinburne and getting rediscovered by Walter Pater (Praz, *The Romantic Agony* 210). Mario Praz, discussing the equivalence between the Byronic Hero and the Fatal Woman highlights the fact that "the function of the flame which attracts and burns is exercised, in the first half of the [nineteenth] century, by the Fatal Man (the Byronic hero), in the second

though, to the reassuring image of the a-sexual phallic “Final Girl” of the horror film, who uses her “prosthetic phallus” to allay the fear of castration that the monstrous (usually male) killer represents by dispatching him in the end,⁷² the *femme fatale* uses her surplus of sexuality – her phallus – to castrate her men (lovers and husbands) and thus becomes a threatening figure. The weapon she employs (gun, knife, ice-pick, bomb) is a misrecognition of her true phallus, her sexual body, which attracts, attacks, and kills.⁷³ In Lawrence Kasdan’s *Body Heat*, Ned highlights the power of Matty’s body, when he tells her

Ned: Maybe you shouldn't dress like that.

Matty: This is a blouse and a skirt. I don't know what you're talking about.

Ned: You shouldn't wear that body.

It is the *femme fatale*’s body that is deadly, and sex is her weapon. That is why she is called a black widow. When Alex (Debra Winger) gives Catherine (Theresa Russell) – her suspect for the serial killings of rich men whom she marries and then kills – a black widow brooch as a wedding gift in *Black Widow*, Catherine teasingly observes, “she mates and she kills”, a line which would become the film’s promotional tagline and the synopsis of the nature of the *femme fatale*.

The ‘90s *femme fatale* is a psychotic, who not only kills but relishes it. She is a psycho *femme fatale*. Killing is not only a necessary means to a profitable end, it is what she does best. She is a professional both in sex and murder. Matty, the new *femme fatale* who re-started the *fatale* game in *Body Heat*, coldly does what she has to do to get away with the money. She even unhesitatingly murders her best friend, the real Matty, whose identity she has usurped as part of her master plan to con everybody. So, in the end it turns out that Matty Walker is

half by the Fatal Woman; the moth destined for sacrifice is in the first case the woman, in the second the man” (*The Romantic Agony* 216).

⁷² See Carol Clover’s “Her Body Himself” in her *Men Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* 21-64.

⁷³ *Femmes (fatales)* as occupants of the Lacanian female subject position and their relation to the phallus and phallic *jouissance* are discussed in detail in both the second and third part of this thesis.

simply a mask that Mary Ann Simpson put on and then simply took off, remaining underneath a free New Woman (the psychoanalytic implications of veiling and masquerade in erotic thrillers are examined in the third part of this thesis). Catherine in *Basic Instinct* is a writer whose life inspires her crime novels (her research involves sexual relations with her criminal subjects) and vice versa (the murder that spins the film's world is a copy-paste of one of her novels), while Bridget in *The Last Seduction* demonstrates her talent for murder by arranging a murder contract on some allegedly straying husband, murdering the detective who trailed her and finally murdering her husband when her lover proves irresolute. Meanwhile they all use their sexual expertise to get what they want or get men where they want them. As Kate Stables points out, while the classic *femme fatale* signified a "sexual presence", her '90s sister "is redefined as a sexual performer" (172-73). The ultimate personification of the *femme fatale* as a sex professional is Madonna's Rebecca in *Body of Evidence*. As Rebecca bluntly announces to her astounded lovers whom she duped and manipulated in order to get acquitted of the murder charges for the death of Andrew, her rich lover, "I fucked you, I fucked Andrew, I fucked Frank. That's what I do, I fuck. And it made me eight million dollars".

The ambivalence of the psycho *femme fatale*'s murderous potential feeds off and into the ambiguity and suspense of the erotic thriller universe. It is her absolute control of herself and her perverse urges that qualify her as an alluring instead of threatening icon, her monstrosity always perfectly camouflaged under her impeccable beauty and sex appeal (to be further analyzed in chapter nine). She is what Wilson calls an "omega character", an "overcontrolled psychopath" who suppresses her impulses and uses her sex appeal to weave her web around her victim (99).⁷⁴ Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct*, Catherine in *Black*

⁷⁴ By contrast, "undercontrolled psychopaths" find it impossible to control their violent streak and once entangled in an unleash of violence they need to take credit for it regardless of the consequences their actions could bring on them (Wilson 95). Usually this version of the overt psychopath is embodied by male characters in action films with the exception of Mona Demarcov (Lena Olin) in the erotic thriller *Romeo is Bleeding* who is very different from the conventional *femme fatale* in her depiction as an almost inhuman monstrous unstoppable killing machine. See Wilson 94-98.

Widow, Matty Walker in *Body Heat*, and Tracy (Nicole Kidman) in *Malice* epitomise the “overcontrolled psychopath” in the way they all carefully suppress their feelings and urges, eliminate their past and (re)structure themselves (and in the case of Tracy even their bodies) to get what they want.⁷⁵ “The suppression is not perfect however” (Wilson 98), so the thrill this type of fatal female poses partly stems from the form her violent outbreak will take and whether she’ll be able to control it and get away with it. “Murder is not like smoking” Catherine tells Nick, “You can quit”. And although she doesn’t, she controls her killing impulse in *Basic Instinct* as skilfully as she tricks the lie-detecting machine into proving her innocent.

The psycho *femme fatale*’s flip side is what I call the psychotic *femme* who discards her *fatale* masquerade and materializes her murderous potential in a raving outbreak against the Symbolic world that has castrated her. She is the female psychopath, a monstrous “lone woman who murders to possess what has been denied her: family, husband, lover, child” (Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine* 122). Alex in *Fatal Attraction*, Peyton (Rebecca De Mornay) in *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (Curtis Hanson, 1992), and Hedy (Jennifer Jason Leigh) in *Single White Female* (Barbet Schroeder, 1992) kill to retrieve what has been taken from them. It is the psychotic *femme*’s castrated nature that according to Creed marks her monstrosity, making her a despicable creature that the film’s cosmos finally mercilessly aborts (*The Monstrous Feminine* 122). By contrast, the psycho *femme fatale* whom Creed acknowledges as castrating instead of castrated, is, along with the rape-revenge victim, a sympathetic figure who is rarely punished (Creed 123). In chapter nine I will return to this point made by Creed to show that it is not her castrated nature that makes the psychotic *femme* unappealing. Rather, the fantasies she generates in the way she materializes her

⁷⁵ In Harold Becker’s *Malice* Tracy sacrifices her ovaries for her *fatale* schemes.

monstrosity are too threatening, as opposed to the ones that both the psycho *femme fatale* and the female avenger provoke.

The convergence of sex and death marks, according to Jacinda Read, the overlapping between the rape-revenge film and the erotic thriller, as aggressive women kill men during or with sex (41-42). Rape, missing from the erotic thriller, is often exchanged for some other form of male abuse to justify female violence (Read 43-44),⁷⁶ however superficially. Therefore, both Bridget (*The Last Seduction*) and Laure (*Femme Fatale*) are slapped before they con their partners and disappear with the money. Matty (*Body Heat*) is patronized by her husband Edmund (Richard Crenna), who misrecognises her as foolish and uninterested in serious “male” business matters.⁷⁷ Finally, Heather (*Final Analysis*) is shown to be sexually forced by her husband before she murders him, while we also learn that she murdered her father because he was raping her.

Reading the erotic thriller *femme fatale* through the rape-revenge tradition, Jacinda Read views what she calls “the erotic female avenger” as “a product of the negotiations that occur when the rape-revenge structure is mapped over the genre of film noir” (48). Along these lines the eroticisation of the *femme fatale*’s deadliness, as well as her getting-away-with-it in the erotic thriller tradition, also stem from the rape-revenge films, which were, according to Read, the first to eroticize female violence and almost never punished their vengeful victims of rape (48). However, while rape-revenge narratives present the transformation of the initially “chaste or dowdy female victim” into a strong, sexual avenger (Read 181), the *femme fatale* is already transformed as the film begins, so maybe her sexual and criminal

⁷⁶ Read bases her argument on Christine Holmlund’s discussion of 1980s “deadly dolls” films in their eagerness to present female violence as justified. See “A Decade of Deadly Dolls: Hollywood and the Woman Killer” 127-51.

⁷⁷ Edmund [to Ned]: We have an interest in a few places along the shore. For the land, you know. Someday. But don’t try to explain that to her.
Matty [to Ned]: I’m too dumb. A woman, you know. . .

ambivalence in the locus of the erotic thriller could be read as a sign of her long-violently-repressed plain-and-nice-girl part.

The revelation of the *femme fatale*'s psychopathology (the psychotic *femme* she breeds in her) leads the erotic thriller to an overlap with the horror genre and its sub-genres, the slasher and the stalker film, opening up the erotic thriller to different possibilities of realising the threat which sets the narrative world of suspended thrill going. A good example of overlapping generic lines is Adrian Lyne's mega-hit *Fatal Attraction*, a film which opens as a social problem film of male infidelity, turns into an erotic thriller of dangerous passions and becomes a horror film in which the monstrous mistress is dispatched by the wife as Final Girl.

2.9. The "Paranoid Woman's Films", the Gothic Tradition, and *Homme-Fatal Erotic Thrillers*

One of the cycles that Doane discusses as part of the 1940s woman's film is what she calls the "paranoid woman's films".⁷⁸ Defining this category, Doane says that "the paranoia [is] evinced in the formulaic repetition of a scenario in which the wife invariably fears that her husband is planning to kill her – the institution of marriage is haunted by murder. Frequently, the violence is rationalized as the effect of an overly hasty marriage; the husband is unknown or only incompletely known by the woman" (123).⁷⁹ According to Doane, the paranoid woman's film cycle – beginning with Hitchcock's adaptation of Daphne Du Maurier's novel *Rebecca* in 1940 – appropriates gothic elements to produce narratives of persecution "infiltrated by the conventions of the film noir and the horror film" (124-25). What is of

⁷⁸ Walker calls this cycle of films "the persecuted-wife cycle". See 17-18.

⁷⁹ Discussing the conventional scenario of female gothic films Diane Waldman says: "a young and inexperienced woman meets a handsome older man to whom she is alternately attracted and repelled. After a whirlwind courtship (seventy-two hours in Lang's *Secret Beyond the Door*, two weeks is more typical), she marries him. After returning to the ancestral mansion of one of the pair, the heroine experiences a series of bizarre and uncanny incidents, open to ambiguous interpretation, revolving around the question of whether or not the Gothic male really loves her. She begins to suspect that he may be a murderer" (qtd. in Cowie, "*Film Noir* and Women" 165n59).

major importance in this group of films is the unclear point of view attributed to the usually troubled heroine, leading to “the ambiguity and suspense of whether the wife is merely imagining it or whether her husband really does have murderous designs on her” (Elsaesser qtd. in Doane 124).⁸⁰

Once the female character is placed in the position of the vulnerable and innocent victim, the threat, embodied by the male character, turns him into a Byronic Hero, the film’s *homme fatal*.⁸¹ A key player in the erotic thriller, the *homme fatal* is dark, mysterious, and sexy, seducing the film’s heroine, who cannot resist him, into a sexually perverse and dangerous affair (the sexual fantasies that the *homme fatal* offers are explored in chapter nine). The erotic thriller takes up the paranoid woman’s films’ storyline and revises it, prioritising the hero’s dark sexuality, which hovers around his potential deadliness signified by the whodunit dimension of his enigmatic past. The *homme-fatal* erotic thrillers usually push the suspected crime back into the past – unless they are courtroom-drama hybrids – turning it into a deadly secret which is then fetishised and obsessively sought by the film’s heroine inside the house, hidden somewhere far from her access. These elements are all part of the paranoid woman’s film tradition. As Doane points out, the woman in this cycle of films assumes an investigative position as she attempts to unlock the secret of some room beyond her access (134) in a house which is “large and forbidding”, a mansion or a castle (124).

⁸⁰ As Cowie very perceptively points out, according to the conventions of the suspense thriller underlying the *noir* element of these women’s films, the questioning of the female heroine’s perception is necessary for the establishment of a suspenseful enigma to stir the film’s narrative reality. See “*Film Noir* and Women” 137.

⁸¹ The roots of the Byronic hero are to be found in Gothic literature and specifically in Ann Radcliffe’s work. According to Abrams and Stilling, Radcliffe’s “mysterious and solitary *homme fatal*” mainly developed in her novel *The Italian* in 1797 (“The Romantic Period” 17). He is a perverse villain-hero whose perverseness turns directly sexual in Matthew Gregory Lewis’ novel, *The Monk*, of the same year. The hero of *The Monk* “brings to the fore the elements of diabolism, sensuality, and sadistic perversion which were pungent but submerged components in Radcliffe’s Gothic formula” (Abrams and Stilling, “The Romantic Period” 17). Informing Byron’s work, the gothic villain-hero then united with other literary figures (the Greek Titan Prometheus, Milton’s Satan, Ahasuerus, and Faust) and the Byronic Hero was born (Abrams and Stiling, “Introduction to *Manfred*” 538). The doomed-by-sin, guilt-ridden Byronic Hero first appeared in Byron’s first canto of *Childe Harold* in 1812 and gradually developed in Byron’s later work, getting all the more dark and mysterious (“The Romantic Period: Topics” n. pag.). Manfred, the title hero of Byron’s first dramatic work, written in 1817, is considered to be “the author’s supreme representation of the Byronic Hero” (Abrams and Stilling, “Introduction to *Manfred*” 538).

Therefore, “[h]orror, which should by rights be external to domesticity, infiltrates the home” (Doane 136), leading to its defamiliarization and transformation into a site of danger.

Meanwhile, in the *femme-fatale* erotic thrillers the male anti-hero also performs an investigative role but a formal one, usually as a law representative. He is the police detective investigating the crime, such as Kyle in John Bailey’s *China Moon* (1994) and Frank in Alan Pakula’s *Sea of Love* (1989); the lawyer who, defending the *femme fatale*, searches for the truth like Frank in Uli Edel’s *Body of Evidence* (1993); the psychiatrist who finds her a lawyer and uses the medical system to acquit her, like Dr. Isaac (Richard Gere) in Phil Joanou’s *Final Analysis* (1992); or the state prosecutor like Rusty in Alan Pakula’s *Presumed Innocent*, who in his search for the *femme fatale*’s – and his ex-lover’s – murderer becomes implicated in a crime he didn’t commit.

At this point I want to give a brief analysis of Kaige Chen’s *Killing Me Softly* (2002) as paradigmatic of the overlapping between the paranoid woman’s tradition and the erotic thriller.⁸² Adam (Joseph Fiennes) is the sexy mountaineer whom Alice (Heather Graham) falls for as soon as their eyes first meet incidentally on the street, the moment their fingers touch in their mutual pressing of the traffic lights button. Moments later they are having wild sex at Adam’s place, within days Alice moves in with him and before long accepts to marry him. The film’s plot follows all the conventions of its gothic tradition. Narrated by Alice in 1st-person flashback narration, *Killing Me Softly* exhibits its *noir* roots as Alice confesses to the police detective the story of sexual perversion she’s shared with her husband whom she accuses of murder.⁸³ As the gothic-like fleeing-from-her-husband heroine reconstructs the maze of events for the police detective, trying to convince him that she is in danger, she acknowledges how little she knows her husband – which means that he could be capable of

⁸² *Killing Me Softly*, Chen Kaige’s English-language debut, received very bad reviews for its lack of originality, ludicrous full-of-clichés scenario, and bad performances. See Philip Kemp, David Rooney, Jo Berry, James Christopher and Nigel Andrews.

⁸³ For information on confessional flashback narration see Andrew Spicer’s *Film Noir* 75-78.

anything. Alice tells the police detective: “People have stories: you and I ... everyone. But I couldn’t tell you one complete story about my husband. Perfectly everything I knew about him came from a book or a newspaper or shreds of information dropped by other people”. Alice’s desire to learn more about her husband’s enigmatic past turns into an obsession as she tries to reconstruct this past from bits and pieces of information: letters that he keeps locked in a closet (in accordance with the gothic tradition). Once she discovers the existence of an ex-lover, she tries to find her but learns that she’s been reported missing for the past eight months. Going to the woman’s home, she has a look at her album and is shocked to discover that the last photo ever taken of her was a nude one outside Adam’s family church, identical to the one Adam took of her on their wedding day. The similarity of the two photographs activates what according to Doane “is a crucial and repetitive insistence, in these films, on the existence in the past of a woman who once occupied the place of the female protagonist and whose fate – often a violent or unexplained death – the protagonist seems destined to share” (142).

Alice never doubts Adam’s guilt so through her eyes Adam is seen as a murderer. But is he really? According to the paranoid woman film’s tradition, Alice is not what we would call a reliable narrator;⁸⁴ she’s depicted as impressionable, marrying a complete stranger and then obsessing over his past. However, she never directly asks him anything but is rather manipulative, acquiring false identities as she secretly searches into his past. Alice lacks any evidence proving Adam’s guilt, so, after she finishes her story, the police detective, representing the objective eye, underlines the fact that she accuses a mountaineer who has only recently saved five people: “You’re accusing a hero Mrs. Talis and you have absolutely no evidence”, he reminds her.

⁸⁴ On the subject of the female heroine’s narrative agency see Krutnik 195.

On the other hand, Adam is the perfect *homme fatal*. He's mysterious and secretive, exhibits an animalistic sexuality and a tendency to violence. At one point, jealous of the possibility that Alice could have a lover, he ties her on the kitchen table and, grabbing her by the neck, tells her: "I could break your neck, I love you so much".⁸⁵ Sex, love and violence are all interlocked in the S&M sexual games they play, and the erotic thriller deadly underside of Adam's passion for Alice is illustrated in the way he proposes marriage to her. As Alice is mugged by a street-bum, Adam, who happens to be around, hunts the mugger down and almost beats him to death. He then passionately grabs Alice, promising that he'll never let anything happen to her and proposes marriage with, what David Rooney in his review of the film calls, "a blood-smeared kiss" (38).

Reviving the conventions of its gothic tradition, *Killing Me Softly* reveals the murders of both Adam's ex-lovers to be related to a family secret, an incestuous adolescent coupling between Adam and his sister Deborah (Natasha McElhone). The incest is not forced, however, but is presented as the result of a mutual act, part of foolish children's play.⁸⁶ Although by the film's end Adam is exonerated once it is revealed that his sister was responsible for the murders, Adam and Alice do not end up together. Breaking the '40s tradition of Hitchcock's *Rebecca* and Fritz Lang's *Secret Beyond the Door* (1948),⁸⁷ where the film's *homme fatal* is finally proved with his wife's support to be not *fatal* at all, Adam and Alice are separated by their lack of trust, his last words to her being: "I just thought you had to trust me".

⁸⁵ This has been the film's most notorious line establishing the film's absurdity and kitsch-ness. See Jo Berry, Philip Kemp, and James Christopher.

⁸⁶ Usually in most gothic stories a villain figure persecutes a beautiful and pure maiden inside the secret passages of some castle or mansion with incestuous intentions. See Mario Praz's "Introductory Essay" of the *Three Gothic Novels* 33 and also Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* as an exemplary gothic story in which Manfred, the villain-hero tries to impose himself on Isabella, his would-be daughter-in-law after his son's death.

⁸⁷ *Secret Beyond the Door* is a very good example of the influence of popular Freudianism in *film noir*, as the revelation of the hero's guilty secret and his own innocence is achieved through the psychoanalysis his wife offers him.

Not all *homme fatal* erotic thrillers echo their gothic roots so explicitly. Dropping the paranoid-woman's part, James Dearden's *A Kiss Before Dying* (1991) transforms Jonathan (Matt Dillon), the film's *homme fatal*, into an evil agent of horror, a psychotic male who kills for money. In Bob Swaim's *Masquerade* (1988), the *homme fatal* cliché of the mysterious sexy male is questioned. Playing on the concept of deceiving appearances, the film distinguishes between *fatal* appearance and *fatal* being. Although, it is Tim (Rob Lowe), the ambitious and sexy local skipper, who is suspected of intending to murder his rich and gullible wife Olivia (Meg Tilly), it turns out that Mike (Doug Savant), the local policeman and Olivia's greedy teenage boyfriend, is the film's real *homme fatal*. Another possible twist of the *homme fatal* erotic thriller ingredients is illustrated by Robert Zemeckis' *What Lies Beneath* (2000). Focusing on the paranoid woman too much, Zemeckis veils the *homme fatal* and turns him into an unsuspected *homme fatal* whose fatality, suppressed throughout the film, is unleashed in the end as monstrosity. The casting of Harrison Ford, the all-American family man, in the role of the film's *homme fatal* further intensified the film's intended shock effect.

2.10. Courtroom-Drama / Erotic-Thriller Hybrids

Once the crime – or part of it – is examined inside a court of law with the *homme* or *femme fatal(e)* in the role of the defendant and the film's anti-hero/-heroine acting as a law representative, who against any sense of good judgment becomes implicated in a sexual affair with the defendant, then we find ourselves in the premises of the courtroom erotic thriller.⁸⁸

Depending on whether the defendant is an *homme* or a *femme fatal(e)*, we end up with

⁸⁸ In the absence of a *femme/homme fatal(e)* implicated in the trial, we are in the premises of a courtroom thriller/drama. John Travolta in *A Civil Action* (Steven Zaillian, 1998), Paul Newman in *The Verdict* (Sidney Lumet, 1982) and Matt Damon in *The Rainmaker* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1997) all play lawyers who try to defend the victims of criminal negligence, perpetrated respectively by big companies, hospitals, and insurance firms. Regardless of the crime's nature, when the focus of the film is on justice being served, then the *courtroom thriller* enters the arena of the *social problem* film.

different types of courtroom-drama/erotic-thriller hybrids. Where explicit sex is suppressed in the case of *hommes fatals* (*Jagged Edge* being the most sexual example of its category), heightened sexuality is the main indicator of the *femme fatale*'s criminal potential. On this basic distinction *femmes* and *hommes fatal(e)s* courtroom-drama/erotic-thriller hybrids play their games of variation. Instead of offering different filmic examples of each category, thus risking repetition, I will present what I consider to be the paradigmatic case of each category.

The prototypical *homme fatal* courtroom-drama/erotic-thriller hybrid involves a dubious man who is charged with his rich wife's murder. Although at times doubting his innocence, his female lawyer gets him acquitted but during the trial she is unwisely drawn into an affair with him. When – usually after his acquittal – she accidentally finds a piece of evidence that reveals his guilt, her life is in danger. Joe Eszterhas, the man who wrote the script for *Basic Instinct*, had seven years before written the blueprint scenario for the courtroom-drama/erotic-thriller hybrid. *Jagged Edge* (Richard Marquand, 1985) gave the conventional courtroom-drama story a twist through the current of transgressive sexuality it introduced.⁸⁹ The sexual crime, which doesn't involve a crime during sex (a *cliché* in the case of the *femme fatale*), is presented to us in flashbacks in a horror-film manner (a dark figure with a hunting knife creeping into the dark mansion while everybody is sleeping on a stormy night). The sexual and the criminal elements overlap through the suspect's flirtation with his lawyer but the two never merge the way they later do in Eszterhas' script for *Basic Instinct* (or the way they usually do in the *femme fatale* courtroom erotic thriller hybrid) where the sexual relation takes place simultaneously with the crime investigation. In *Jagged Edge* the sexual element remains in the background as a driving force, adding suspense throughout the courtroom drama, but is only allowed existence after the courtroom thriller finishes. In accordance with the *homme fatal*'s function (to be analysed in chapter nine), Jack's (played

⁸⁹ Robert E. Kapsis includes *Jagged Edge* in his category of "adult thrillers" reviving in the late 1980s. See 177.

by Jeff Bridges) criminal potential can never be materialised during the act of sex, so the sexual act between him and his lawyer is obscured and Jack's monstrosity is re-played as part of the horror film underside that initiated the film's suspenseful narrative.⁹⁰

While the *homme fatal*'s darkness is related to his criminal potential and is signified by his transgressive relation with his lawyer, when it comes to the *femme fatale* the reverse is the case. Her own darkness reflects her transgressive sexuality which results in murder. Therefore, *femmes fatales* courtroom-drama/erotic-thriller hybrids move more explicitly along the erotic thriller axis than their male counterparts because of the different fantasies they offer (to be explored in chapter nine).

Uli Edel's *Body of Evidence* (1993), coming out a year after Verhoeven's ultra-successful *Basic Instinct*, copy-pastes the latter onto the courtroom genre.⁹¹ This mixture is reverberated in Philip French's review of the film as "a *Jagged Instinct* – *Basic Edge* thriller" (56). Instead of being a police-detective, Willem Dafoe plays a defense attorney, Frank Dulaney, who defends the *femme fatale* and cannot resist her perverse charms. The novelty here is that Madonna, depicted as a Sharon Stone copycat,⁹² is not just accused of murder, she is accused of being herself the murder weapon.⁹³ As Frank tells the jury in his opening statement, "The state would like you to believe that she somehow fornicated Andrew Marsh to death". The film opens in a similar way to *Basic Instinct* only instead of seeing the crime taking place during the act of sex, we see a couple having sex on video while the male

⁹⁰ Having spent the night together, on the morning after Jack's acquittal, Teddy accidentally finds the typewriter used to write the guiding notes she was receiving. Absolutely certain of Jack's guilt, she flees to her place taking the typewriter with her. The final scene has her waiting in her bed for the killer's visit. The setting is once more that of a horror film, doubling the initial murder scene, only the victim is aware and waiting for the killer's arrival.

⁹¹ The British magazine *Empire* drew a list of common ingredients between the two films. See "Front Desk Clips: Yes! It's *Body of Instinct*!" 20.

⁹² Madonna's bleached-blond hair, transgressive sexuality (Stone's bisexuality is here exchanged for sado-mazochism) and provocative answers while testifying in court are reminiscent of Stone's ice-blond Catherine Trammell. So when the prosecutor questions the coincidence of her prior affair with her dead lover's doctor, she answers: "Portland is a small city. I even dated a man who dated a woman you dated".

⁹³ According to the film's Production Notes she is "a beautiful young gallery owner, who is accused of something unusual . . . using her body as a murder weapon" (1).

participant is watching ... already dead. The prime suspect for his murder is the woman on the tape, Rebecca Carlson (Madonna), his lover. The film's whodunit question leads to a trial built on Rebecca's sex life. Vainly Frank tries to separate the two as he reminds the jury that "Rebecca Carlson is not on trial for her sexual tastes. She is being tried for murder". In fact, as is the case with all *femmes fatales*, it is all about Rebecca's sexual tastes (a point to be further explored in chapter nine in relation to the *femme fatale* fantasies). While the jury tries to decide whether her body is the murder weapon or not, Frank conducts his own "private investigation" in his sex bouts with her. As the public and the private converge in Frank's indiscretion, Frank experiences the deadliness that Rebecca's body signifies through his initiation in sadomasochistic sex with her. As it is out of court, in their private sessions, that we get to see Rebecca's body in action, I agree with Todd McCarthy's observation that these scenes "are the film's main action set-pieces" (64) overlapping with the alternating static courtroom scenes of sexual narratives. It is the absolute coupling between the investigative and the sexual narrative that makes *Body of Evidence* different from *Jagged Edge* and part of the erotic thriller paradigm, formulated by Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct*.⁹⁴

2.11. To Conclude . . .

Having delineated the erotic thriller both as hybrid filmic text and as part of the map of American film genres, I conclude that it is its use of the sexual act that demarcates the erotic thriller's generic boundaries. We need to remember that it is the gradual reinforcement of

⁹⁴ Receiving poor reviews, *Body of Evidence* was characterized as "[a]n erotic thriller that's strangely unerotic and devoid of thrills" (Salisbury 27). In my opinion, the film wasn't successful because it didn't manage to balance the erotic and the thriller so that they feed off each other. Since the Madonna character was accused of being a murderess of older rich men with faulty hearts, Frank didn't fit her profile so the threat that the sex scenes were supposed to convey was rather artificial and their effect moved more towards explicit titillation. On the other hand, the erotic element didn't work either, as the sex scenes were more or less received as copycats of Madonna's S&M book, *Sex*, and her album *Erotica* that came out the year before (See the reviews of Johnston, "Base Instincts with a Low Body" 16, McCarthy 64, and Hoberman, "Sex Machines" 45). Finally, Madonna's casting for the role of the *femme fatale* was considered by most critics disastrous, transforming the film into a joke of an erotic thriller (See Cramer 132-33, Johnston 16, Hoberman 45, and McCarthy 64).

explicit sexuality that led the classical detective story to its erotic thriller progeny. Moving from the *detective world* where the sexual relation is excluded and “the detective is structurally forbidden any involvement with a woman”(Copjec 179), we enter the locus of the *thriller* where sex is used as a means of emphasising the male protagonist’s strength to resist female temptation, we then pass to the *noir* and *neo-noir* worlds where sexual involvement with the seductress is inescapable and we finally enter the *erotic thriller* as the reversed image of the *noir* world where sexual relationship becomes the main focus of the story, triggered by some outer event. That is, as we have already seen, in the erotic thriller the sexual relationship springs from the criminal deed and the story is transferred to the arena of sexual activity.

Therefore, since the sexual act is vital for the erotic thriller and the interest of my thesis lies in the fantasies it activates, in my next chapter I will provide a concise history of the way sex has been treated by the mainstream American screen after the 1960s when the Production Code gave way to the Ratings System. To underline the problematic relation Hollywood has always had with sex, I will be using European cinema but only as a means of comparison. European cinema is not my focus in this thesis. Referring to films, genres, and directors I have already touched upon in these two chapters, I will prove that it is no coincidence that the erotic thriller was born in the early ‘80s and reached its peak in the first half of the ‘90s, as it was the greater sexual permissiveness of the times that facilitated its rise. Respectively, it is the shift of American culture to sexual conservatism at the turn of the century that is responsible for its demise.

CHAPTER THREE

Sex and Hollywood: An Unholy Union

Hollywood has always had a problematic relation with sex. Regardless of whether the industry's puritanism reflected a conscious strategy of a whole-sale entertainer anxious to secure as many ticket-buyers as possible, or it simply reverberated the socio-cultural circumstances of the times, or both, post-Production Code Hollywood moved hesitatingly in the area of sexual representation. When the suppressive Production Code gave its place to the more liberal MPAA ratings system in 1968, sex and violence returned with a vengeance. According to Gerald Mast's historical account, "what was most distinctive about the post-Production Code New Hollywood was its particular use of sex and violence to cast a 'cynical look back on the genre films of old Hollywood'" (qtd. in Linda Williams, "Sex and Sensation" 491). Williams corroborates Mast's thesis contending that the up-to-that-point "off-scene forces" of sex and violence became the "*raison d'être* for a whole new cinematic tradition" (493). Investigating the relation between the two, one observes that sex returned mainly in the guise of violence. Arthur Penn's 1967 *Bonnie and Clyde*, acclaimed by film critic Patrick Goldstein, amongst many, as "the first modern American Film",¹ unleashed in violence the sexual dysfunction of its male lead, and the couple's inability to copulate ignited their union through violence. Even the final scene of the couple's massacre climaxed the accumulated violence in an orgasmic outlet during which the bodies of the couple, over-penetrated by the sheriff-men's bullets, were united for ever in death's embrace. Another key film of the time that announced the release of sexual tension through violence was Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). The film's most graphic shower-scene in which Marion (Janet Leigh) was brutally murdered by sexually-aroused Norman (Anthony Perkins), after he had

¹ qtd. in Ebert's review of the film. See <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19980803/REVIEWS08/401010306>

spied on her undressing body through a hole in the wall, supplanted sex in its mechanics of escalating penetrative gashes and reminded audiences of the strong bond in American cinema between sex and death.

While Hollywood sublimated sex through violence, Europe on the other hand began to engage with its exploration. During the '60s and '70s sex became the main site of social malaise and emotional emptiness for European directors. Early examples of cinematic experimentation with sexual imagery include among others Roger Vadim's 1956 *And God Created Woman* (*Et Dieu Créa ...La Femme*), the film that raised the newly introduced Brigitte Bardot to stardom and sex-symbol status overnight (Vincendeau 492). Female sexuality is both the film's main icon and point of reference and the film's opening side-shot of Bardot's sunbathing naked body from behind establishes sex at the core of Vadim's film.² Sexual provocation, manipulation, violence, perversion, and sadomasochism flourished in filmic contexts around Europe throughout the following decades; every now and then some new film would appear to raise even higher the stakes of sexual controversy and explicitness of sexual imagery, such as the first mainstream screen image of pubic hair, shot in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 masterpiece, *Blow-Up*.³ Luis Buñuel's obsession with perversion, engraved deeper and deeper in his work, especially during the '60s and '70s, declares him, in acclaimed film-critic Roger Ebert's words, "the dirtiest old man of genius the cinema has ever produced".⁴ His final film *That Obscure Object of Desire* (*Cet Obscur Objet du Désir*) (1977) is acclaimed as his most complete investigation of sinister desires and sexual obsession,⁵ following earlier projects like *Belle de Jour* (1967) and *Tristana* (1970). Meanwhile, five years earlier Bernardo Bertolucci's highly controversial and sexually

² The film's direct address of its sexual subject generated a big scandal in the US analogous to the one that Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* would thirteen years later. See Brian Webster's review of Vadim's film in http://apolloguide.com/mov_fullrev.asp?CID=2512&Specific=298

³ See Fulwood 42.

⁴ See Ebert's review of Buñuel's *Tristana* in <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19700101/REVIEWS/1010319/1023>

⁵ See Derek Smith's review of the film in http://apolloguide.com/mov_fullrev.asp?CID=4838&Specific=5652

provocative 1972 *Last Tango in Paris* (*Ultimo Tango a Parigi*) presented a high-profile American star, Marlon Brando, “bar[ing] his soul (and his arse) to the camera in a desperate quest for a meaningful orgasm” (Thompson 36). The film’s highly scandalous “butter scene” is the first scene of anal sex seen by wide audiences, raising the stakes of what could be shown on the big screen. The next infamous scene of anal sex in Europe would push the limit even further in its intolerable depiction of traumatic sexual debauchery in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s 1975 *Saló, or The 120 Days of Sodom*, a disturbing confluence of the Sadean and the Nazi.

Sex is de-glamorized by the European lens and explicitness-to-the-point-of-crudeness frustrates voyeuristic pleasure. The sexual act is revealed as disturbing and traumatic, offering the illusory promise of communication to lonely, desperate individuals who become trapped in painful self-destruction. The Lacanian “comedy of heterosexuality” and the impossibility of the-two-becoming-One thesis (examined theoretically in the second part of this study) is unveiled by the European cinematic eye, which looks at sex too closely and sees the panting desperate act that Hollywood easily misrecognises as the essence of unity and completion (the third part of this thesis is full of erotic thriller fantasies of unity). Nauseating pleasure, emanating from the compulsion to repeat actions that are no longer pleasurable once they go beyond a limit, is the flip side of Hollywood’s orgasmic sexual fantasy. This nightmarish, consumptive side of sex that leads to degeneration and death is aligned with other bodily functions such as eating, defecation, urination, menstruation and ejaculation portrayed as early as 1976 in Nagisa Oshima’s Japanese *In the Realm of the Senses* (*Ai No Corrida*) in which the male lead seasons his food inside his lover’s vagina, masturbates her while she’s menstruating and ejaculates in her mouth after she performs fellatio on him.⁶ Having raised an

⁶ Other famous examples of food-sex conflation include Marco Ferreri’s *La Grande Bouffe* (1973), in which a weekend banquet of culinary and sexual excess results in the four noblemen’s death, when they decide to eat themselves to death; and of course Peter Greenaway’s brilliant *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989) pushes the equation between food, sex and death even further. Situated mostly in the thief’s restaurant

ongoing debate as to its status as pornography or art, the film includes some of the first shots of fellatio and vaginal penetration, performed by non-porn actors, ever addressed towards a wide audience.

As European sex-kittens regularly exhibited their luscious breasts and buttocks on screen and Antonioni offered three-some sex along with the already mentioned first cinematic image of pubic hair in *Blow Up* (1966), America was still under wraps. In 1961 the first French kiss on screen was shown, between Warren Beatty and Natalie Wood in Elia Kazan's *Splendour in the Grass*; in 1965 "mainstream America [was reminded] what a white woman's breasts looked like" in Sidney Lumet's *The Pawnbroker* (Newman 84); and in 1992 Hollywood gave its own version of pubic hair in the famous "crotch scene" in Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct*. Brian de Palma had actually pre-dated Verhoeven by twelve years, when back in 1980, in the opening shower scene of his notorious *Dressed to Kill* he initially included a shot of pubic hair. He was, however, obliged by Filmways, the film's distribution company, to "airbrush [it] out" among further cuts and re-editings so that the film would be accepted by CARA (Motion Picture Association of America's Classification and Rating Administration) as an R and drop the initial X-rating it was granted (Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core* 277-78).⁷ In his subsequent *Body Double* (1984), a film engaging in the illicit pleasures of the underground porn industry, De Palma is said to have intended to shoot "the first Hollywood studio movie with unsimulated sex scenes" but eventually wasn't allowed to do so (Newman 84). Impossibility to shoot graphic sex gave way to explicit violence and women's bodies were, after all, closely shot as penetrated, if not by a penis then by some other male-possessed instrument (a razor in *Dressed to Kill* and a drill in *Body Double*).

where his wife and her lover enjoy sexual trysts in the various kitchen compartments under the cook's guardian observation, when the cuckold finds out and has the lover killed, his wife organises the perfect revenge. In the ultimate scene of the film, she has the cook make dinner out of her lover's corpse, which she then forces her husband to eat. "Try the cock", she tells him in a line which verbalises the film's main line of thought, "it's a delicacy. And you know where it's been".

⁷ Years later the shot has been restored for the DVD version of the film.

The '70s uproar of European experimentation with sexual perversion and sadomasochistic desires was answered by Hollywood in the late '80s-early '90s with the Zalman King-Adrian Lyne cycle of erotic women's films. *9 ½ Weeks* has been promoted as the '80s version of Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*. Referring to the film's promotional campaign, Bart Mills stressed how "Lyne kept comparing his film to *Last Tango in Paris*" (46-47). This comparison, a main point of discussion in most reviews of the time, led to the film's nickname: "Last Tango in Manhattan".⁸ However, it seems that *9 ½ Weeks* couldn't handle the provocative subject it undertook to portray. In his review of the film, David Thompson supports this idea by saying that "[i]f, as the pre-publicity suggests, we are meant to relive the brutal clash of Bertolucci's lost souls in Adrian Lyne's coy exercise in the-sexual-position-as-pop-promo, then something has gone very wrong in current trends of film-making" (36). Despite the film's transgressive subject – a currently divorced art-gallerist, Elizabeth (Kim Basinger), is lured into forbidden pleasures when she meets and falls for John (Mickey Rourke), a broker with perverse sexual tastes – its depiction of sex is characterised by a Mills-and-Boons aesthetic, aiming at pleasurable sexual titillation. As *Variety*'s review of the film observes, "[d]espite some unusual, almost public locations for their lovemaking sessions – a clock tower, Bloomingdale's, a filthy alley – what they actually do together is utterly normal, and far from explicitly presented" (22). What sets out to be a journey of traumatic self-knowledge through sex transforms into a flashy pop playboy-like fantasy of sado-masochistic sensibilities. In this sense, even the most distressing scenes of degrading objectification through sex are transformed into innocuous fantasies of pleasurable staged pain. While the most (in)famous Bertolucci sex-scene has the character of Brando perform anal sex on top of a shrieking Maria Schneider using butter as lubricant, Lyne's equivalent shows Kim Basinger blindfolded on the kitchen floor playfully fed with "she-knows-not-

⁸ See the *Variety* review of the film 22, Adrian Wootton 180 and David Thompson 36.

what”⁹ to the tune of Devo’s highly appropriate “Bread and Butter”. The playful routine that constitutes a sensual foreplay that never leads anywhere, climaxes in sublimated orgasm as John is sprinkling soda and spreading honey all over Elizabeth’s body. And while Bertolucci frequently bared his leads’ bodies and souls, in order to draw a line between the sex they shared and the different fantasy it supported for each, Lyne keeps his leading couple buttoned up, veiling the act for the sake of titillation. Close-ups of the female body alternate with medium shots of the entwined lovers’ bodies veiled by the pouring darkness, light, rain, and video-clip aesthetic of their lovemaking, which represents more the cultural fantasy of the union of the two-in-One through the sexual act than an effort to depict the reality of the act (Hollywood veiling techniques in the representation of the sexual act in erotic thrillers will be addressed in the third part of the thesis).

Between *Last Tango in Paris* and *9 ½ Weeks* fourteen years lapsed; during this time the European auteurist vision, New Wave sensibilities and a more liberal relation with sex (in *Last Tango*) gave way to Hollywood conservatism and strict obedience to the rules of marketability (in *9 ½ Weeks*). Hollywood of the ‘80s pulled a veil over anything unpleasant, presenting a beatified version of the stressful and the traumatic for the sake of financial success. Presenting the marketing strategies followed in the wake of *9 ½ Weeks*, Mills explains that “[t]he touchier a film’s subject matter, the more closely marketers monitor its post-production” as, if a film seems too disturbing, people will not go to see it (47). Fearing a box-office disaster, MGM/UA, the film’s production companies, asked Lyne to tone the film down with a view to “sell[ing] it as a love story, not as some freaky bondage flick” (Mills 47). Along these lines the poster MGM/UA chose for the film’s US distribution showed a close-up kiss between the film’s two stars and a rather conventional copyline: “They broke every rule”

⁹ This phrase is taken from Thompson 37.

(Mills 51).¹⁰ Meanwhile, the poster used to promote *9 ½ Weeks* in the major foreign markets was a completely different story. It depicted a hand holding an ice cube, which was melting onto a blindfolded woman's lips while the copyline read: "Their love took them beyond desire, beyond passion, beyond obsession. The daring and provocative motion picture from Adrian Lyne, director of *Flashdance*, starring Kim Basinger and Mickey Rourke, destined to break new cinematic ground" (qtd. in Mills 51). What was too much for US audiences was totally unproblematic for Europeans.

Any revolutionary desires that Lyne may have harboured were destined to succumb to the demands of Hollywood ratings and audience sensibilities. So, the film was re-edited several times and several scenes were cut to make it conform to Hollywood norms of sexual representation. More specifically, "[i]n order to achieve an 'R' rating in the USA, two scenes involving use of handcuffs and Seconal pills have been eliminated [...] [and] [a]t one point, in the umpteenth montage sequence of the film, Rourke buys a riding crop, never to use it" (Thompson 36). Which, of course, makes one wonder as to what the point is to make a film about sex and then gradually take all the sex out of it. As the *Variety* review of the film concludes "filmmakers probably shouldn't have gone ahead with such a picture if they weren't prepared to go all the way and have the guts to really make a film about sexual obsession, ratings be damned" (22).

Not only can ratings never be damned, but quite the opposite. It is all about getting the right rating to cash out. Getting an NC-17 or an X immediately marginalizes the product in certain markets. As Jon Lewis points out, talking about the fate of NC-17, X, or unrated films, certain theatres, mall-located multiplexes and the big north American cable channels won't screen them, it is difficult to advertise them, the Blockbuster Video chain – "by far the largest

¹⁰ Tony Seiniger, whose office created the poster, claimed "We didn't want to do anything threatening or disgusting, just a nice kiss about to happen" (qtd. in Mills 51).

video rental outfit in the country” – won’t include them on its shelves,¹¹ and big foreign conservative markets such as Asia will decline them (*Hollywood v. Hard Core* 285).¹² Which is why all studios strive for a profitable R and are willing to make any alterations and cuts necessary, even if that means sidestepping the director and having someone else do them instead. Lewis mentions the case of Brian De Palma’s 1983 remake of *Scarface*, which, having received an X for its first version, led Universal to ask De Palma for the necessary cuts. Confronted by his unwillingness, the studio gave him the choice of doing the cuts himself or letting someone else do them for him (*Hollywood v. Hard Core* 285-86). The result was that “[f]our submissions of four versions of the film later, De Palma secured an R rating and finally took credit for a final cut of the film” (Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core* 286).

In contemporary conglomerate Hollywood, where film studios are owned by multinational trade companies and run by high-profile executives, the latter decide about the fate of films. Based on their personal tastes, they decide to promote some films which become the carriers of their professional prowess, while burying others, especially those which through negative publicity could stain their reputation in the eyes of shareholders, that is NC-17 and X films (Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core* 286). The rigidity of executives driven by personal ambition leads to a different kind of censorship and suppression of artistic creation. This situation is nicely illustrated in George Huang’s 1994 *Swimming with Sharks*, an independent feature casting Kevin Spacey as the corrupt, back-stabbing, two-faced Hollywood executive¹³ whose interest isn’t in good projects but power games. As Lewis nicely puts it, “The auteurs of this New Hollywood are executive-level specialists and professionals who in many cases never bother actually to see the film they’re promoting” (“Following the Money” 68). Censorship based on individual power is illustrated in real-life cinematic practice in Lewis’ presentation of the US distribution of David Cronenberg’s 1996

¹¹ At least not until Wayne Huizenga was in charge of Blockbuster (Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core* 292).

¹² Also see Kevin S. Sandler 75-76 and 81.

¹³ The film’s tagline is “Back Stabbing – Two Faced – Revenge”. See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114594/>

Crash. This film, an adaptation of J. G. Ballard's homonymous experimental novel, received an NC-17 rating in America so Time Line, a small independent company which had taken up its distribution in the US, decided to release the film only a month after the Cannes Festival, where the film won the Special Jury Prize, so as to benefit from the publicity and the controversy the film generated. However, when Ted Turner, the vice chairman of Time Warner, which owned Fine Line, saw the film, he ordered the postponement of its release. The delay was sure to destroy the film's already limited chances due to its NC-17 limited release. Almost a year later, in the spring of 1997, when it was finally released, *Crash* didn't do well at the box-office and received mostly bad reviews. Turner had succeeded in sabotaging a film he hated so much that he preferred financial loss to the film's success.¹⁴ Interestingly Fine Line didn't make any effort to change NC-17 into R by encouraging or forcing Cronenberg to make cuts (Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core* 286-88). Turner's censorship of his products as well as other cases of independent companies obliged by their corporate parent companies to abandon projects considered too controversial for their public image proves the importance of an R for a film's survival.¹⁵

After the short-lived flirtation between hard-core pornography and legitimacy, conferred through financial success in the early seventies,¹⁶ it seemed for a while that major Hollywood companies would enter the business of adults' films through the door of soft-core production. As Lewis points out, "[t]he studios never attempted to assimilate hard core, despite its considerable market share in the early seventies" (*Hollywood v. Hard Core* 223), which proves their need for legitimacy. However, soft-core features of art house claim were a

¹⁴ As Lewis points out, "Turner hated the film enough to lose money and in doing so sent a clear message to filmmakers working at his movie studios, at the time, the most extensive and prestigious in the business" (*Hollywood v. Hard Core* 288).

¹⁵ See the case of Todd Solondz' *Happiness*, the winner of the 1998 International Critics Prize at Cannes Festival, a highly controversial black comedy about deviant sexualities, in Lewis' *Hollywood v. Hard Core* 290-91. Also on the same subject see Sandler 87

¹⁶ According to Lewis the three most successful hard-core films released between 1972 and 1973 were Gerard Damiano's *The Devil in Miss Jones* and *Deep Throat* and the Mitchell Brothers' *Behind the Green Door* (*Hollywood v. Hard Core* 211).

different story. Bernardo Bertolucci's 1972 *Last Tango in Paris*, although X rated, had United Artists taking up its distribution in the US. The film's European origin, Bertolucci's reputation amongst serious filmgoers, and the casting of an acclaimed post-*Godfather* Marlon Brando as the film's lead allowed United Artists to promote the film as mainstream fare (Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core* 224-25). Another case of Hollywood going X, though for the last time, was Just Jaekin's *Emmanuelle*, distributed in the US in 1974 by Columbia Pictures. Like *Last Tango*, *Emmanuelle* was more or less packaged along the lines of a foreign art film. Its French origin, first-rate production values, and entertaining eroticism allowed Columbia to promote *Emmanuelle* as something more than just a series of sex-scenes, highlighting its "foreign art-film pedigree" (Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core* 227-28). The advertising campaign, chosen by Columbia, and the film's tagline ("X was never like this") associated X with the film's uniquely elegant, art-house qualities (Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core* 228). The poster for *Emmanuelle* conflated the icon of an apple and a woman's face, introducing the use of design elements in film advertising (Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core* 229). This, and Columbia's president's claim that he only got interested in the film due to its appeal to European women, set *Emmanuelle* apart from pornography appealing to men only, and highlighted its "special" qualities (Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core* 228).

Although both Columbia and United Artists proved their ability skilfully to handle X-rated material, and by the time *Emmanuelle* was released the Supreme Court had banned hard-porn altogether, leaving a huge gap in the niche of adult-films to be filled by soft-core products, "Columbia and the rest of the industry steered clear of X-rated products after *Emmanuelle*" (Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core* 229). On the other hand, the companies' desire for legitimacy coincided with a new turn the Hollywood industry took in the mid '70s with the huge success of a new breed of high-concept films. The Spielberg-Lucas phenomenon and their box-office mega-hits introduced a different cinematic sensibility,

addressed “huge, multiple demographics” and put an end to Hollywood’s frivolous “fling” with transgression (Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core* 229). The prevalence of spectacular PG money-makers, such as Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* (1975), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and its progeny – *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989)¹⁷ – and George Lucas’ *Star Wars* (1977) and the series it generated, all proved escapist cinema to be the best and most profitable turn that Hollywood could take. The shift from the director-as-author to the director-as-superstar¹⁸ went hand-in-hand with the passage from the film as individual *oeuvre* to the film-as-event, with products springing from the film added to increase the companies’ revenues. Turning film into one more product added to the chart of global trade and stock exchange transformed cinema-as-art into cinema-as-mass-consumed-fast-food-films.¹⁹ The “high-concept”²⁰ blockbuster with its event status and plot-driven qualities was the perfect carrier for the New Hollywood “synergy” spirit²¹ that encouraged close cooperation between sibling-companies, promoting thus the production of films with a multi-media potential, transmittable to all media and open to the impingement of “tie-ins” such as musical soundtracks, books, comics, video-games, theme-parks, toys and clothes (Schatz 29).

Although the production of extravagant carriers of thrill, adventure, and PG revenues dominated the industry, experimentation with compromising subjects such as pathology, sex, and death still remained on the directorial agenda, especially of those who became involved in

¹⁷ This one was rated as PG-13

¹⁸ See Schatz 20.

¹⁹ As the character of weatherman Dave Spritz (played by Nicolas Cage), says in one of his excellent downbeat monologues in Gore Verbinski’s 2005 *The Weather Man*: “It [fast food]’s easy, it tastes all right, but it doesn’t really provide you any nourishment”. Blockbuster Hollywood is definitely fast-food cinema.

²⁰ According to Schatz the term is mainly attributed to Steven Spielberg who in an interview he gave in 1978 said: “What interests me more than anything else is the idea. If a person can tell me the idea in twenty-five words or less, it’s going to be a good movie” (qtd. in Schatz 33)

²¹ Erotic thrillers are not blockbusters in Neale’s sense of the term “refer[ing] on the one hand to large-scale productions and on the other to large-scale box-office hits” (“Hollywood Blockbusters” 47). Normally they are “mainstream A-class star vehicle[s] with sleeper-hit potential” (Schatz 35) that occasionally become box-office hits (such as *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct*), but as Linda Ruth Williams points out “their primary revenue eventually comes from video and other ancillary sales” (*The Erotic Thriller* 91).

the '80s resurgence of what was now officially recognised as new *film noir*. Reworking *film noir* to the exigencies of the time led to the release in the early '80s of a body of films such as Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* (1981), Bob Rafelson's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), William Friedkin's *Cruising* (1980) and Ken Russel's *Crimes of Passion* (1984), among others, which dealt with the *noirness* of sex, thus signalling a new era in sexual sensibilities. Sex as fun and free in the early '70s (Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core* 228) gave way to pathology in the '80s and '90s, exhibited explicitly in the erotic thriller. As other film genres sublimated the image of the sexual act and conferred its power through grotesque farce or excruciating violence (to be further developed in chapter seven), the erotic thriller dared the Hollywood machine by offering soft-core images of transgressive sex on screen. However, as I will show in chapter seven, where the icon of sex is involved, there is always veiling of some kind and in the case of the erotic thriller, as I argue in chapter eight, thriller is its main veil.

The erotic thriller bred a new crop of overtly sexual *femmes fatales*. Matty from *Body Heat*, Cora from the remake of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and their '90s sisters, Catherine from *Basic Instinct* and Rebecca from *Body of Evidence*, confidently flaunt their naked bodies to their sexual partners and to the camera. Post-AIDS sex becomes violent, sadomasochistic, perverse, deadly, potentially deadly, or else interrupted. Meanwhile voyeurism and exhibitionism as staples of on-screen sex establish perverseness as the sexual situation *par excellence* of the '90s. Discussing *Basic Instinct*, Marcelle Clements points out that "its most famous scene is *not* a bedroom scene (though the hack-hack-hack kinkiness at the beginning of the film certainly made an impression) but rather the provocative Sharon Stone crossing and uncrossing her legs in the now notorious white dress – the voyeurism theme again" (92).

With the advent of the new millennium and especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the New York World Trade Centre and America's regression to conservatism, the explicit depiction of the sexual act has disappeared from the Hollywood mega-screen. Linda Ruth Williams, considering the demise of the erotic thriller in Bush's America in her excellent article "No Sex Please We're American" – a title which appropriates that of the British stage farce: *No Sex Please: We're British*²² – observes that "Hollywood just doesn't do sex like it used to do. A creeping puritanism has infiltrated the industry, particularly since the election of George W. Bush in January 2001, pushing the erotic back into the closet along with a range of other progressive cinematic concerns" (18). "Hollywood is putting its clothes on", Edward Helmore corroborates, and adds: "Actors and actresses don't want to do sex scenes, scriptwriters don't want to write them, directors don't want to choreograph them, and the studios don't want them filmed anyway because audiences are becoming younger" (n. pag.).

Indicative of the new Hollywood situation is the present fate of directors who at their prime pushed the barriers of what could be sexually shown on the Hollywood screen. Brian De Palma, Paul Verhoeven and William Friedkin have all contributed sexually provocative films that instigated a lot of reaction. Today they express their strong discontent about the current state of cinematic affairs.

Audiences and younger film-makers don't want to go to those [disturbing] places, and in any case US film is almost totally fantasy-driven. Comic books and video games (Friedkin qtd. in Linda R. Williams, "No Sex Please" 20).

The subject matter that's flooding American cineplexes is of no interest to me. (De Palma qtd. in Linda R. Williams, "No Sex Please" 20).

²² Anthony Marriot and Alistair Foot's play, *No Sex Please: We're British*, ran successfully for years in London stages and was transferred on the big screen in 1973 by Cliff Owen.

I feel so fed up with the formulaic thinking and absence of values and of any relationship to life (Verhoeven qtd. in Linda R. Williams, “No Sex Please” 20).

So, Friedkin directs safe studio products such as the action-thriller *The Hunted* (2003),²³ De Palma makes films outside America – *Femme Fatale* was located, shot and financed in France –²⁴ and Verhoeven’s latest Hollywood film *Hollow Man* (2000) was met with a lot of conservative reaction “with its deliberately offensive rape scene cut and its odious protagonist granted more mainstream appeal” (Linda R. Williams, “No Sex Please” 18). “The whole window has closed down”, Verhoeven says and his absence from the cinematic scene proves it. His next project, which is now in-production is a Netherlands-UK-German co-production called *Zwartboek* (*The Black Book*), a film about WWII. So, is that it? Is sex out of the Hollywood picture for good? Paul Verhoeven thinks “it’ll cycle up” as long as the political climate changes. “[I]f this president [George Bush] is re-elected [t]hen it’ll take another six years before we can go in a new direction” he says (qtd. in Linda R. Williams, “No Sex Please” 20). Unless, as Ken Russell, the director of the sexually controversial 1984 *Crimes of Passion*,²⁵ stated back in 1985 “Steven Spielberg makes an erotic film because he can change anything” (8).

At the same time, on the other side of the Atlantic mainstream directors experiment with hard-core porn imagery. The merging of hard-core porn and mainstream film production – hoped for by many back in the ‘70s when Gerard Damiano’s *Deep Throat* got major distribution in the US and its follow-up *The Devil in Miss Jones* received some enthusiastic mainstream reviews (Newman 84) – is now in a sense realized outside the US. Films such as

²³ The film presents the story of an agent (Tommy Lee Jones) going after a hit-man (Benicio Del Toro).

²⁴ For more details on *Femme Fatale* as an independent project see De Palma’s interview with Bill Fentum in <http://www.briandepalma.net/femme/ff2.htm>

²⁵ *Crimes of Passion* presents Kathleen Turner as a post-*Body Heat* femme fatale who leads a double life; a successful dress designer femme during the day, she transforms at nights into a fatale who cruises the netherworld of sexual perversion under the pseudonym China Blue.

Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998), Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (1999), Virginie Despente's *Baise Moi* (2000), Patrice Chéreau's *Intimacy* (2001) and Carlos Reygadas' *Battle in Heaven* (2005) have contributed shots of sexual penetration and/or fellatio to the map of mainstream sexual representation. The speed of changing contemporary sensibilities is made evident in the Michael Winterbottom film *Nine Songs* (2005), a controversial film, deemed by many as exploitative and pornographic. In its sexually allusive running time of 69 minutes the film depicts a sexual affair through nine instances of sexual intercourse, interrupted by nine live-concert songs. Moving his camera so close that it shows all, Winterbottom indulges us with close ups of all the gamut of sexual activity, vaginal penetration, cunnilingus, masturbation, bondage and fellatio leading to clear and in-detail ejaculation. Both staples of pornography, the "meat shot" (penetration) and the "money shot" (ejaculation), are part of Winterbottom's narrative of a contemporary affair. Alternating scenes of actual rock-n-roll concerts in London's Brixton Academy with scenes of real sex, shot on low-budget digital video in a documentary style and devoid of any lavish soundtrack that would wrap the reality of the act in the dreamy cloak of romance, Winterbottom establishes sex, drugs (we see them occasionally doing cocaine) and rock-n-roll as the stage on which the emotional drama of misrecognised (for the male character-narrator) love will take place.²⁶

In the staging or non-staging of the sexual act, different cinemas promote different kinds of sexual fantasy that leaves the screen and permeates reality's postmodern frenzy of images. By replaying the same storylines again and again, Hollywood erotic thrillers prioritize certain types of fantasy that infiltrated '90s popular culture and fed the cultural unconscious. But how is the Symbolic subject's fantasy structured? How does it relate to sexual desire? And what has cinema got to do with it? Why is the icon of sexual unity so powerful and how does the Hollywood erotic thriller manage to package transgressive sex as the dream of unity?

²⁶ The only image, which is allowed by Winterbottom to retain its taboo status and thus remain property of the realm of hardcore aesthetics – however, who knows for how long more – is anal penetration.

These are the key questions that I will attempt to address in the following two parts of my thesis.

PART II

THEORETICAL CONCERNS

CHAPTER FOUR

Postmodern (Trans-Sexual) Trans-Spectacles

The exploration of (sexual) fantasy is crucial today both as part of the film-viewing process and pleasures that Hollywood genre cinema (through the erotic thriller) offers, and in relation to the postmodern obsession with images and looks. Either we talk about a postmodern “spectacularization” of reality or a late-capitalist commodification of images,¹ it is the blurring of distances between reality and fantasy that is symptomatic of the era in which the erotic thriller was born. Therefore, before I explore (sexual) fantasy in its cinematic and psychoanalytic dimensions (in the following chapters) and before I discuss the erotic thriller as a fantasy-machine (in the third part of the thesis), I want to establish the *spectacular* (in its Debordean sense) nature of current reality since it is as part of this reality that the erotic thriller produces its fantasies. However, I will limit my attempt to the presentation of the postmodern condition and will not get into an analysis of its causes, as the latter would demand an economico-political look, which is not relevant to the concerns of the particular thesis.

Talking about the impact of 20th-century technological advancement on everyday reality, representation, and signification, Vivian Sobchack claims that “we are all part of a moving-image culture and we live cinematic and electronic lives” (67). In her illuminating essay “The Scene of the Screen”, Sobchack presents the shift from photographic realism to cinematic modernism and electronic postmodernism focusing on the change this has entailed in people’s sense of time, space, physical presence and relation to the world. Reaching the stage of the electronic, Sobchack claims, temporal and spatial barriers are invalidated as the new technology turns the spectator into a user who can interact with the photographic or

¹ According to Jameson, in postmodern culture capitalism has reached its highest form, turning everything, even the market itself, into a commodity. “Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process”, he writes (x).

cinematic object and is able to confer changes on it (75).² Photographic *reproduction* and cinematic *representation of ...* turns into electronic *representation-in-itself*, “a system of *simulation* – a system that constitutes ‘copies’ lacking an ‘original’ origin” (Sobchack 79).³

Once referentiality gives way to intertextuality, the cultural signifiers address other signifiers instead of signifieds and “[e]verything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation” (Debord par.1). This takes us to a “society of the spectacle”,⁴ where “[t]he spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (par. 4). Writing in the late sixties, Guy Debord exposed the ideological force of seemingly harmless images, which in permeating reality become it, in the eyes of a sleeping society whose sleep they safeguard (par. 21). Once “the simple images become real beings” and everything is turned into an icon of itself (Debord pars. 18-19), the always already alienated human subject (in the Lacanian sphere of thought) becomes an alienated spectator of simulated acts, misrecognised for the real thing. In Debord’s words:

the more he [the spectator] contemplates the less he lives; the more he accepts recognizing himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. [...] his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. This is why the spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere. (par. 30)

Reflecting on his 1967 thesis from the standpoint of 1988 in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord observes that the reign of “spectacular power” has grown even stronger as it “has succeeded in raising a whole generation molded to its laws” (par. III).

² For example, DVD viewing allows the spectator to interfere with the film’s duration and form. One can watch the film in fast-forward or slow motion as well as choose the order of scenes from the scene-selection menu, thus revising the film’s form.

³ On the visibility of postmodern reality see also Norman K. Denzin’s “Preface” and “Defining the Postmodern Terrain” and especially 7-12.

⁴ This is the title of Guy Debord’s seminal book.

Its latest form, what Debord calls the “*integrated spectacular*”, abolishes any clear-cut distinction between reality and illusion as the one permeates and conditions the other, an equivalent to Jean Baudrillard’s “hyper-real” western world.⁵ Debord writes:

the final sense of the integrated spectacular is that it integrates itself into reality to the same extent that it speaks of it, and that it reconstructs it as it speaks. As a result, this reality no longer confronts the integrated spectacular as something alien. When the spectacular was concentrated, the greater part of peripheral society escaped it; when it was diffuse, a small part; today, no part. The spectacle is mixed into all reality and irradiates it.

(*Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* par. IV)

Reality is no longer separated from fantasy as “it [the real] is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all. It is a hyperreal: the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere” (Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations” 167).⁶ Once fantasy permeates reality everything becomes a spectacle to be played and re-played for the eyes of insatiable spectators who, in a hypnotic state, dream about reality while living the dream.

The reign of the spectacular and the power of the media in carving postmodern reality is also acknowledged in the ‘90s by Slavoj Žižek who observes: “today, our perception of reality is mediated by aestheticized media manipulations to such an extent that it is no longer possible for us to distinguish reality from its media image – reality itself is experienced as an aesthetic spectacle” (*The Metastases of Enjoyment* 75). This, however, leads to a de-realization of reality, as “the minimum of idealization the subject needs in order to be able to sustain the horror of the Real” (Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* 66) suddenly becomes all too

⁵ As Baudrillard observes in his illuminating essay “The Structural Law of Value and the Order of Simulacra”, “[u]nreality no longer resides in the dream or fantasy, or in the beyond, but in the *real’s hallucinatory resemblance to itself*” (70).

⁶ For a presentation of Baudrillard’s three orders of simulation see “The Structural Law of Value and the Order of Simulacra” and especially 61-73.

much. Injecting symbolic reality with so many imaginary configurations, which, instead of aiming at supporting our sense of reality, claim for themselves the part of a superior, impeccable, reality, takes us to the Baudrillardian notion of a hyperreal world, where “[i]llusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible” (“Simulacra and Simulations” 177). This doesn’t mean of course that the physical every-day reality has in any way ceased to exist. Rather, our reception of this reality has changed, as we now perceive it through the images of reality we consume. In the 21st-century spectacular milieu the individual turns into “a restless voyeur, a person who sits and gazes (often mesmerized and bored) at the movie or TV screen” (Denzin 9). Spectacles condition the viewers’ notion of reality at the same time that even the most horrific of realities is depicted by the media and received by spectators as spectacle and therefore unthreatening, usually happening to someone else, at some distant location that ensures the spectator’s fantastic security.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks against the New York World Trade Centre have come to be regarded as the quintessential instance of reality perceived as fantasy. The basic screen through which the western world witnessed the tragedy was naturally that of Hollywood spectacle cinema. As Žižek points out, “to us [the Western world], corrupted by Hollywood, the landscape and the shots we saw of the collapsing towers could not but remind us of the most breathtaking scenes in the catastrophe big productions” (“Welcome to the Desert of the Real” n. pag.).⁷ At the same time, he underlines the de-realisation of the scenes of horror that took place in the 9/11 setting, saying that although the number of the 6000 victims was repeated again and again, there were no shots of carnage like the ones habitually included in reporting shots of Third World catastrophes, as if “the real horror happens THERE, not HERE” (n. pag.). In terms of this distinction, when the attack against the World Trade Center

⁷ As Douglas Kellner observes in his enlightening analysis of “spectacles of terror”, “The September 11 terror spectacle looked like a disaster film, leading Hollywood director Robert Altman to chide his industry for producing extravaganzas of terror that could serve as models for spectacular terror campaigns” (43).

took place, the distant THERE violently moved HERE polluting western reality with what up to that time was a mere image on the western screen. As Žižek claims:

it is prior to the WTC [World Trade Center] collapse than [sic] we lived in our reality, perceiving the Third World horrors as something which is not effectively part of our social reality, as something which exists (for us) as a spectral apparition on the (TV) screen – and what happened on September 11 is that this *screen fantasmatic* apparition entered our reality. (“Welcome to the Desert of the Real” n. pag.)

Administering a blow on US soil and particularly New York, “one of the most media-saturated [cities] in the world” (Kellner 43), and demolishing the symbols of global capital and American potency, the 9/11 attack was received as “a deadly drama [played] live on television” (Kellner 43). No wonder that the traumatic scenes of the plane crashes and the burning and deteriorating towers were played and re-played to the degree of ultimate fascination, and that all the major TV networks suspended their regular programming to provide nonstop coverage of the events. The physicality of the actual event instantly gave way to the image as spectacle, offering global audiences a “you are there” illusion.⁸ But for the illusion to be preserved, the images had to be repeated, renewed and enriched. Commenting on the press coverage the 9/11 and the post-9/11 events received, Kellner notes that “[t]he September 11 terror attacks in New York were claimed to be ‘the most documented event in history’” (44). No wonder everyone became obsessed with terrorism after 9/11 as if it didn’t exist prior to that time; terrorism only became existent for the (viewing) masses when spectacularized. As Debord observes: “[w]hen the spectacle stops talking about something for three days, it is as if it did not exist. For it has then gone on to talk about something else, and

⁸ I borrow the term from Kellner 44.

it is that which henceforth, in short, exists". (*Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* par. VII)

As everything becomes spectacle and spectacle becomes everything, any distinguishing lines disappear. Reality merges with illusion, the public interchanges with the personal and anything hidden comes to the fore. Everything becomes "all too visible" as "[t]here is no longer any transcendence or depth, but only the immanent surface of operations unfolding, the smooth and functional surface of communication" (Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* 12). As signifieds are pushed out of the picture and signifiers "embark upon an endless process of self-reproduction" (Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil* 6), the obscenity of the postmodern "ecstasy of communication" lies in the fact that the over-visible signifiers have nothing to show, saturating the screen with images which show nothing (Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* 33).

And so all desires, wishes, and values are recycled in frenzy as always already accomplished, repeating their fulfilment at a faster and more hyperbolic rate through spectacles which emerge from everywhere, but which, because void, depend on the intensity of their appearance and the shock value they carry to support the misrecognition they feed.⁹ In "cancerous proliferation", everything contaminates everything, until "there is a total confusion of types": sex, politics, economics, art, sports etc. are everywhere (Baudrillard, *Transparency of Evil* 8); but "[w]hen everything is political, nothing is political any more, the word itself is meaningless. When everything is sexual, nothing is sexual any more, and sex loses its determinants. [...] this state of affairs is epitomized by a single figure: the transpolitical, the transsexual, the transaesthetic" (9-10).

Accordingly, when everything is turned into a spectacle we reach the stage of the "transspectacular", where everything is staged and faked at the same time that it is acclaimed

⁹ Baudrillard locates the obscenity of our culture in "the confusion of desire and its equivalent materialized in the image" (*The Ecstasy of Communication* 35).

as “the real thing”. In his essay “Welcome to the Desert of the Real”, Žižek, based on Badiou’s thesis, describes the 20th-century encounter with Real (in the Lacanian sense of the term) violence “as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceiving layers of reality” (n. pag.). Using Badiou’s analysis of the Stalinist show trials and Lacan’s teachings on the Real, Žižek explains that, since, according to Lacan, the search for the Real Thing equals annihilation, “the only way to trace the distinction between the semblance and the Real is, precisely, to STAGE it in a fake spectacle” (n. pag.). Therefore, we are in constant need of spectacles to reinforce our sense of reality to the point that postmodern reality finally resides in the spectacle.

The authentic XXth century passion to penetrate the Real Thing (ultimately, the destructive Void) through the cobweb of semblances which constitute our reality thus culminates in the thrill of the Real as the ultimate “effect,” sought after from digitalized special effects through reality TV and amateur pornography up to snuff movies. (Žižek, “Welcome to the Desert of the Real” n. pag.)

Current spectacular reality is communicated to the spectators through a well-paced circuit of images and messages incessantly projected on the TV screen. No interruption or silence is allowed to disrupt the fictional saturation of the screen and unveil the void – both screen and mental – that TV images cover (Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil* 13). Postmodern violence rises, therefore, from the emptiness of the screen. As Baudrillard says, “Today’s violence, the violence produced by our hypermodernity, is terror. A simulacrum of violence, emerging less from passion than from the screen: a violence in the nature of the image. Violence exists potentially in the emptiness of the screen, in the hole the screen opens in the mental universe” (*The Transparency of Evil* 75).

In the realm of the spectacular, lost unity is recuperated through visual narratives. In these narratives the spectator is offered a pivotal position and access to the spectacles s/he watches; s/he is even attributed the power to influence their development, as in the case when spectators can vote for their desired ending in TV reality shows, affecting the lives of the participants, or when sample audiences used by Hollywood to test the marketing potential of their blockbusters can with howls of disapproval force the producing companies to seek for other ending(s) that will prove more palatable to the viewing public and thus more profitable.¹⁰ Meanwhile, there are TV shows, which offer audiences solutions to their problems and escape from mundane routine. However, under the colourful veils of this seeming communication, the spectator is revealed to be more alone than ever, clinging to the idyllic spectres that cover the feared fragmentation. As Debord points out, “[w]hat binds the spectators together is no more than an irreversible relation at the very center which maintains their isolation. The spectacle reunites the separate, but reunites it *as separate*” (*Society of the Spectacle* par. 29). This makes the dream of unity even more necessary and the spectator ready to claim his long lost coherence through spectacle.

The virtualisation of every-day reality (economic transactions, communication etc.) becomes the trademark of the spectacular. Based on his observation that today’s market offers us everything the way we need and/or want it, free from any harmful elements, such as coffee without caffeine and beer without alcohol, Žižek contends that “Virtual Reality simply *generalizes* this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance” taking us to an artificial, de-realized reality, which however “is experienced as reality without being one [...] in the same way decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like the real coffee without being the real one” (“Welcome to the Desert of the Real” n. pag.). After the virtualisation process is completed, “reality is its own best semblance” (Žižek, “Welcome to the Desert of the Real” n.

¹⁰ Previewing has proved an effective marketing tool for Hollywood companies in estimating their products’ box-office potential. A discouraging public reception almost always directs the company to seek an alternative ending that will make the film more popular.

pag.). As Denzin says talking about the postmodern convergence of real and fake, “if it looks and feels real, it is real” (122).

As everything turns into its image and visibility conditions being or rather simulates it, existence (not as a physical entity) becomes uncertain, demanding constant verification (Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* 29). Which is why “[e]veryone seeks their *look*. Since it is no longer possible to base any claim on one’s own existence, there is nothing for it but to perform an *appearing act* without concerning oneself with *being* – or even with *being seen*. So it is not: I exist, I am here! But rather: I am visible, I am an image – look! look!” (Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil* 23).

4.1. Trans-Sexual Images

“Transsexuality” is, according to Baudrillard, the postmodern status of sexuality not in the anatomical meaning of transvestitism but in the sense “of playing with the commutability of the signs of sex”, and involves undifferentiated artifice as the nucleus of the human subject’s symbolic sexual identity (*The Transparency of Evil* 20-21). Moving from the modernist revolution for free sexual pleasure to postmodern transsexual freedom in artifice through the proliferation of sexual insignia or body parts that one can take on, sexual undifferentiation signifies today’s “prosthetic” body, which takes up difference as a “look” and misrecognises it as being (Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil* 20). Postmodern sex in its quintessential form is the pure act of exchanged body parts between sex objects.¹¹ Discussing the role of sex in 20th-century “atomization” society Zygmunt Bauman stresses, “Nothing follows from the sexual encounter, apart from sex itself and the sensations which accompany the encounter; sex, one may say, left the family home for the street, where only accidental passers-by meet

¹¹ For a discussion of postmodern sexuality see Norman K. Denzin’s analysis of two 1989 films: Rob Reiner’s *When Harry Met Sally* and Steven Soderbergh’s *Sex, Lies and Videotape* in his chapter “The Postmodern Sexual Order: Sex, Lies, and Yuppie Love” 107-24.

who – while meeting – know that sooner or later (sooner rather than later) their ways are bound to part again” (147). Sex has turned into its own semblance, one more image to fill in the postmodern screen of sexual signs and body parts. The postmodern obscenity of “the more-visible-than-visible” transforms the sexual body into “a proliferation of multiple objects wherein its finitude, its desirable representation, its seduction are lost” (Baudrillard, *The Ecstasis of Communication* 44). Sex, like any other simulacrum, disappears through proliferation and dispersal (Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil* 4), contaminating all other spheres of life. So, if “[s]ex is no longer located in sex itself, but elsewhere – everywhere else” this, as we have already seen, for Baudrillard translates into its disappearance (*The Transparency of Evil* 8). Postmodern sexuality turns transparent in its all-visibility “hid[ing] what little remains of reality” through images, while “[i]mages have become our true sex object” (Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* 32, 35).

As Baudrillard observes in his *Cool Memories II* (1996), the “sexual definition of man” and the “televisual definition of the image” are analogous in reverse. The intensification of one translates into the diminution of the other. In Baudrillard’s words: “[t]he more the image evolves towards high definition, the more identity heads towards low definition” (62). As media images become flooded with sexual imagery ever more transgressive and provocative, the absence of sex from contemporary life is declared. Mazda nicely illustrates the current over-saturation of advertising with sexual images in its 2005 commercial, launched in Europe in the promotion of a new car model. In the ad a good-looking man transports some female mannequins to a clothing store. During the drive the car’s movement and mechanical vigour sexually arouse one of the mannequins so much that her eyes glisten, and when the man gets her out of the car, we can see that her nipples are erected. The ad, which provoked angry protest in England among feminists, who saw it as one more act of female objectification, extends sexual interaction to the realm of objects and establishes

seduction as an ever-present state of daily affairs (such as driving). Sexual prowess is established in the ad as mechanical, part of the car's attributes, and the only sexually aroused body that we see is the inanimate, absolutely-perfect-in-its-proportions-and-almost-as-good-as-alive body of a lifeless dummy. What masks the difference of the dummy, her impossible flirtation with the car and the man, is "the erotic look"¹² she is shown to have. The final image of the man holding her in his arms, his eyes gazing at the erected nipples, explodes all difference into sameness, as what the spectator sees is a sexually aroused female in a man's arms. The established sameness (in sexual reaction between a woman and a mannequin) transforms into (sexual) difference at the sight of the erotic embrace between a male and a female. In Baudrillard's words this would translate as: "After the orgy, then, a masked ball. After the demise of desire, a pell-mell diffusion of erotic simulacra in every guise, of transsexual kitsch in all its glory. A postmodern pornography, if you will, where sexuality is lost in the theatrical excess of its ambiguity" (*The Transparency of Evil* 22).

However, although sex is supposed to permeate popular culture, it is rather its semblance, which does so. As Peter Bradshaw observes in his review of Michael Winterbottom's *9 Songs* in the *Guardian*: "We behave as if sex is everywhere in popular culture, but despite the ketchupy smothering of everything with a supposed sexiness, despite the speed dating, porn chic, reality TV bedrooms, desperate housewives etc etc, actual representations of ordinary, common-or-garden sex are still very uncommon".¹³ In order to preserve the misrecognition of the visual signifier for the thing itself, the image of the sexual body is dispersed in all spheres of life, while sexual discourse permeates all media discourse, masking thus the absence of the signified through the compulsive repetition of its mirroring signifier. Once scenarios of desire are obsessively staged and restaged in the Symbolic via the

¹² According to Baudrillard the erotic look "conceals [the] generic lack of specificity" (*The Transparency of Evil* 21).

¹³ See

http://film.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/Critic_Review/Guardian_Film_of_the_week/0,4267,1434764,00.html

re-positing of sexual bodies and their stories, it is through fantasy that reality is established, their unholy union dispersed and disseminated as the new reality.

The spectacularization of sex affects the form that the act takes in the late 20th-century. As sex is disentangled from any direct relation to emotional, social or even procreational meaning and is “redeployed” as an autonomous value existing for its own sake, it becomes “submitted without qualification to the aesthetic criteria of strong experience and sensual gratification” (Bauman 151). Thus, sex relies more and more on the force and eccentricity of its mechanics to sustain any feeling of pleasure to the agent or spectator of the act. This partly explains the contemporary obsession with transgressive and perverse sex (what psychoanalytically would be translated as an obsession with what is more in sex than the act itself) both on and off screen. This is exactly the kind of sex that erotic thrillers exhibit, eccentric, intense, and dangerous sex between transgressive heroes that violate the directives of Symbolic Law.

Having explored in this chapter the postmodern milieu of sexual spectacle in which the erotic thriller was born and before I investigate the sexual fantasies it has contributed to the Western cultural hyper-reality (in the third part of the thesis), I need to address (Hollywood) cinema as the medium through which the spectator’s fantasy-frame is activated. In the next chapter we’ll set off from the dark auditorium and the lit mega-screen and move gradually to examine the watching subject’s mechanism of fantasy, which is activated every time on and off screen objects of desire come into sight.

CHAPTER FIVE

Film and Spectatorial Fantasy: From Freud and Lacan to the Erotic Thriller

Fantasies, dreams and daydreams share the same visual basis with contemporary postmodern spectacles,¹ supplying the cinematic screen with an abundant set of signifiers, which through the medium of film simulate various realities. As Anna Brenner points out, “[t]he medium of film allows for a successful creation of represented fantasy in its ability to craft a physical universe through the manipulation of time and space with editing and special effects” (n. pag.). Doubling the structure of dream, a mass film-industry like Hollywood reflects our culture’s collective fantasies and offers us a reflection of popular public daydreaming. However, what is the exact relation between dreams, daydreams, fantasy and film? How is fantasy activated during film viewing and how is the spectator involved? What kind of effect do cinematic images have on the spectator? And how does pleasure or frustration stem from the screen? To answer these questions, in this chapter we’ll enter the dark auditorium where subjectivity exists in seeing and, before directing our eyes towards the screen where erotic thrillers project their fantasies (in the final part of the thesis), we’ll turn our eyes to the desiring spectators and investigate the mechanism of fantasy as constitutive of the Symbolic subject.

5.1. Dark (Room) Fantasies

In *The Imaginary Signifier*, a book based on his 1975 paper of the same title,² film theorist Christian Metz, a major follower of Lacanian theory and one of the founders of “apparatus

¹ Underlining the visuality of dreams, Freud notes that although feelings and thoughts are part of the dream, and other senses participate in the process of dreaming, “it [the dream] is predominantly a question of images” (“Lecture 5” 118).

² The book was initially published in France by Union Générale d’Éditions in 1977, while its English translation appeared in 1982 by Indiana University Press.

theory” in the 1970s, setting off from the principle that “the degree of illusion of reality is inversely proportional to that of *wakefulness*” (106), compares and contrasts the “filmic state” and the “dream state” and reaches the predictable conclusion that the two share common ground. Unable to achieve the suspension of consciousness that sleep provokes, the spectator is placed, however, in a state of half-awakeness, half-dreaming – the darkness of the venue, the immobile physical state and awareness of the cinematic conventions facilitating that.³ Once the spectator’s resistances are lowered, the secondary processes and the reality principle they obey are suspended,⁴ while the primary processes of “ ‘pure’ pleasure principle, uncorrected by the reality principle” take sway.⁵ In this sense, film viewing facilitates a wish-fulfillment mechanism, which can never, however, reach the absolute regression of the dream-state, while at the same time it forecloses direct access to the unconscious, which is always already filtered by the conscious. In Metz’s words:

when he [the subject] is awake (when he is, for example, watching or making a film), the secondary process succeeds in covering over all his psychical paths, thoughts, feelings and actions, so that the primary process, which remains their permanent basis, ceases to achieve directly observable results, since everything observable, before becoming so, will have passed through the secondary logic, which is that of the conscious. (123)

Complete regression is therefore possible, as a rule, only in the state of sleep, and this is also why the film spectator, a person who is not asleep, remains incapable of true hallucination even when the fiction is of a kind to stir his desires strongly. (115)

Between these two states (filmic-dream) Metz introduces a third one, that of “daydreaming”, “which, like the filmic state and unlike the dream, is a waking activity” (129).

³ For more details see Metz 116-17 and 127-28.

⁴ Both the “reality principle” and the “pleasure principle” are presented in detail further on.

⁵ On primary and secondary process in relation to film viewing, see Metz 120-28

He then aligns the daydream with Freud's "Tagtraum", "the *conscious phantasy*",⁶ created in the human subject's effort to prolong the pleasure afforded by fantasy (132). Both the daydream and the filmic state result in "allow[ing] the primary process to emerge up to a certain point" (Metz 134), differing, however, in the satisfaction they bring to their agents. Films are considered by Metz as inferior to daydreams since in daydreaming one selects their images and their probable positions, whereas in the case of film those are imposed on the spectators from the outside and often do not conform to their desires (135).

According to Metz, through narrative cinema⁷ the three realms of dream, reality and fantasy are integrated, raising at the heart of the triangle they formulate, the spectator's *visée de conscience*, which partakes of all three while at the same time identifying with none; in Metz' words, it is "a type of look whose status is at once hybrid and precise and which establishes itself as the strict correlative of a certain kind of looked-at object" (141). Since, according to Metz, the basic principle of narrative cinema is that of closed containment, the film itself obliterates its discourse-dimension and "masquerades as story" taking place at some "past definite" time, and flaunts a "narrative plenitude and transparency [...]" based on a refusal to admit that anything is lacking, or that anything has to be sought for" (91). The naturalization and overvisibility of the spectacle, combined with the invisibility of the spectators and their isolation in and through the darkness of the venue,⁸ result in the naturalization of the looking process and the denial of the spectacle's exhibitionist nature, "giv[ing] the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world" (Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure" 25).⁹ In this sense, the spectator enjoys the narrative voyeuristically at the same

⁶ For the terms see Metz 129.

⁷ According to Kevin Jackson's book of cinematic terms, *The Language of Cinema*, narrative cinema involves "conventional story-telling film[s], whether dramatic or documentary, as opposed to the kind of poetic or **abstract** film[s] characteristic of the *avant-garde*" (169).

⁸ Metz underlines the importance of the invisible, silent, motionless spectator, reduced to a "*vacant*" subject who identifies primarily with the film's "seeing agency" (96).

⁹ In her famous 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Mulvey commented on the screening conditions (darkness of auditorium versus all-lit screen) and narrative conventions, which create the illusion of invisibility to spectators that are encouraged to misrecognize a public image for a private one. See Mulvey 25.

time that s/he is allowed to disavow this knowledge, enjoying pleasure in the type of “the primal scene and the key-hole” (Metz 95).¹⁰ As Metz points out, “the double denial essential to the story’s existence is preserved at all costs: that which is seen does not know that it is seen [...], and its lack of awareness allows the voyeur to be himself unaware that he is a voyeur. All that remains is the brute fact of seeing” (97). The importance of the primal scene for the erotic thriller’s generic make-up and fantasy-structure will be analysed further on.

If Metz’s presentation of film-viewing as the reflexive “brute fact of seeing” were to be viewed through the Freudian lens of the primordial fantasy, located by Laplanche and Pontalis underneath the active and passive act of seeing (seeing-being seen) – “when the subject no longer places himself in one of the different terms of the fantasy” (“Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality” 34n64) – we would reach the level of fluidity and multiplicity of positions that the feminist film-as-fantasy model offers (to be seen further on), answering both the reductionism of the gender-less spectator of the 1970s “apparatus theory” and Laura Mulvey’s schema of fixed and gendered spectatorial pleasure. However, Metz’s emphasis lies on the centrality of the subject in relation to the spectacle consumed and not on the film-viewing positions. That is probably the reason why sexual difference is absent from his work.

As I’m not interested in spectatorship *per se*, but rather in exploring the appropriation of the vicissitudes of fantasy by cinema, both as institution and cultural product, I will briefly delineate the spectator-screen interaction for apparatus-theory – based on Christian Metz’s work – and for Mulvey, as a representative feminist voice, while my focus will be on their description of cinematic processes that in some way relate to fantasy.

In his theory, Metz aligns the act of seeing with an “all-perceiving” spectator, “an all-powerful position which is that of God himself” (49). All-perceiving spectators see what is on the screen as they simultaneously “*constitute*” the film through seeing it, aligning their look

¹⁰ For more details see Metz 93-97.

with the camera which during the film is exchanged for the projector, “[a]n apparatus the spectator has behind him, *at the back of his head*, that is, precisely where phantasy locates the ‘focus’ of all vision” (Metz 48-49). During the viewing process these god-like spectators identify secondarily either with the characters or with the actors of films (Metz 46-47, 56), but mainly they identify with the camera as transcendental subjects, who themselves project on the screen the images they introject, both as screen and projector, duplicating the camera (Metz 48-51, 96-97). In Metz’s words:

When I say that “I see” the film, I mean thereby a unique mixture of two contrary currents: the film is what I receive, and it is also what I release, since it does not pre-exist my entering the auditorium and I only need close my eyes to suppress it. Releasing it, I am the projector, receiving it, I am the screen; in both these figures together, I am the camera, which points and yet which records. (51)

As the all-perceiving spectator identifies primarily with “*seeing*”, the subject-object axiom is obliterated. The spectator’s “own image does not appear on the screen” and what does, the “*seen*”, becomes “the pure object” (Metz 97), existing due to the spectator and for his eyes only. That is, in Metz’s paradigm cinema viewing functions as a Symbolic repetition of the Imaginary configuration of the self in the image. In the same way that during the famous Lacanian Mirror Stage the child’s sense of self is established in the perfect image (ideal-I) reflected back to the mirrored infant, the spectator’s relation with the objects in the world is mediated and conditioned by the images received from the cinematic screen. However, it is because the Mirror Stage has already preceded establishing the identification of the self as “I” with the *seen* that spectators can assume the Metzian *seeing* position (Metz 97).¹¹

¹¹ Lacan’s most famous essay “The Mirror Stage” will be presented in detail later on in this chapter.

As I've already mentioned, in his preoccupation with the centrality of the spectator, Metz totally disregards the gender parameters that make the film-viewing experience different for men and women. In her essay, "The Cinematic Apparatus – Problems in Current Theory" (1978), Jacqueline Rose addresses the problem of the eviction of sexual difference from the work of apparatus-theorists Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Comolli, and underlines the urgency of its re-inscription for film-theory.¹² However, the loudest and most conspicuous feminist response to the genderlessness of apparatus theory was that of Laura Mulvey.

In her most controversial essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", first published in *Screen* in 1975, which has, according to Barbara Creed, "probably generated more debate, both in the pages of *Screen* and elsewhere, than any other single article in the history of contemporary film theory" ("Introduction" 16), Mulvey expresses the urgent need to use psychoanalysis as "a political weapon [in] demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (22). Mulvey identifies the central all-perceiving subject of film theory as male and the film as his fantasy, pushing the woman to the position of spectacle (28). Consequently, only men (spectators and their "screen surrogate[s]"), "the active controllers of the look", can get active pleasure from the female spectacles they consume, either voyeuristically (by punishing the castrator and saving the castrated) or through fetishistic scopophilia (by turning the female threat into a reassuring fetish), while women characters, reduced to spectacles "to be looked at", are either sadistically punished or transformed into symbols of male potency (Mulvey 27-29). Working on the same fixed axis of polar opposites as Metz,¹³ Mulvey (mis-)recognizes as male the subject whose "primordial

¹² See her book *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* 199-213. Annete Kuhn in her recent essay "The State of Film and Media Feminism" (2004), a re-assessment of film studies in the twenty-first century, also addresses Metz's exclusion of sexual difference both in his discussion of the spectator but also in his use of Freudian concepts such as the much-employed terms of "disavowal" and "fetishism". Jacqueline Rose also deals extensively with Metz's appropriation of "disavowal" in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* 201-2.

¹³ Metz distinguishes between the *seeing* subject and the *seen* object (97). Mulvey adds the patriarchal consciousness to Metz's opposition and comes up with the man *looking* and the woman *being-looked-at* (27).

wish for pleasurable looking” the cinema satisfies.¹⁴ Mulvey’s thesis was heavily criticized for allowing the female spectator only the possibility of masochistic pleasure, and was answered by various feminists’ proposals of alternative models of spectatorship.¹⁵ As I’ve already mentioned earlier, spectatorship is not my present concern, therefore for my thesis the importance of Mulvey’s work lies in her building up on Metz’s perception of cinema as replaying the gamut of the subject’s imaginary configurations.

Like Metz, Mulvey sees the cinematic process as a repetition of the Lacanian Mirror Stage, during which “it is an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence of the first articulation of the ‘I’, of subjectivity” (“Visual Pleasure” 25). According to Mulvey, cinema depends on the indissoluble link between image and self-image that constitutes the subject in the Lacanian paradigm, supporting the spectator’s fantasy of ideal-ego by offering ample ego-ideals both inside (characters) and outside (stars) the screen (“Visual Pleasure” 25-26). On the other hand, “the structures of fascination” that cinema possesses lead spectators to a temporary loss of their ego in the way to its final reinforcement by the time the film finishes (Mulvey 26). In agreement with Mulvey, Metz also defines spectatorial pleasure in the loss of self during the screening of a film, saying that cinema-goers, and especially *cinephiles* go to the cinema “partly in order to be carried away by the film (...), but also in order to *appreciate* as such the machinery that is carrying them away” (75). The dysfunction of these structures leads to what Metz calls “filmic unpleasure”. According to Metz we get bored, dislike, or totally hate films that do not adequately feed our id or that feed it too much, raising our ego’s defence-system: the super-ego (111). In Metz’s words: “if a subject is to ‘like’ a film, the detail of the diegesis must sufficiently please his conscious and unconscious phantasies to permit him a certain

¹⁴ The quoted phrase is on page 25.

¹⁵ Amongst the most important feminist reactions to Mulvey’s 1975 essay and her own revision of it in her “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ inspired by *Duel in the Sun*” (1981) have been those of Mary Ann Doane, Teresa de Lauretis and Jackie Stacey.

instinctual satisfaction, and this satisfaction must stay within certain limits, must not pass the point at which anxiety and rejection would be mobilised” (111).

By identifying filmic pleasure with wish-fulfilment, Metz obscures the structural aspect of fantasy, an aspect, however, which becomes the focus of psychoanalytic feminists such as Elizabeth Cowie, one of the co-founders, editors and contributors to the British *m/f* journal which from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s hosted many important feminist issues and provided space for different feminist voices to be heard. In her article entitled “*From Fantasia*”, first published in *m/f* in 1984, Cowie announces her aim to bring together fantasy, psychoanalysis and film (147). Addressing the use of fantasy in relation to film, Cowie observes that “the concept has been used either peripherally or pejoratively”, that is either as a way to dismiss Hollywood “as escapist” or as a term to mark unrealistic, imaginary or supernatural-driven genres such as science fiction films (147-48). Referring to the use of the term by psychoanalytic film theorists such as Stephen Heath and Mary Ann Doane, Cowie contends that their reading of the film text’s circuit of desire always involves an Oedipalization of desire which can only be read through a fixity of subject positions and a prioritisation of male desire (148). Through her own psychoanalytic reading of fantasy-as-structure, Cowie aims at re-considering the fixity of subject positions in the frame of fantasy and thus exploring the potentials of female desire.¹⁶

In her most influential book, *Representing the Woman* (1997), Elizabeth Cowie extends and revises her investigation of fantasy in its fundamental relation to sexuality as it is established in films as “public forms of fantasy” (124). Following Lacan’s famous dictum that it is fantasy and not the object “that is the support of desire” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 185), Cowie claims that what offers pleasure to the subject is not obtaining any desired objects but setting out its fantasy (*Representing the Woman* 133). Similar to narrative fiction,

¹⁶ Fantasy as the prioritised site of multiple identificatory possibilities for the viewing subject, is the model I assume as operative in my own analysis of Hollywood erotic thrillers.

filmic pleasure is derived from the way the story moves towards a happy ending, not from the actual ending itself (Cowie, *Representing the Woman* 133). Therefore, although an indecisive ending or no closure at all doesn't, according to Cowie's argument, affect the spectator's pleasure (133), on the contrary a bad, incongruous ending that disrupts a film's particular organisation of spectatorial desire can result in the spectator's rejecting a film. In this sense, films repeat again and again what becomes part of their generic conventions because what determines "their successful collective consumption is not universal objects of desire, but a setting of desiring in which we can find our place(s). And these places will devolve, as in the original fantasies, on positions of desire: active or passive, feminine or masculine, mother or son, father or daughter" (Cowie, *Representing the Woman* 143). Therefore, the banality of aesthetic choices and generic aspects, repeated again and again (as in the case of erotic thrillers), exhibits positions and relations that have proved successful and are therefore indicative of mainstream cultural desires. Hollywood offers ready-made fantasies that spectators can *enter* as if they belonged to them,¹⁷ identifying with any of the numerous positions the filmic worlds offer and activating their own convergence of conscious and unconscious, primal and secondary fantasies that fuse past, present, and future.¹⁸ Talking about realism as "the most typical aesthetic criteria for good film" (*Representing the Woman* 141), Cowie underlines the importance for film-as-fantasy to be enjoyed quietly and unobserved. Through formal and aesthetic criteria (realistic narrative, developed and "believable" characters, motivated development of plot, etc.) spectators are "bribed" into believing in the film's reality, disavowing their knowledge of its fictional status (Cowie

¹⁷ Cowie underlines Freud's thesis that the reader is never in a position to see the author's fantasies and be entertained by them but rather "*enters* into those fantasies" (*Representing the Woman* 140).

¹⁸ Talking about the intersection of past, present and future in the daydream's wish-fulfilling function, Freud writes: "some provoking occasion in the present [...] has been able to arouse one of the subject's major wishes. From there it harks back to a memory of an earlier experience (usually an infantile one) in which this wish was fulfilled; and it now creates a situation relating to the future which represents a fulfilment of the wish" ("Writers and Day-Dreaming" 135).

141).¹⁹ Realism becomes a prerequisite, functioning both as “a *defence* against fantasy and also as a ‘hook’, involving the spectator in the fantasy structure ‘unawares’” (Cowie, *Representing the Woman* 143). In this way, spectators enjoy a type of pleasure that Freud has called *incentive bonus* or *fore-pleasure*, which facilitates “the release of still greater pleasure arising from deeper psychical sources” (Freud, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” 141). It is only through the fore-pleasure of a film’s formal and aesthetic conventions that spectators can indulge in “the ‘greater pleasure’ of the fantasy” (Cowie, *Representing the Woman* 143).²⁰

5.2. The Artist, his Fantasy and the Audience

At this point I consider it necessary to move from film theory into psychoanalysis to explore Freud’s discussion on the relation between fantasy and art. Although Freud didn’t think highly of the art of cinema, his study of the constitution of the subject has proved fundamental for film theory and still informs discussions around the constitution of the filmic subject both on- and off-screen.

As opposed to individual fantasy, where the fantastic world is secluded from the real one in terms of childishness or inappropriateness, with the day-dreamer being “ashamed of his phantasies and hid[ing] them from other people” (Freud, “Writers and Day-Dreaming” 133-34), there is, according to Freud, “a path that leads back from phantasy to reality – the path, that is, of art” (“Lecture 23” 423). Artists, very much like day-dreamers, “[build] castles in the air” by means of their frustrated libido, which finds sublimated relief in the fantastic worlds they mould (Freud, “Writers and Day-Dreaming” 133).²¹ Artists manage to make their fantasy part of reality by working with it: they reshape it, make it lose its individual limited

¹⁹ Freud uses the verb “bribe” in his essay “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” when he says that “[t]he writer softens the character of his egoistic day-dreams by altering and disguising it, and he bribes us by the purely formal – that is, aesthetic – yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies” (141).

²⁰ Metz also underlines the importance of the preservation of deception in cinema. That is, the spectacle must retain the spectator in a “make-believe” state, otherwise it is considered bad and ineffective (72).

²¹ On sublimation see Freud’s “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” 163-64.

character, alter its origins, distort it and disguise what's most personal and, according to Freud, repelling, through "the purely formal – that is, aesthetic – yield of pleasure" which they attach to it ("Writers and Day-Dreaming" 141). Becoming pleasurable, fantasies outweigh repression mechanisms, which have been keeping them locked in the unconscious (Freud, "Lecture 23" 423-24). Experiencing the fantasy of the artists, the audience manages to "derive consolation and alleviation from their own sources of pleasure in their unconscious which have become inaccessible to them" (Freud, "Lecture 23" 424).

Thus, for Freud art has a therapeutic effect on both the artists, who manage to evade neurosis by giving an outlet through art to their blocked libidinal energy, and on the people who through the artist's libido enjoy a relaxation of personal frictions and are allowed guiltless pleasurable access to their own day-dreams. Through the safe distance that art provides, pleasure is allowed even in its most perverse form, once the barriers the reality principle poses are loosened due to the "unreality of the [artist's] imaginative world",²² as "many things which, if they were real, could give no enjoyment, can do so in the play of phantasy, and many excitements which, in themselves, are actually distressing, can become a source of pleasure for the hearers and spectators at the performance of a[n] [artist's] work" (Freud, "Writers and Day-Dreaming" 132).²³

5.3. Hollywood as Dream-Machine

Discussions of Hollywood as "dream factory" can be traced as far back as 1931, when the close relation between the workings of dreams and films was first noted (Gabbard 1). Laura Mulvey attributes an important degree of Hollywood magic to the industry's skillful "manipulation of visual pleasure" ("Visual Pleasure" 24). Through its use of "formal beauty"

²² The phrase comes from Freud, "Writers and Day-Dreaming" 132.

²³ The Freudian notions of "pleasure principle" and "reality principle" and their relation to fantasy are presented in detail further down.

and the exploitation of the spectator's "formative obsessions" (here Mulvey refers to the Lacanian Mirror Stage which offers to the infant its first mis-recognition of itself in its image of completeness), Hollywood offers glimpses of fulfillment to lacking Symbolic subjects (24). Meanwhile, Jane M. Gaines attributes the myth-making powers of the cinematic medium to technological advances. In her words, through image and sound Hollywood manipulates simple stories and transforms them into epic mega-narratives of extraordinary proportions; "Because of its amazing technological capabilities, capabilities that are enhancements of the magical tale, it [cinema] could be said to have a *utopianizing* effect, that is, whatever subject receiving cinematic treatment can be produced as a 'wishful landscape'"(109-10). Employing Ernst Bloch's concept of "hope" for a better world and his view of Hollywood as representative of the daydream, Gaines contends that "*if* there is hope in the world, *if* there is an imagining beyond things as they are, this imagining will be found in some form in the mirrorings of Hollywood realism" (108).

The propagation of the dream, which on the Hollywood big screen has been mainly identified with the American Dream, has always been the aim of the American film industry. So much so, that it has even been articulated as the epilogue of one of the most successful Cinderella-versions of the '90s, Garry Marshall's *Pretty Woman*. At the film's closure, a street person, representing the average man, shouts to passers-by something that should function as reminder for the audiences that have just watched the film: "Welcome to Hollywood, what's your dream? Everyone comes here. This is Hollywood, Land of dreams. Some dreams come true, some don't, but keep on dreamin'. This is Hollywood, always time to dream, so keep on dreamin'" (qtd. in Radner 64).

5.4. Fantasy / Phantasy

Before we examine the way the relation between fantasy and desire develops from Freud's first theorization of fantasy until Lacan's re-reading of the Freudian models, let us examine briefly an inconsistency in the use of the term.

In talking about *fantasy* one necessarily comes across the doubleness of the term: *fantasy* versus *phantasy*, and the problem of the distinction between the two. According to Anna Brenner's definition in the internet glossary of media keyword terms hosted by the site of The University of Chicago, the word "fantasy" comes from the Greek word "phantasia" meaning "to make visible" whereas the term "phantasy" comes from the German word "phantasie" (n. pag.). To explain the latter Brenner quotes Laplanche and Pontalis, who write that "phantasie" means "imagination, in the sense of 'the world of imagination, its contents and the creative activity which animates it'" (n. pag.). Going directly to the source, that is, Laplanche and Pontalis' renowned *The Language of Psychoanalysis* and their etymological analysis of phantasy versus fantasy, we see that they differentiate between the less philosophical German "*phantasie*", employed by Freud in his studies, and the French equivalent "*fantasme*", a more philosophical term revived by psychoanalysis to convey "a specific imaginary production, not the whole world of phantasy and imaginative activity in general" (314). It is because the French usage of "*fantaisie*" carries negative overtones of "whimsy, eccentricity, triviality etc.", which are conveyed in its English equivalent as well, that "most English psychoanalytic writers have preferred to write 'phantasy'", as opposed to their American colleagues, who have showed preference for the term spelt with an f (Laplanche & Pontalis 314-15).

As Laplanche and Pontalis observe, "phantasy" is a psychoanalytic term used to refer to all kinds of conscious and/or unconscious phantasies (*Language of Psychoanalysis* 315). Freud himself used the term "*phantasien*" to refer both to conscious day-dreams, made by the

subject in a waking state, and unconscious wishes and phantasies that reach consciousness through night-dreams (316). Although Freud himself distinguished between different levels of phantasy, he wasn't concerned with establishing the differences, but rather the links between them (316).²⁴ In her influential paper "The Nature and Function of Phantasy" Susan Isaacs suggested back in the late forties that they distinguish between the two terms by using the "ph" to refer to unconscious mental processes and the "f" for conscious daydreaming (qtd. in Brenner n. pag.). Isaacs' proposition has at times been considered helpful and led to the commonly-drawn distinction between phantasy as the theoretical mechanism of desire (disclosed in the clinical situation) as opposed to fantasy as the concrete, often materialist wish for a particular object, feeding one's consciousness with different scenarios of acquisition. In this latter sense, fantasy has become infiltrated in the cultural-analysis setting and related to "discussions of aesthetics and media" (Brenner n. pag.). Answering Isaacs' proposition, Laplanche and Pontalis underline that it is impossible to use the "ph" / "f" dichotomy in reading Freud's texts, as "the suggested distinction does not do justice to the complexity of Freud's views. In any case, it would lead to problems of translation; if, for every occurrence of '*Phantasie*' in Freud's writings, a choice had to be made between '*phantasy*' and '*fantasy*', the door would be open to the most arbitrary of interpretations" (*Language of Psychoanalysis* 318nβ).²⁵ Once the need for a "ph" / "f" distinction is abolished, the American usage of "fantasy"²⁶ as inclusive of both conscious and unconscious processes prevails over the "ph" term, which appears to be too specialised and limiting for the contemporary postmodern interdisciplinary milieu.

²⁴ See also Cowie's *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis* 129.

²⁵ In their essay "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality", written around the same time as *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Laplanche and Pontalis refute altogether Isaacs' distinction between conscious and unconscious fantasies and suggest, instead, a division between "original and secondary fantasies (whether repressed or conscious)" (28).

²⁶ For the American usage of "fantasy" see Brenner
<http://humanities.uchicago.edu/faculty/mitchell/glossary2004/fantasy.htm>

Along these lines I will be using the term spelled with an “f” to talk about both conscious and unconscious fantasies. The “ph” term will definitely appear, however, in many of my quotations, turning any attempt at absolute control and coherence into a postmodern farce.

5.5. Fantasy & Desire: from Freud to Lacan

In his groundbreaking body of work, Sigmund Freud was the first to establish fantasy as a mechanism of psychical reality that protects the patient from realizations so stressful as to be repressed into the unconscious. Studying hysteria, Freud discovered that on most occasions his patients’ narratives of seduction were not real events, but fantasies, “imaginary memories” resulting from childhood impressions and causing hysterical symptoms, mainly triggered during adolescence (“Sexuality in the Neuroses” 75).²⁷ Later, Freud related these types of fantasy to what he called “the day-dreams of youth”, which he viewed in connection to night dreams. In his words:

These phantasies [the day-dreams] are satisfactions of wishes proceeding from deprivation and longing. They are justly called “day-dreams”, for they give us the key to an understanding of night-dreams – in which the nucleus of the dream formation consists of nothing else than complicated day-time phantasies of this kind that have been distorted and are misunderstood by the conscious psychical agency. (“Hysterical Phantasies” 87-88)²⁸

But before we explore the relation between dreams, daydreams and fantasies in the Freudian universe, we need to have a look at Freud’s description of the mechanism of

²⁷ The whole title of Freud’s essay is: “My Views on the Part Played by Sexuality in the Aetiology of the Neuroses” (1906 [1905]).

²⁸ The whole title of the essay is: “Hysterical Phantasies and their Relation to Bisexuality” (1908).

fantasy and its relation to the establishment of a desiring subject (this mechanism I will show the erotic thrillers to double and manipulate in the third part of the thesis).

5.5.1. The Emergence of Fantasy as the Outset of Desire

In their essay “Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality”, Laplanche and Pontalis, discussing the close relationship between desire and fantasy revealed in the Freudian term *Wunschphantasie* (wish-fantasy),²⁹ argue that the origin of fantasy lies in the “hallucinatory satisfaction of desire” (24). To elaborate on the relation between the two key terms (fantasy-desire), let us conduct a thorough examination of the mechanisms that are activated in the human subject by the workings of desire

In his work on dream-processes, Freud addressed the effect of wishes on the activation of hallucinatory mechanisms which aim at reducing the anxiety that wishes provoke by duplicating the experience of satisfaction (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 757). That is, “[t]he first wishing seems to have been a hallucinatory cathecting of the memory of satisfaction” (Freud 757-58) in the child’s search for the object that would make the repetition of satisfaction possible. In the absence of the original maternal object, the infant employs its repository of memories to reproduce the prior stability of pleasurable satisfaction.³⁰ According to Freud, the way the human psychical apparatus faces a need is through what he calls “perceptual identity”, that is the “repetition of the perception which was linked with the satisfaction of the need” (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 720). Once satisfaction of the wish is not achieved and the need persists, the internal cathexis of the psychical energy transforms into an external one and “a second [psychic] system, which is in control of voluntary movement” is employed to satisfy “purposes remembered in advance” (720). So the infant

²⁹ See also Laplanche and Pontalis’ *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* 317-18.

³⁰ According to Freud and his “principle of constancy”, or else the “Nirvana principle”, “the mental apparatus endeavours to keep the quantity of excitation present in it as low as possible or at least to keep it constant” (“Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 277)

first hallucinates about the breast, but shortly shifts its attention to the external world and, adhering to “a conception of the real circumstances in the external world” – what Freud has called “the reality principle”³¹ – screams and jerks its legs and arms in the attempt to change these circumstances and achieve satisfaction of its wish to suckle the maternal breast (Freud, “Two Principles of Mental Functioning” 36).³²

The choice of auto-erotic objects during infancy aims at re-experiencing the pleasure the infant received from suckling the maternal breast. This pleasure, which is now disconnected from the act of feeding, is effected through the workings of fantasy, declaring the existence of the child as a sexual being. Laplanche and Pontalis discuss the connection between fantasy and auto-erotism in Freud’s work, arguing that “he [Freud] seems to be sharing the common belief that in the absence of real objects the subject seeks and creates for himself an imaginary satisfaction” (“Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality” 24).

To elaborate more on this point let us go back to Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* and his writings on “Infantile Sexuality”. Discussing auto-erotism, Freud views thumb-sucking as an auto-erotic activity which retrieves through fantasy a past satisfaction: the simultaneous convergence in the act of breast feeding of the satisfaction of hunger and the pleasure of sucking through the erotogenous zone of the mouth. In Freud’s own words:

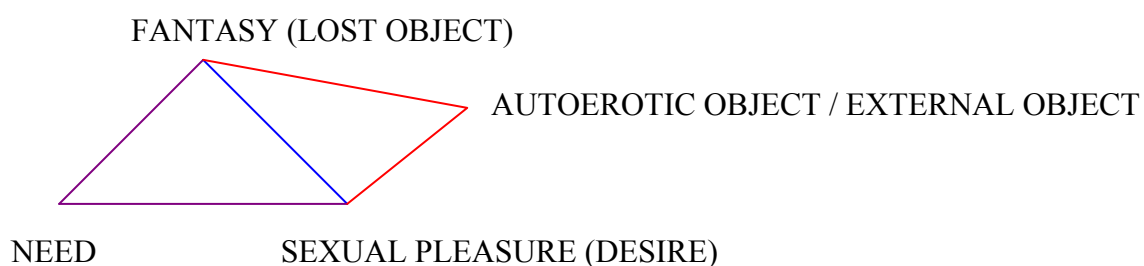
It is clear that the behaviour of a child who indulges in thumb-sucking is determined by a search for some pleasure which has already been experienced and is now remembered. [...] The child’s lips, in our view, behave like an *erotogenic zone*, and no doubt stimulation by the warm flow of milk is the cause of the pleasurable sensation. The satisfaction of the erotogenic zone is associated, in the first instance, with the satisfaction of the need for nourishment. To begin with, sexual activity attaches itself to

³¹ An account of how “the reality principle” and “the pleasure principle” relate to fantasy is provided in the next section.

³² The whole title of Freud’s essay is “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning”.

one of the functions serving the purpose of self-preservation and does not become independent of them until later. [...] The need for repeating the sexual satisfaction now becomes detached from the need for taking nourishment – a separation which becomes inevitable when the teeth appear and food is no longer taken in only by sucking, but is also chewed up. (97-98)

The disengagement of need from the sexual pleasure that some activity or (maternal) object confers on the infant is effected, according to Laplanche and Pontalis, through the insertion of a third term (fantasy), which declares the autonomy of sexuality through autoerotism. Or it could be the other way round; in its effort to regain the lost satisfaction, the infant manages to relive the sexual pleasure, which is thus dissociated from the physical need and conjoined with fantasy. Thus, the autoerotic object becomes the supporter in fantasy of originary sexual pleasure (Laplanche and Pontalis, “Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality” 25). Turning this into a schema, we come up with two triangles and the fantasy-desire axis as their meeting point:



Fantasy becomes part of the triangulation necessary to turn the child into a social subject by disrupting the unmediated relation with the mother. Once the convergence of nutrition and pleasure on the maternal body is disrupted, fantasy creates its substitute in the form of a narrative. This becomes the narrative of the child’s desire for the mother, which will later go

through the Oedipal stage and, through the insertion of the father as the third term, will establish the child as a sexual social subject.³³

An important point raised by Laplanche and Pontalis is that the Freudian model of fantasy only makes sense if fantasy emerges as the infant's expression of desire for the lost breast, that is for the breast as a sign: "it is not the real object, but the lost object; not the milk, but the breast as a signifier, which is the object of the primal hallucination" ("Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality" 33-34n57). Illustrating this point further, Cowie explains that when the experience of satisfaction is separated from the object offering it (the maternal breast), the latter becomes a sign representing the *lost satisfaction* the baby derived (from suckling the breast): "[f]or the baby, the 'breast' becomes the object of desire – as giving the experience of satisfaction – but it is so not as itself but as a signifier of the *lost* object which is the *satisfaction* derived from suckling the breast, but which comes to be desired in *its absence*" (*Representing the Woman* 132). The particular way in which fantasy sets out the infant's desire for the primary object determines its sexuality and its preference for particular objects and positions that activate its desire in relation to the lost object.

This becomes evident when the child reaches puberty and its sexual organisation changes; "[w]hile the ego goes through its transformation from a *pleasure-ego* into a *reality-ego*, the sexual instincts undergo the changes that lead them from their original auto-erotism through various intermediate phases to object-love in the service of procreation" (Freud, "Two Principles of Mental Functioning" 42). The choice of object at this stage is made in two ways: the " 'anaclitic' or 'attachment' one based on attachment to early infantile prototypes" or the "narcissistic one, which seeks for the subject's own ego and finds it again in other people" (Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" 145n1). In both cases a minimum of fantasy is necessary to support the libidinal investment of the newly-found object with the

³³ The theme of Oedipality and triangulation will occupy our attention in the next chapter.

traits of the lost object(s) of desire, the parental prototypes. Consequently it is unconscious fantasies that sustain each individual's conscious fantasies of sexual desire. As Freud tells us in his "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality", "[a] child's affection for his parents is no doubt the most important infantile trace which, after being revived at puberty, points the way to his choice of an object" (152).

5.5.2. Pleasure versus Reality equals Fantasy

In his essay "Two Principles of Mental Functioning" (1911), Freud talks about the two principles that determine the function of unconscious mental processes, these being the "pleasure principle" and the "reality principle". It is in this paper that the term "pleasure principle" makes its first appearance to indicate the agency that governs the primary – unconscious – mental processes, directing them towards the achievement of pleasure and answering any unpleasurable event with repression (36).³⁴ Once psychical activity, driven by the pleasure principle, answers "the peremptory demands of internal needs" with hallucinations, and thus lack of satisfaction, the need for survival causes the replacement of the pleasure principle by the reality principle, which relates to the secondary – conscious – mental processes that address external reality and try to change it through some action (Freud, "Two Principles of Mental Functioning" 36-37). What prevails in the mind is no longer what is pleasurable, but what is real, and hallucination is exchanged for action, which in the long run attains pleasure after all (Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" 278). In Freud's words:

Actually the substitution of the reality principle for the pleasure principle implies no deposing of the pleasure principle, but only a safeguarding of it.
A momentary pleasure, uncertain in its results, is given up, but only in order

³⁴ When repression takes place, the stimulus is obstructed from attaining its aim, but is instead channeled through different outlets, away from the conscious. See Freud's discussion on the workings of repression in his homonymous essay "Repression" 141-58.

to gain along the new path an assured pleasure at a later time. (“Two Principles of Mental Functioning” 41)

However, while the ego-instincts fall under the directives of the reality principle, the sexual instincts, on the other hand, remain under the sway of the pleasure principle. Through auto-erotic activities, and then through the sublimation of sexual desires, during the infantile latency period – between the resolution of the Oedipus complex and puberty – hallucinatory satisfaction of desire is still at work making the role of the reality principle unnecessary (Freud, “Two Principles of Mental Functioning” 40). Moreover, in adherence to the principle of constancy, which guards the mental apparatus against any expenditure of energy, the sources of pleasure are resolutely retained and unwillingly exchanged by the human subject in the form of fantasy (39).³⁵ In Freud’s words,

With the introduction of the reality principle one species of thought-activity was split-off; it was kept free from reality-testing and remained subordinated to the pleasure principle alone. This activity is *phantasying*, which begins already in children’s play, and later, continued as *day-dreaming*, abandons dependence on real objects. (“Two Principles of Mental Functioning” 39)

And even when the sexual instincts are also subsumed under the services of the “reality-ego” and auto-erotism becomes “object-love in the service of procreation” (Freud, “Two Principles of Mental Functioning” 42), fantasy is still very much operative in the subject’s striving towards “the fulfilment of a wish, [or] a correction of unsatisfying reality” (Freud, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” 134). Nicola Glover highlights the close relation between fantasy and pleasure when she writes that “[t]he day-dreamer ignores reality in his dream and gives full rein to the pleasure principle in evolving wishful phantasies” (n. pag.). Through fantasy

³⁵ In his earlier essay “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” (1908 [1907]), Freud contented that: “whoever understands the human mind knows that hardly anything is harder for a man than to give up a pleasure which he has once experienced. Actually, we can never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another” (133).

desire is voiced and satisfied (Brenner n. pag.) in the locus of imagination with nothing to disturb the individual's reality. In this sense, fantasy in the form of day-dreaming becomes the third term which functions as "a mediator between the subject, and their wishes, and the negation of acting on their desires, in reality" (Brenner n. pag.). Getting satisfaction from mere hallucination, the subject is once more ready to join lacking reality without trying to bring about changes in it through actions. That is, during daydreaming, fantasy supplants reality and the subject experiences things vicariously through the images that the mind constructs. In this way the pleasure principle is followed at the same time that the reality principle is adhered to.

Fantasies that become disturbing to the ego are simply repressed and the libido retains its repressed points of fixation through unconscious fantasy (Freud, "Lecture 23" 420). This is the exact nature of the famous beating fantasy that Freud analysed in his most celebrated essay: "A Child is Being Beaten". Although often studied as illustrative of the multiplicity of subject-positions it offers to the fantasizing subject,³⁶ I will read the beating fantasy as exemplary of the way sexual fantasy is symbolically established in triangulation. If no third term appears to interrupt the symbiotic relation of the double (mother/father-child) the fantasy is repressed awaiting the third element that will halt censorship and will allow the fantasy a Symbolic presence.

5.5.3. "A Child is Being Beaten"

Moving from the mechanism of fantasy to its organization of content and the way it offers erotic pleasure to the subject, in his essay entitled "'A Child is Being Beaten' A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions" (1919), Freud analyses the three stages of the "beating-fantasy" which he found very common among hysterics and neurotics, but which

³⁶ Elizabeth Cowie, as I have already presented earlier, is one amongst many feminist psychoanalytic theorists who suggest the film-as-fantasy model as a way to read films, revising the possible pleasures of spectatorship.

he believed to be as common among “the far greater number of people who have not been obliged to come to analysis by manifest illness”(163).³⁷ This fantasy, verbalized by Freud’s patients through the phrase “a child is being beaten”, is the final stage of a fantasy which, accompanied by masturbation, affords the individual sexual pleasure (163).

Recreating the stages of the beating-fantasy, Freud revealed its first phase to be: “*My father is beating the child whom I hate*”. During this phase the child who receives the beating is not the child having the fantasy but some other child (probably a brother or sister) whom the child experiences as a rival for parental love. The child having the fantasy is absent from the fantasy and simply enjoys the spectacle in a sadistic way (170). At this stage, according to Freud, the fantasy isn’t yet related to sexual excitation and masturbation (173). In its second phase, the fantasy transforms into the unconscious and almost always analytically constructed “*I am being beaten by my father*”.³⁸ The conversion of the child producing the fantasy into the beaten child turns the fantasy into a masochistic one, where pleasure arises from the repression into the unconscious of incestuous love and the guilt that this pleasure creates in the subject. As Freud writes:

This being beaten [“My father is beating me (I am being beaten by my father)”] is now a convergence of the sense of guilt and sexual love. *It is not only the punishment for the forbidden genital relation, but also the regressive substitute for that relation*, and from this latter source it derives

³⁷ Freud bases his analysis of the three stages of the beating-fantasy on six case histories of patients of his: four female and two male. Therefore, due to the majority of the cases being female, he announces the restriction of his observations to the beating-fantasies of little girls (see 167 and 169). In the actual analysis, however, he mainly uses the noun ‘child’ instead of ‘girl’ giving to his observations a sense of neutrality and generality. It is only later in his essay, when he tries to adapt the model to boys, that he clearly addresses the situation of both boys and girls. See 182-88.

³⁸ Freud includes the case of a male patient who consciously remembered that he used to fantasise about being beaten by his mother, when he masturbated; a fantasy which he later enriched by substituting his mother with the mothers of his fellow students and with other women who resembled her (175). In two more cases female patients developed very elaborate day-dreams springing from the masochistic second phase of the beating fantasy to enjoy excitation, although masturbation wasn’t performed (176).

the libidinal excitation which is from this time forward attached to it, and which finds its outlet in masturbatory acts. (175)

The third and final phase of the fantasy, of which the subject is completely conscious, translates into the famous phrase: “a child is being beaten”. Here the father as beater is obliterated and his substitute is either undefined or taken up by some teacher, or anyone “from the class of fathers” (Freud 171).³⁹ Meanwhile, the child who produces the fantasy is no longer part of the fantasy but is supplanted by – usually more than one – child,⁴⁰ and beating, as well, is often replaced by some other form of punishment and/or humiliation (Freud 171). In this final stage, the beating-fantasy “has strong and unambiguous sexual excitement attached to it, and so provides a means for masturbatory satisfaction” (Freud 171). However the child itself is once more absent, reduced to a mere spectator who enjoys the spectacle voyeuristically and thus sadistically.⁴¹ “But only the *form* of this phantasy is sadistic; the satisfaction which is derived from it is masochistic” (Freud 177), as this fantasy carries with it the repressed second stage which it masks. The sensations of incestuous desire and guilt are veiled behind the sadistic spectacle of an obscured image of impersonal violence, turned against unknown individuals, who are after all “nothing more than substitutes for the child itself” (Freud 177).

Therefore, sexual fantasy in Freud’s model, either conscious or unconscious, brings together pleasure and guilt, and operates as a means of wish fulfillment either through staging the realization of some wish or its frustration, when the urging desire is repressed due to the guilt it provokes. In this sense, as Cowie claims, “[f]antasies provide satisfaction, [...], not only by presenting a wish but also by presenting the failure of a wish if the latter has undergone repression”, since “[d]efences are inseparably bound up with the work of fantasy”

³⁹ The quoted phrase appears on page 183.

⁴⁰ According to Freud, it is almost always boys that are being beaten both in the fantasies of boys and in those of girls (177).

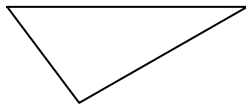
⁴¹ Freud claims that his patients answered his demand to learn where they were positioned in the third phase of fantasy by saying “I am probably looking on” (171).

(“*From Fantasia*” 151). What characterizes fantasy, therefore, is fluidity both of content and subject-positions. “The child” becomes “me” only to become “a child” in the third phase of the beating fantasy, verifying Cowie’s observation that both daydreams and more complex fictional narratives (such as those shown in cinema) resemble the “original” fantasies in providing a variety of possible subject-positions, “so that the subject takes up more than one position and thus is not fixed” (“*From Fantasia*” 149).⁴²

Another noteworthy aspect of the beating fantasy, one of major importance for my thesis, is its triangular structure in both of its stages that can be consciously manifested or retrieved:

1st stage

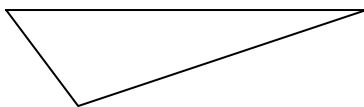
My father is beating the child



I (differentiated from the child who gets the beating)

3rd stage

A child is being beaten (by **some fatherly figure** that obscures the father)



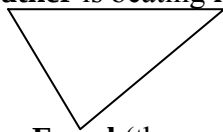
I (separated from “the child” looks on the scene)

The second stage of the beating fantasy, although in Freud’s words “the most important and the most momentous of all”, “has never had a real existence. It is never remembered, it has never succeeded in becoming conscious” but is always analytically constructed (““A Child is Being Beaten”” 170-71). According to Žižek’s reading, “[t]he second form of the fantasy is

⁴² Through a thorough analysis of Max Ophüls’ 1949 *The Reckless Moment*, Cowie illustrates her point on the variety of subject positions offered by a film narrative which, functioning as fantasy, implicates the spectator as much as the main character in its maze of images. See 152-58.

[...] the Lacanian real”, that which is not part of the Symbolic (it has never happened) but which has to be presumed to preserve the consistency of the Symbolic reality (*Looking Awry* 120). However, it only becomes inscribed in the Symbolic world once the psychoanalyst, acting as the third term, triangulates the impossible dyad of father-child. That is, the Real object gets represented in the Symbolic through the psychoanalyst, who stands in as the missing link between the two stages and adds the missing part to complete the whole. So the 2nd stage becomes:

My father is beating me



Freud (the analyst looks on the scene)

However, it is the third stage which offers the “beating fantasy” a consolidated Symbolic existence and names Freud’s essay as it is the third stage which joins the first and second ones by exchanging both the child and the father for a string of possible signifiers. Therefore we can say that the third stage of the “beating fantasy” triangulates the other two and establishes the “beating fantasy” as the fantasy-frame of sadomasochistic pleasure in the various subject-positions it offers to the fantasizing subject. Also, the triangular schema of the “beating fantasy” leads me to the conclusion that in its bringing together pleasure and pain and a multiplicity of identificatory positions, sexual fantasy (in analogy to the “beating fantasy”) can only exist in the Symbolic as always already triangulated.

Having discussed fantasy both as a mechanism and narrative (that is, both as structure and form) we need now to investigate its relation with the dream and daydream.

5.5.4. Dreams, Daydreams and Fantasies

The overlapping of fantasy and daydreaming is highlighted in Freud’s conviction that the model fantasy is to be found in the reverie, “that form of novelette, both stereotyped and

infinitely variable, which the subject composes and relates to himself in a waking state” (qtd. in Laplanche and Pontalis, “Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality” 22). On an individual level people daydream all the time, fantasizing about “scenes and events in which [their] egoistic needs of ambition and power or [their] erotic wishes find satisfaction” (Freud, “Lecture 5” 128). Regarding agency, “[t]he hero of the day-dream is always the subject himself, either directly or by an obvious identification with someone else” (Freud, “Lecture 5” 128).

In his discussion of the relation between dreaming and daydreaming, Freud in his *Dream* book points out the common ground they share: “[l]ike dreams, they [day-dreams] are wish-fulfilments; like dreams they are based to a great extent on impressions of infantile experiences; like dreams they benefit by a certain degree of relaxation of censorship” (632-33). On the other hand, the function of “secondary revision”, which is one of the processes through which dreams are shaped into orderly coherent narratives,⁴³ in resembling the workings of waking thought establishes a link between the dream and the daydream, since the aim of the secondary revision is to “mould the material offered to it into something like a day-dream” (Freud 633). Through the process of secondary revision the night dream is given coherence and is turned into a harmless fantasy scenario; it “loses its appearance of absurdity and disconnectedness and approximates to the model of an intelligible experience” (Freud 630). When there is a ready-made daydream that fits the purpose of the dream, then no new cover-up has to be manufactured for the unconscious fantasy-content that the dream carries, but the daydream is integrated into the dream. As Freud writes, “[i]f, however, a day-dream [...] has already been formed within the nexus of the dream-thoughts, this fourth factor in the dream-work [secondary revision] will prefer to take possession of the ready-made day-dream and seek to introduce it into the content of the dream” (633).⁴⁴ In the same way that dreams

⁴³ the other three being “condensation”, “displacement”, and “symbolism”. For an elaborated presentation of these terms see Freud’s chapter VI in his *Interpretation of Dreams* 381-651.

⁴⁴ See also Freud’s “Lecture 23: The Paths to the Formation of Symptoms” 420 and his “Hysterical Phantasies and Their Relation to Bisexuality” 88.

are unconscious, day-dreams range from conscious to unconscious ones;⁴⁵ they all, however, aim at the same goal. Both dreams and daydreams are wish fulfilling fantasies, realisations of conscious and/or unconscious desires (Freud, “Writers and Day-Dreaming” 137).⁴⁶

5.5.5. Lacan and Fantasy

Developing Freud’s ideas, Lacan and his followers put emphasis on the structural aspects of fantasy, stressing the importance of fantasy as “the *mise-en-scène* of desire”. As Elizabeth Cowie points out, following Laplanche and Pontalis: “Fantasy involves, is characterized by, not the achievement of desired objects, but the arranging of, a setting out of, desire; a veritable *mise-en-scène* of desire” (“From Fantasia” 148).⁴⁷ The staging of desire, which takes flesh through fantasy, is constitutive of the subject who is always there, though sometimes unperceived, “determined by the phantasy”, which supports its desire (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 185). It is through fantasy that the subject comes to terms with its own fragmentation and accepts its barred subjectivity through Imaginary closeness to the Real part it had to relinquish to be born as a Symbolic subject (to be further illustrated). Viewing fantasy through the lens of loss, Žižek writes that “[f]antasy is the very narrative of this primordial loss, since it stages the process of this renunciation, the emergence of Law” (“The Seven Veils of Fantasy” 209). Lacan’s matheme of fantasy $\mathcal{S} \diamond \alpha$, which attests to the inseparability of the three realms: the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real,⁴⁸ reveals triangulation as the schema *par excellence* of fantasy and establishes the barred subject’s desire for the lost

⁴⁵ See Freud’s Lecture 23 420 as well as his *Interpretation of Dreams* 632 and his “Hysterical Phantasies and Their Relation to Bisexuality” 88.

⁴⁶ However, in Lecture 5 Freud gave on dreams years after his seminal *Interpretation of Dreams*, he underlined the incompatibility of dreams and day-dreams saying: “Are there any other things common to them? I cannot discover any; I can see nothing anywhere but differences, and differences in all kinds of ways” (119).

⁴⁷ As Žižek also points out, “fantasy does not simply realize a desire in a hallucinatory way [...] A fantasy constitutes our desire, provides its coordinates, i.e. it literally ‘teaches us how to desire’” (“The Seven Veils of Fantasy” 191).

⁴⁸ Lacan’s three realms are presented in the next section.

object that creeps back to the Symbolic from the Real to haunt the subject's fantasies via the *objet a*.

5.5.6. The Lacanian (Desiring) Subject and the Three Realms

At this point we need to look briefly at the subjectivisation of the individual and its relation to the three Lacanian realms: the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real, as it is in its Symbolic existence that the desiring subject is born.

In his most famous paper, "The Mirror Stage",⁴⁹ "Lacan's first real entry into the psycho-analytic world" (Macey, "Introduction" xvi),⁵⁰ Lacan defines the order of the Imaginary as the domain of fantasy which proves to be constitutive of the human subject. He refers to the first image of itself that the infant beholds between the age of six and eighteen months, while standing or being held in front of some reflecting surface; "still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence", the infant views a total image of its body which Lacan calls the "Ideal-I" and which the child (mis)perceives as its real self (*Écrits* 2).⁵¹ Unable yet to master control over its body-parts, the infant gets the reflection of a completely unified image of itself, which eclipses its present fragmentation and constitutes its subjectivity outside itself, in the fantastic unity of a fantasmic *Gestalt*. In Lacan's words:

The fact is that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as *Gestalt*, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted, but in which it appears to him above all in a contrasting size (*un relief de stature*) that fixes it and in a symmetry that inverts it, in contrast

⁴⁹ The whole title of Lacan's paper is "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience".

⁵⁰ For the background history to Lacan's most widely known paper see David Macey's "Introduction" in *The Four Fundamental Concepts* xvi-xvii as well as Sean Homer's *Jacques Lacan* 17-18.

⁵¹ For my study I'm using Jacques Lacan's *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Routledge, 1997.

with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him.

(*Écrits* 2)

The image in the mirror serves to solidify the development of the “I” outside the subject in the form of an illusory ideal-ego, which the infant misrecognises as its real self. Lacan’s comment on the infant’s first look at its mirror reflection is indicative of the *méconnaissance* that will forever condition the subject’s look: “this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction” (Lacan, *Écrits* 2).

The ego as “an ‘imaginary function’ formed primarily through the subject’s relationship to their own body” is divided from the subject who “is constituted in the symbolic order and is determined by language” (Homer 44-45). It is the order of language which exchanges being for meaning, leading to the human subjects’ sliding under the bar of the signifier that will always and forever stand for them, “[f]or in its symbolizing function speech is moving towards nothing less than a transformation of the subject to whom it is addressed by means of the link that it establishes with the one who emits it – in other words, by introducing the effect of a signifier” (Lacan, *Écrits* 83). Through this process of “alienation”, subjects sacrifice a part of themselves to the reign of the signifier and thus take up their position in the Symbolic as barred subjects $S/\bar{S}$. Naming is a very important part of this process, as it is the combination of name and forename that gives Symbolic existence to an up-to-that-point nonexistent subject. This name, which is given to the child from the outside, being selected by the parents before the child’s birth, will gradually become the core of the being the child had to sacrifice for the sake of subjectivity (Fink 53). As Anika Lemaire points out, “[t]he subject will be inserted into the linguistic circuit of exchange only by being named in his parents’ dialogue and by receiving a forename” (70). The order of language, which constitutes the locus of the Other, “the field of that living being in which the subject

has to appear” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 203), pre-exists the child, delivers it to life, shapes its life and leads it to death. Nothing exists outside the signifier. In Lacan’s words:

Symbols in fact envelop the life of man in a network so total that they join together, before he comes into the world, those who are going to engender him ‘by flesh and blood’; so total that they bring to his birth, along with the gifts of the stars, if not with the gifts of the fairies, the shape of his destiny; so total that they give the words that will make him faithful or renegade, the law of the acts that will follow him right to the very place where he *is* not yet and even beyond his death; and so total that through them his end finds its meaning in the last judgement, where the Word absolves his being or condemns it – unless he attain the subjective bringing to realization of being-for-death. (*Écrits* 68).

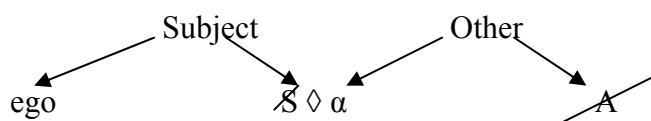
As the process of alienation constitutes the subject, the process of separation constitutes the desiring subject through “*the alienated subject’s confrontation with the Other, not as language this time, but as desire*” (Fink 50).⁵² The infant is separated from the mother through the insertion of the father as the third term that triangulates the closed, a-social dyad of mother-child and thus creates the circuit on which Symbolic desire will circulate. It is through the Oedipus complex that the child accepts castration, bowing to the authority of the Law that the father embodies and resigning from unmediated pleasurable contact with the mother. By accepting castration, the child exchanges Real *jouissance* for Symbolic desire as, according to Lacan “[c]astration means that *jouissance* must be refused, so that it can be reached on the inverted ladder (*l’ échelle renversée*) of the Law of desire” (*Écrits* 324). At this point, we should stop our discussion of castration, as we will stray from our current point of interest, which is the three Lacanian realms and the way the human subject relates to them.

⁵² For more details on the concepts of “alienation” and “separation” see Jacques Lacan’s *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 203-29. Also see Bruce Fink’s *The Lacanian Subject* 49-68, Sean Homer’s *Jacques Lacan* 71-73 and Anika Lemaire’s *Jacques Lacan* 67-77.

In the next chapter, I will return to discuss in detail the Oedipus complex and the role of castration both in the Freudian and Lacanian schemas as part of my exposition of the viewing spectator as a desiring subject, who misrecognises in the sexual act (seen in the erotic thriller) the fantasy of pre-Oedipal unity.

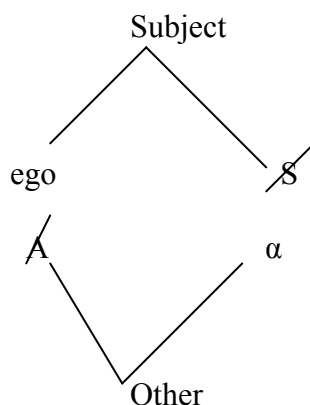
What remains after the unsymbolisable dyad of the mother-child is broken becomes part of Lacan's realm of the Real. The part of its being the subject sacrificed for its existence as a Symbolic subject formulates the place where its subjectivity is eclipsed. Drawing the distinctive line between meaning and being, Lacan reverses the famous Cartesian "cogito ergo sum" into: "I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think" (*Écrits* 166). The Real consists of all residues, anything that escapes signification and is thus expelled from the locus of the signifier. It is the order of the subject's unconscious – wishes, desires and thoughts – and the place where the wholeness of the subject's union with the mOther is pushed after its Symbolic transformation into the triangle of the family romance. According to Homer, "[t]he real is that which is beyond the symbolic and the imaginary and acts as a limit to both" (83). The *jouissance* the subject is forced to deny for the sake of its Symbolic identity is reclaimed through fantasy and the *objet a*, which comes to represent the residue of the gap-ridden child-mOther unity, the cause of the subject's desire, through which the subject replaces division with the illusion of wholeness.⁵³ So, what is banished from the Symbolic into the Real finds its way back to the Symbolic through Imaginary configurations in the realm of fantasy. As Fink observes, "separation results in a kind of intersection whereby something of the Other (the Other's desire in this account) that the subject considers his or her own, essential to his or her existence, is ripped away from the Other and retained by the now divided subject in fantasy". Fink represents this relation between the Symbolic subject and the Other in the following schema:

⁵³ See Bruce Fink 59-61 and Sean Homer 87.



(61).

It is through triangulation that human subjects can retain their Symbolic fragmentary identity while simultaneously retaining their relation to their Real lost part through the fantasy of wholeness. If we reverse Fink's Real triangle and place it underneath the Symbolic one, the two formulate a rhombus, the transformation into a geometrical schema of Lacan's *poinçon* $\diamond$ as the mediating signifier between the barred subject and the object cause of his/her desire (*objet a*). If triangle is the schema *par excellence* of the Symbolic then any Symbolic coupling translates into two triangles that formulate a rhombus, the schema *par excellence* of fantasy.



Fantasy becomes the setting where the drama of desire is persistently played out since desire can never be satisfied; it is always desire “for something else”, therefore “substitution is its most reliable rule” (Luepnitz 224). Although wholeness can never again be fully experienced, glimpses of it can be gained through all the “objects” people accumulate (money, sexual companions, children, fame, friends etc.), which function as *objets a*, momentarily covering the lack and offering the illusion of fulfillment while at the same time embodying the gap that

can never be filled (Homer 87-88). And so desire for some Other thing is rekindled to be satisfied in the realm of fantasy. This, as we shall see, is a stereotypical situation in many erotic thrillers where a sexual triangle is created when a seemingly happily married man who has everything (career, money, a beautiful family in the suburbs, and a beautiful, understanding wife) meets the film's *femme fatale*. Instantly she unveils his lacking existence and, activating his sexual impulses, turns into his new *objet a* promising him fulfillment through an illicit sexual affair.

At this point, having investigated fantasy both inside and outside the cinema auditorium, let's bring the two together through the exploration of the "primal scene" fantasy, the first image of sexual act the human subject ever experiences. The spectator re-lives the primal scene during film-viewing in general and through particular film genres. Both pornography and the horror film, as we shall see, recite in reverse the same transgressive look the child fetishised in its attempt to disavow the traumatic image of the copulating parents. The reason why we are interested in this particular look is because the erotic thrillers borrowing both from pornography and horror films recreate for the mainstream the subject's pleasurable and horrific gaze at the primal scene.

5.6. Hollywood and the "Primal Scene" Fantasy

Talking about the way cinema satisfies the spectator's pleasure in seeing (scopophilia), Metz specifies that: "the mechanism of satisfaction relies on my awareness [as spectator] that the object I am watching is unaware of being watched. 'Seeing' is no longer a matter of sending something back, but of catching something unawares. That something which is designed to be *caught unawares* [...] has become story, the story of the film" (95 emphasis added). The process of catching the spectacle unawares and watching it obscured by the darkness of the auditorium, resembles in structure the Freudian "primal scene" of infancy. This, according to

Freud, involves the child's early fantasy of seeing its parents having sex, without their noticing its presence, in a posture from which their sexual organs are visible (probably *a tergo*).⁵⁴ This resemblance establishes, according to Metz, the Oedipality of "the cinematic signifier" (64) and the institutionalization through cinema of the "prohibited practice" (of sex), as the transgressive look (65).

Apart from the cinematic instance, the primal scene is also the staple of pornographic spectacle, brought into the mainstream by the erotic thriller. The transgressive and guilty look of the little child watching the parents' intercourse is duplicated by that of the spectator consuming pornographic images. That is why a crucial precondition for the pleasurable consumption of pornography is that the spectator always remains unobserved. It is not accidental that in most video clubs pornographic materials are stored in a secluded place, off-limits for minors, but at the same time offering privacy to those customers who want to choose something from this sector without being watched by other customers. As Annette Kuhn observes in her discussion of pornographic images, "[t]he voyeur's pleasure depends on the object of this look being unable to see him" (*The Power of the Image* 28). That is why, she continues, "one of the two staples of softcore pornography" – and characteristic of pornographic representation of women – is the "*caught unawares*" icon,⁵⁵ in which the woman enjoys a moment of auto-erotic pleasure completely unaware of the gaze she stimulates: "Her eyes are closed, she faces away from the camera, but her body is wide open. [...] An attractive woman takes a solitary bath and is carried away by the sensuousness of it all. The spectator sneaks a look at her enjoyment of an apparently unselfconscious moment of pleasure in herself: the Peeping Tom's favourite fantasy" (29-30). In agreement with Kuhn, Elizabeth Cowie presents as a stereotypical fantasy-generating pornographic image that of a

⁵⁴ For more details on the reality / phantasy of the primal scene see especially part V of the Wolfman Case in Freud's "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis (The 'Wolf Man')" 281-95.

⁵⁵ My emphasis.

“woman laying prone, her genitals exposed to the camera, her hand suggesting the gesture of masturbation” (“Pornography and Fantasy” 137-38).

The second characteristic of the primal scene which pornography also reproduces is the visibility of the sexual organs (only implied in the erotic thriller). Both soft and hard core pornography offer close-ups of the genitals, their difference lying in the inclusion of the whole body in the softcore scene, when, by contrast, hardcore pornography offers fragmented bodies, and the spectator’s attention is drawn to over-emphasised body-parts (Kuhn, *The Power of the Image* 37-38, 39). In her seminal study of the hardcore industry, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”*, Linda Williams, tracking the route the hardcore film followed on its way to relative legitimacy and feature-length status by the early 1970s, records a progressive move from the nude female body in the 1950s and ‘60s “nudie cuties”, to the female pubis in “beaver”, “split beaver” and “action beaver” films.⁵⁶ The first public exhibition of hardcore material came in two 1970s documentaries about Denmark leading to feature-length hardcore films in the tradition of Gerard Damiano’s 1972 *Deep Throat*. *Deep Throat* legalized the usual practice of the silent “stag films” which consisted of fragmented and nonlinear sequences of what industry slang calls “meat shots”, “offering visual evidence of penetration” (Williams, *Hard Core* 93). *Deep Throat* was, according to Williams the first instance of a widely seen film showing “a penis ‘in action’” (100) and turning the so-called “money shot” – given this name in the industry “because men are paid more for the shot, and consumers get their ‘money’s worth’” (McClintock 124, Williams 95) – into an established value (Williams 94). Showing male ejaculation – the “cum-shot” as it is also called – Gerard Damiano’s legendary *Deep Throat* “extend[ed] visibility to the next stage of representation of the heterosexual sex act: to the point of seeing climax” (Williams 94).

⁵⁶ The “beaver film” focused the attention of the camera on the female pubis, the “ ‘split beaver’ films” included “the spreading of legs or labia to facilitate a better view”, while the “ ‘action beaver’” films showed autoerotic or lesbian activities including touching or simulated cunnilingus (Williams, *Hard Core* 96-97).

Let me return now briefly to the Freudian primal scene and Freud's theory on fetishism to establish the status of the spectator's transgressive gaze. According to Freud, the child's transgressive gaze becomes the fetish, that is the "substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and – [...] – does not want to give up" ("Fetishism" 352). Once the infantile transgressive gaze reveals what the child should never see – the forbidden act – and the parents' posture unveils the absence of the mother's penis, the child disavows the traumatic reality while at the same time retaining it through the substitute it erects in the place of the maternal penis (Freud, "Fetishism" 353). This substitute, both "a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it", attracts the interest that was formerly attached to the possibility of the maternal penis but is increased by the force of the trauma that the horror of "castration" confers on the child (Freud 353). In other words, the fetish is even more important than the mother's penis it substitutes for, as at the same time it covers the reality that must always stay hidden. Receding in fear from the dreadful sight of the female lack, the child's look freezes on the forbidden image (of the copulating couple) and the stimulation it provokes, its excited, transgressive gaze being "the last impression before the uncanny and traumatic one", therefore sustained as a fetish (Freud 354). It is the same transgressive gaze that both the process of cinema-viewing and the consumption of pornography, horror and erotic thrillers repeat and re-fetishize through the over-visibility of the cinematic screen and the forbidden images projected on it.

Through the restaging of the fetishistic keyhole-gaze of forbidden pleasure, the viewing subject affirms the wishful disavowal of castration, while at the same time affirming it (Freud, "On Fetishism" 356). But since the fetish owes its existence to the child's view of the parents' copulation, its safeguarding also resides in the repetition of the traumatic scene. So, both pornography and erotic thrillers satisfy the spectators' "compulsion to repeat" the scene which gave form to the fetish. In reference to the human urge to retain stability through

repetition, Freud wrote that “from the moment at which a state of things that has once been attained is upset, an instinct arises to create it afresh and brings about phenomena which we can describe as a ‘compulsion to repeat’” (“Lecture 32” 139). To account for the traumatic dimension that the fetish always also carries, we should refer to Freud’s observation, initially stemming from his grandson’s *fort-da* game, that “there really does exist in the mind a compulsion to repeat which over-rides the pleasure principle” (“Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 293). This compulsion to repeat things which is, according to Freud, to a large degree a carrier of repressed unpleasurable material, doesn’t necessarily contradict the pleasure principle (“Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 290). The (conscious or unconscious) unpleasure that the sight or fantasy of the female genitals creates to the spectators of pornography and erotic thrillers, respectively, is compensated for by the pleasure of the fetishistic gaze, which enjoys the restaging of the forbidden scene.

So, in pornographic films (and the same goes for the erotic thriller) the interest never lies in the story or the characters, but in the acts they perform. As Annette Kuhn remarks, “[t]he outcome of the story the spectator already knows, but his desire is of course to *see* it. Once the scene is set, pornography can get down to the real action” (*The Power of the Image* 45). What the pornographic scene stages is the transgressive desire signified by the incessant repetition of the same series of acts, brought to (a provisional) closure through the graphically presented climax. As Cowie points out, it is “the desire to desire which pornography represents”, aspiring towards a continuous arousal and sexual satisfaction through the compulsive repetition of the same scenario of penetration:

It is the wish to be aroused and the wish to fantasize a scenario of sexual activity which pornography serves, so that the climax is a kind of interruption, albeit one which also maintains the system. The pleasure of sexual fantasy and pornography is desired for itself, [...] It is the continuing

imagining of a possible sexual satisfaction which drives desire. Even where the body flags and the penis refuses to rise, the *wish* for sexual desire is there. (Cowie, "Pornography and Fantasy" 137)

On the other hand, pornography and erotic thrillers also duplicate the organization of the originary scene of fantasy by re-activating the spectator's desire for the primary, lost, maternal object. As Cowie points out, images of female parts function as both successors and substitutes of the maternal breast, so "[t]he woman's naked body and the delineation of her genitals as fragmented images present at the very least 'the object which satisfies' or 'the object through which I am pleased' just as the breast had done" ("Pornography and Fantasy" 138).

The bodily sensation of terror that horror films arouse, re-play the traumatic part of the primal scene when the child first cast its eyes on the dreadful sight of what it perceived as the mother's "wound" (presumably from her cut-off penis). The father is instantly recognized as the agent of the mother's castration, which is occasionally also verified by the blood stains that the child often sees in the parental bed or the mother's underclothes (Freud, "On the Sexual Theories of Children" 200). It is the blood that becomes the fetish in horror films, aligned with the spectator's fetishistic gaze, which at the same time repeats the scenario of castration (through the numerous mutilated bodies), as it disavows it. The blood covers the fearful wound and the final blow brought on the castrator (the monster) brings reassurance and pleasure, joining the perverse pleasure that the spectator has already been enjoying by compulsively repeating the repressed pleasures of castration.

However, since the emphasis of pornography lies on sexual excitation and bodily pleasure (even in pain), whereas horror films focus mainly on sentiments of fear, disgust and pain (although very pleasurable), we could say that pornographic and horror films are the two sides of the same coin, meeting in the territory of the erotic thriller. Both pornography and

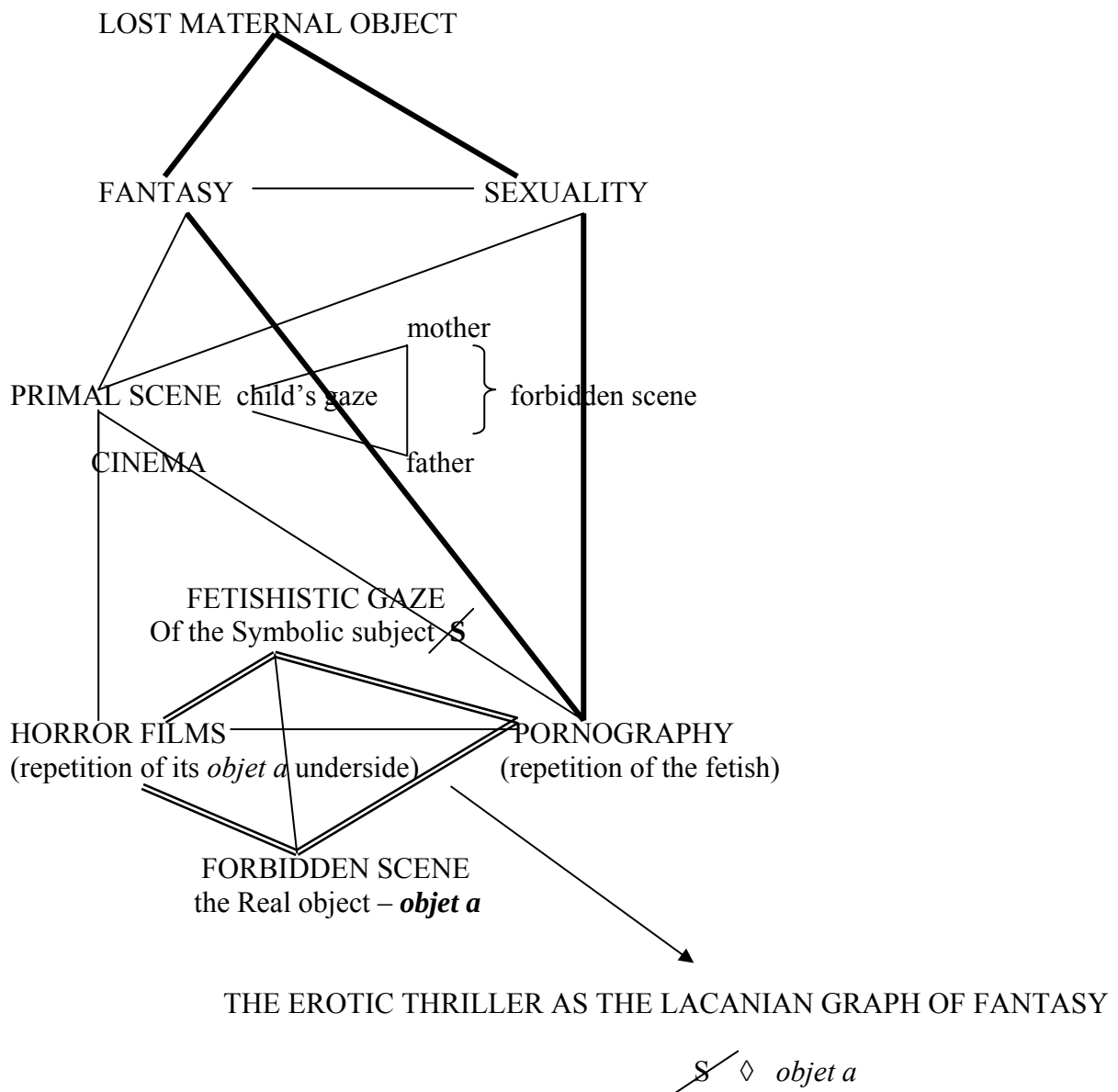
horror alternate their evocation of threat and reassurance, but if we wanted to place them at one end or another, we would definitely categorize pornography as pleasing and horror films as anxiety-generating. Cowie, re-reading the Freudian fetish through a Lacanian screen, identifies the Lacanian *objet a* with that part “where it [the Freudian fetish] appears together with castration anxiety”; “in signifying absence it [the *objet a*] also signifies a possible making-present”, but not the object that will fill the absence and turn it into a presence, which is what the fetish does (*Representing the Woman* 218).⁵⁷ In these terms, pornography would stand as the fetish, offering the merging of the two-in-one through genital sex as the way to wholeness, while horror films would be the realisation of the Lacanian *objet a*, repeating the representation of absence and thus triggering the desire for the object that would fill the lack. Meanwhile the erotic thrillers, as we shall see in the third part of the thesis, do both, constantly alternating between wholeness and disintegration. The fetishistic gaze⁵⁸ and the forbidden traumatic scene that both pornographic and horror films recite allow their spectators, as Symbolic subjects, access to the Real (trauma) through the fantasy-scenarios that they play out, realizing the Lacanian matheme of fantasy: $\$ \diamond \text{objet } a$. However, if pornography and horror together realize the Lacanian rhombus of fantasy and if the erotic thriller, as I will show in detail in the third part of the thesis, brings together the two triangles of horror and pornography in staging the sexual act as subliminal, both pleasurable and terrifying, then the erotic thriller as a genre is the epitome of fantasy, the locus *par excellence* where the spectator’s transgressive look can retrieve its object of fascination in the characters’

⁵⁷ For Cowie’s discussion of the relation between the fetish and the *objet a* see her *Representing the Woman* 217-21.

⁵⁸ The fetishistic gaze partly identifies with “partial vision”, a kind of look which “negotiates the tension between the desire to see and dread at the prospect of seeing” (Pinedo 51). In the case of horror films partial vision is realised when at the most suspenseful moments of expected murder spectators are partially blocking their sight with their hands, peeping though their fingers compulsively looking at what they cannot see. In the case of porn partial vision is realised when at the moments of fornication some spectators, feeling too awkward for looking at what they are not supposed to at the presence of others, pretend not to see by talking or fidgeting, anything that affirms their non-participation.

entwined bodies, which in performing the (sexual) act materialise the fantasy of unity that can at any time transform to the dread of castrating death.

All these relations (from the lost maternal object and its retrieval through fantasy to the spectator's re-living in the darkness of cinema the primal scene as the sexual fantasy *par excellence* by watching pornographic and horror films, the two united in mainstream erotic thrillers) are depicted in the following schema:



Although the nature of sexual fantasy (in its retrieval of the lost object and primary sexual pleasure) is pornographic, mainstream Hollywood, as I've already established, would never stage it. So, while other contemporary cinematographies (as we saw in chapter three) have been experimenting amply with the unveiling of the sexual act, Hollywood, on the other hand, veils it under the workings of fantasy in its sole mainstream genre to have ever screened the sexual act: the erotic thriller.

Having established the triangular nature of (sexual) fantasy that spectators and erotic thrillers share and before we enter the arena of films in the final part of the thesis (to investigate fantasy as the veil through which we see the act and as the scenario that the act recites), in the following chapter we need to turn once more to the viewing subjects and their establishment as desiring subjects through the resolution of the Oedipus complex. Once the subject's trajectory of desire is formulated as triangular, it is the perverse desire for completion that activates the fantasy of misrecognised unity through sex. Thus, the sexual act becomes the instance *par excellence* of the union-of-the-two-in-One illusion, at the same time that all sexual relations compulsively repeat the triangular organisation of desire (to be analysed theoretically in the next chapter and illustrated in relation to the erotic thriller in chapter ten). It is this lost unity that erotic thrillers invoke in their elaborate staging of transgressive sex.

CHAPTER SIX

The Desiring Spectator and the Fantasy of the (Sexual) Act

To understand the importance of the sexual act for the fantasies that the erotic thriller breeds we need to turn to the spectator and examine the importance of sex for the human subject. What kind of fantasies does sex support and why is it the prioritized signifier of a relation's narrative? How does the act of sex manage to obscure the subject's Symbolic castration and feed the illusion of unmediated union with the lover of one's dreams, materializing the impossibility of Oneness? Especially, since the actual succession is exactly the opposite; the unity (One) of the couple is exchanged for each partner's triangulated Symbolic desire. That is instead of the fantastic (3)-2-1 (each lover's triangulated desire is veiled in their coupling that leads to Oneness) that both the sexual act scenario and through it the erotic thriller promotes, the Symbolic reality is the reverse: (1)-2-3 (the infant experiences undivided unity in the coupling with the mother which is triangulated for the infant to become a Symbolic desiring subject).¹ Let us examine this triangulation in detail.

6.1. A Couple is Always Already a Triple: the Oedipus Complex from Freud to Lacan

According to the basic Freudian schema of the Oedipal, a triangle is formulated each time a dyad is interrupted by a third element, which mediates the two. In the Lacanian sphere of thought, the dual relationship of any two signifiers is always already mediated by a third signifier in relation to which both are defined by the directives of the Symbolic. The subject is nothing more than the effect of such a coupling, "the intermediary effect between what characterizes a signifier and another signifier" (Lacan, *Seminar XX* 50). The first instance of

¹ I use the parenthesis to indicate the veiling of the equivalent term. I will discuss this veiling in the third part of my thesis in my analysis of the fantasies of wholeness the erotic thrillers promote.

such mediation is constitutive of the desiring subject when the a-social dyad of mother-child is mediated by the father to provoke the dissolution of the child's Oedipal attachment to the mother through the threat that castration introduces.

At this point we need to go back to Freud's account of the Oedipus complex, the focal concept in his theory of sexuality and sexual difference. In his later work on the Oedipus complex, around the 1920s, Freud came up with the notion of the castration complex as that which leads the Oedipus complex to dissolution, establishes the super-ego, and constructs male and female human subjects. As Juliet Mitchell points out, "[t]ogether with the organizing role of the Oedipus complex in relation to desire, the castration complex governs the position of each person in the triangle of father, mother and child; in the way it does this, it embodies the law that founds the human order itself" (14). It was the castration complex that allowed Freud to account for the different way in which attachment to the mother was terminated in boys and girls. As he writes in his famous lecture on femininity, "[u]nless we can find something that is specific for girls and is not present or not in the same way present in boys, we shall not have explained the termination of the attachment of girls to their mother. [...] this specific factor, [...] lies in the castration complex" ("Lecture 33" 158).

In his two essays "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" (1924) and "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" (1925), Freud talks about the different way the "phallic phase" – "in which in both sexes the male organ (and what corresponds to it in girls) attains an importance which can no longer be overlooked" (Freud, "Lecture 32" 131) – leads to the Oedipus stage in boys and girls via the "event" of castration. Freud underlines the fact that, although their libido will finally be differently cathected, both boys and girls share the same starting-point: "[i]n both cases the

mother is the original object [of desire]" ("Anatomical Sex-Distinction" 334).² Later on, although the boy retains the mother as his love-object during the phallic phase in which the Oedipus complex is activated, there has to be a shift of interest for the little girl from the mother to the father.

So, the little girl is first attached to the mother until, simultaneously with the activation of her phallic phase during which she starts paying attention to her clitoris and engages in masturbatory activities, she witnesses the male genitals of some brother or friend.³ Immediately she realizes that she is deprived of what they have and develops the feeling of "penis-envy". In Freud's words: "She has seen it and knows that she is without it and wants to have it" ("Anatomical Sex-Distinction" 336). So, she either fantasises about getting one, or "disavows" her recent discovery, that is, refuses the acknowledgement of the fact that she doesn't possess a penis (Freud, "Anatomical Sex-Distinction" 337). Later, penis-envy leads her to feel contempt for her mother "who sent her into the world so insufficiently equipped" (Freud, "Anatomical Sex-Distinction" 338) and through the equation "penis-child" the little girl's interest shifts to her father with whom she wants to have the baby. Once the father becomes her love-object, the little girl enters the Oedipus complex, which for girls is, according to Freud, "a secondary formation", "*made possible and led up to by the castration complex*" ("Anatomical Sex-Distinction" 340-41).⁴

In the case of boys, the masturbatory activities of the phallic phase coincide with the boy's entrance into the Oedipus phase where he takes up his mother as the object of "libidinal cathexis", that is, as his love-object. Contrary to what happens in the case of girls, "*in boys the Oedipus complex is destroyed by the castration complex*" (Freud, "Anatomical Sex-

² From this point on I will use the short version of the title of Freud's essay "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes".

³ On the subject of female pre-Oedipus and Oedipus phase see Freud's "Anatomical Sex-Distinction" 323-43, "Female Sexuality" 367-92, and "Lecture 33" 145-69.

⁴ In later essays Freud elaborated further on the subject of female sexual development in terms of his preoccupation with the question *Was will das Weib?* (What does woman want?).

Distinction” 341). That is, the threat of castration leads the little boy, urged by narcissistic investment in his penis, to drop his conflict with the father over the mother and identify with him. Although the boy’s newly discovered interest in his penis is answered with threats of castration by those who take care of him, and although, as Freud argues, during that phase the boy also has his first encounter with the female genitals, it is some later event that finally activates in him the threat of castration by deferred action. In Freud’s words:

when a little boy first catches sight of a girl’s genital region, he begins by showing irresolution and lack of interest; he sees nothing or disavows what he has seen, he softens it down or looks about for expedients for bringing it into line with his expectations. It is not until later, when some threat of castration has obtained a hold upon him, that the observation becomes important to him: if he then recollects or repeats it, it arouses a terrible storm of emotion in him and forces him to believe in the reality of the threat which he has hitherto laughed at. (“Anatomical Sex-Distinction” 335-36)

Although “[u]sually it is from women that the threat [of castration] emanates”, Freud doesn’t see women as potential castrators but simply as enunciators of the punishment that some male figure (father, doctor etc) will finally perform (“Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex” 316).⁵ Therefore it is some paternal figure that interrupts the mother-son relationship and threatens the little boy with castration if he doesn’t obey the Law and renounce his mother as the object of his libido.

Although both sexes go through Oedipal libidinal states and face the castration complex, the different way the two complexes operate in boys and girls results in difference in male and female structuring and social bearing. The Oedipus scenario is completely

⁵ Barbara Creed in her influential book *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, revisits the Freudian Oedipus scenario and (re)activates in it the repressed image of the female as castrator, which she then recovers in contemporary film. In chapter nine I will re-read Creed’s distinction between castrated and castrating women to discuss the fantasies these monstrous *femmes* create.

overridden in the mental universe of the male subject. The threat of castration that the father impersonates leads the little boy to identify with paternal authority which “is introjected into the ego, and there it forms the nucleus of the super-ego” (Freud, “Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex” 319). Having the boy’s libidinal impulses deactivated and transformed into feelings of affection for the mother, the a-social unity is repressed for good to ensure socially and culturally acceptable unions. In the case of the little girl, after the fixation with the mother gives way to the Oedipus complex through the realization of castration, there seems to be no need for the process to get anywhere further. The double has been successfully tripled. Therefore, as Freud notes, “the Oedipus complex escapes the fate which it meets with in boys: it may be slowly abandoned or dealt with by repression, or its effects may persist far into women’s normal mental life” (“Anatomical Sex-Distinction” 342). Once the Oedipus scenario poses no threat to society, the little girl’s fixation with the father becomes culturally acceptable, as opposed to the primary socially disruptive unity with the mother.

As is well known, Lacan re-reads the Freudian Oedipus complex through structural linguistics, exchanging the penis with the phallus as “the signifier of the signifiers” that establishes the circulation of desire through language and thus establishes the child as a desiring subject. In Lacan’s famous words, “[t]he phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire” (*Écrits* 287). It is the *splitting* from the mOther through the mediation of the Name-of-the-Father that allows the child to take up the signifier of the phallus as the representation of its desire, which is now located outside, in the realm of the Other. As “[l]ack and desire are coextensive for Lacan” (Fink 54), it is once the child realizes the loss of its undifferentiated unity with the mOther that desire to regain this state is born (Mitchell and Black 200). The child addresses the demand for Real unity to the mOther who can only cater for her offspring’s needs, the rest

formulating the child's unquenchable desire for more.⁶ Stretching its desire to the mOther, desiring what she desires, the child's desire is established outside its own body, realizing the famous Lacanian dictum: "man's desire is the desire of the Other" (*Écrits* 264).⁷ Although it is the desire of the child to offer fulfillment to the mother by being the phallus for her, the mOther's desire always exceeds the child in her own search for fulfillment (personal, professional etc.). Thus, the child's "[d]esire is that which is manifested in the interval that demand hollows within itself, in as much as the subject, in articulating the signifying chain, brings to light the want-to-be, together with the appeal to receive the complement from the Other, if the Other, the locus of speech, is also the locus of this want, or lack" (Lacan, *Écrits* 263). Of course the child offers to the mother a part it does not own any more, a part it has already exchanged for its entrance to the Symbolic. In Lacan's words: "[t]his moment of cut is haunted by the form of a bloody scrap – the pound of flesh that life pays in order to turn it into the signifier of the signifiers, which it is impossible to restore, as such, to the imaginary body; it is the lost phallus of the embalmed Osiris" (*Écrits* 265). For the *splitting* to be completed, the child must relinquish its demand over the mOther and exchange it with desire for Symbolic unity through language. The demand must be repressed, establishing the child's unconscious⁸ and completing its initiation to the Symbolic network not only as a subject of

⁶ As Lacan says in his most famous essay "The Signification of the Phallus", "[d]emand in itself bears on something other than the satisfactions it calls for. It is demand of a presence or of an absence – which is what is manifested in the primordial relation to the mother, pregnant with that Other to be situated *within* the needs that it can satisfy" (*Écrits* 286); and also "desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting (*Spaltung*)" (*Écrits* 287).

⁷ In his "Function and Field of Speech and Language", Lacan explains the ex-istence (existing outside) of the subject's desire by pointing out that "man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other" (*Écrits* 58).

⁸ According to Judith Feher-Gurewich, in the Lacanian context primary repression does not involve the Freudian Oedipal fantasy but the signifiers that represent the child's splitting from the mother. So, "[t]he subject's unconscious, [...], is born at the moment when the jouissance of the Other becomes translated into the desire of the Other" (196).

language but also as a desiring subject.⁹ It is the role of the father to cut in between the child and the mOther and claim her for himself. Lacan specifies that it is not necessarily the actual father but some paternal figure or anyone who represents for the child the power of the Law, what Lacan calls “the paternal metaphor”, that must introduce the child to the signification of the phallus. As he very characteristically says, “the attribution of procreation to the father can only be the effect of a pure signifier, of a recognition, not of a real father, but of what religion has taught us to refer to as the Name-of-the-Father. Of course, there is no need of a signifier to be a father, any more than to be dead, but without a signifier, no one would ever know anything about either state of being” (*Écrits* 199).¹⁰ It is, however, the mother’s behaviour that determines the outcome as “[t]he father is present only through his law, which is speech, and only in so far as his Speech is recognized by the mother does it take on the value of Law. If the position of the father is questioned, then the child remains subjected to the mother” (Lacan qtd. in Lemaire 83). Accepting its separation from the mOther and identifying with the father as “having the phallus”, the child takes its place in the family unit and acknowledges its sexual being in relation to the paternal phallus as “having” or “not having” (and thus “being”) it (*Écrits* 289). The recognition of the child’s inadequacy signifies its Symbolic castration. In a quite sardonic tone Lacan reminds us of castration’s Symbolic nature, when in his *Ethics of Psychoanalysis (Seminar VII)* he writes: “Everyone knows that castration is there on the horizon and that it never, of course, occurs. What does happen relates to the fact that the little man is rather a paltry support for the organ, for that signifier, and that he seems rather to be deprived of it. And here one can see that his fate is common to that of the little girl” (308).¹¹ It is through the child’s castration that the Oedipus complex is resolved and the child is

⁹ As Lacan observes “[t]hat which is thus alienated in needs constitutes an *Urverdrängung* (primal repression), an inability, it is supposed, to be articulated in demand, but it re-appears in something it gives rise to that presents itself in man as desire (*das Begehren*)” (*Écrits* 286).

¹⁰ Also see *Écrits* 217 and Rose’s “Introduction – II” 39.

¹¹ In his discussion of castration and the Oedipus complex, Lacan does not differentiate between boys and girls as in his theory it is after the castration takes place that children carry out sexual difference by taking up one of the two Lacanian subject-positions, equally accessible to both biological males and females.

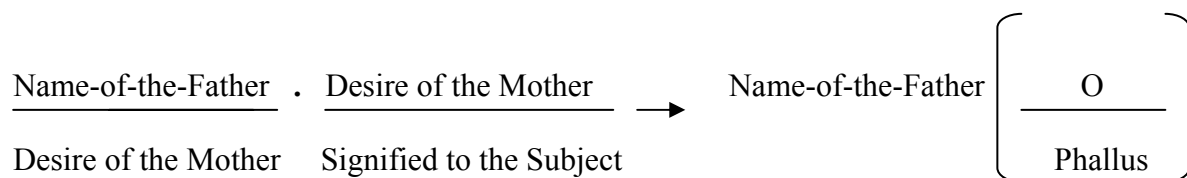
successfully inscribed in the Symbolic as a speaking and desiring individual. The sacrifice of being brings about the gift of free subjectivity. In Lacan's words:

Man's freedom is entirely inscribed within the constituting triangle of the renunciation that he imposes on the desire of the other by the menace of death for the enjoyment of the fruits of his serfdom – of the consented-to sacrifice of his life for the reasons that give to human life its measure – and of the suicidal renunciation of the vanquished partner, depriving of his victory the master whom he abandons to his inhuman solitude. (*Écrits* 104)

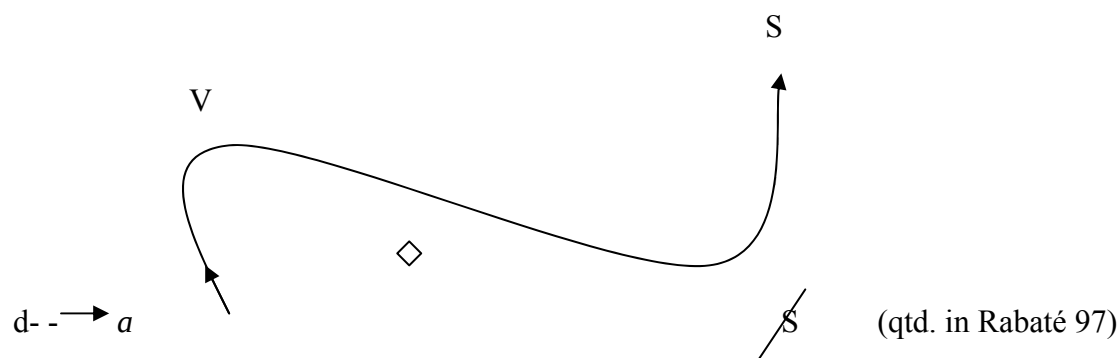
Underlining the analogy between “separation” from the mother (the final part of the Lacanian “splitting” – *Spaltung*) and “alienation” through language, Rose observes that “[b]y breaking the imaginary dyad, the phallus represents a moment of division (Lacan calls this the subject's ‘lack-in-being’) which re-enacts the fundamental splitting of subjectivity itself” (“Introduction – II” 40). It is in this fissure that the subject is located, in its relation to the mOther through the structure of the signifier which draws the Lacanian “*vel* of alienation” and “condemns the subject to appearing only in that division” between being and meaning (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 210). Emerging in the locus of the signifier the moment it “fades” as being, the “I” becomes distanced from “me” at the same time that desired unity is preciously preserved in the mirror image of the ideal-I that the human subject first experienced during the Mirror Stage and ever since introjected as an inseparable part of the self. At the same time, the Symbolic identity of the child is solidified through the “Name-of-the-Father” which substitutes for the “Mother's Desire” by naming it (Lacan, *Écrits* 200). Based on his “*formula of the metaphor*”, Lacan also formulated “the metaphor of the Name-of-the-Father”.¹² Let's try and see what we can make out of Lacan's formula. Through metaphoric language, the Real existence of the mOther turns from signified into a signifier

¹² For Lacan's “*formula of the metaphor*” on which “the metaphor of the Name-of-the-Father” is based see his *Écrits* 200.

that is replaced by an-other, the Name-of-the-Father, which is then to be exchanged metonymically for a series of others, keeping further and further isolated the Otherness of the Phallus.¹³ That Real, sacrificed, flesh-and-blood part – the precondition for Symbolic existence – must under all circumstances be kept restrained, under the Symbolic Father’s never-sleeping guard. That is the role of the parenthesis in Lacan’s formula.¹⁴ It detains the phallus, veils it, allowing it thus to play its role “as itself a sign of the latency with which any signifiable is struck, when it is raised (*aufgehoben*) to the function of signifier” (Lacan, *Écrits* 288).



After the dyad is interrupted and the triad of the family romance is established, the subject’s locus of desire is activated through fantasy with some other signifier coming to stand in for the impossible mOther. At this point one of Lacan’s graphs of desire, the one he used to represent perverse desire in his piece on Kant and Sade, is appropriate to represent the first erotic tragedy of the human subject and the establishment of desire as always already perverse in its urge towards the wholeness that would translate into the subject’s Symbolic death.



¹³ For the meaning and symbolization of metaphor and metonymy in Lacan, see *Écrits* especially 156-57 and 164.

¹⁴ For Lacan’s formula see *Écrits* 200.

In the above graph “d” stands for desire which is still sustained in fantasy between a barred subject ($\mathcal{S}$) and the object-cause of desire (*objet a*), brought together through the *poinçon* ($\diamond$) of the fantasy-frame. What characterizes the perverse fantasy is its will (*Volonté*) to reach full subjectivity (S) (Rabaté 97). As Renata Salecl points out in her discussion of hysteric, obsessional, and perverse desire, “the pervert has an answer – he has found satisfaction and has no doubt about what he wants or what the Other wants”, so he “struggles to bring law into being and thus to make the Other exist” (“The Anxiety of Love Letters” 40-41). In this sense, perverse fantasy resembles the fantasy of the child who desires to be once again fully engulfed by the mOther’s desire. But this, Lacan tells us in a very graphic allegory, would immediately translate into the death of the subject as it is the signifier of the phallus (and therefore the barring of the subject) that ensures its survival as a Symbolic subject.

The mother is a big crocodile, and you find yourself in her mouth. You never know what may set her off suddenly, making those jaws clamp down. This is the mother’s desire.

So I tried to explain that there was something reassuring. I am telling you simple things – indeed, I am improvising. There is a roller, made of stone, of course, which is potentially there at the level of the trap and which holds and jams it open. That is what we call the phallus. It is a roller which protects you, should the jaws suddenly close. (qtd. in Fink 56-57)

On the other hand, it is to the place of the mOther that the subject will always turn “to find the constituting structure of his desire in the same gap opened up by the effect of the signifiers in those who come to represent the Other for him, in so far as his demand is subjected to them” (Lacan, *Écrits* 264). The splitting between the child’s fragmented and whole self is always mediated through the maternal figure, who validates the instance and gives meaning to it as “that moment only has meaning in relation to the presence and the look

of the mother who guarantees its reality for the child” (Rose, “Introduction – II” 30). However, as Rose continues, the mother doesn’t function as a mere mirroring surface giving back to the child its image, but herself “grants an image to the child, which her presence instantly deflects”, initiating a “process of referring” that fragments the very sense of unity that her holding the child establishes (30).

To bring this section to closure (however provisionally), let me point out once more that triangulation determines the Lacanian universe, as it is through the mediation first of the image and then of the signifier that the subject is born into the Symbolic, and it is through the mediation of the Law-of-the-Father that the phallic economy of sexual desire is established as the mode *par excellence* of sexual fulfillment and wholeness. In Lacan’s words:

It is this moment [in which the Mirror Stage comes to an end] that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence by the co-operation of others, and turns the I into that apparatus for which every instinctual thrust constitutes a danger, even though it should correspond to a natural maturation – the very normalization of this maturation being henceforth dependent, in man, on a cultural mediation as exemplified, in the case of the sexual object, by the Oedipus complex.

(*Écrits* 5-6)

In this sense there can never be a doubling or coupling between the subject and another. On the contrary the minimum possible number of participants in any relation is always already three – which brings us to the point of our departure: that any couple is always already a triple. What remains to be seen is the way this is materialized in sexual couplings, as this will determine the subject’s relation to the sexual couplings on screen.

6.2. Sexual Triplings

Moving to sexual relationships and Lacan's most famous quotation, "there's no such thing as a sexual relation", we will discover triangulation to be the motif behind any sexual (un)relation, and love nothing more than a mirage of the wholeness that can never again be retrieved. Going back to Freud and his account of potential couplings between men and women in terms of their pre-Oedipal and Oedipal attachments, we find support for Lacan's posterior declaration of sexual unrelation in Freud's comment that "[o]ne gets an impression that a man's love and a woman's are a phase apart psychologically" ("Lecture 33" 168).

In his *Four Fundamental Concepts*, setting off from Aristophanes' myth of sexual complementarity according to which "it is the other, one's sexual other half, that the living being seeks in love", Lacan introduces the concept of "lamella" as the "unreal organ" of libido (205) that the sexed subject is desperately seeking to recover.¹⁵ The lamella "is precisely what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction" (198) and thus can only ever be retrieved through fantasy, through imaginary representatives, *objets a*. Saying that it is the lamella that each subject seeks in their search for love, Lacan reduces the sexual partner to a mere prop in the staging of the subject's tragedy of lost unity.

In her discussion of erotic correspondence, Renata Salecl reminds us that in the eyes of psychoanalysis, "every sexual relationship has failure at its core" (44). But why is that? What kind of illusions do we carry with us in our sexual relationships? What is it that we demand from our sexual partners that they can never give us? Why is sex the domain *par excellence* where the dream of unity is always played out? What is it about the sexual act that

¹⁵ For the origin of the word "lamella" see Darian Leader 46.

makes it foster the dream of the unity of the two in One? And why does it always have to end in disaster?

A very quick, obvious but far from adequate answer would be that cultural reasons urge the individual to seek for fulfillment in the domain of love. Our society is fundamentally based on the institution of the family, so for the maintenance of this social organization people must continue formulating families. However, there's something about love – or I should rather say, sex – that makes people compulsively return to it again and again no matter how many disastrous experiences they've had, trying desperately to find that special one that will reveal to them the secret of life. Neither money, nor fame or success could ever compete with love. Rather, they are always used as a medium to get to that special person, the sublime lover that will unlock the gates of a paradise, lost but not forgotten. There's definitely something about the sexual scene that incites the subject to over-invest in it. To find out what that is, we need to turn our exploration to the subjects' sexual structuring.

In Lacan's topography male and female subjects are not structured in relation to each other, which would create the theoretical possibility of complementarity, but are both structured in relation to a third term, which is what psychoanalysis calls the signifier of all signifiers in Western culture: the phallic function (Φx). Therefore the individual subject's quest for wholeness is necessarily filtered through the phallic signifier. But how exactly is this related to sex? To answer this question we must first examine the controversial relation between the penis and the phallus.

6.3. The Phallus and the Penis: Same or Other?

There has been an ongoing debate regarding the relation between the phallus and the penis, subsumed in the feminist denunciation of Lacan as a phallocrat, voiced by Luce Irigaray and answered by Ellie Ragland-Sullivan during the '80s; Ragland-Sullivan in her turn accused

Irigaray of mis-reading Lacan (Gallop, *Reading Lacan* 133-34). Discussing the debate in her influential study *Reading Lacan* (1985), Gallop underlines Ragland-Sullivan's clarification that the "Lacanian Phallus"¹⁶ does not identify with the biological organ (penis) but their confusion inheres in language. As Gallop herself writes, "[e]ven though Lacan might intend the word 'phallus' to mean a 'neutral,' 'differential function,' because he uses a word that is already in the language, already in use, in the lexicon – *Le Petit Robert*, for example, defines it as 'virile member' – the confusion is inevitable" (136).

On the other hand, others, such as Deborah Luepnitz, have recently claimed that it was the very relation between the two, combined with Lacan's observation that "many human beings use the penis to cover their pervasive sense of bodily lack" that made him choose the term "phallus" for his signifier of lack (226). But just a page further, in her discussion of castration she obscures the horizon around the contested term. On the one hand, she attributes the choice of "phallus" to Lacan's desire to present his theory as a re-reading of Freud. In this sense, she claims, the image of the ancient phallus had to be preserved. In the very next sentence, though, she explains Lacan's choice through his obsession with language. Quoting a line from *Seminar XX* where Lacan supports the importance of using "old words, as stupid as anything, but really use them, work them to the bone" (60), Luepnitz reads Lacan's choice as his effort to flaunt the values that language had already attributed to the term a long time ago (227).

Lacan definitely flaunts the phallus, as observed by Jane Gallop in her discussion of Lacan's work on sexual difference in her book *The Daughter's Seduction* (1982). Reading the memorial to Ernest Jones that Lacan wrote in 1959, a year after the latter's death, as the meeting point of his two essays on sexual difference – "The Signification of the Phallus" and "Directive Remarks for a Congress on Feminine Sexuality", both written the year before –

¹⁶ Gallop specifies that she only incorporates in her own text Ragland-Sullivan's capitalization of the term "Phallus" (*Reading Lacan* 134n4).

Gallop claims that the phallocentrism of psychoanalysis that Jones reveals with some embarrassment in his 1916 article – “The Theory of Symbolism” – and which he strives to repair, is shamelessly displayed in Lacan’s texts. In Gallop’s words:

Lacan is impolite enough, ungently enough, immoderate enough to flaunt the phallic disproportion. Nowhere is the phallus’s privilege more exposed in all its brutal outrage to any gentlemanly “sense of proportion” than in Lacan’s theory.

The discovery made and lost by Jones – the “fact” that there are more phallic symbols than all other symbols put together – is rediscovered by Lacan, in 1958, the year Jones dies. (*The Daughter’s Seduction* 18-19)

Lacan, Gallop claims, is not accidentally preserving the Freudian phallic term “castration”, as opposed to Jones’ sexually neutral term “aphanisis”, to describe the relation of the human subject to the order of the signifier (19-20). Rather, he “retains a term which unveils the obscene privilege of the phallus” (Gallop 20).

In his paper “The Signification of the Phallus”, Lacan goes on to define the phallus by extracting what it is not. He tells us that “[i]n Freudian doctrine, the phallus is not a phantasy [...] Nor is it as such an object (part-, internal, good, bad, etc.) [...] It is even less the organ, penis or clitoris, that it symbolizes [...] For the phallus is a signifier” (*Écrits* 285). This is the version of the Lacanian phallus that Rose and most of Lacan’s commentators adopt, concentrating, according to Gallop, “on the fixing of meaning” while denying the “slippage” in his text (*Reading Lacan* 144). One such slippage is traced by Muller and Richardson in their reading of “The Signification of the Phallus”. They point out that when Lacan says that “[c]linical experience has shown us that this test of the desire of the Other is decisive not in the sense that the subject learns by it whether or not he has a real phallus, but in the sense that he learns that the mother does not have it” (*Écrits* 289), Lacan’s use of the phallus “slips”

between the signifier and the male organ (qtd. in Gallop, *Reading Lacan* 143-44). Nevertheless, Lacan himself entertains the possibility of the penis lurking behind the signifier of the phallus when he talks about the various reasons for which someone (but not him) would choose the phallus as the privileged signifier. Let us have a look at the passage:

It can be said that this signifier is chosen because it is the most tangible element in the real of sexual copulation, and also the most symbolic in the literal (typographical) sense of the term, since it is equivalent there to the (logical) copula. It might also be said that, by virtue of its turgidity, it is the image of the vital flow as it is transmitted in generation. (*Écrits* 287)¹⁷

Of course, Rose stresses that the only reason why Lacan relates the Symbolic usage of the phallus to its visibility is to invalidate the visibility of the object in favor of the duplicity of the linguistic sign. As she states, “he [Lacan] constantly refused any crude identification of the phallus with the order of the visible or real [...], and he referred it instead to that function of ‘veiling’ in which he locates the fundamental duplicity of the linguistic sign” (“Introduction – II” 42). Rose is surely right here, since in his very next sentence Lacan negates the real dimension of the phallus for the sake of its signifying role: “All these propositions merely conceal the fact that it can play its role only when veiled, [...] raised (*aufgehoben*) to the function of signifier” (*Écrits* 288). Either way, Gallop is right to argue against any fixity of clear meanings, as this would run counter to Lacan’s philosophy of language. As she very nicely puts it, “his [Lacan’s] language itself, and not just his theory of language, includes a fixing and slippage” (*Reading Lacan* 144), which of course brings us to our opening point, expressed by Ragland-Sullivan and supported by Gallop, that the confusion between the penis and the phallus inheres in language.

¹⁷ The lack of agency in Sheridan’s passive voice is exchanged in Rose’s translation for the general subject One. So, instead of “It can be said” Rose translates “One might say”. See Lacan’s *Feminine Sexuality* 82.

Another interesting version coming from the '90s of why the penis has been identified with the phallus as signifier is provided by Žižek, evoking Saint Augustine, in his essay: “‘I Hear You with My Eyes’; or, The Invisible Master”. In note 23 of his essay he points out that “the phallus is an organ of power-potency, yet an organ whose display of potency essentially eludes the subject’s control – with the alleged exception of some Hindu priests, one cannot bring about erection at will, so that erection bears witness to some foreign power at work in the very heart of the subject” (122). Once the penis is disclosed to function beyond the subject’s will, getting erect or flaccid at the most inappropriate times, as if there was something more in it that commanded its corpoReality against the intentions of the subject, as if it belonged to anOther, then its misidentification with the phallus is inescapable.

Erection seems to be an important aspect of the penis-phallus identification. In his own discussion of the Lacanian phallus, Malcolm Bowie quotes Freud’s words of admiration for the impressive phenomenon of erection, which defies the natural laws of gravity, as proof for Freud’s – and also his follower, Lacan’s – “patronage of Priapus” and their enthusiasm for his “magical powers” (128). In the part of his “Signification of the Phallus” I have just referred to on the previous page, where Lacan speculates about a possible relation between the phallus and the penis as the reason for the prioritization of the phallus as the privileged signifier, he presents an erect ejaculating penis when he talks about its “turgidity” and the “vital flow” it represents (*Écrits* 287). Finally, the phallus as symbol of sovereign power in classical antiquity always depicted an erect penis (Macey, “Phallus: Definitions” 318).

Of course with erection we are once more back to the economy of visibility, which is culture-specific as opposed to other, older forms of sexual organization.¹⁸ The visible erect

¹⁸ Jane Gallop refers to Freud’s two long footnotes in his “Civilization and its Discontents”, which she teasingly refers to as “smelly footnotes” since in them Freud talks about the devaluation and expulsion of olfactory stimuli and changes in sexual organization as part of the progress of civilization. Smell – especially related to women’s menstruation – gave its place to visual sexual excitation, once human beings acquired an *erect* posture (*The Daughter’s Seduction* 26-28 emphasis added). For the footnotes see Freud’s “Civilization and its Discontents” 288-89n1 and 295-97n3.

penis, which penetrates and thus “fills” the vagina, is easily misrecognized for the phallus, the signifier of lack and its fulfillment.¹⁹ In this sense, as Elizabeth Grosz points out, moving from the level of need to demand and finally desire, the penis drops its biological role of urination and insemination to transform into the *objet a* “in a circuit of demand addressed to the (m)other”, and finally into the signifier of desire “an object of unconscious fantasy” (136).

6.4. The Phallus-as-Penis, the Penis-as-Phallus, and the Sexual Dream of Unity

First of all, as Parveen Adams points out, “the phallus is the signifier of lack and so is the covering of lack *par excellence*” (51). Secondly, since it is through the signifier of the phallus that men and women take up their position in the Symbolic world as masculine or feminine subjects – *having the phallus* or *being* it accordingly – it is their relation to the phallus that “defines the structure of romantic relations between them” (Grosz 136). Finally, the cultural *meconnaissance* of the phallus for the penis results in the subject’s search for individual wholeness through sexual relationship. Once the phallus is misrecognised for the male reproductive organ, which men “have” and women represent, it is the function of copulation which is awarded the fantastic attribute of representing wholeness, underlining the imaginary complementariness of the sexual duets. This turns the erotic coupling into the ultimate instance of union of the two in One and declares the erotic narrative as the fundamental fantasy of unity.

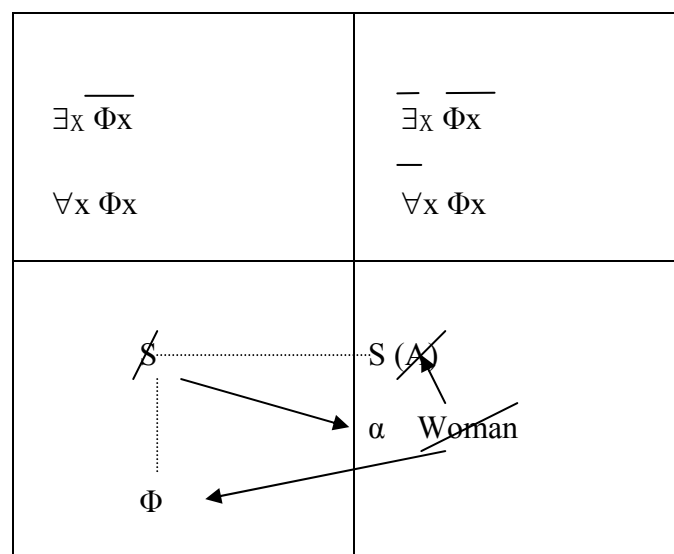
Before looking at the dream of unity through sex, which flipsides into nightmarish anxiety of betrayal and fragmentation, we need to examine Lacan’s topography of sexual

¹⁹ In Elizabeth Grosz’ words, “[b]ecause of its erectile form and ‘preference’ for penetration, the phallus serves to ‘fill’ the lack” (137).

subject positions and possible relations and see how many *ménages à trois* are formulated each time a man relates to a woman.

6.4.1. Male and Female Subject Positions

In his “Love Letter” lecture in *Seminar XX*, Lacan defines the two subject positions (male/female) by proposing the following schema:



(78)

In the top left box we have the symbolization of the male subject position, the negation of which leads us to the top right box and to the female subject position. According to Lacan, these two subject positions are not necessarily taken up respectively by biologically determined males and females but each subject can choose between the two, which “are the only possible definitions of the so-called man or woman portion for that which finds itself in the position of inhabiting language” (*Seminar XX* 80). The male subject position is defined by the phallic function Φx , which determines every male subject x through castration. Castration becomes the token of the male subject’s inscription on the plane of the Symbolic and it is only in relation to the phallic function that man can address wholeness ($\forall x \Phi x$), which is, however, always already impossible due to castration, represented in Lacan’s schema by the

barrier that separates the Symbolic from the Real. It is the father's function – $\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$ (inscribed over the male subject position) – that guards the male subject and secures his castration, binding the incest-taboo as the precondition for the subject's Symbolic existence through the *ex-sistence* (placing outside) of the primal father to whom castration does not apply and who is whole in his unsymbolised nature (*Seminar XX* 79-80). Fluctuating in his doubleness inside and outside the symbolic register, the primal father becomes the signifier which can never be pinned down in meaning and in this sense ex-sists, remains outside, Symbolic representation while at the same time he is the anchoring point that secures its existence. As Fink says, discussing the nature of the primal father, he is “excluded from within”:

He [the primal father] ex-sists: the phallic function is not simply negated in some mild sense in his case; it is foreclosed [...] and foreclosure implies the utter and complete exclusion of something from the symbolic register. As it is only that which is *not foreclosed* from the symbolic order that can be said to exist, existence going hand in hand with language, the primal father – implying such a foreclosure – must ex-sist, standing outside of symbolic castration. We obviously have a name for him, and thus in a sense he exists within our symbolic order; on the other hand, his very definition implies a rejection of that order, and thus by definition he ex-sists. (110)

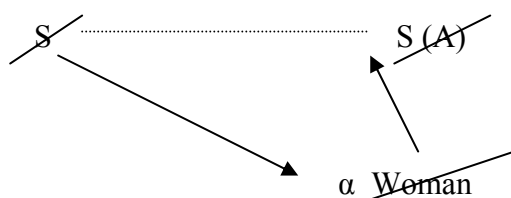
Moving to the top right box and the female subject position, $\forall x \Phi x$, part of it is located in the unsymbolisable Other, as the negation of signification.²⁰ Being inscribed in the Real, “the woman portion of speaking beings” is a “not-whole” and is thus not allowed any universality (Lacan, *Seminar XX* 80).²¹ That is why in Lacan's table Woman is barred, crossed out, as “Woman cannot be said (*se dire*). Nothing can be said of woman” (*Seminar XX* 81). However, as Fink points out, talking about woman's relation to the Other, “Lacan

²⁰ See Fink 107-8 and 112-13.

²¹ Also, see Lacan's *Seminar XX* 72-73.

does not cast this idea in positive terms, by stating, for example, that *some part of every woman* escapes the reign of the phallus. He leaves it as a possibility, not a necessity” (112). That is why when talking about the Real *jouissance* that woman experiences without being able to talk about it, Lacan specifies that “[i]t doesn’t happen to all of them [women]” (*Seminar XX* 74). At the same time, woman also has direct access to the phallic function Φ . Moreover there is no female function equivalent to the primal father that ever completely eschews the reign of the phallus and thus avoids castration ($\overline{\exists x} \overline{\Phi x}$). In this sense, “every woman is *at least in part* determined by the phallic function” (Fink 112). In Lacan’s words: “It’s not because she is not-wholly in the phallic function that she is not there at all. She is *not* not at all there. She is there in full (*à plein*)” (*Seminar XX* 74).

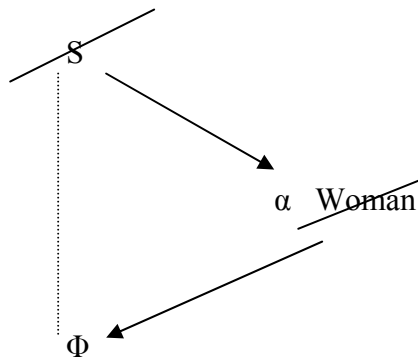
The relation which the two subject positions enter is the following: the male reaches the Other through woman who takes up the position of the *objet a*, the cause of his desire, formulating a triangular relation which can only be fulfilled in the realm of fantasy ($\$ \diamond a$).



In Lacan’s own words:

this $\$$ never deals with anything by way of a partner but object *a* inscribed on the other side of the bar. He is unable to attain his sexual partner, who is the Other, except inasmuch as his partner is the cause of his desire. In this respect, as is indicated elsewhere in my graphs by the oriented conjunction of $\$$ and *a*, this is *nothing other than fantasy*. (*Seminar XX* 80 emphasis added)

At the same time man can only relate to Φ , the phallic signifier, via the intermediary of woman, who is necessary to testify man's possession of the phallus by herself *be-com-ing* it, so that she gets access to the male body of Symbolic signification (Lacan, *Écrits* 290).

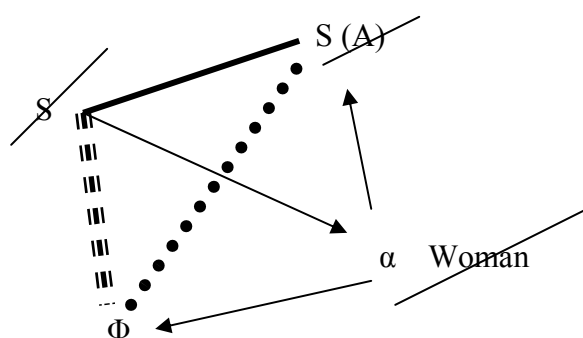


This triangulation, which is structurally dependent on the mis-identification of the phallic signifier with the male organ, exposes the illusion at the heart of any coupling. According to the Lacanian paradigm, signifying the phallus with her whole body *being* displayed for him, the woman offers to the male subject the fantasy of herself as the phallus. *Having* her sexual body all to himself, he misrecognizes it as the Symbolic insignia of his phallic possession. What makes the illusion possible and preserves it is a third term “a ‘to seem’ that replaces the ‘to have’, in order to protect it on the one side, and to mask its lack in the other” (Lacan, *Écrits* 289). This, third term, according to Lacan, projects sexual behaviour and copulation, as the sexual act *par excellence*, “into the comedy” (*Écrits* 289). Thus, the melodrama of essence is revealed to be a comedy of appearance where the coupling is disclosed to have always already been a tripling.

Entering the Symbolic through what she is not, woman masquerades as the desired object (Lacan, *Écrits* 290),²² and supports “the comedy of copulation” as the ultimate instance of union and wholeness. However, at the same time she is also the impossible object, that

²² Lacan borrows the term “masquerade” from Joan Riviere. In her most famous essay “Womanliness as Masquerade”, Riviere employs the term to talk about the “mask of womanliness” that women professionals and/or intellectuals put up to allay the anxiety and the fear of punishment that their claim over “male” activities creates in them. In chapter nine I’m exploring masquerade in relation to the lesbian *femme fatale* who hides her “male” side under the mask of femininity.

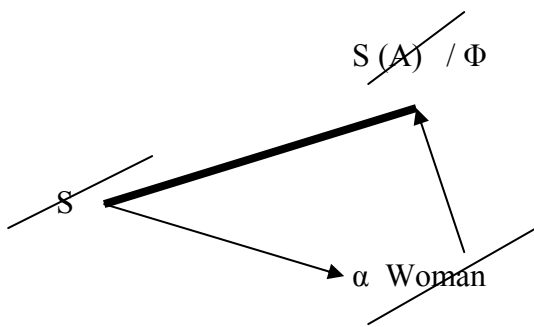
which cannot be spoken of since it escapes meaning. In Lacan's words: "Woman has a relation with $S(A)$, and it is already in that respect that she is doubled, that she is not-whole, since she can also have a relation with Φ " (*Seminar XX* 81). Doubled in herself, woman formulates a triangle on her own which cuts through the two sexual triangles she performs with man, declaring triangulation as the schema *par excellence* of sexual union.²³



In Lacan's words : "*Si quelque chose ex-siste à quelque chose, c'est très précisément de n'y être pas couplé, d'en être 'troisé,' si vous me permettez ce neologisme*" (Lacan qtd. in Fink 114).²⁴ Bringing the three triangles together, we end up once more with the rhombus of fantasy, as it is in the realm of fantasy that all sexual (un)relations are played out. It is again in fantasy that the three triangles are reduced to one (after being folded twice), with the third term of the remaining triangle still obscured to support the fantasy of direct union of the two in One. So we end up with the following schema, in which the relation between the male subject and his female partner as *objet a*, the object-cause of his desire, is misperceived as the arrowless straight black line which brings in direct unity the male subject and his dream of wholeness that woman must support by obscuring her Real existence.

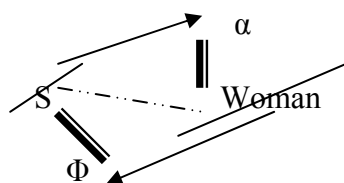
²³ This schema comes from Lacan's table on the subject positions. To the initial schema, which only includes the arrows, I added the rest of the lines to make the triangles obvious.

²⁴ "If something ex-sists with respect to something else, it is precisely inasmuch as it is not coupled, but rather 'tripled' to it, if you will allow me this neologism." (Fink 195n34)

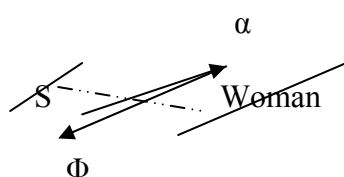


So what happens to love? According to Lacan, “Love is impotent, though mutual, because it is not aware that it is but the desire to be One, which leads us to the impossibility of establishing the relationship between ‘them two’ (*la relation d’ eux*). [...] – them-two sexes” (*Seminar XX 6*). Addressing the impossible One, both partners experience the Other through the phantasmic presence of a physical absence enunciated through their union. Once the signifier is misrecognised for the signified, the union acquires a phantastic being and becomes the third term that obstructs the view of the one from the other, rather replacing one’s partner with a vision of One-ness. It is in this sense that “there is no such thing, that it is impossible to found (*poser*) a sexual relationship” of direct access of one to the other (Lacan, *Seminar XX 9*), since any couple is always mediated by a third term which pushes being into representation and the game of love to the realm of fantasy.

Love is thus doomed as it is based on an illusion the couple shares and doesn’t share at the same time. In the following schema, which comes out of Lacan’s table on subject-positions, the two parallel arrows indicate the different directions that the lovers’ gazes take, both looking at a place where their partner is not, both contemplating their own dream of unity with their lost whole “I”. As Lacan reminds us, “The One everyone talks about all the time is, first of all, a kind of mirage of the One you believe yourself to be” (*Seminar XX 47*).



The two lovers can never really share the same illusion of Oneness since, as Lacan beautifully puts it, “When, in love, I solicit a look, what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that – *You never look at me from the place from which I see you*. Conversely, *what I look at is never what I wish to see*” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 103). Through substitute-objects, sexual roles, and performances the distance between the lovers and their functions becomes blurred, leading to the imaginary coincidence of the two arrows in the above schema:



This is the mirage of love that Lacan talks about, sustained or eliminated in the domain of the bed like all the rest of the dreams that people make.

Which is why, in his *Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek claims that for the sexual act to take place there must always exist a fantasy frame in which the sexual act may be enclosed. As genuine Symbolic subjects, the two lovers are never alone in direct relation to each other. Rather, they are both mediated by the signifier of their partner's fantasy frame, through which their lover sees in them the more in them than themselves.²⁵ As Renata Salecl puts it, “Love is linked to the fact that at the end we know nothing about the object that attracts us in the Other, and that at the same time the Other knows nothing about this object that is in him more than himself, that is, what makes someone attracted to him” (“The Anxiety of Love Letters” 42).

On the other hand, talking about “the jouissance of the body”, Lacan points out that this is “asexual (*asexué*), because what is known as sexual jouissance is marked and dominated by the impossibility of establishing as such, anywhere in the enunciable, the sole One that interests us, the One of the relation ‘sexual relationship’ (*rapport sexuel*)” (*Seminar XX* 6-7). However, visibly interlocking the lovers' bodies, the one inside the other and ideally

²⁵ According to Žižek, “*objet petit a*, as the object of fantasy, is that ‘something in me more than myself’ on account of which I perceive myself as ‘worthy of the Other's desire’” (*Plague of Fantasies* 8).

culminating in mutual orgasmic pleasure, the instance of copulation easily erects the myth of the impossible union of the two in One through *Eros*, which “seeks to force together and hold together the portions of living substance” (Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 334n1).²⁶ Phallic *jouissance* is misrecognised for bodily *jouissance* as in Freud’s words “the greatest pleasure attainable by us [is] that of the sexual act” (“Beyond the Pleasure principle” 336), rooting the Reality of sexual union in fantasy. Sex is pronounced the validator of Symbolic Oneness, declaring that no marriage is legal until it is consummated. That is, Symbolic unity is only represented after Real unity is imaginarily assumed to have taken place on the level of bodies. But what an irony! The reproduction of the species springs from a tragic misrecognition of *jouissance* as bodily. Seeking for it repeatedly but always missing it, “it is by missing that *jouissance* that it [the speaking being] reproduces – in other words, by fucking” (Lacan, *Seminar XX* 121).

6.4.2. The Monstrous Marriage and its Progeny

Once sex becomes the act *par excellence* of unity and fulfillment, it also becomes the source of great anxiety. Bodily appearance, sizes, shapes and sexual performance are scrutinized and found adequate or lacking. But even when someone is deemed a successful lover, there is always the fear of a bad performance or a body that cannot beat time forever to sustain the demanded image of perfection. As Lacan observes, “The fact that the phallus is not found where it is expected, where it is required, namely on the plane of genital mediation, is what explains that anxiety is the truth of sexuality. ... The phallus, where it is expected as sexual, never appears except as lack, and this is its link with anxiety” (qtd. in Salecl, “The anxiety of Love Letters” 37). Misidentifying phallic *jouissance* with the performance of his penis, the male partner is so preoccupied with “getting the job done”, reaching climax after having

²⁶ For Lacan’s discussion of Freud’s ideas around *Eros* and *Thanatos* see *Seminar XX* 66.

satisfied his partner that in Lacan's words: "man does not come (*n' arrive pas*), [...], to enjoy woman's body, precisely because what he enjoys is the jouissance of the organ" (*Seminar XX* 7).

Either way, the bubble of perfection that good sex may sustain will eventually burst and reveal its fictitiousness as the union is based on deception. Both men and women enter sexual relationships by lying about what they "have" and who they "are", offering empty promises to each other about things they cannot deliver, but are then shocked when they do not get what they were promised, and heavily traumatized when they are rejected for what they are revealed to be and to have.²⁷ In Salecl's words, "The major problem for the male and the female subject is that they do not relate to that which their partner relates to in them" ("The Anxiety of Love Letters" 36). Entering the arena of love in garments they pretend to wear under the light of the Other's fantasy, the lovers, like the emperor in Hans Christian Andersen's tale, misrecognize their fictitious costumes as real.²⁸ So, they carelessly move away from the light, confident in their lovers' outfits. Only, the moment the light of the Other's fantasy stops projecting onto the lovers' bodies the images of their garments, they are revealed to be naked, divested of grandeur, transformed from sublime into ridiculous.

This is a problem the myth of total love covers by turning the love-affair into an impossibility. In courtly love poetry the lovers are never allowed to meet bodily and consummate their love, retaining, thus, the necessary distance that preserves the fantasy-frame in which both are (mis)recognized as sublime figures. Defining courtly love, Lacan says that "[i]t is a highly refined way of making up for (*suppléer à*) the absence of the sexual relationship, by feigning that we are the ones who erect an obstacle thereto" (*Seminar XX* 69). Something must always be sacrificed for the fantasy to be retained. So, "[t]he ultimate proof

²⁷ As Salecl nicely puts it, "a man is traumatized by not being able to assume his symbolic role and a woman by not possessing the object of the Other's desire" ("The Anxiety of Love Letters" 38).

²⁸ For the Danish tale "The Emperor's New Clothes" see the Hans Christian Andersen Center in http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes_e.html

of a true (absolute, ‘incestuous’) love is that the lovers split, renounce the full consummation of their relationship – if the lovers were to remain together, they would either die or turn into an ordinary everyday bourgeois couple” (Žižek, “‘There Is No Sexual Relationship’” 209) with all the inadequacies and inconsistencies this entails, turning the dream of unity into a nightmare of fragmentation.

Having established the importance of the sexual act in the activation of the romantic fantasy of wholeness, I will come back to it in the third part of the thesis to examine the way Hollywood erotic thrillers exploit this fantasy and turn it into the veil through which they show sex. Meanwhile, in the next chapter I will focus on the ways in which Hollywood has staged the sexual act. By studying the sexual images that Hollywood expresses or represses we will observe how Hollywood balances the threatening aspect of sex by moving its camera too far or too close, veiling and unveiling but never disclosing what can only be shown masqueraded as some-Thing else.

CHAPTER SEVEN

(Un)-Veiling the Act: Hollywood and Sexual Representation

As I have shown in my third chapter, Hollywood has always had a strange relation with sex as act, sublimating it whenever possible.¹ Talking about the way sex is portrayed in Hollywood, the most controversial Hollywood director of the '90s, the Dutch Paul Verhoeven, claims that on the one hand sex is absent from scripts. There are no sex scenes in the scripts as screenwriters rely on what Verhoeven calls a "biological" exposition of sex textually represented in a single sentence: "'They make passionate love' and that's it" (qtd. in Bouzereau 201). To this reality Verhoeven juxtaposes Eszterhas' script for *Basic Instinct*, in which the sex scenes between the two leads take up four or five pages of the whole text (qtd. in Linda Ruth Williams, "No Sex Please We' Re American" 20). Of course the difference between the erotic thriller and other Hollywood genres is that the erotic thriller depends on a lingering view of the act as it is in and through the act that the film's criminal potential emanates. Therefore, none of the obstructing techniques that Hollywood uses in other genres to obscure what it is supposed to be showing could work. Before we concentrate our attention on the erotic thriller in the third part of the thesis, in this chapter I would like to provide a context for the way Hollywood handles the sexual act in the case of the erotic thriller by exploring the overall way in which the sexual act has been staged on the Hollywood mega-screen. In my attempt to do so, I will follow Slavoj Žižek's "three modes of depicting the

¹ Those who oppose the inclusion of sex in films, such as *Radio Times* film critic Barry Norman, argue that "it distracts one's attention from the film" (66). Martin Scorsese states that he avoids sex scenes as they usually "stop the movie dead" (qtd. in Kenny 62) and *People* magazine film critic Leah Rozen extends the discussion to on-screen exposition of nudity stating that "[t]he minute someone takes their clothes off that's all you're looking at" (qtd. in Fernandez 63). On the other hand, actor Willem Dafoe while stating that he enjoys doing sex scenes and expresses irritation at the MPAA's prejudice as to what constitutes acceptable sex on screen (Witter 82), all the same acknowledges male nudity as distracting. In the interview he gave to *Empire* on the occasion of the screening of the controversial erotic thriller *Body of Evidence* where he stars with Madonna he said that "a lot of people really fall out of a movie if they see that [the penis]", and added "I know that when I see a man's penis in a movie, whether it's small, large, circumcised, uncircumcised, upside down, backwards, purple, it's *always* a distraction..." (Witter 82).

sexual act” (*Plague of Fantasies* 176). According to Žižek, there are three ways to refer to the sexual act psychoanalytically in direct equivalence to the three Lacanian realms and the type of object found in each: “comicality”, “perversion” and “pathetic ecstasy” (*Plague of Fantasies* 175-76). I want now to explore each of these categories in relation to genre cinema in order to show the different veils that Hollywood has used to portray the forbidden act.

7.1. Sex as Comical: The (Sexual) Act Exaggerated

Comicality is situated on the side of the Symbolic as the outcome of stressing the visibility of the barred subject’s separation from undifferentiated – pushed to the Real – *jouissance* (Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies* 175). Accordingly, the gap between the sexual act and the fantasy of unity it represents is made visible by moving the perceiving lens all too close to it, to reveal the mechanics of the act that distance obscures. Once sex is revealed as a fragmented act performed by an equally fragmented subject, the initial fantasy of wholeness gives its place to an absurd image. As Žižek remarks, “[t]o the external ‘sober’ glance, there is something irreducibly funny (stupid, excessive) in the sexual act” (176). The genres that portray the sexual act as excessive are pornography and sex comedies. Pornography is not part of mainstream Hollywood but I will include it in my discussion as it flaunts what sex comedies obscure through the generic element of comedy.

By orchestrating all the possible sex stances, zooming in on the actors’ exposed genitals, fragmenting the body into its different parts which are then offered individually and repeatedly for extra pleasurable looking, offering exemplary and multiplied moans, looks, and physical reactions, the pornographic spectacle is perceived in two different ways, depending on the frame through which one perceives the sexual spectacle. Pornography either (in the opposite direction of comicality), as we have already established in chapter five, activates the primal scene fantasy by placing the spectator in a keyhole position (watching from a distance

unobserved) resulting in sexual arousal, or in its artificial exaggeration, exposing its mechanics from too close in excruciating detail, pornographic sex exposes the grotesque nature of an act which “is always-already split from within” (Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies* 177). Since as Žižek contends there is no “proper”, “natural” way to have sex, but we learn how to do it, following existing rules and imitating others who are supposed to be good at it, there is always the possibility that this distance between the subject and the sex s/he performs may become visible if for some reason s/he disconnects from the act to observe him/herself doing it (177).² In Žižek’s words: “in the middle of the most intense sexual act, it is possible for us all of a sudden to ‘disconnect’ – all of a sudden, a question can emerge: ‘What am I doing here, sweating and repeating these stupid gestures?’” (*Plague of Fantasies* 65). If the performed sexual act is interrupted by something or if watching it on screen takes place with the spectator’s awareness of his/her visibility (such as when pornography is watched by a group of friends) then sex is exposed as mechanistic and fulfills its ridiculous potential.

Sex comedies also present sex as absurd. Dealing with teenagers, especially boys who are desperate to lose their virginity and get sex-wise, films in the tradition of the ‘80s *Porky’s* series,³ as well as its 21st-century version, the *American Pie* series,⁴ play around the *angst* of boys anxious to prove their virility. Sex is reduced to its technical dimension (penetration and ejaculation) and the films’ usually homophobic plots obsess around body parts, sizes and fluids. Any remainder of romantic fantasy is removed, exchanged for the male phallic fantasy of potency through sexual performance. Sex is revealed as totally mechanistic, while sexual

² This distancing from the act is especially pertinent today as both male and female magazines obsess over sexual performance.

³ The film that started what finally became the *Porky’s* trilogy was a minor 1982 production written and directed by Bob Clark. Its success led to the first sequel one year later – *Porky’s II: The Next Day* – with 20th Century Fox as part of the project. Then, in 1985 James Komack’s *Porky’s Revenge* completed the series. Currently, twenty-four years after the success of the original, the 21st-century remake of *Porky’s* is already in production.

⁴ Paul Weitz’ 1999 *American Pie*, J. B. Rogers’ 2001 *American Pie 2* and Jesse Dylan’s 2003 *American Wedding*.

performance is organ-bound and dependent on visibility. However, the grotesqueness of the act is absorbed and released through the comedy of the plot.

A crucial point to be made regarding sex comedies is that you never see any sex in them, you only fantasize about it through images of bare-breasted women in G-strings (a staple of the genre). Replacing the soft core with milder female spectacle has facilitated the genre's ascent to mainstream status in the 21st century and has made it a possible vehicle even for A-list names such as Cameron Diaz. Adolescent sex comedies of the past, full of unknown teenage actors ready to show bare parts of their body, are now clearly reaching for respectability and the adult population by lowering the explicitness of sexual spectacle, raising the age-level of the sexually-in-search heroes and adding preoccupations of an emotional nature to the habitually superficial plot of sex comedy. The initial drive of the plot – the characters' search to "get laid" – becomes a search for sexual partnership and love as the sex comedy overlaps with its romantic counterpart. Therefore, the new crop of sex comedies goes back to sexual innuendo, addressing the spectator's fantasy rather than the eye.

An interesting example, one indicative of the conservative turn Hollywood has taken in the 21st century, is Judd Apatow's 2005 *The 40 Year Old Virgin*. The film extends the topic of sexual preoccupation and awakening from adolescence to adulthood through the story of a sexually ignorant adult. Andy (Steve Carrell) is a forty-year old salesman who, due to misfortunes when he was younger, hasn't managed to have sex yet. Along the generic conventions, the film exhibits an obsession with sex; virginity and celibacy are treated as illness and are linked to suspicions of homosexuality, while admirable virility is identified with sexual excess. On the other hand, crossing lines with the genre of the romantic comedy, where sex is romanticized and its mechanics obfuscated in the fantasy of ultimate companionship and tenderness, sex is ultimately exposed by the film as a pathetic means to love. "It's really not about sex, per se, it's about love and about this guy's discovery" states

lead Steve Carrell in his interview for *Empire* (n. pag.).⁵ Sex as bodily contact is initially misrecognised as bonding and love, but the film ultimately suggests that it is only the other way round that one can enjoy ecstatic pleasure. The film's ending conforms to the demands of the sexual comedy but sanctified through the directives of romance. So, Andy finally has sex but only after marrying Trish (Catherine Keener), the woman he's fallen in love with.

In its female version, sex comedy gets self-reflexive presenting women who are aware of the illusion to which men are victims. An example of this relatively recent type of female sex comedy is Roger Kumble's 2002 *The Sweetest Thing*. The film presents three beautiful flat-mates who claim their right to sexual satisfaction. Knowing that the basic rule of the sexual game involves "the reign of the penis", they perform accordingly. In a little number, reminiscent of classic musicals, called "The Penis Song", performed in a restaurant, they expose the artificiality of female behavior in bed. "The Penis Song", which reminds us of the most famous faked-orgasm-scene in the history of contemporary American cinema, the one that Sally performs for Harry in a restaurant in Rob Reiner's well-known romantic comedy *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), reveals the fragmented nature of sex and female performativity cloaked in comedy.

7.2. Sex as Perverse: The (Sexual) Act Replaced

Moving to a "perverse" depiction of sex, the sex act disappears altogether and another act fills the gap in representation. In psychoanalytic terms, imaginary *objets a* obfuscate the gap between the desiring subject and his/her *jouissance* by turning the gaze on some "partial object which acts as a stand-in for the impossible-unrepresentable [sexual] act" (Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies* 176). So, in the perverse representation of the sexual act, the act itself is missing, displaced by some other "supplementary perverse dimension" (Žižek 182).

⁵ See http://www.empireonline.co.uk/interviews_and_events/interview.asp?IID=397

Murder takes the place of sex in many Hitchcock films, echoing Truffaut's claim that "Hitchcock shoots the sexual act as if it were a murder and murder as if it were a sexual act...." (qtd. in Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies* 182). In *Psycho*, for example, it is the invisible to spectators sex act between Marion and her lover that leads her to crime. We see her abscond with the money she steals from her boss and end up at Norman Bates' hotel. And later it is the sexual desire that she inspires in Norman that leads him to penetrate her again and again with his knife until she drops dead in the shower. The sex that we are prevented from seeing is replaced by crime shown in excruciating detail.

In the same tradition, horror teen-flicks exhibit sex acts always exchanged for gruesome massacres of teenagers, who immediately after or while enjoying the illicit pleasures of sex are dispatched by some psychotic murderer who impales them again and again with some penetrating object. The act of sex (often encapsulated in the soft core image of the bare-breasted female victim) is always obscured in these films and supplanted by the detailed presentation of the act of murder, the choice of weapon being the point where the two acts intersect. Using primitive weapons such as knives, axes, and ice picks as opposed to guns implies, according to Carol Clover, "closeness and tactility" (32), making bodily contact between the murderer and the victim necessary. Veiling the act of sex, teenage slashers sublimate the transgression of sex with that of murder, casting a pornographic gaze on the penetration of the sexual body by a murderous weapon.⁶

Paying tribute to Hitchcock's mastery, another auteur of American cinema, Brian De Palma gives his own version of "terrifying sex"⁷ in his controversial and much contested

⁶ John Carpenter's classic 1978 hit *Halloween*, Sean S. Cunningham's 1980 *Friday the 13th* and their hideous progeny of sequels and imitators, Jim Gillespie's 1997 *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and its sequel Danny Cannon's 1998 *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer*, Jamie Blanks' 2001 *Valentine* and Jaume Collet-Serra's 2005 *House of Wax*, all exhibit numerous bodies sliced by some asexual male figure, who exchanging his penis for some sharp instrument, supplements the invisible pleasures of sex with visible thrusts of death.

⁷ This is how de Palma characterised sex for *Esquire* magazine back in 1984 and around the time of the release of his film *Body Double* (qtd. in Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 82).

directorial *oeuvre* and especially in his two sex-slashers: *Dressed to Kill* and *Body Double*.⁸ In the former it is the desire for sex that leads Kate (Angie Dickinson) to death. In the film's opening scene Kate's frustrated sexual desire is established in a shower fantasy she enjoys while watching her indifferent husband shaving. Later in the film she engages in casual sex with a stranger. Although we do not see the act we are shown its consequences; on her way out of the man's apartment Kate finds his blood tests in a drawer announcing his infection with viral blood disease. And then, as she leaves the apartment we watch her being slashed to death in the elevator by some blonde female figure. It turns out that it's the female part of Kate's psycho-shrink Dr. Elliott (Michael Kane), Bobby, who punishes her for arousing sexual desires in Elliott. However, the point not to be missed in *Dressed to Kill*, also made apparent in the film's title, is that the moment Kate activates her sexual potential ("dresses up") and engages in illicit extramarital sex, death as both murder and disease awaits her. These two are the partial objects that the film offers us as stand-ins for the act of sex. At this point someone could contest my argument by pointing out an early scene in the film of Kate having sex with her husband, which we *are* shown. Of course the reason we are allowed to see it is because for Kate, our focal point in the film up to her death, it isn't sex but conjugal obligation which she fakes as pleasurable.⁹ For De Palma sex is terrifying, as I have already shown in my second chapter, when it results in giving up control, being thus at the risk of transforming into a doomed victim. Sex in De Palma's universe is the sublime Lacanian *Thing* (*Das Ding*) one can never see, being offered, instead, glimpses of partial objects (*objets a*) that signify its existence.¹⁰

⁸ It seems that De Palma did *Body Double* as a response to the controversy that *Dressed to Kill* generated aiming at provoking the public even more. In his own words: "So after the battles, which had started with *Dressed to Kill*, I said, 'OK, you want to see violence? You want to see sex? Then I'll show it to you,' and I went out and made *Body Double*!" (qtd. in Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 86).

⁹ As she angrily tells her psychiatrist about her husband, "he gave me one of his wang-bang specials this morning and I'm mad at him". When the doctor asks her if she told him she was upset, she answers "Of course not. I moaned with pleasure at his touch. Isn't that what every man wants?"

¹⁰ *Das Ding* in relation to *objet a* is presented in my next chapter as part of my discussion of the erotic thriller fantasy-machine.

In *Body Double* it is not sex but male sexual desire that confers death on the woman through watching. Male voyeurism “consumes” the female image when Jake (Craig Wasson), a failed B-movie actor, is set up by a fellow actor, Sam (Gregg Henry), who is planning to murder his rich wife, Gloria (Deborah Shelton), and wants Jake for his alibi. Jake’s watching is a precondition for the murder so Sam hires a porn actress to impersonate his wife and with a titillating strip-act fix Jake in front of his window. So, it is Jake’s desire to consume sex-images that leads to Gloria’s death, and the spectator along with Jake watches while Gloria’s body is penetrated with a drill. Although this is a film about the underground horror porn industry and sex is supposedly everywhere, at the same time it is nowhere to be found. Sex is insinuatingly simulated with the use of provocative nude-breasted body doubles and immediately turned into a site of murderous penetration. However, it is watching this time instead of sex itself that brings death. Sex inserts watching as a precondition of murder. The dyad of murderous sex and sexy murder is triangulated as spectators are acknowledged their signifying position in the cinematic staging of sex. As Linda Ruth Williams claims in her discussion of voyeurism in *Body Double*, “anyone who looks with pleasure, including the film’s own audience, is culpable” (*The Erotic Thriller* 87).

Crime became the preferable spectacle for repressed homosexual desire (and an invisible homo-sexual act) signified by the strange coupling between a law-enforcer and a serial killer in many of the serial-killer films that flooded the market in the ‘90s, after the unprecedented success of Jonathan Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). The libidinal game between the two men, the hunter and the hunted, becomes visible in the numerous amputated bodies the one leaves behind for the other to see and touch, the graphic shots of murder signifying the ardent desire that sustains the perverse (sexual) power-game between the two. The police-detective, or in many cases the reporter, is chosen by the murderer and the

development of their perverse relation takes place through the murders the latter commits.¹¹ Placing the investigative figure in the position of an all-perceiving Other whose vision he keeps delayed, the murderer manages to re-kindle the investigator's desire to catch him, feeding thus his own hysterical desire to be desired by the Other.¹² As Žižek observes, "the neurotic-hysteric wants to be the object of the Other's *desire* not the object of his *enjoyment*" (*Plague of Fantasies* 33). So, knowing that the Other's desire can only be retained through the postponement of its satisfaction (Žižek 33), the murderer keeps staging the scenery of the detective's pleasure but then always being one step ahead, frustrates it, to keep the game going. This leaves for the detective the position of "the pervert", according to which the subject "determines himself as object, in his encounter with the division of subjectivity" (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 185). Placing himself as the object of the murderer's pleasure, the detective tries to align his surveying gaze of the victims' bodies with the murderer's gaze so that he can see through his eyes and catch him.¹³

Although it is mainly murder that supplants sex, realizing visually the psychoanalytic coupling of sex and death, other acts can also be employed. In Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) it is the robbing of banks that fills the gap that sexual incompetence creates.¹⁴ In Alfonso Cuarón's *Great Expectations* (1998) the act of sex between Finn (Ethan Hawke) and Estella (Gwyneth Paltrow), the woman of his dreams, is obscured, exchanged for its allusive substitute, coupling through artistic creation. Before touching her actual body, Finn recreates

¹¹As soon as Malcolm (Kurt Russell), a reporter for a Miami newspaper, decides to quit his job and settle for a quiet life with his teacher girlfriend (Mariel Hemingway) in Phillip Borsos' *The Mean Season* (1985) the murderer from his latest article calls to tell him about the new murder he's going to commit. The phone-calls and the murders continue and it is because the investigator keeps looking at and for the murderous acts that the killer keeps staging them, placing his works of art for the investigative eyes to see.

¹²In Joe Charbanic's *The Watcher* (2000) the homoerotic libidinal game between the police investigator (James Spader) and the serial-killer (Keanu Reeves) makes the latter move his criminal activity to a different city when the police-detective is transferred. Playing with the detective's desire to save the victims the murderer sends him photographs of prospective victims in advance.

¹³This is the case in Michael Mann's *Manhunter* (1986) where the detective Will Graham (William Petersen) watches, almost compulsively, the photos and the home videos from the murder scenes trying with his "sixth sense" to literally see through the serial killer's eyes in order to catch him.

¹⁴Although we get a detailed look of their transgressions their sole successful lovemaking is totally obscured from us. However, it is probably not accidental that as soon as they manage to satisfy their libido through sex they are consumed by the violence their pursuers unleash on them.

it in paint. Feeling all the curves of her body, rubbing and shaping her lines with trembling hands and over-enthusiastic awkwardness, Finn is finally transformed into an anxious lover at his big moment. The scene's video-clip aesthetic – quick-paced editing, storming inter-cutting flashes of Estella posing in streams of light pouring through the window, alternating with Finn's drawing of her,¹⁵ and the rising beat of the scene's soundtrack – results in a climaxing scene of sublimated orgasmic pleasure. Finally, in Finn Taylor's *Dream with the Fishes* (1997),¹⁶ bodily contact between the two lovers is supplanted by tattooing. Having reached the final stage of a terminal illness, Nick (Brad Hunt) can no longer have sex with his girlfriend Liz (Kathryn Erbe) who redresses their lack of body-contact by shooting tattoos on their bodies. The pain they feel as the needle penetrates the skin to ejaculate ink that will permanently inscribe the body replaces the physical sensations of sexual contact while physical pleasure is exchanged for pleasure-in-pain.

7.3. Sex as Pathos: the (Sexual) Act Interrupted

Finally, representing sex as “pathos” – Žižek's third possibility of sexual representation – involves the actual act but obfuscated by some “asexual phantasmic screen”¹⁷, “a fascinating image destined to render present the pathos of the act” (Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies* 176). Therefore, we see the act but interrupted by something else which partially blocks our vision from the totality of “the impossible Thing” (Žižek 176). Through the use of visual metaphor (i.e. cross-cutting between the sex act and some other scene such as the mating of animals or some violent natural phenomenon, a crime etc.),¹⁸ music (romantic, or fast-pacing and usually

¹⁵ According to Jackson *intercut* involves “cutting between two or more sets of action in such a way as to make them form a single dramatic unit” (128).

¹⁶ *Dream with the Fishes* is an American Independent Production but I include it here because it provides a very good example of exchanging the sexual act for something else but murder.

¹⁷ I borrow the term from Žižek's *Plague of Fantasies* 183.

¹⁸ According to Kevin Jackson's dictionary of film terms, *cross-cutting* involves “cutting between two or more sets of action, often to create suspense or some other kind of exciting effect, or more generally to establish some narrative or metaphorical connection between them” (61).

escalating to signify the climaxing of the act) or natural sounds (wind or rain to signify the intensity of the sexual passion), a fantasy-frame is erected which veils the act and obscures its fragmentary nature. So, instead of two people performing with all the groaning, moaning and clumsiness that this entails – which of course would reveal the comical nature of the act – what we are shown is the fantastic version of a phantasmic *jouissance*, a well-orchestrated sexual spectacle of two immaculate bodies entangled in an orgasmic embrace of perfect timing and absolute pleasure, signified by something else in the picture. This is the kind of sex we get in Hollywood romantic comedies and family melodramas.

In romantic comedies sex becomes “lovemaking”, that is expression of love feelings, part of a relationship’s routine and its problems. The act of sex in romantic comedies is either presented as grotesque and funny, realizing its comic dimension and overlapping with sex-comedies, or as the materialization of the absolute fantasy of romantic coupling, giving thus flesh to the romance part of the filmic world. In the latter case we usually get a glimpse of the initiation of sex and immediately the scene dissolves to the after-the-act.¹⁹ In Nancy Meyer’s *Something’s Gotta Give* (2003), a romantic / sex comedy hybrid, middle-aged sex between Harry (Jack Nicholson), an ageing Casanova and Erica (Diane Keaton), a successful divorced playwright, is presented as semi ludicrous in its mechanics. Jack takes Viagra pills to be able to perform and his heart situation makes him far from the ideal lover. However, the comicality of their sexual encounter is neutralized by the romantic passion they share, which revitalizes both and gives them a second chance at happiness.

The same kind of romantic treatment of sex is to be found in family melodramas and almost any other Hollywood film involving a love affair. Sex is always incorporated in the love relationship and emphasis lies in the feelings the two lovers share and the problems they have to overcome to be together. In James Cameron’s *Titanic* (1997), when the moment

¹⁹ In a *dissolve* “[t]he end of one scene fades out while the beginning of the next scene fades up, so that the two are on the screen simultaneously for a few seconds” (Jackson 74).

comes that Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Rose (Kate Winslet) have sex, their love is already established. Rose's decision to escape her suffocating life and join Jack and Jack's declaration of devotion to her in his "You jump, I jump" line turn sex into the act that seals the union of the lovers. Cameron presents them more like two pranking children who roam the ship rather than a man and a woman engaged in a doomed passion. We never see them engage in any sexual caressing, and all the foreplay between them takes place in the scene where Jack draws Rose's picture. She lies naked opposite him, sexually inviting, but he is too professional to respond as anything but an artist. However, he blushes when he rubs with his fingers the curves of her body on his paper, trying to hide his excitement. Making love inside a car for the first – and last – time points at teen-sex comedies but the image invoked is immediately deconstructed when Jack is shown shaking, held in the maternal embrace of Rose. The steamy windows, the glistening-with-sweat bodies of the two lovers and Jack's hand hitting the windowpane to signify the orgasmic moment formulate the veil of romantic love that obscures the sexual act, showing it only partly.

Following the Lacanian train of thought on the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise, Žižek contends that in the same way that Achilles can outrun the tortoise but can never finish next to it, "[t]he subject is always too slow or too quick, it can never keep pace with the object of its desire" (*Looking Awry* 110). In this sense the sexual act can only be seen from too far, veiled and obscured by the cutting, fading,²⁰ or dissolve of the love scene, or from too close, in which case it disappears and what the subject is left looking at is some "vulgar, groaning fornication" (*Looking Awry* 110). The sexual act, according to Žižek, can never be directly reached but is always mediated by a veiling distance, which ensures the integrity of the filmic narrative. Once the distance is overcome and copulation prevails, any narrative reality transforms into a prop for the staging of fornication (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 110-11).

²⁰ A *fade* involves "a type of optical effect in which the image on screen gradually ebbs away, often though not always to black" (Jackson 89).

But, what about the erotic thriller? Sex in the erotic thriller is not supposed to be absurd but terrifying and pleasurable, unable to be supplanted by anything else as *it* supplants the potential for crime. Key-sex (between the victim-hero and the *femme fatale*) is never interrupted; on the contrary the sexual act is important since it is there that the murderous potential of the film hovers, especially at the moment of orgasm. In this sense it doesn't violate the integrity of the story as it forms part of the story. So, what is the screen through which we are shown the sexual act in the erotic thriller, and how is the explicitness and transgressiveness of the act handled so that erotic thrillers are not threatening? The answer lies in the concept of fantasy. It is through the veil of sexual and criminal fantasy that we see dangerous and transgressive sex, and it is through the fantasies sex activates that the erotic thriller manages to be more pleasurable and inviting than threatening and repulsive. As the erotic thriller's screen and the particular narratives it breeds, fantasy will be the focus of our next part.

PART III

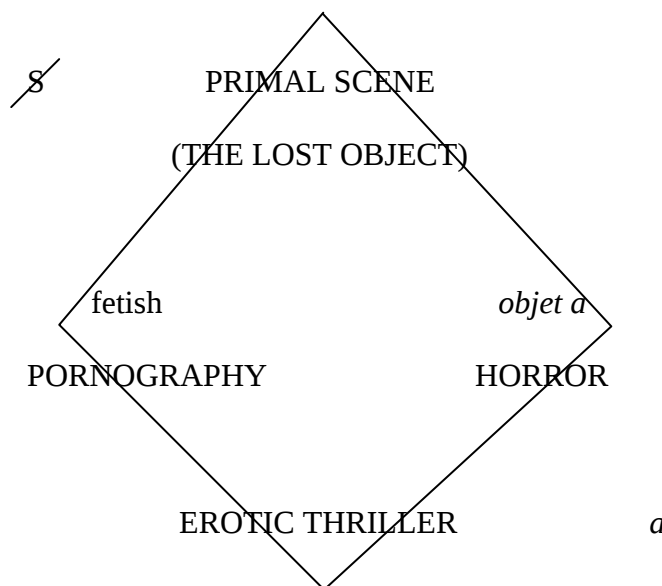
THEORY MEETS THE FILMS

CHAPTER EIGHT

Thrill(er)ing Primal Fantasy: The Screen of Erotic Thriller

(Sexual) Pleasures

To analyse the way the erotic thriller stages its universe of transgression (both sexual and criminal) and, according to the genre's demands, gets away with it, we need to go back to the ending of chapter five. Discussing sexual fantasy in relation to cinema, I there defined the primal scene as the sexual fantasy *par excellence* that cinema activates, both through the act of viewing but also through three particular genres. Horror films and pornography repeat the two sides of the primal scene fantasy offering to the in-spect(at)ing eye the transgressive gaze as fetish (in pornography) and *objet a* (in horror). Where the former pleases the eye/I by reproducing infinitely the site of orgasmic pleasure, the latter disrupts it by activating the threat of castration, thus precipitating the circuit of desire for the ultimate object that will avert the threat. Meanwhile, the two together constitute the Lacanian rhombus of fantasy, which is doubled by the erotic thriller genre. Incorporating both the pornographic pleasure and the horrific threat, the erotic thriller is a fantasy screen that activates a string of *objets a* to restage in front of the spectator the primal scene as the lost unitary object that promises fulfilment to the desiring subject. So the erotic thriller functions both as the rhombus through which the barred ~~S~~pectators reach for the object-cause of their desire and as a series of *objets a* that spectators are offered to fill in the gaps of their fragmentary existence. Bringing together Lacan's matheme of desire, the primal scene and the basic triangular fantasy-structure, we end up with the following schema in which the Lacanian *poinçon* has been transformed into a rhombus as the schema *par excellence* of fantasy:



This is the mechanism generating erotic thriller fantasies. Ambivalence is a fundamental term for the erotic thriller machine. Caught in the double movement of being and not being (*fatale*, sexual and criminal), having and not having the object of desire, the erotic thriller commits the act and then denies it. Doing and refusing it, naming sex as murder and murder as sex, both possibilities are always erected simultaneously on screen through the different *objets a* that are summoned to signify the doubleness, hovering between the two, being potentially both or none. This is the basic erotic thriller fantasy-frame and the veil through which the erotic thriller screens its transgressive acts. Most of the films' titles reflect this fluid duplicity, which – if the film in question does what it should be doing – can never be pinpointed to any of the possibilities the title launches.¹ To refer to some of the most famous ones, *Basic Instinct* addresses our evolutionary battle for survival both through sex (reproduction) but also through murder (killing for food or survival). *Sea of Love* signifies plenitude, but one could also be drowned in a sea (of love). *The Last Seduction* could imply

¹ Talking about film titles, Hitchcock pointed out that this is where suspense begins. Titles raise particular expectations for the audience, making them wonder about which point in the film the title will be realized. See Hitchcock's example of *Mutiny on the Bounty* in his "Lecture at Columbia University" 272.

either a happy ending in marriage or a morbid black-widow-like death. *Final Analysis* signifies the ending of psychoanalysis around some libidinal blockage or its interruption by death. Finally, *Body Heat* invokes a body out of control susceptible to sex and/or murder.

To further illustrate this ambiguity as the staple of the erotic thriller world, I will turn now to *Basic Instinct*, the film around which this thesis is built. In *Basic Instinct* all characters on both sides of the law are ambivalently implicated. Having already mentioned Nick's professional ambivalence in a previous part of my thesis, here I will deal with the rest of the characters. All the women in the film are lesbians and potentially murderous (Roxy and Hazel are ex-murderers supposedly reformed, and Catherine is suspected of Johnny Boz's murder).² Even Beth, the police psychologist, although initially presented as a good-woman figure who passionately stands by Nick, as the film progresses is alleged to have had an obsessive sexual relation with Catherine back in college, and murdered an old college professor, her ex-husband, Johnny Boz (Catherine's boyfriend) and Gus (Nick's partner). All the women have an ambivalent physical identity as well; all of them – and even Beth in her college years – look like Catherine, signifying thus Catherine's "polymorphously perverse" persona both sexually and criminally.³ Gus is also marked as sexually ambivalent in terms of the homoerotic implications of the buddy theme (a point already raised earlier); Verhoeven's choice of the gay country-western bar "Rawhide II" for the sexualised dialogue between Gus and Nick highlights the implications (Hoberman, "Fantastic Projections" 4). Of course Catherine is the embodiment of ambiguity on every level (her ambiguity as a *femme fatale* will be explored in the next chapter). The overlapping between her crime novel *Love Hurts* and the real-life murder of Johnny Boz that activates the film's thriller narrative underlines Catherine's ambivalence as a character in the film's world. As the police psychiatrist says, she has either written the book in advance as an alibi for her act, which would make her

² On the whodunit question in *Basic Instinct* see Lynda Hart's *Fatal Women* 124-34.

³ According to Freud all human subjects possess an innate disposition to all kinds of sexual irregularities and excesses ("Three Essays on Sexuality" 109).

diabolical, or someone else out of hatred for her has committed the murder as described in the book to frame her, in which case she's an innocent victim. Catherine's ambiguity is, however, never resolved, not even by the film's ending. So, although according to evidence found in her apartment, Beth is supposed to have been the culprit, the film ends with a shot of an ice pick lying under the bed in which Nick and Catherine have just had sex. But even there in the very last shot the film resists giving any clear answer, so the ice pick that we see in close-up is the metallic one that we saw Catherine use for its intended function at her house earlier in the film and not the cheap wooden K-Mart one used in the murders. Furthermore, Catherine is clearly not only the basic character in the film whom the hero investigates. She also "writes" the film through *Shooter*, the crime novel she writes during the film, which overlaps with the film's plot. Catherine's book is about a cop (for whom Nick is her cop prototype) who, in her words, "falls for the wrong woman" and gets killed by her. In a scene that illustrates Catherine's doubleness as character and writer of *Basic Instinct*, Nick is looking at the pages of her book as they come out of the printer and there we read about Gus's murder before it actually happens in the film, as part of Catherine Wolf's (Catherine's *nom de plume*) book.

Let's examine now how ambivalence serves the staging of the sexual act. As we've already established, erotic thrillers exhibit lavish sex scenes which flirt with suspenseful horror. While enjoying the sensuality of the scene we are alert to its deadly potential. All of a sudden, there can be a shift to reveal the horrific underside and turn the sensuous sex into appalling gore. It is fear that makes sex good, Paul Verhoeven proclaims in his textbook erotic thriller, *Basic Instinct*, in a scene between Catherine, the suspect of murder, and Nick, the investigating officer, after they have shared a night of steamy sex together.

Catherine: Did you really think it was so special?

Nick: [...] I thought it was the fuck of the century.

[...]

Catherine: Tell me Nicky were you frightened last night?

Nick: That's the point, wasn't it? That's what made it so good.

It is also fear that makes sex possible. It is only because the sexual mystery contains the answer to the crime-puzzle that we get to see it all. Sex is only permitted as masqueraded, veiled by the thriller part of the story. Talking to Linda Ruth Williams about how he got away with the length of *Basic Instinct*'s main sexual scene, Paul Verhoeven discloses that

the scene, which is three or four minutes long, [...], is still disguised. Or to put it another way, the nudity is only possible there because it's also a thriller scene. Because you are continuously reminded of the first scene which was a killer scene. And all the symbols of the scene, the tying up and mirror and the way the bed is, are continuously signalling to the audience that, yes, they're making love, but is she going to kill him or not? So I was able to include all the erotic elements *because* of the thriller elements.

(*Erotic Thriller* 243)

Keeping both the sexual and the criminal on scene, Verhoeven re-stages the primal scene fantasy. The sexual act as fetish over-plays presence at the expense of absence (Cowie, *Representing the Woman* 265) as the two bodies engulf each other in visible unity establishing the fantasy of orgasmic pleasure. On the other hand, the traumatic view of castration that the child disavowed is transferred to the crime part of the story and hovers in the background of the sexual act, infecting it with danger. Sex in *Basic Instinct* and in all erotic thrillers is potentially dangerous because the *femme fatale* is the potential murderer. In this way the castrating part of the sexual act can be safely enjoyed by the watching subject, once it is veiled as something else. At the same time, as the *femme fatale* threatens the male investigator with murder/castration, he also threatens her with arrest/mutilation.

Catherine [to Nick]: You shouldn't play this game.

Nick: Why not? I like it.

Catherine: You're in over your head.

Nick: Maybe, but this is how I'll catch my killer.

So, during the act of erotic thriller sex the masochistic fantasy of castration is compulsively re-staged, metamorphosed and merged with the sadistic fantasy of "getting" the murderer. In the exchange between sadistic and masochistic sexual pleasure, the erotic thriller fantasy resembles the beating fantasy, both in its organization and in its alternation between sadistic and masochistic pleasures that the various subject positions confer.

As in the first sex scene between Catherine and Nick where a long look at the sexual act is only possible because of the crime it alludes to, in the film's opening scene an explicit close-up of the ice pick penetrating the male body is only possible because of the orgasmic pleasure the on-screen sexual act has established. The scene opens with an establishing shot of an unidentifiable bare-breasted blonde female moving on top of a man whose hands she ties to the bedpost; as she takes him to the point of orgasm, she takes out an ice pick and repeatedly penetrates his body. Taking place at the moment of orgasmic plenitude, the realized threat of castration is contained and the depiction of the murderous act in all its gross detail is only possible because it is veiled by the fantasy of orgasmic release. Seven shots of stabbing, a medium shot of the woman stabbing the man in the neck and his left eye and blood squirting all over their bodies (Bouzereau 188) would have been too threatening had they not been covered by the veil of orgasmic release.

Fantasy is the screen for everything the erotic thriller portrays. Doubling the Lacanian *matheme* of fantasy with its structure, the erotic thriller can only function as long as the misrecognising demands of fantasy are preserved. Should this veil be torn or removed, the Imaginary wholeness the erotic thriller evokes and promotes would transform into its monstrous double. "Traversing" fantasy to show the reality of fragmentation would prove too

threatening, turning any film that would commit the ultimate mistake into a nauseating object to be expelled so that spectators can retain what Kristeva, describing the object in relation to the appallingly desirable maternal body, calls the “beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself” (13).

Talking to Bouzereau about the way he shot the main sex scene between the lead stars Michael Douglas and Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*, Verhoeven described a stylised, choreographed, storyboarded and over-rehearsed scene (201). Sex, Verhoeven highlights, is always staged in the US as fantasy, viewed from afar (the film’s three major sex scenes are analysed in chapter ten). He notes that normally there is a lot of soft background lighting and fade-overs and dissolves⁴ to tone images down so “you never really see people fuck, [. . .] that’s how these scenes are normally done in American movies”, “it’s almost like love scenes are on the divine level and you should not be intruding too much” (qtd. in Bouzereau 200-1). Sexual transgression is thus always fake transgression. In this way, sex in the erotic thriller universe, although potentially “dirty” and perverse, is far from threatening since it is staged as fantasy.⁵ That is why archetypal fantasies are employed to signify threat. Death during sex, and especially during orgasmic release, is a basic icon in many erotic thrillers (both *Basic Instinct* and *Body of Evidence* open with men dying during sex, the former at the point of orgasm, while in *Sea of Love* the murders are staged as if taking place during the sexual act). Describing the workings of *Eros* and the *death instinct* in his 1923 paper “The Ego and the Id”, Freud pointed out the similarity between orgasm and death: “The ejection of the sexual substances in the sexual act corresponds in a sense to the separation of soma and germ-plasm. This accounts for the likeness of the condition that follows complete sexual satisfaction to dying, and for the fact that death coincides with the act of copulation in some of the lower

⁴ A *fade* involves “a type of optical effect in which the image on screen gradually ebbs away, often though not always to black” (Jackson 89), while in a *dissolve* “[t]he end of one scene fades out while the beginning of the next scene fades up, so that the two are on the screen simultaneously for a few seconds” (Jackson 74).

⁵ Discussing sexual representation in the ‘90s, Marcelle Clements underlines the transgressive nature of *Basic Instinct* calling it “the year’s most famous dirty movie, featur[ing] murder as a sexual aid” (92).

animals” (388). Describing his vision about the film’s opening scene of sex/murder in *Basic Instinct*, Verhoeven echoes Freud in his identification of copulation with demise:

There, it’s love and then that complete reversion into death. Basically, it’s like a black widow ... When the male starts to fuck the female, he’s very careful. Genetically, he knows that’s a dangerous thing, but he cannot resist so he fucks her anyhow. And then, slowly he wants to pull back. He seems to succeed, but at the moment he seems out of reach, she grabs him and sucks him to death, sucks all the blood out of him. That’s basically the scene. That’s the scene I wanted to make. (qtd. in Bouzereau 205)

To illustrate the difference between transgression and the fantasy of transgression that *Basic Instinct* screens, I want to include in my discussion *Spetters*, a Dutch film Verhoeven made in the early ‘80s. Explaining his intentions, Verhoeven said:

I wanted to go beyond what was normal, what you would normally see on the screen. I wanted to show things that are true and real but that are normally omitted. I wanted to say [...] I’ll shoot it the way it’s done. I’m not going to be elliptic or shoot it in a way you don’t see it, in the dark or in the shadows, I’ll shoot it straight. This is how people give a blow job, and this is how they rape, this is how they masturbate, this is how you jerk off somebody, and you see it all. That’s just the reality of life. (qtd.in Bouzereau 199-200).

The result was a film that created considerable public commotion on release as being homophobic, misogynistic and anti-invalids and led to the formation of a “National Anti-*Spetters* Committee” in Holland. Furthermore, the press reaction was, according to Verhoeven, “300 percent negative”, and the film was only released outside Holland, in liberal France, after the success of *Basic Instinct* (Bouzereau 198-99).

Evidently, transgression is part of both descriptions but in a completely different way. Where in the European version adherence to a neo-realist aesthetic depicts sex in its traumatic dimension as the taboo mechanics behind the coherence of the glamorous line “they make passionate love”,⁶ Hollywood transgression is veiled behind fantasy. In its careful orchestration of choreographed movements performed under fervent soundtracks Hollywood has always transformed sex into a series of Imaginary objects – *objets a* – that come to occupy the field of the transgressively subliminal Lacanian *Das Ding*, the gap in all representation.

8.1. *Das Ding*, *Objet a*, *Jouissance* and Desire: The Case of *Showgirls*

To illustrate the difference between transgression and its fantasy we need to go back to Lacanian theory and explore the role of fantasy as the veil that obscures the workings of the drive by addressing desire for some impossible thing. Talking about the distinction between desire and the drive, Lacan says: “the drive divides the subject and desire, the latter sustaining itself only in the relation it misrecognizes between that division and an object which causes it. Such is the structure of fantasy” (“On Freud’s ‘*Trieb*’ and the Psychoanalyst’s Desire” 419). Let’s see what we can make out of this. By the end of the ‘60s, Lacan was relating desire to the subject’s acceptance of castration. It is only because the subject accepts the loss of the primary object that a gap takes the place of the object, establishing the subject’s circuit of desire: “Desire is always instituted by a lack, and hence desire is on the same side as the law” (Miller, “Commentary on Lacan’s Text” 423). Being on the side of the law, desire obeys the prohibitions of the pleasure principle, which renounces *jouissance* as the residue that secures the legitimacy of the Symbolic world. Even in the case of transgressive fantasy, “desire never

⁶ Verhoeven stated in his interview with Linda Ruth Williams that when he did his Dutch films he was preoccupied with communicating the reality of the situations he was presenting in his films (*The Erotic Thriller* 241-42).

goes beyond a certain point. What lies beyond it is *jouissance* and the drive of which that *jouissance* is the satisfaction” (Miller, “Commentary on Lacan’s Text” 423). Both *jouissance* and the drive are located “on the side of the Thing” (Lacan, “On Freud’s ‘*Trieb*’ and the Psychoanalyst’s Desire” 419) and are related to desire through fantasy. It is through fantasy that the lost object is claimed via the *objet a*, and desire is misrecognized as following the drive. In Miller’s words, “the subject’s desire is sustained only by the misrecognition of the drive known as fantasy” (“Commentary on Lacan’s Text” 426).

It is due to fantasy that the Thing “[is kept] at bay” (Hammill 66), exchanged for some *objet a* which functions both as the object of the drive and the cause of desire. As Graham L. Hammill points out:

In Lacanian theory, the *objet a* is not the desired object: exactly the reverse. The *objet a* is desire’s cause, and, if anything, desire’s objective is to obscure the cause. The *objet a* is the object of the drive. [...] While desire sustains itself by repeatedly searching for some illusory, impossible object that, were it to exist, would offer a satisfactory end to desire, the drive aims to satisfy itself by continually returning to its circuit. Hence while desire can never achieve satisfaction, the drive achieves satisfaction through the repetition of its own aim. And, in the process, the drive traces out some object – some *objet a* – that agitates desire and serves as desire’s inexplicable cause. (56)

So, it is the constant flow of the drive around some *objet a* which covers the gap of the lost thing and secures *jouissance*, which fantasy translates as the want-to-be and want-to-have pleasure of desire.⁷ Attracted by some Symbolic object that the subject misidentifies with the *objet a* of the realm of the drive, the subject’s desire is (re)kindled and pleasure is identified

⁷ For Lacan “desire is the metonymy of the want-to-be” (*Écrits* 259).

with the attainment of the object. However, since the object attained is never the object expected, and since the latter is the cause rather than the object of desire, pleasure is always postponed, keeping the circuit of desire open. Thus, the undetected workings of the drive are secured by the scenarios of desire that fantasy stages. That is exactly how erotic thrillers function; they become the veil of fantasy that allows spectators to misrecognise the drive which incessantly repeats the same circumventing movement around the lost object (*Das Ding*) for their desire for some misidentified partial object (*objet a*). At the same time, erotic thrillers also offer an abundance of *objets a* that spectators can misidentify with the Thing (*Das Ding*). These partial objects (*objets a*) activate the spectators' fantasy-frame and put in motion a fantasy narrative that sets in motion the spectators' desire. This desire, however, is once more misrecognised by spectators as desire for the things themselves, which become invested with the spectators' interest, allowing a number of possible identifications that offer various pleasures. *Fatalis objets a* and the particular fantasy-scenarios that erotic thrillers offer will be examined in the following two chapters.

Once the frame of fantasy is shattered, or in Lacanian terms "traversed", the *objet a* as semblance disappears to unveil naked *jouissance* hovering around the void of the mortifying Thing.⁸ Instantly the site becomes too threatening for the eye/I and is rejected. To illustrate the violence of this rejection and the feeling of repugnance that provokes it, I will employ Kristeva's notion of "the abject". According to Kristeva, "Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (10). Loathing, repugnance, and nausea are the feelings inspired in the human subject by the repellent part that has to be expelled for the subject to exist in the realm of meaning (Kristeva 1-4). The loathing that Verhoeven's *Spetters* caused in its spectators marks the film as abjective. Going too close to transgressive

⁸ For an account of the "traversing of fantasy" in a Lacanian psychoanalytic scene, see Hammill 72. Also see Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 273-74.

sexuality with its depiction of masturbation, fellatio, and homosexual gang rape, *Spetters* blocked the circuit of the spectators' desire by releasing repulsive *jouissance* "in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant" (Kristeva 9). The "gagging sensation" and "spasms in the stomach" that abjection provokes⁹ justifies the violence of expulsion to which the abject is doomed, justifying the public reaction to *Spetters* I mentioned earlier on.

Thinking he could *get away with* excess if he incorporated it in the fantasy of Las Vegas spectacle, Verhoeven tried once more to cross the line, this time on American soil after his big success with *Basic Instinct*. *Showgirls* narrates the story of a young fallen angel, Nomi Malone (Elizabeth Berkley), who tries to escape her dubious past and succeed as a dancer in the Stardust casino scene while working as a lap dancer in a seedy strip-club. Having managed to "push the envelope" of what could be seen on the Hollywood screen in *Basic Instinct*, Verhoeven thought he could use the fame that it granted him to push the limitations still further. According to Keesey and Duncan, "On the strength of his previous box-office successes, Verhoeven got pre-approval in his contract with MGM/United Artists to make an NC-17 movie, thus becoming the first director in history to be granted such no-holds-barred freedom by a major Hollywood studio" (136).¹⁰ Being the first NC-17 film to be widely released,¹¹ *Showgirls* based its whole publicity campaign on its controversial rating and word-of-mouth scandal (Feasey 172-73). The film's tagline, "Leave your inhibitions at the door, the show is about to begin", teased spectatorial expectation while the film's main poster showed its star-actress emerging naked from two black curtains that kept hidden the parts of her body that had to remain unseen. The film, which pushed the newly-launched NC-17 category to its

⁹ On food loathing and abjection see Kristeva 2-6.

¹⁰ See also William Grimes' "'Fleshdance': Back to Basic Instincts" 15A and Christopher Goodwin's "Naked Ambition" 7.

¹¹ The NC-17 Rating, created to differentiate sexually explicit from pornographic films, was first applied to the arthouse production *Henry and June* in 1990. *Showgirls* was the first box-office oriented film to take up what was considered an economically disastrous classification. See Christopher Goodwin 7 and "Fleshed Out" 12.

doom,¹² has, according to Zoe Heller, “received possibly the worst reviews in modern history” (42). As Josh Young writes in the Arts page of the *Sunday Telegraph*, the film “was laughed off the screen” (7), while its director claims to have been “amazed at the *violence* of the reviews” which resembled the ones he got for *Spetters* (qtd. in Linda Ruth Williams 242). I would argue that *Showgirls* activated spectatorial and critical abjection. Let’s see why.

In her analysis of *Showgirls*, Linda Ruth Williams attributes the first mistake to the gap between what the film promised and what it finally delivered. “[T]he promotional boast that it [*Showgirls*] would push beyond the audience’s wildest imaginings” (*The Erotic Thriller* 170), combined with its NC-17 rating, created hardcore expectations which the actual film frustrated with the softcore spectacle it offered. In Williams’ words, “*Showgirls* is a film in which no one cums on anyone, ever; yet it was promoted as an experience in which everyone does everything constantly” (172). Caught between the hard and soft-core terrains, *Showgirls* offered hardcore language accompanied by softcore images, which proved too soft for the film’s good. To illustrate this point let us look at an example. After the young aspiring dancer, Nomi Malone, makes it to the Stardust casino dance-show, her former boss Al (Robert Davi) from the Cheetah strip-club, where she used to work, and the grotesque mama-figure of the club, Henrietta Bazoom (Lin Tucci), go to see her. This is part of the tacky dialogue exchanged between them:

Al [addressing Nomi]: You look like shit.

Henrietta: She looks better than a ten-inch dick and you know it.

Al [addressing Nomi]: So, you like it here?

Henrietta: What do you think she’s gonna miss you?

Al: Yeah, why not? We miss her.

¹² Many saw Verhoeven’s endeavour as possibly groundbreaking regarding the new rating. William Grimes representing this line of optimism writes, “If it [*Showgirls*] succeeds, the film may rewrite the rules that govern Hollywood’s treatment of sex on screen” (15A).

Henrietta: She misses us like that lump on my twat I had taken off last week.

As Williams puts it, “The vulgarity of the commentary exceeds the explicitness of the image: Verhoeven goes no further than he did in *Basic Instinct* (perhaps not as far – Stone did offer the glimmerings of the gynaecological view)” (*The Erotic Thriller* 173). Alternating between the two sexual terrains, being both and none at the same time, the film failed to match erotic thriller ambiguity; rather it provoked frustration at the failure to offer spectators the promised object: sexual plenitude.

In psychoanalytic terms, the *objet a* that falls within the subject’s fantasy-frame and activates the subject’s narrative of desire as the misrecognised part that will offer the dream of wholeness is never the Real Thing (which would lead to the subject’s Symbolic death). Viewing *objet a* and the Thing in the light of what Adrian Johnston describes as “an infrequently invoked distinction between ‘jouissance expected’ and ‘jouissance obtained’” (n. pag.), the *objet a* is revealed as the Imaginary equivalent of the Real Thing. In *Seminar XX* Lacan draws the distinction between the two types of *jouissance*, which ensures the circuit of the drive and the resurgence of *jouissance*. “‘That’s not it’ is the very cry by which the jouissance obtained is distinguished from the jouissance expected. It is here that what can be said in language is specified”, Lacan writes (111). Defining the “jouissance expected” as “an illusory, mythicised ‘full satisfaction’”, Adrian Johnston aligns it with the primordial Thing (*Das Ding*), while the “jouissance obtained” always proves lacking and fragmented, offering partial pleasure (n. pag.). However, it is the job of fantasy to assure that the misrecognition of the Thing as *objet a* will take place and that the “jouissance obtained” will be misperceived as the “jouissance expected”. Once the gap between the two is made visible, the fragmented nature of the “jouissance obtained” is revealed, turning the *objet a* into a most threatening and

thus abjected object. This explains the hostility that *Showgirls* inspired in its audience. *Showgirls* proved a disturbing film because, promising plenitude, it delivered fragmentation.

In terms of the sexual spectacle, Verhoeven impoverishes it from the inside. Reducing sex to “a tool” used by Nomi for money and fame (Verhoeven qtd. in Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 243), Verhoeven punctures the excess of sexual spectacle to disclose its threatening mechanics. So, the titillating fantasies that strip tease and lap dancing potentially arouse are transformed into abjective nightmares of raw bodily functions. Explaining the rules of lap dancing to a new girl, Al says, “50\$ a pop, you take them in the back. Touch and go. They touch they go. You can touch them, they cannot touch you [. . .] Now, if they cum it’s OK. If they take it out, cum all over you, call the bouncer, unless, he gives you a big tip. If he gives you a big tip it’s OK. You got that?” As if that wasn’t enough, Eszterhas’s script pushes the scene even further. Before Al leaves the room, these are the last directions/threats he gives to the new girl: “If you want to last longer than a week you give me a blowjob. First I get you used to the money, then I make you swallow”, to which of course the shocked girl (doubling the shocked spectator) utters, “Was he serious?”

Losing the game of seduction that he so effectively played in *Basic Instinct*, in *Showgirls* Verhoeven transfers the sexual act onto the female body, which is stripped completely as his own version of “going all the way”. As Christopher Goodwin sardonically writes,

Having gone to “first base” with *Basic Instinct*, and having seen the effect that a modicum of pubic hair could wreak on a susceptible movie audience, E & V [Eszterhas and Verhoeven] have now gone “all the way”. In *Showgirls* [. . .] there’s barely an actress whose pubic region doesn’t need more grooming than the hair on her head. (7)

Supplanting sexual excess with the excess of nudity, Verhoeven's naked *femmes* turn invisible as "[in] baring all, [they] [reveal] nothing" (Iley 5) and once nothing is hidden, according to Linda Ruth Williams, "there is nothing to find" (*The Erotic Thriller* 175). Divested of all its veils, the female body as sexual spectacle turns superficial and boring, unable to activate desire. Moving too close to the sexual body, Verhoeven pulls apart the veil of fantasy which offers it as *objet a* in its totality and instead reveals it as blemished. A highly seductive scene between Nomi and James (Glenn Plummer), a black guy who pursues her, in which dancing merges with the foreplay of the sexual act, is disrupted when to avoid the act Verhoeven once more shifts to the functions of the body and reveals Nomi's body as menstruating by having James actually thrust his finger inside her to check the status of her body himself. By the time he wipes his fingers and suggests that he has towels so they can get on with it, the sexual act between them has already shifted from a pleasurable image of bodily unity to the abjective spectacle of body fluids and grunting heaps of flesh. If in the Lacanian paradigm of the gaze, "what one looks at is what cannot be seen" (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 182) but what the subject finally sees is "the minimum of idealization the subject needs in order to be able to sustain the horror of the Real" (Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies* 66), Verhoeven invalidates any possibility of idealization by showing what must always remain unseen, thus offering horrific Reality in the place of Imaginary *jouissance*. Let's have a look at the mechanism of this transformation.

In his example of what the voyeur sees when s/he peeps through the keyhole, Lacan depicts the illusory nature of vision, which allows the erection of the subliminal object projected by the screen of fantasy in the place of the Real Thing. "What the voyeur is looking for and finds is merely a shadow, a shadow behind the curtain. There he will fantasize any magic of presence, the most graceful of girls, [...], even if on the other side there is only a hairy athlete", Lacan remarks (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 182). As long as the fantasy of

“the most graceful of girls” is sustained, the ideal object - *objet a* - promises some “*jouissance* expected” which kindles the watcher’s desire. Once the voyeur decides to go closer, enter the room, tear off the veil and look behind it at the Real object, that is, commit the misdemeanour of Žižekian “intrusive *overproximity*”¹³ (going all too close), the “hairy athlete” is revealed as the excremental underside of the graceful girl. Approaching the ideal object too much, it “*is changed inexplicably into a gift of shit*” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Objects* 268). This is exactly what happens with Verhoeven’s *Showgirls*.¹⁴

Going all too close to its character, *Showgirls* reveals Nomi as a whore and a bitch, ready to do whatever necessary (she gets her first big part by pushing Cristal, the star of the show, off the staircase). In Verhoeven’s words, “Nomi was a kind of prototype of anybody who goes over dead bodies” (qtd. in Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 244). The lack of ambivalence in Nomi’s character as opposed to the all-ambivalent Catherine in *Basic Instinct* reduces Nomi to a flat character whose cheapness of style, crudeness of manner and violent outbursts clearly cast her as abjective, dislikeable even to Verhoeven (Iley 5). Misidentifying Elizabeth Berkley, the young aspiring actress who impersonated Nomi, with the abortive world of *Showgirls*, critics turned her into a bashing doll and exploded their rage on her, giving her some of the cruelest reviews ever written. They wrote that she had “the non-personality and permanently gaping mouth of an inflatable doll” and danced “as

¹³ See Žižek’s *Plague of Fantasies* 67.

¹⁴ Verhoeven raged about how “neither critics nor audiences were ‘ready’ for the searing indictment of the sex industry and modern America that his film represents” (Heller 42) and talked about the serious research he and Joe Eszterhas did in Vegas interviewing all kinds of people on big shows and strip clubs (qtd. in Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 242). On the one hand Verhoeven underlined the realism of *Showgirls* and its unerotic nature as part of the film’s intention to talk about “the use and abuse of sex”;¹⁴ “the way they use sex in Vegas is really disgusting” he said to Linda Ruth Williams (*The Erotic Thriller* 243). On the other hand, in some other interview he said exactly the opposite: “The only thing I could imagine with regard to *Showgirls* is that part of the audience will go home in a state of excitement and, thinking of the film, make love or masturbate” (qtd. in Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 175). Finally, in the tie-in *Showgirls* book he fell in between: “Is it all just tits and ass? . . . Some people might say so. Even if this perception were true, that’s fine with me. Why shouldn’t we enjoy the beauty of the human body? However . . . all the sex scenes have a purpose in addition to simply stimulating sexual enjoyment” (Heller 42). Obviously Verhoeven wasn’t very clear about his intentions, resulting in blocking the on-screen image of (sexual) fantasy and thus allowing the spectators a glimpse of the shocking reality of the sexual act and industry that from the right distance seemed arousing and activated all kinds of pleasurable fantasies.

spastically as a rag doll in a hurricane” (qtd. in Keesey and Duncan 141). Mocked off the screen like the film itself, Berkley’s career in Hollywood was over.

Gina Gershon, on the other hand, who impersonated Cristal, the star-goddess of the Stardust show came out unscathed. Gershon, both like Stone and Berkley, “was launched into the mainstream” by Verhoeven, but unlike Berkley’s doom she became recorded in people’s conscience as “the performer who emerged from *Showgirls* with her career intact” (Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 197, 202). What was it that set Cristal apart from Nomi and allowed her to evade the latter’s fate? The answer is once more fantasy. Cristal is not transgressive; rather she successfully offers us the fantasy of transgression. As the two women dine together Nomi conceitedly tells Cristal “I’ll never be like you”. That’s exactly her problem. She can never be like Cristal, not even when she violently usurps her place. Even with her hip broken, Cristal is still the star of the Vegas show scene.

Cristal, as opposed to Nomi, doesn’t run away from anything. She doesn’t try to become somebody else by suppressing her past; rather she engulfs it as part of her manufactured identity. She discloses that she has taken her name from a champagne brand and openly acknowledges that she owes her sexiness to the powers of plastic surgeons and hair cosmetics. She doesn’t reject the power of sexual performance that has offered her a place in the show, money, and fame, by trying to present it as art the way Nomi does. She accepts the rules of the Symbolic game she plays and boldly pronounces to Nomi “You *are* a whore darling [. . .] We all are. We take the cash, we cash the cheque, we show them what they want to see”. Accepting her Symbolic position, Cristal echoes Catherine’s declaration to Nick in *Basic Instinct* “I don’t make any rules Nick. I go with the flow”. Going with the flow, Cristal allows the mechanism of fantasy to fill in the Symbolic gaps with the Imaginary version of sex that the Stardust show offers: spectacles of titillating fantasia like the S&M

production number prove pleasurable and not at all disturbing in their staging of the fantasy of sexual transgression.

Nomi, on the other hand, resists her Symbolic role re-claiming the part she exchanged for her place in the Vegas world (her prostitution). Thus she blocks the Imaginary mechanism of fantasy and allows Real threat to emerge from the gaps she unveils. In her desire to escape the underworld of Cheetah by becoming part of the Stardust respectability, she achieves the opposite; to unveil the Cheetah as always already part of the Stardust, a reality which must always remain veiled, covered by the desired fantasies the Stardust generates. Cristal knows the rules of the game and plays it successfully. Nomi misperceives the game, believes in the illusion it offers and is determined to possess the promised *objets a*: Zack, and herself as the new Stardust Goddess. But as she touches the elusive objects their magic is lost and the enchanting Cinderella carriage turns into a pumpkin pulled by mice. Fantasy is shred to pieces and the nauseating movement of the drive is revealed relentlessly repeated around the fearful Thing. Bringing the Thing to sight, Nomi becomes *it*.

Where Nomi invokes fragmentation Cristal embodies wholeness. Cristal's sexual ambivalence manages to activate the fantasy of unity that heterosexual images in the film disrupt. As a bisexual female Goddess she desires and is desired by both men and women, and is ready to satisfy all kinds of fantasy, acknowledging her role as dancer for money. Cristal's bisexuality is aligned with Catherine's in *Basic Instinct* as "not so much bisexual as heterolesbian, putting her lesbianism on show primarily as a foreplay spectacle for the eyes of a man" (Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 203). The scenes where Cristal dances with Nomi greedily touching her body or where Cristal is making eyes at Nomi as the latter performs her strip dance in Cheetah telling her later how much she and everyone (that is all the men) in the club enjoyed "looking at her tits", establish Cristal as the lens through which Nomi's body is seen as desirable. Cristal turns Nomi into an *objet a*. It is not accidental that

the private lap dancing that Nomi performs for Zack is the only piece of heterosexual fantasy in the film that actually works. It is Cristal who ensures that. Doubling the club seduction scene between Catherine and Nick in *Basic Instinct*, where Catherine uses Roxy to titillate and provoke Nick, Verhoeven reversed the dynamics of the scene having Nomi seduce Cristal by lap dancing for Zack. Rubbing her body against Zack's while posing for Cristal, Nomi activates both heterosexual and lesbian fantasies of the orgasmic wholeness that Zack's cumming signifies. Later on, when Nomi has sex with Zack in his swimming pool and works the same aggressive number on him, the lack of Cristal's gaze prevents the act being staged as fantasy. Lacking a fantasy frame, the excess of the act establishes it as absurd.

8.2. Is Genre the Problem?

Verhoeven claimed that the problem with *Showgirls* was that it was outside genre and that the film's reception would have been completely different if they had added a murder mystery:

I always thought that basically, to make that movie more successful, I should have just had a murder mystery and situated it in Vegas, and it would have been fine. If we'd done that, I think we would have got away with everything that people became so angry about. I should have protected myself better and gone back to genre. (qtd. in Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 242)

William Friedkin's comment in relation to *Jade*, an erotic thriller he made in the same year as *Showgirls*, reverberates Verhoeven's claim and establishes the erotic thriller as a safe vehicle for the screening of sex in Hollywood. "*Jade* had to be masked as a crime melodrama, with the secret life of a woman as the background. It would only get made in America as a crime

melodrama, as a thriller. It would not get made if it was just a pure examination of a woman's sexuality", Friedkin declared (qtd. in Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 140).

However, it's not that simple. It is not the erotic thriller as genre that would allow Verhoeven to get away with the particular portrayal of sex in *Showgirls*. The reason why *Basic Instinct* became a success and *Showgirls* failed is not the fact that the first is an erotic thriller and the other isn't. In *Basic Instinct* veiling and revealing takes place simultaneously so in no single scene do you actually see what you look for. First of all, as I've already mentioned, the murder mystery functions as the veil through which the sexual act is seen but other veils are employed all the time. Let's have a look at the veiling techniques employed in the infamous Sharon Stone crotch-flash scene. Alternating between medium and close shots of Stone during her interrogation scene, it is during a long shot that Stone uncrosses her legs. Offering the sight of her pubic hair from a distance, Verhoeven excites his spectators aligning their gaze with that of his male participants in the scene, setting up their desire to really see what wasn't supposed to be shown. But, at the moment Verhoeven seems ready to realise his promise and his camera moves to a close-up of what must remain unseen Stone crosses her legs, so the forbidden object is briefly glimpsed at as it disappears from sight. By partly exposing what he also partly obscures, Verhoeven offers titillation without risking the threat that an actual close-up of the genital region in all its detail would confer to the scene. That is why nothing was ever disturbing in *Basic Instinct* and he got away with excess. Even the way the so-called rape date scene between Nick and Beth was orchestrated managed to prove more of a fantasy of transgression rather than a traumatic scene. As Nick and Beth enter her apartment he presses her violently against the wall and they start to kiss. The scene takes place after the interrogation scene and Nick is already under Catherine's influence. It is clearly Catherine whom Nick fantasises as he makes out with Beth, so Catherine as the third term in the sex scene between Nick and Beth clearly offers the scene as fantasy. Shifting

between medium shots of the two bodies in violent embrace and close-ups of Beth's body, Verhoeven moves to a long shot taken from Nick's back when Nick pushes Beth against the couch and gets ready to penetrate her anally. Although we hear Beth's protestation and are shown her resisting in medium shot, as the camera moves closer to her and by the time we see her and Nick in a medium close-up¹⁵ she's stopped resisting and is shown to feel or fake pleasure. Even afterwards when Beth is clearly upset with Nick telling him that he wasn't making love with her, it isn't clear whether she is upset because of that or because Nick forced her to do something she didn't want. The hide-and-seek game of seduction he so efficiently played in *Basic Instinct* allowed Verhoeven to get away with sexual excess, not the addition of a murder to the plot.

Too absorbed in pushing the limits in *Showgirls*, Verhoeven got careless and deactivated fantasy, his protection mechanism in transgression. He promised audiences "[t]he side of Vegas you were never meant to see"¹⁶ and unleashed forces he then couldn't handle. Doing what one does in Vegas, he gambled and lost. It is not accidental that when the film was re-released as camp a year later it was received much differently as in campness *Showgirls* found the veil it lacked to become seductive. So Linda Williams' prediction that "*Showgirls* will reemerge one day, like Nomi and Cristal from their papier-mâché volcano, in triumphant glory to gain the praise that it deserves" (qtd. in Keesey and Duncan 146-47) can materialise once the veil of fantasy is restored to transform abjection in *Showgirls* into its fantasy.

At this point I want to examine the staple of the erotic thriller fantasy, the *femme fatale*, as the prototypical *objet a* that activates the erotic thriller fantasy-frame in producing pleasurable scenarios that activate spectatorial desire. Juxtaposing the *femme fatale* with her

¹⁵ A medium close-up includes the actor from waist to head (Jackson 52).

¹⁶ This was one of the film's promotional taglines. See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114436/taglines>

homme and *homo* counterparts, I would like to explore their popularity in terms of the different fantasies they generate.

CHAPTER NINE

Femme, Homme, and Homo Fatal(e)s Fantasies

In the erotic thriller world the *fatal(e)* figure is the embodiment of the *objet a* which the ~~S~~pectator reaches through the fantasy-frame of the erotic thriller. Being the object-cause of desire, the *fatal(e)* figure activates the spectators' fantasy-frame at the same time that it is transformed into a series of objects of desire. That is, in its different facets the *fatal(e)* figure is always doubled, both part of the machinery and its product, both the force which keeps the erotic thriller machine moving and producing fantasy-narratives, but also part of these very narratives. *Femmes, Hommes, and Homo fatal(e)s* become the anchoring point around which the erotic thriller's transgressive narrative unfolds to generate fantasies that will trigger spectatorial desire, while also becoming the veil through which spectators will look at the impossible Thing that the erotic thriller fantasy-narrative transforms into the sublime *objet a*. In this chapter I would like to examine the differences between *femmes, hommes* and *homo fatal(e)s* in terms of the way they function and the fantasies they generate. To do so, I will employ the Lacanian table of subject positions and discuss the *fatal(e)s* figures in the relations they draw between the three Lacanian realms, in the attempt to justify their popularity in terms of the degrees of threat they pose to Symbolic stability.

It seems that, regardless of the gender of the *fatal(e)* figure, the position it inhabits in the heterosexual fantasy-frame of the erotic thriller is the Lacanian female subject position, relating to the fearful Real that hovers behind the Imaginary unity of the victim-hero's Symbolic fragmentation. That is why in her absolute flexibility the *femme fatale* is the definition of fantasy. The doubleness of the female subject position, discussed in chapter six, conforms to the demands of the erotic thriller fantasy. Split between the Real she inhabits and the Phallus she embodies, the female subject possesses the ambivalence and promotes the misperceptions that fantasy demands. It is not accidental that all allegedly lesbian *femmes*

fatales are depicted as bi-sexual, conforming thus to the demands of the heterosexual fantasy-frame of the mainstream erotic thriller (to be explored in detail in the following chapter). Both lesbian and heterosexual *femmes fatales* are fully compatible with the exigencies of the erotic thriller fantasy as both move flexibly between Symbolic inexistence, Real fullness of presence (rendered through their relation to Other women), and Imaginary phallicisation (through their relation to men), fusing into one form, what Linda Ruth Williams calls the “hetero-lesbian” *femme fatale*. A butch *fatale* would be too threatening for mainstream fantasy as she lacks ambivalence. Having refused her relation to the Symbolic through men, she is fully in the Real, threatening the male subject’s Imaginary Phallus (the *femme fatale*) by claiming her for herself. That is why in mainstream Hollywood there are no butch *fatales* (I’ll get back to this point in my analysis of the lesbian *femme fatale* in *Bound*).

On the other hand, *hommes fatales* are successful as long as their ambivalence remains veiled and contained within criminality. The transgressive Reality they carry into the film’s fantasy-frame must be felt but never seen, always outweighed by the machismo that signifies their strong ties to the Symbolic economy. That is, the *homme fatal*’s ambiguity can never become sexual and his sexual transgression must always fall within the directives of phallic excess. This makes him a limited and problematic icon, compared to the *femme fatale*, easily transformable into an abjective figure. That is undoubtedly one of the reasons why the sole experimentation with male homosexual fatality, William Friedkin’s *Cruising*, failed, proving the threat that male homosexuality poses to the mainstream fantasy-frame.

To illustrate the points I’ve made regarding the various *fatal(e)s* figures, I will set off from the anchoring point of the mainstream erotic thriller fantasy, the *femme fatale*, and explore her basic constitution by juxtaposing her to her siblings: the castrated psychotic *femme* and the castrating female avenger. Having explored their generic differences in chapter

two, I now want to explore these differences in terms of the fantasies the three fatal types of femaleness activate.

9.1. (*Femme*) *Fatale* Fantasies

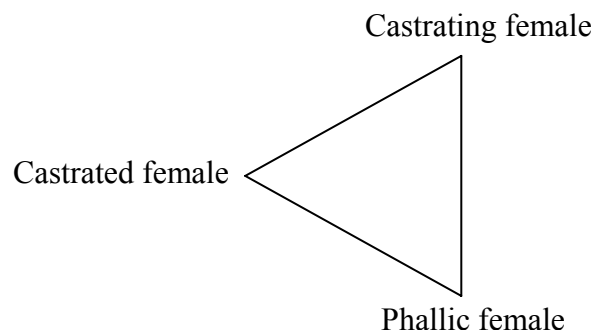
In her influential study *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Barbara Creed, as I've already mentioned, re-reads Freud's castrated female through her repressed double, the castrating *femme* (*femme castratrice*). Creed aligns the *femme castratrice* with the mythological Sirens¹ and differentiates them from the phallic female, saying that the latter "represents a comforting phantasy of sexual sameness", whereas her monstrous sisters "a terrifying phantasy of sexual difference" (158). Reading the classic *femme fatale* as a phallic female, Creed sets her apart from the *femme castratrice*, explaining that it is not the phallus that threatens with castration but the mythical *vagina dentata* (157). However, Creed doesn't consider the case when the prosthetic phallus is employed as a veil to hide underneath it the *femme's* *vagina dentata*. This is the case of the erotic thriller *femme fatale*, who in being both phallic and potentially castrating tempts her male victim with her alluring fetishised body, made up as the perfect phallus, while castration always hovers in the background.

Her sexy lingerie, stockings and garters, tight clothes, low cleavage, jewellery, and tattoos, all function as marks that pronounce the body as erectile, protruding around the mark that allows its reception as a fetish (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* 102). Strip tease (either conscious, such as Laure's in *Femme Fatale*, or not, such as when the male anti-hero spies on the *femme fatale* getting undressed) also marks the *fatale* body as phallic since "[e]ven if the body is not structuralised by some mark [. . .], even if it is not fragmented, the bar is always there as the clothes come off, signaling the emergence of the body as phallus" (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* 102). The *femme fatale's* make-up, her

¹ On the other hand, Sharon Russell aligns the siren and the vampire with the *femme fatale* in their Romantic allusion to mystery but not threat (115).

conventionally red lips and painted eyes, also work towards transforming her body into an artifice of closure. As Baudrillard puts it, “The painted mouth, objectified like a jewel, derives its intense erotic value not, as one might imagine, from accentuating its role as an erotogenic orifice, but conversely from its closure – paint being as it were the trace of the phallic” (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* 103). The same goes for her eyes, which under the make-up drop their threatening gazing potential (looking at what they must never see), turning into what Baudrillard calls “Medusa’s eyes”, eyes that “revel in their own fascination, [. . .] their seduction deriv[ing] from this perverse onanism” (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* 103). However, in the same way that the fetish is always marked by the threat it allays, the *femme fatale*’s body always already incorporates the threat it strives to fend off.

Freud claims that the little boy’s view of the little girl’s genitals (the image of the castrated female) arouses in him the fear of castration, which leads to the dissolution of the Oedipus complex (“Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex” 317-18). However, at the same time, he underlines the role of women in solidifying this fear through their verbal threats (316-17). Therefore, the image of the female is constituted in a tripartite relation: the unpleasant realization of the castrated status of woman counteracts with her threat as potentially castrating and the boy’s desired image of the phallic female, leading to a triangular structure that informs all male fantasies of femaleness.



The *femme fatale*’s ambivalent shift between her phallic image and castrating potential seduces her victims, who are drawn to her like moths to the light, dazzled by the brightness

that blinds them to the underlying dangers. It is her fluidity, her transformative power that casts the *femme fatale* as part of the erotic thriller fantasy-machine as well as the machine's basic object of desire. Once she drops her ambivalence, she loses the veil of fatality that turns her into a sublime object and becomes a threatening castrated figure. Distinguishing between the monstrosity of castrated and castrating *femmes*, Creed, as we've already seen in the second chapter, claims that the latter (incarnated by the female psychotic and the rape-revenge heroine)² usually elude punishment, whereas castrated *femmes* are always punished. But since the castrated females also turn castrating and vengeful like the rape-revenge heroines, what is it that differentiates them from Creed's *femmes castratrices*?

Before I proceed to answer the question, let me summon up Creed's distinction between a character like Alex Forrest in *Fatal Attraction* and Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct* by employing respectively the terms I have already deployed in the second chapter: psychotic *femme* and psycho *femme fatale*. It is not the psychotic *femme*'s castrated nature that makes her threatening, as the rape revenge-heroine is also brutally castrated on screen, and both of them turn castrating because of their violent and unjust castration, but it is only the psychotic *femme* who is always punished with death. By contrast, the psycho *femmes fatales*, who like the rape-revenge heroines get away with murder, kill for fun, money, to see whether they can get away with it, or for no reason at all (both Roxy and Hazel in *Basic Instinct* claim to have murdered on impulse). The main difference between a psychotic *femme* and a psycho *femme fatale* lies not in motivation or action but method. The psychotic *femme* is threatening because she drops all her female ambivalence and declares her castrating nature. Alex in *Fatal Attraction* doesn't try to manipulate Dan (sexually or in any other way), she doesn't try to seduce him or reach a compromise of some kind; she demands, threatens

² To these I would also add the action-heroine

and attacks. The same goes for Peyton (Rebecca De Mornay), “the Nanny From Hell”,³ in *The Hand That Rocks The Cradle* (Curtis Hansen, 1992). Peyton is established as a vengeful monster, who will stop at nothing to get what she wants, that is Claire’s (played by Annabella Sciorra) family. Although she does try to seduce Claire’s husband and prove Claire an unfit mother, she is never an ambivalent figure, her monstrosity protruding at every instance. By contrast, the psycho *femme fatale* is always ambivalent, shifting between the Freudian categories of the homely (*heimlich*) and threatening (*unheimlich*),⁴ her seductive powers lying in her very instability and non-definability. While she dares the erotic thriller anti-hero with her castrating powers, she veils them all the time under the phallic cover of her fetishised sexual body. This is the game that Catherine and Nick play throughout *Basic Instinct*; Catherine flaunts her alluring body as the veil through which Nick looks at her potentially castrating sexual performance. This is the way in which the rape-revenge heroine, as well, evades becoming a threatening figure; she fetishizes herself before the act of castration. Discussing *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978), Creed observes that the scenes of revenge are eroticized as the victim-of-rape lures her violators with the promise of sex and castrates them during the act (128-29).⁵ Through the eroticization of death, a veil of pleasure is cast over the threat of castration and “the *femme castratrice* becomes an ambiguous figure. She arouses a fear of castration and death while simultaneously playing on a masochistic desire for death, pleasure and oblivion” (Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine* 130). It is this ambivalence that shields her from becoming too threatening for her own good and, thus, she escapes the doom of the psychotic *femme*.

Delineating the possibilities of fatality in the erotic thriller universe through a juxtaposition between the *femme* and *homme fatal(e)* both in a hetero-/bi-sexual and homosexual terrain through a discussion of *Basic Instinct* versus *Bodily Harm* and *Cruising*

³ The term belongs to reviewer Joy Andrews qtd. in Jermyn 252.

⁴ See Freud’s “The ‘Uncanny’” 339-76.

⁵ On the subject of eroticisation of the female avenger in the rape-revenge film see Jacinda Read 35-41.

versus *Bound*, I will attempt to prove the *femme fatale* as the staple of the erotic thriller fantasy, justifying thus her popularity over any other *fatal(e)* figure.

I will begin my exploration of the *fatal(e)* dynamics from the hetero-/bi-sexual terrain, focusing mainly on Sharon Stone's Catherine Tramell from *Basic Instinct* and Daniel Baldwin's Sam Mackeen from *Bodily Harm*.⁶ Catherine embodies the *femme fatale par excellence* and Sam is her closest equivalent, as *Bodily Harm* follows in reverse the basic plotline of *Basic Instinct*. Any differences between the two characters (and thus between the fantasies they activate) stem from the *femme / homme fatal(e)* make-up.

9.2. Bodily Instincts and Basic Harms: *Femmes vs Hommes Fatal(e)s*

Sexual ambiguity is an important feature of the *femme fatale* as long as phallic *jouissance* and thus heterosexual spectacle remain part of the sexual scene. If she is heterosexual like Matty in *Body Heat*, she is insatiable, feeding the male fantasy of "fucking her partner to death" (verbalized by her lover, Ned, as fantasy and her husband, Edmund, as fear). She is into S&M, suggesting "perversion [as] a way of relating to the opposite sex" (Miller, "On Perversion" 314) like Rebecca in *Body of Evidence*. She leads a double life like the sexually repressed Trina (Linda Fiorentino) in *Jade*, who turns into the uninhibited, and thus *fatale*, prostitute, Jade, materializing the Otherness that women see in their mirror.⁷ She deprives the act of emotion, gives sex a transactional value and even stages her own rape to promote her financial schemes like Bridget (Linda Fiorentino) in *The Last Seduction*. Or, like Catherine in *Basic Instinct*, she is bisexual, offering both perversion and excess as part of the sexual fantasy she activates for the male hero.

⁶ Although I'm limiting my exploration to Hollywood erotic thrillers, I'm including *Bodily Harm* a DTV genre representative as it offers the best example of a paradigmatic *homme fatal* I could find.

⁷ According to Jacques-Alain Miller, "It is because Woman is Otherness as such or the Other that she spends so much time in front of the mirror – just to recognize herself, or perhaps to recognize herself as Other" ("On Perversion" 319).

Catherine's bisexuality, as I've already argued in relation to Cristal in *Showgirls*, does not aim at an exploration of Catherine's non phallic *jouissance* but is rather there to signify sexual plenitude that ultimately transforms into the fantasy from which the sex act between Catherine and Nick feeds. It is no accident that we never see Catherine in action with any of her women. We only see her sexually caress and kiss Roxy in the presence of Nick, using Roxy, according to Linda Ruth Williams, "to appear more alluring to him" ("Erotic Thrillers and Rude Women" 14).⁸ Having drawn Nick to Catherine, Roxy is only allowed to watch (along with the spectators) unobserved from the bathroom, while Catherine and Nick indulge in what he calls "the fuck of the century". Roxy's lesbianism is therefore only necessary "to signify Catherine's bisexuality" (Hart 128), adding to the latter's depiction as a sexually voracious female with strong sexual appetites who dares Nick into sexual (deadly) plenitude. Once that necessity is fulfilled, Roxy poses a threat to the heterosexual fantasy of Nick and Catherine's unity, transforming into Nick's opponent. After his first sexual encounter with Catherine Nick goes to the bathroom and discovers Roxy watching them. The verbal exchange between them underlines their antagonism over Catherine:

Roxy: If you don't leave her alone I'll kill you.

Nick: Let me ask you something Rocky, man to man. I think she is the fuck of the century. What do you think?

In masculinizing her name, Nick underlines her reception as male by the system of heterosexual desire. Thus, from Catherine's double (a point to be discussed) Roxy turns into Nick's double⁹ whom he has to get rid of if he wants to "get the girl". So, two scenes later, Roxy is killed as she tries to run over Nick with Catherine's car.

⁸ Chris Holmlund also points out that Catherine's lesbianism is "played out for Nick's staunchly heterosexual gaze" ("Cruisin' For a Bruisin': Hollywood's Deadly (Lesbian) Dolls" 38).

⁹ According to Lynda Hart, "if the 'normal' woman was man's opposite, the invert as the opposite of the normal woman became man's double" (8). In the film this doubling is visually signified when Nick washing his face in the bathroom looks up in the mirror to see Roxy's reflection.

Sexual plenitude is also signified through Catherine's heterosexual activities. The language she uses to describe her relation to the deceased, Johnny Boz (Bill Cable), is overtly sexual. Her answer to Nick's "How long were you dating him?" is "I wasn't dating him, I was fucking him". Divesting sex of any emotion and reducing it to a bodily function that offers pleasure, Catherine translates male partnership into sexual activity. When Nick and Gus (in their capacity as the San Francisco police department investigating officers) first question her regarding her whereabouts on the night of Johnny's murder and Nick, seeking proof of her assertion that she spent the night alone, asks her, "Was there anyone with you last night?", Catherine coolly answers "No, I wasn't in the mood last night". Later, in the interrogation scene, when asked about the nature of her relationship to Johnny Boz, Catherine answers: "I had sex with him for about a year and a half. I liked having sex with him. He wasn't afraid of experimenting. I like men like that, men who give me pleasure. He gave me a lot of pleasure". Catherine reduces Johnny to an object she employs at will for pleasure, her "designated fuck".¹⁰ Outside his function Johnny Boz is non-existent for Catherine. So, when Nick as part of the police routine tells her, "Let me ask you something Ms Tramell. Are you sorry he is dead?" she answers, "Yeah, I liked fucking him". Employing this kind of sexual language, Catherine incessantly restages the sexual act for her listeners, activating for them the fantasy of orgasmic plenitude at every possible occasion. As Kate Stables points out, "speech about sex becomes another form of sexual performance" for the *femme fatale* (177).

Actually it's all about sex where the *femme fatale* is concerned. We learn that Catherine's "research" for her novel *Love Hurts* was the reason she went to Johnny's club, "picked him up and had sex with him". Although Bridget (*The Last Seduction*) is presented as a successful career woman, Yvonne Tasker is right to note that we never see her working; rather "[t]he sort of work we do see her doing is perverse" (*Working Girls* 131). She uses sex

¹⁰ This is the phrase Bridget uses to answer Mike's question regarding the status of their relationship in *The Last Seduction*: Mike: "Where do I fit in?" Bridget: "Oh, you're my designated fuck".

and murder interchangeably to get away with the money she's stolen from her husband. The same goes for Rebecca in *Body of Evidence*, who, although introduced as a gallery owner, by the film's end boldly propounds that "fucking" is what she does. So, the *femme fatale* is a carrier of sex, infecting the Symbolic with the Reality of the act that must always remain veiled, (mis)-perceived as something else. After titillating her male interrogators aurally with all the details of the sex she performed with Johnny, Catherine offers them a glimpse of the act by slowly uncrossing her legs and revealing her bare pudendum, while addressing Nick with the lines: "Have you ever fucked on cocaine, Nick? It's nice". Turning the act visible, Catherine disturbs the signifying work of her interrogators by thrusting on them the Thing they are seeking for. "[S]ignal[ling] nothing but sex" (Stables 179), the *femme fatale* becomes *it*, offering at all times and in many different guises the act which, as I have already established in chapter six, activates the prototypical fantasy of unity of the two in One (a point to be illustrated through filmic examples in the last chapter of the thesis).

Catherine's flaunting of her sexuality, sexual desire, and performance, disrupts Symbolic coherence and marks her as the incarnation of the disruptive Real she reveals. Breaking through the conventional link of sex with emotion (in romance) or money (in prostitution), Catherine extricates it from the Symbolic chain of mediation and recognises it as a signifier that bears no signified and is exchanged for no other signifier, a Thing in itself. Gus, on the other hand, abiding by the Symbolic meaning of sex, answers Catherine's claim that she wasn't dating Johnny but fucking him by posing the second of the Symbolic relations in which the sexual act is sealed: "What are you, a pro?" he asks her, to which she playfully answers "No, I'm an amateur". It is sex as the sublime horrific Thing that *Basic Instinct* as artefact and Catherine as its cornerstone constantly turn into a fantasy of *das Ding*, an *objet*

a.¹¹ So the Real threat that Catherine as the *femme fatale* signifies is always already transformed into a fantasy and that is how it becomes more pleasurable than threatening.

Doubleness is the veil through which transgression is transformed into its fantasy throughout the film. First of all, Catherine's books double the Real murderous acts that hover in the background, as their fictionalised versions become part of the Symbolic through language. Written years after her parents' accident at sea, Catherine's first book, called *First Time*, tells the story of a boy who planned his parents' plane crash and made it look like an accident. Her second novel, *Love Hurts*, written after one of Catherine's college professors was mysteriously ice-picked to death, was re-staged as Johnny Boz's murder. Turning the murderous acts into language, Catherine ensures the survival of Reality through the veil of fiction, transforming the threat into its fantasy. Thus, her "need for punishment [as] an instinctual manifestation on the part of the ego, which has become masochistic under the influence of a sadistic super-ego" (Freud, "Civilization and its Discontents" 329-30) is satisfied at the same time that the confessed material is individualized and cut off from its source, leaving her blameless. "I'd have to be pretty stupid to write a book about killing and then kill somebody the way I describe it in my book. I'd be announcing myself as the killer. I'm not stupid", she tells her interrogators. On the contrary, as Beth cries out to Nick later on, "She's evil. She's brilliant".

Catherine herself is doubled first by Roxy and then, after the latter's death, by Hazel. It is not accidental that after Johnny's murder we (along with Nick and Gus) misrecognise Roxy for Catherine when we first meet her. Roxy's physical appearance¹² and witty coolness clearly introduce the territory that Catherine will command.

Gus: When was the last time you saw Johnny Boz?

¹¹ As Adrian Johnston reminds us, "the Real thing framed or screened by fantasy is objet petit a; *das Ding*, behind the veil of fantasies, is the traumatic, extimate 'thing'" (n. pag.).

¹² As Lynda Hart points out, Catherine, Roxy, and Hazel are all stereotypical upper-class white women, with similar build and long blond hair (129). Also, in her introduction scene Roxy does her hair in the same way that Catherine does for her interrogation scene.

Roxy: Is he dead?

Gus: Why do you think he's dead?

Roxy: Well, you wouldn't be here otherwise, would you?

Through her lesbianism Roxy represents Catherine's Real part. She lacks any Symbolic existence outside her relation with Catherine and after her death her murderous Real part is fully revealed in the photos that Nick sees of her two murdered brothers. Taking up the paternal phallus as her own (symbolised by her father's razor), Roxy dispatched with it her male adversaries. That is why Roxy as Catherine's Real part has to be destroyed so that Catherine can engage in phallic *jouissance* through her relation with Nick. But then, when Catherine terminates the affair, Hazel, as Roxy's replacement, is present to signify Catherine's Reality. Having taken up the Symbolic phallus (signified by the knife she got as a wedding gift), Hazel eradicated her Symbolic existence as wife and mother by killing her husband and kids and embraced the Real part in her.¹³ Once Catherine finishes her new book, *Shooter*, which embodies the Reality that underlies the Symbolic relation between herself and Nick, retrieved through fantasy, she enforces that fantasy on Symbolic reality by announcing to Nick the end of her book and the death of the book's detective as synonymous with the end of their affair.

Nick: I finished my research.

Catherine: I finished my book.

Nick: Yeah, so how does it end?

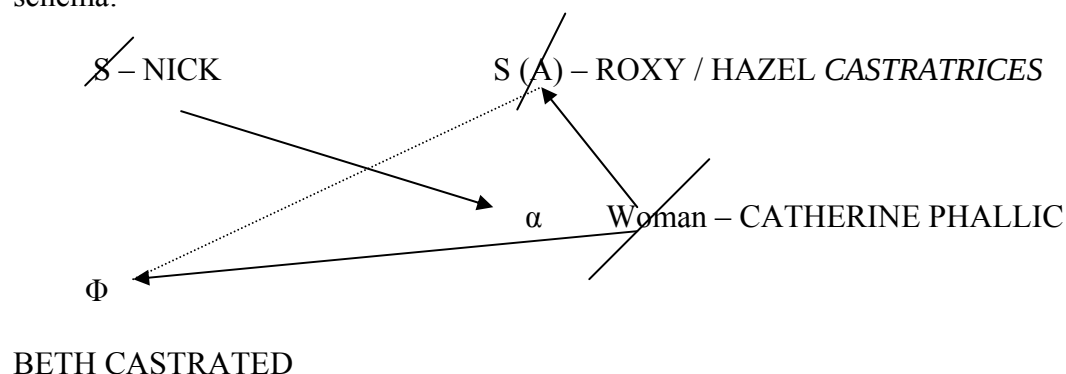
Catherine: I told you, she kills him. Goodbye Nick.

Nick: Goodbye?

Catherine: Yeah, I finished my book. Didn't you hear me? Your character's dead. Goodbye.

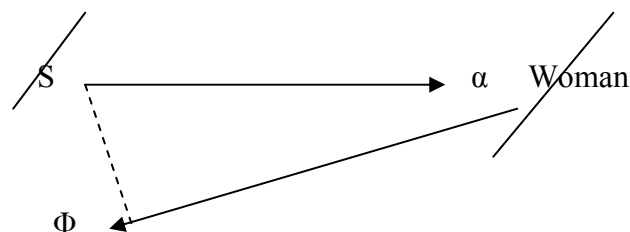
¹³ Hazel's Real part is accommodated in the Symbolic and compulsively repeated through television. Catherine tells Nick that Hazel never misses "America's Most Wanted".

What makes Catherine the ultimate *femme fatale* is the fact that she lacks solidity as a character. She is the flow she claims to go with, the core of the film's narrative world. All the female characters lead back to her and she only takes shape through the accumulation of their shadows that she links in vampirical interrelation. So, if Roxy serves in the film to signify Catherine's Reality, which is then fetishised, as Roxy becomes *it*, allowing Catherine to pose as the perfect phallus for Nick; and if Hazel's presence re-replaces Catherine in the realm of the horrific Real, as potential *femme castratrice*; then who signifies the phallic part that Catherine partly takes up? The answer is Beth. Obscuring her ambivalent past involvement with Catherine through a physical transformation (she turns brunette) and change of name (from Liz Hoberman she becomes Beth Garner), Beth sacrifices Real *jouissance* for her place in the Symbolic. Attempting to *be the phallus* for Nick, both in bed and in the police force, Beth fails in both sectors. Accused of frigidity by Nick and replaced by male colleagues in her evaluation of Nick's ability to perform police work, Beth is revealed as castrated. Through Beth as her castrated part – who, according to Creed's line of argument of castrated women, is savagely dispatched by the film's end – and Roxy and Hazel as her Real embodiments, Catherine can assume in the male fantasy the Imaginary position of the homely phallic female, while at the same time shifting between the two threatening-to-the-male fantasy positions. Joining Lacan's table of subject positions with the triangular schema of the male fantasy of femaleness that I presented earlier in this chapter, we end up with the following schema:



Catherine, materializing Lacan's diction of Womanhood, doesn't exist. Hovering between her castrating and castrated parts, realized in the film through her doubles, Catherine can be both and neither at the same time. Suspected but never proved as castrator in the film's Symbolic reality (for the crime of Johnny Boz), and offering glimpses of her castration (such as when she reveals her vulnerability to Nick after Roxy's death asking him to make love to her), Catherine clearly poses as the perfect phallus which she can either give Nick to possess or castrate him with. In being phallic she is the fantasy of femaleness in the patriarchal Symbolic. This point will be further explored in the next chapter in terms of the dynamics of the relationship between Catherine and Nick and the fantasies they generate.

Let's now turn to *Bodily Harm* and examine Sam MacKeon as a paradigmatic *homme fatal*. Unlike the *femme fatale*, Sam must always partly belong to the Symbolic. Where the *femme fatale* is doubled between the Reality she accedes to and the Phallus she signifies for some male barred subject, the *homme fatal* is doubled between himself as barred subject and the *objet a* through which he becomes the absolute Phallus. That is, he sets off from his Symbolic place, passes over to the Real and recaptures his phallic unity without the mediation of any female. He materializes the fantasy of wholeness narcissistically, restoring his ideal-ego that the mirror image first established. In this sense, the *homme fatal* materializes the phallic triangle of the Lacanian table of subject positions, which we have already examined in chapter six when we explored the relations that the two subject positions enter.



Being totally self-sufficient in his activation of the fantasy of wholeness, Sam as the paradigmatic *homme fatal* needs no female to perform his *fatal* function, so the sexual part of

the narrative is superfluous. That is why in *Bodily Harm* the crime that triggers the film's whodunit plot isn't sexually related.¹⁴ Unlike *Basic Instinct*, where the crime takes place during the act of sex, in *Bodily Harm* we see a young stripper multiply stabbed in the parking lot of a club by an unidentified figure. Sam is named the main suspect due to his past sexual relation with the victim but nothing in the murder scene points at him. The same pattern is repeated in most cases where an *homme fatal* is involved. In *Sliver*, the crime involves a woman thrown off her apartment balcony by a supposedly male figure. In *A Kiss Before Dying*, the Matt Dillon *homme fatal* throws his sweetheart off the top of a building; in *Guilty as Sin* the Don Johnson *homme fatal* is accused of throwing his wife out of the window, while similarly in *Killing Me Softly* Joseph Fiennes as Adam is suspected by his wife of having arranged his fiancée's fall off a cliff. The only sexually marked crime on the mainstream erotic thriller scene performed by an *homme fatal* takes place, as we've already seen in chapter two, in an older Joe Eszterhas script. In *Jagged Edge*, Jeff Bridges murders his rich wife and makes it look like a sexual assault by some psycho-sadistic murderer. However, the murder doesn't take place during sex. It can never happen during sex. Taking himself the woman's role as phallus and thus turning into the full phallic subject of infancy, the *homme fatal* can only stage the murder as sex but can never actually murder during sex as that would lead to the disintegration of his Imaginary Phallus. Killing the part he has introjected during the act *par excellence* of unity of the two in One would signify his repositioning as a barred Symbolic subject who could only reach Imaginary unity through women.

So, an *homme fatal* is split between the a-sexuality of his phallic wholeness and the excessive repetition of the Symbolic act that signifies this wholeness according to the directives of the heterosexual fantasy-frame. That is why bisexuality is totally out of the question as it would undermine his phallic potency and turn him into a threatening figure.

¹⁴ As Rita Cates (Linda Fiorentino), the female detective in the film, announces to her male colleagues regarding the opening murder, "No sign that the crime was sexually related".

Bisexuality would push the *homme fatal* to the Other triangle formulated in the subject positions table. Outside the phallic economy of unity, the *homme fatal* – as we'll see in relation to *Cruising* – becomes an abject figure immediately expelled by the popular fantasy. So, the paradigmatic erotic thriller *homme fatal* is usually a womaniser like Sam in *Bodily Harm* and David in *Guilty as Sin* or a voyeur like Zeke in *Sliver*, who enjoys sex narcissistically by watching himself doing it on video. The a-sexual version of the *homme fatal* would still be threatening, since, as already established, the sexual act is the staple of the erotic thriller fantasy. In the heterosexual Symbolic economy of the erotic thriller an a-sexual male would translate into an impotent man closer to Symbolic castration than Imaginary wholeness. In this sense, the sexually impotent Tom Berenger character in *Sliver* doesn't qualify as an *homme fatal* and that's of course the reason why the film flirts with the voyeuristic Baldwin character for the part of the film's *homme fatal* and only names Berenger as one in the end, when an abject figure is needed to be aborted as the murderer.

To get back to Sam, he is presented as a womaniser, who, in the words of one of his girlfriends, "likes to fuck with your head". As Sam's alleged old girlfriend explains to the police detectives, "He [Sam]'d have some other girl's picture out right where you could see it just as he was telling you that you're the only one". As opposed to Catherine, Sam's sexual excess must always fall within the heterosexual libidinal economy. His Reality can only be marked by female sexual excess, signified by his preference for strippers, which at the same time reinforces his phallic image. His shift from the realm of the Symbolic to the Real that fatality demands is as far as an *homme fatal* can go without becoming threatening. That is why Sam as a prototypical *homme fatal* only strays from the Symbolic but never really breaks from it; his past identity as a cop that hovers in the background of the film's investigation signifies his strong affinities to the Symbolic. He never fully inhabits the Real, the way the *femme fatale* does. Sam is split between his Symbolic self that he transgresses and his Real

part that he enjoys but then rejects and retrieves through his own phallic ideal-ego. This split is reflected in Sam's choice of women. As the police psychologist says about him, "Basically he prefers women that society would classify as bad [. . .] But that's not all. Even though he prefers these women he feels guilt over it so he pursues redemption which he finds in women he perceives are more pure, like a nurse or a teacher".

Sam's ambivalence, like any other *homme fatal*'s, is only criminal. Being an ex-cop he would know exactly how to make the murder seem like an act of a crazed fanatic or a set-up by one of his enemies. His past as a cop is as obscure as his present guilt. We learn that he quit the force in the middle of an investigation that kept pointing at him and came into a chain of strip-clubs without anyone ever finding out what happened. We also learn that in the past he got away with the murder of his girlfriend claiming that it was an accident. His obvious alibi that as an ex-cop he must have been stupid to kill two women with whom he was related in the exact same way could also be part of his plan to get away with murder. It's the same rationale we saw in *Basic Instinct* with Catherine and her book. However, in *Basic Instinct* Catherine's criminal ambiguity is transferred to the sexual scene, marking the sexual act between herself and Nick as doubly transgressive. Violating the rules of the Symbolic world by sleeping with his suspect, Nick risks not only his Symbolic castration but also his Real one, as Catherine could at any point murder him. This is never the case in *Bodily Harm*. Although her partner J.D. (Gregg Henry) warns Rita (Linda Fiorentino) that she risks her life by sleeping with a potential murderer, her sexual encounters with Sam have nothing threatening about them. Sex between Sam and Rita follows the directives of the romantic representation of sex and the act is never revealed as transgressive, since, as I have already established, that would undermine Sam's *homme fatal* persona.

Sam and Rita's union can only depict Symbolic fragmentation but never a Real one. Their past affair, when Sam was still in the force and Rita was married to a fellow cop, was

fuelled by its transgressive nature. As Rita tells her therapist, “When I was cheating on Michael and Sam and I would have sex in unconventional places, I don’t know, it seemed like the riskier it was the more turned on I got. Especially when people started finding out about it. I knew it was bad. That’s what made it so good”. Once the fragmentation became Real as the cuckolded husband shot himself in front of them, the affair ended. When Sam and Rita meet again, she is the investigating officer in the murder case against him so she is the representative of the Symbolic he aims at transgressing. As they get together sexually for the first time after two years and Rita tells him “we shouldn’t do this”, he gives her their familiar line: “that’s why it’s gonna be so good”. And once more, when the investigation is over and Sam is absolved from all the charges against him, their relationship ends.

Compared to Catherine, Sam is obviously less *fatal* as his range of shifting is always already bound by the exigencies of the Symbolic. The directives of the heterosexual male fantasy and the phallic economy of unity through the act of sex demand that he possesses the phallus at all times. Transgression and ambiguity, which are part of the *fatal* profile, can be safely staged as long as they do not violate the *homme fatal*’s phallic status. Along these lines, the revealed murder weapon in the glove box of Sam’s car at the film’s end is celebrated as the ultimate proof of Sam’s criminality-fatality. In a misidentification between the murder weapon, the penis, and the phallus, Sam is gloriously revealed to *have it*. The daylight, the music score and the openness of the car flaunt the film’s revealing final close-up, making it far from threatening.

Let’s move now to examine the constitution of fatality in the realm of homosexuality through an analysis of *Cruising* and *Bound*. *Cruising*, as I’ve already pointed out, is the only mainstream erotic thriller which employs a male *homo fatal*, while *Bound* is the latest and most successful (in terms of box-office and critical reception) example of a theatrically released erotic thriller to present a lesbian *femme fatale*. Through the analysis of the

differences between the two *fatal(e)s* figures and the fantasies they generate, I will attempt to justify the failure of the former and the success of the latter.

9.3. Boundless Cruising: *Homo Fatal(e)s*

Tom Ryan begins his critique of *Cruising* by pointing out that “[f]ew films in recent years have been accompanied by the level of anger that has attached itself to *Cruising*” (322). Anger and resentment are definitely part of the “gut level reaction” that the film’s director, William Friedkin, has claimed to be interested in inspiring through his films,¹⁵ unfortunately not the right emotions to make the film popular with audiences. Unveiling the dark carnal fringe world of S&M at a time when the gay movement had just begun its struggle against gay discrimination, *Cruising* was picketed by gay activists like no other film in the history of cinema up to that time. Gay journalists led by Arthur Bell, the *Village Voice* reporter on whose articles Friedkin based the plot of *Cruising*, attacked the film and protesters disrupted filming (Friedkin qtd. in Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 135-36). However, the film didn’t prove problematic only for the gay world regarding its depiction of homosexuality; as Mark Kermode underlines, *Cruising* “excited the most extreme reactions from its audiences” (22). My contention is that *Cruising* proved threatening to audiences because it attacked the Imaginary stability of Symbolic heterosexuality and revealed the Reality that women normally veil by signifying the phallus for their male partners. The film’s focus on a *hom(m)o fatal* taking the subject position conventionally assigned to the female sex, reveals the gap that the female participation in phallic *jouissance* keeps veiled from sight.

Based on the real murders of homosexuals around the time of its filming, *Cruising* presented Al Pacino as Steve, the heterosexual cop who goes undercover in order to attract,

¹⁵ According to Friedkin’s claims, “The major reasons to make a film are to move people emotionally, to move them to laughter, tears or to fear . . . I’m not interested in an interesting movie. I am interested in gut level reaction” (qtd. in T. Ryan 322).

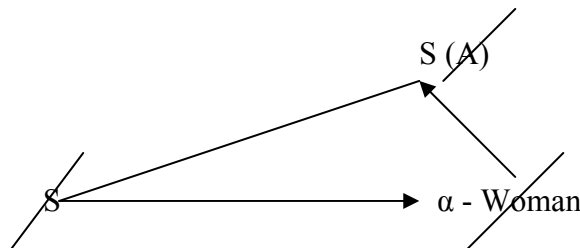
according to the police Captain's orders, the serial murderer of gay men. Not knowing whom he should be attracting, Steve cruises the S&M bars bewildered by the sexual action he witnesses. Although Friedkin, in his interview with Linda Ruth Williams, claimed that the underground S&M world of gay bars was only "an exotic background", placed around the murder-mystery of the film's plot (*The Erotic Thriller* 135), it's not as simple as that. Pointing at no one as a probable suspect until much later, *Cruising* offers all the participants in the bars as possible *hom(m)os fatals* surrounding Steve with an excess of threatening aggressive sexuality. Describing the spectacle in the bars, Hayles and Rindskopf write: "Jock-strapped muscular men dance together, packed tight in a swelter whose rankness you can almost smell; sweat, sperm, and vaseline mingling with the ubiquitous black leather" (2). The excess of homosexual activity and the direct exposition of the act stripped from any mediating veil makes the spectacle threatening. "Eyes stare at faces and genitals, sizing up the prospects, accepting or rejecting with minimal preliminaries. A phrase or two and the bargain is struck" (Hayles and Rindskopf 2), leading the party involved to some dark corner or hotel room for the consummation of the deal.

Obscuring the film's *hom(m)o fatal* and rather offering all cruisers as potential murderers, *Cruising* infects the homosexual act with death, as any of the couplings formulated in the bars could lead to death. Informed by the threat of AIDS, which at the beginning of the '80s was on its rise, it is homosexual desire that is recognised as the film's fatal force. As the victims double one another in physical appearance, which is the reason why Steve was chosen for this assignment in the first place, they are finally doubled by the murderer, the film's *hom(m)o fatal*. As Jack Foley observes, in *Cruising* "twins proliferate", making it almost impossible at certain points to tell the victim from the murderer (16). The lack of fixed differences between the killer and his victims results in a proliferation of the *fatal* ego, dispersed onto the entire heavy leather scene.

The threat that the homosexual act poses to the heterosexual erotic thriller fantasy-frame is rendered through Friedkin's suppression of the actual act in the darkness of cuts where the act was supposed to appear. Obscuring the act, Friedkin offers blackness in its place, fetishised in the film in the blackness of the leather attire gay cruisers wear. Meanwhile, in the place of Imaginary castration we are offered images of Real castration as the victims are penetrated with the murderer's knife. These images are very disturbing because they function in a double way: as the staging of deadly fragmentation and the re-staging of the veiled Imaginary castration. The insertion in the extended shot of the first murder of subliminal shots of anal penetration highlights the blending of the two. These shots are, as Jeff Dawson contends, "lightning-quick images" which, although not seen by the spectators, are registered on the human brain, affecting people on an unconscious level by implanting suggestions on their brain (13). Although inserted during the film's editing, the frames of anal penetration intercutting with the shots of the body being impaled by the murderer's knife reflect Friedkin's belief that sex and violence are interconnected (qtd. in Kermode 24) and pick up on the psychoanalytic relation between *Eros* and *Thanatos* (to be presented in the following chapter), turning the murder scene into an abjective spectacle not as much for what is seen but for what isn't.

The *hom(m)o fatal* that the film finally offers is only a veil for the film's Real *fatal* figure which is male bisexuality. What was most disturbing about *Cruising* was its presentation of the S&M gay scene as always already part of the Symbolic, mainly signified in the links that the film draws between the police and the S&M world (T. Ryan 323; A. Martin 324, 392). Let's see in psychoanalytic terms what the threat that homosexuality poses to the Symbolic fantasy-frame is. As opposed to the *homme fatal*, the *hom(m)o fatal* takes up the female subject position fully, engulfing Real wholeness. Pushed outside the phallic economy of desire, the *hom(m)o fatal* signifies for the barred subject the fragmentation that

the phallic economy obscures behind the veil of the Phallus. Along these terms, the *hom(m)o fatal* reveals what *femmes fatales* cloak by participating in phallic *jouissance*. Turning into the perfect Phallus outside the phallic economy of desire, the *hom(m)o fatal* becomes threatening as a potentially castrating figure especially once bisexual practice inserts him back into the Symbolic. So, on the one hand I agree with Adrian Martin's claim that "[t]he whole 'leather set' scene is based on a glorification of phallic power" (324) functioning as a fetish, but the moment Steve penetrates the "forbidden scene" and is gradually sucked into it, the fetish transforms into the Thing which threatens the subject with Symbolic death. Pushed into the Real part of the triangle formulated between the two subject positions, the *hom(m)o fatal* turns into the phallic primal father who comes back from his Real tomb to castrate/devour the disobedient sons himself.¹⁶



It is not accidental that the film's murderer is depicted as obsessed with his dead father who orders him to kill. In an ambiguous scene between the killer and his father, which could be a memory or mere hallucination on the part of the son, we are shown the father telling the son: "You know what to do". And so the son kills anyone that arouses the Real Phallus; as he dispatches his victims he tells them "you made me do this". Murdering the Thing again and again in the person of his victims, the murderer tries to re-establish his relation with the Symbolic through castration.

¹⁶ On the subject of the murder of the primal father and the totem meal see Freud's *Totem and Taboo* 140-46.

The film's ultimate sin in the game of the terror played against the heterosexual fantasy-frame, which turned it into "the most hated movie of the decade" (Hayles and Rindskopf 2), is the flip side of the seduction game that pleasurable erotic thrillers play. The difference between *Basic Instinct* and *Cruising* in their use of the *fatal(e)* figure is that in *Basic Instinct* Catherine's ambiguity serves to titillate Nick. Transgression flirts with threatening Reality but always finally reinforces the ego's Imaginary sense of unity through the phallic union of the sexual act. In *Cruising*, Real fragmentation thrives as Steve is the new *bi-fatal* who allegedly has only just murdered/castrated his first victim.¹⁷ In the film's final shot any safety lines are withdrawn exposing ~~Spectators~~ to Real fragmentation as Nancy, Steve's girlfriend, who in the film has served as a signifier of Steve's heterosexuality (Pennington 3), tries on the phallus. As she puts on the leather attire in the living room and Steve contemplates himself as the ultimate Phallus in the bathroom mirror, a long shot catching a glimpse of a dark figure in S&M attire from behind, similar to the one which established the murdering *hom(m)o fatal* in the film's beginning, reveals an-Other potential *hom(m)o fatal* slipping inside the subterranean gay bar frontier. The reflections of a proliferated castrating *Das Ding* that infest the scene of *Cruising* turn the film into the ultimate *abject*. No wonder it provoked such violent reactions on the part of its onlookers!

Turning to *Bound*, I would like to begin by stressing the film's popularity with all kinds of audiences. As Kessler points out, "Despite the negative press many lesbian so-called thrillers receive from the lesbian community, *Bound* received raves, as well as being praised by the straight/mainstream press" (14). Mingling once more sex and death through the story of two lesbian lovers outwitting the mob, *Bound* presented lesbianism as a pleasurable spectacle (as opposed to the threatening site of male homosexual action in *Cruising*). Where *Cruising* was violently rejected *Bound*, was embraced, becoming in Kessler's words "family

¹⁷ After the murderer is arrested there is another murder. Ted (Don Scardino), Steve's gay friend, is found slashed to death. Although the policeman on the murder scene says that this was probably "a lovers' quarrel" there is a strong implication in the film that Steve did it. See Hayles and Rindskopf 3-4.

fun for everyone” (13). But how does *Bound* handle its lesbian *femme fatale* and manage to successfully activate the erotic thriller fantasy-frame?

First of all, as I’ve already claimed earlier in this chapter, the lesbian *femme fatale* of the mainstream erotic thriller is the ultimate *femme fatale* in her established bi-sexuality. In *Bound* Violet (Jennifer Tilly) is depicted as the ultimate *femme*. In her tight, short, low cleavage dresses, high heels, heavy make up, deep red lipstick and long painted nails, Violet is the ultimate Baudrillardian phallus, activating the male heterosexual fantasy. Violet is the *objet a* of all the men in the film (Shelley has sex with her, Johnny and Mickey want her) and the perfect phallus that Caesar (Joe Pantoliano) misrecognises as possessing. Posing for the eyes of men in the film and then allowing them access to her body through sex, Violet manipulates the male heterosexual fantasy-frame, masquerading herself, in Joan Riviere’s meaning of the term, as the ultimate object of male desire. According to Riviere, “women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men” (35). Talking about her character, Violet, Jennifer Tilly echoes Riviere’s concept of female masquerade; “She [Violet] presents herself in a way that’s designed to make men underestimate her, and it’s sort of a disguise she uses so she can move freely through a man’s world” (qtd. in Applebaum 18). So, Violet is misrecognised as familiar (*heimlich*) by Caesar, who, failing to see her lesbian face, is outdone by her. Corky (Gina Gershon), her butch lover, also misperceives her as a heterosexual *femme fatale*. In the eyes of Corky it is the sexual act that defines one’s identity; since Violet has sex with men, according to Corky, she can never be lesbian. However, Violet invalidates the limiting lines and exploits the fantasy that the act of sex generates. Her deep knowledge of the way in which the heterosexual fantasy-frame functions allows Violet to command the fantasies she generates and thus *get away with it*. In this sense, Violet employs sex as Catherine does murder. She is a professional, her talent lying in the flow of images she stages for her men through the act of

sex. As for all the paradigmatic *femmes fatales*, sex is what Violet does. The following dialogue between Violet and Corky illustrates Violet's fatality.

Corky: You don't have sex with men?

Violet: I don't

Corky: Shit. Oh, for Christ's sake Violet. I heard you. Thin walls remember?

Violet: What you heard wasn't sex.

Corky: What the fuck was it?

Violet: Work.

Where images are deceiving, the truth lies in the language that the body speaks. Violet implores Corky: "You can't believe what you see. But you can believe what you feel", as she puts Corky's hand under her dress to let Corky feel her bodily arousal. Violet claims the Reality of her lesbian identity by revealing to Corky her mark of lesbianism; the hidden tattoo that Violet has on her breast marks her second phallus, the one she preserves for women. Violet's Reality is far from threatening, marked, as I have already discussed in relation to Catherine, as sexual plenitude, while the image of the two women engaging in sexual acts falls within the directives of male heterosexual fantasy of two women making out for the eyes of a man. As Andrew Garroni claims in his interview with Linda Ruth Williams, the reason why a lesbian sexual number is normally part of the DTV erotic thriller checklist is because "[i]t's a male fantasy" (*The Erotic Thriller* 70). As he goes on to explain, a lesbian sex scene is pleasurable because it allays male fears of a bad performance. One can simply relax and enjoy watching without any anxiety over wondering "did I satisfy the woman, did she think I was really good?" (qtd. in Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 70). Both scenes of lesbian sex between Violet and Corky offer titillating pleasure without risking any part of the phallic fantasy. For example, in the scene of their first sexual encounter the camera moves from a long to a close

shot of the women's bodies, travels on Violet's obscured by dim light body from behind and all the way to Corky's well-lit exposed naked body writhing in pleasure. Violet is veiled as her hand is revealed in a close up pleasuring Corky. Only as the camera slowly moves towards Corky's face are both women's breasts zoomed on and finally we get a close-up of Corky's face filled with orgasmic relief. Keeping Corky at the centre of the shot, the Wachowskis emphasise the *caught unawares* part of the scene, veiling sex under overtones of autoerotic pleasure.

Corky's portrayal as butch is also based on ambiguity, turning her into one more possible site of heterosexual pleasure. On the one hand, Corky is depicted as a man. Her men's clothes and underwear, the male gaze she casts at Violet, like in the elevator scene when the close-up of Violet's legs from behind is offered as Corky's point of view, her being good with her hands¹⁸ fixing things (a trait we are told she shares with Violet's father), even Caesar's initial – and Real – misrecognition of Corky for a man when he sees her from behind in his living room highlight the identification between Corky's butchness and maleness. On the other hand, in the main sex scene at Corky's place it is Corky's body that the camera lingers on, the sweat glistening on her skin and the tattoo on her pelvis transforming Corky into a phallus. Also, her passive pleasure as Violet, being the active party in the scene, penetrates Corky with her fingers while the latter has yielded totally in her arms, depicts Corky as female in bed.

If Violet is both *femme* and *femme fatale* and Corky is butch and masculine, their unity produces a whole Woman (butch and *femme*) and a whole Phallic subject (*femme fatale* and male), offering the ultimate fantasy of plenitude and narcissistic wholeness. As screenwriter and director Larry Wachowski asserted, Corky and Violet are complementary characters: "They're just reflections of each other and a part of a whole. So they're pretty much the same character, even though on the surface they seem very different" (qtd. in Lippy 93). This

¹⁸ On the importance of hands in *Bound* see Mandy Merck's "The Lesbian Hand" 124-47.

reminds me of Violet's line with which the film first opens; "I had this image of you inside of me like a part of me". Initially the phrase, heard in Violet's voice, is nonsensical revelling in its materiality, a signifier on its own, outside any possible context. Later on, the same phrase is repeated by Violet to Corky, who refutes it as false, based on the directives of the phallic economy of visibility. As Jean Noble points out, "Corky arrogantly polices the essentialized boundaries of lesbian identity [. . .] by arguing that Violet cannot be lesbian because she 'has sex' with men, and does not 'look' lesbian" (5).

Violet knows how to make herself "look" as what men desire to see. Veiling her Real part under herself as the Imaginary Phallus, Violet hides her Viole(n)t part (Noble 4) until she meets Corky. Then, she strongly proclaims to her "I want out"; but she is determined to go out full-handed. So, she asks Corky to help her outwit the Mob. Like a typical *femme fatale* Violet binds the sexual relation with crime, but unlike one, she stays true to Corky, proving to her, finally, their similarity, their being part of each other. Snatching the forbidden object (the mobsters' money), and duping the Symbolic order signified by the patriarchal mobster, Mickey (John P. Ryan), Violet gets away with it, doing what she knows best. In the words of her creators (the Wachowskis) she becomes "this piece of sexual candy" (qtd. in Applebaum 18), the ultimate fantasy of femaleness, covering her castrating powers behind her sexual body (phallus) and artful vulnerability (castration). Far from ever being threatening, Violet knows how to offer pleasurable fantasies, herself being the ultimate One.

Therefore, the *femme fatale* as the *objet a par excellence* in the erotic thriller universe, as well as her male equivalents, are successful as long as they ensure that the veil of fantasy remains intact for the spectators to view with pleasure even the most perverse of sexual spectacles. As long as fantasy attracts the gaze onto the sublime terrifying potential of the veiled horrific Thing, even the most transgressive of images satisfy the spectators' perverse desires. It is once the lens of the camera moves all too close to reveal what should always

remain unseen that true horror arises and the spectators quickly avert their eyes from the painful traumatic sight.

Turning to the final chapter, I want to describe the basic fantasies the erotic thriller offers by looking into the cornerstone-film of this thesis, *Basic Instinct*. Through an exploration of the film's heterosexual dynamics, formulated in the affair between Nick and Catherine, I want to show how the fantasy of wholeness and fragmentation is activated as part of the triangulation/coupling motif prevalent in erotic thrillers. Finally focusing on the camera as the obscured third term of the cinematic instance, I will attempt to expose its role in the veiling that constitutes the erotic thriller fantasy.

CHAPTER TEN

Basic (Instinct) Fantasies

In this chapter I want to unveil the main objects of desire that erotic thrillers offer to their audiences in the form of ready-made fantasy-frames, full of recognisable and pleasurable icons that the spectators can take up in a variety of subject positions. By exposing the sexual patterns the erotic thrillers repeat, I aim to uncloak the workings of the Cultural Imaginary as far as the icon of the sexual act is concerned. That is, I will illustrate what I have already established theoretically in chapter six, that the importance of the sexual act lies in its activation of the myth of unity of the two in One, the unified fictive reflection of the self that the human subject first caught sight of during the Mirror Stage. Restaging the primal scene as the primary sexual fantasy during which the image of castration is recognised and disavowed at the same time, the erotic thriller compulsively repeats the coupling of the fearful child (usually embodied by the male anti-hero) and the horrific mOther (the film's *femme fatale*). The paternal figure as the third term that mediates the mother-child unity is discarded in one way or another (to be analysed under the *ménage-à-trois* motif erotic thrillers employ) and the transgressive coupling feeds the fantasy of Imaginary wholeness through what Lacan has called "the comedy of heterosexuality". Doubling the human subject's fantasy-mechanism, the erotic thriller bases its power on the sexual act, which acquires a double importance. On the one hand, as we have already seen in the generic examination of the erotic thriller, it is the importance of the sexual act for the film's plotline that differentiates it from its neo-noir sibling and marks it as individual. On the other hand, the staging of the sexual act is the staple of the erotic thriller's fantasy-machine. Joining *Eros* with *Thanatos*, and the fetish as the disavowal of castration with the *objet a* in its restaging of the castration scene, the sexual act is always already doubled, satisfying the barred subject's need for stability through repetition. Lack and its eradication are incessantly restaged as fantasies, Imaginary versions of the Real

Thing that the drive keeps circumventing in the name of desire. Manipulating the fantasies that the sexual act generates, erotic thrillers play with transgression and offer pleasure in their staving off of unpleasure. *Basic Instinct* will be my expository ground in this exploration, but other films will also inform my attempt to register the basic fantasies that erotic thrillers circulate.

10.1. Transgressing the Boundaries: Unified Fragments and Fragmented Unities

Fragmentation and disintegration are basic erotic thriller fantasies. Sex always overlaps with murder (established generically in the first two chapters), either through the investigator-suspect coupling or the lovers-planning-a-murder motif. In the first case, the sex act between the *femme fatale* and the investigator as her potential victim stages the “black widow” fantasy of death-during-the-act, while in the second, murder relates to, but never merges with sex. In *Body Heat* we see the illicit lovers in bed after the act, discussing murder. In *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Bob Rafelson, 1981) we see the reverse: the two lovers having sex after having just committed murder. *Eros* is bound to *Thanatos* but their dividing lines are always clear as sex signifies the former and murder the latter.¹ As long as the death drive is kept at a visible and safe distance from the libidinal force of *Eros* that dominates the icon of the unified bodies, both fantasies are enjoyed as pleasurable. It is the merging of the two that establishes threat as the core of the sexual act and fragmentation as the fearful reality behind it.

The “black widow” fantasy is the paradigmatic *Thanatos* fantasy that erotic thrillers re-play for their spectators. *Basic Instinct* poses the black widow fantasy as its cornerstone.

¹ A comical variation of the link between sex and murder comes in John Dahl’s *The Last Seduction*. In the film, Mike (Peter Berg) tries to develop his relation with Bridget/Wendy (Linda Fiorentino) into something more than sex. But Bridget/Wendy, like a typical *femme fatale*, can only commit through murder. So, she suggests that they seal their bond through a murder that each commits individually as part of the murder-sales she arranges through the phone.

The crime that activates the film's plotline is a black widow murder, reflecting an other, Imaginary one, part of Catherine's fictional world of *Love that Hurts*. When Nick becomes involved with Catherine as the potential murderer, the black widow fantasy hovers in the background of their sexual affair. It is actually the black widow fantasy that turns Catherine from an ordinary woman into Nick's sublime lover.² That is, Catherine conforms to Nick's fantasy-frame as a black widow. Defining the meaning of a barred subject's fantasy-frame, Žižek remarks that it involves "a set of phantasmic features which, when they are encountered in a positive object, make us desire this object" (*Plague of Fantasies* 39). Catherine activates Nick's circuit of desire by signifying for him the threat of castration, placing him in the masochistic position of the victim. This subject-position activates Nick's desire for wanting to see if he can get away with it.

As I have already established through my generic analysis of the erotic thriller, getting-away-with-it is an erotic thriller catchphrase and the cornerstone fantasy in the erotic thriller world (reflected also in the title of my thesis). In *Basic Instinct* it is the main object-cause of desire for Catherine and Nick and the third term through which they both see each other. It is the veil that allows them both to shift between sadistic and masochistic pleasure, established as operative in the Freudian beating fantasy, the prototypical fantasy of sexual pleasure (explored in chapter five). Their incessant move between the positions of the victim and the victimiser, physically realised in the act of sex, activates their circuit of desire. The dialogue Nick and Catherine have on the morning after the act seals the dynamic of the sexual fantasy they share, which turns the ordinary act of sex into the sublime "fuck of the century".

Catherine: You shouldn't play this game.

Nick: Why not? I like it.

Catherine: You're in over your head.

² Žižek reminds us that "there is nothing intrinsically sublime in a sublime object". Rather, an ordinary, everyday object is elevated to the place of *Das Ding*, "the impossible-real object of desire" (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 194).

Nick: Maybe, but this is how I'll catch my killer.

Catherine: I'm not gonna confess all my secrets Nick just because I have an orgasm. You won't learn anything I don't want you to know.

Nick: Yes, I will and then I'll nail you.

Catherine: No, you'll just fall in love with me.

Nick: I'm in love with you already, but I'll nail you anyway.

"Nailing" is an important term in the castration fantasy that Nick and Catherine share. Nick's desire to "nail" Catherine reverberates the image of Catherine literally nailing him the night before, postponing – through the pain her long nails caused as they marked his skin – the orgasmic release he strived to attain. Hovering between the Real scarring of the body, its Symbolic incarceration (Nick arresting Catherine as the murderer), and Imaginary phallic penetration, nailing symbolizes the fantasy-frame in which the gazes of Catherine and Nick meet.

Castration is staged twice in *Basic Instinct*, both as reality and fantasy. The film's opening scene reveals the sacrifice of the living body as a prerequisite for the film's Symbolic whodunit reality, which throughout the film revolves around the void that the crime instigated. That void is imaginarily filled by the quest for the murderer and the re-staging of castration as fantasy. As Ellie Ragland Sullivan observes, "the drive intersects with desire in a *Fort! Da!* game of seeking, finding, and repeating that turns into the structure of wanting-not-to-lose" (*Essays on the Pleasures of Death* 170). Doubling the *Thanatos* scene, the *Eros* scene between Catherine and Nick retrieves the act of fragmentation as the reality that the libidinal unification of the bodies veils but necessarily always already feeds on. If the opening scene of castration hadn't existed, the sexual act between Nick and Catherine would never have attained the mythical proportions of "the fuck of the century". Let's have a look at the mechanics behind the myth.

The opening scene of *Basic Instinct* offers a prototypical staging of the keyhole fantasy of the primal scene in the limited view it offers us of the forbidden act and its participants (more on this later). Once the act of sex is established and before the woman is revealed as castrated, she reveals her own phallus/ice pick with which she castrates her lover. Replaying the primal scene fantasy through the black widow fantasy, *Basic Instinct* offers a castrating fearful mOther figure whose phallus/ice pick becomes the horrific sublime Thing that the other ice picks employed in the film signify as *objets a*. Nick does not see the act but as the investigating detective he is established as the possessor of the transgressive look. Looking at, and for, what he's not supposed to see, Nick disavows the threat posed by the mutilated body through the act of looking as *objet a*. Bringing the two *objets a* together, he buys an ice pick and watches Catherine using it to chop a block of ice. "You like watching me do it, don't you?" Catherine asks. The triangulation of looking/seeing/misrecognising, operative in the affair between Catherine and Nick, will be analysed later in this chapter.

Later on, when Nick has sex with Catherine for the first time, the image of Johnny Boz's mutilated body, the experience of the castrating act through Catherine's language in *Love Hurts* (her book), and the image of Catherine chopping ice coalesce to formulate the fantasy-veil through which the act is experienced by Nick. When in the second part of the sexual act Catherine takes the active role, ties Nick to the bed post with a white scarf (similar to the one employed in both murders inside and outside the book) and leads him to orgasmic release, the orchestration of the scene functions like a *déjà vu*. Like the primal scene fantasy, the scene activates the memory of an experience never actually had but which conditions Nick's perception of the act, offering him abjective *jouissance*. Activating the fantasy-frame of desire for the Real jettisoned object, retrieved through *jouissance*, the fear that Nick feels marks the abject, posing as the border between himself and what Kristeva calls the "*land of oblivion* that is constantly remembered" (8).

It is in the fear that the sexual act triggers that Nick as a representative victim-hero retrieves the *jouissance* that the threat of castration and the primal scene fantasy established. As Ellie Ragland-Sullivan points out, “we depend on archaic fixations that repeat certainties which we value, lest loss, questions, or doubts leave us open to an encounter with the unbearable real of anxiety” (*Essays on the Pleasures of Death* 153). Indulging in sex with a potentially castrating female, Nick repeats the castrating scenario in which fear becomes the *objet a* that activates Nick’s desire, covering up the lack of castration while restaging it. Through the veil of the black widow fantasy, fear allows Nick to access the *jouissance* of the drive at the same time that it feeds his desire to eradicate the loss by yielding completely to it. Fear becomes the third element to signify Catherine and Nick’s union in the Symbolic as the fetish-object exchanged between them, which supports the Imaginary whole version of the act that in Nick’s eyes transforms into “the fuck of the century”.

Although Real castration informs the fantasy Nick and Catherine share, the threat can never materialise, as that would be too threatening, sacrificing the pleasure principle that commands erotic thrillers. So, everything threatening is ultimately veiled into a *fantasy of threat* (the technical aspect of this veiling will be examined later). Veiling the glimpse it offered us of the abjective image of Real unity with the mOther in the crime that activates the whodunit streak of the film, *Basic Instinct* offers the abominable image of the fusion which reduces a Symbolic subject to an unidentified mass of flesh, but then denies it, misrecognising it for one more in the series of crimes that keep the film’s thriller narrative going. That is, crime becomes the third term that allows the abjective merging of the mOther devouring the child a Symbolic existence in the form of the film’s whodunit narrative.

Similarly, Roxy is the third term that offers a Symbolic bearing to the Imaginary merging of Nick and Catherine. Roxy, as a spectator stand-in, watches unobserved Nick and Catherine having sex. Although, as Lacan says, “What one looks at is what cannot be seen”

(*Four Fundamental Concepts* 182), it is implied in the film that Roxy has seen the unseeable in the sexual act between Nick and Catherine. The following dialogue between the two points to that direction:

Nick: I guess Roxy is not taking this too well, huh?

Catherine: She's seen me fuck plenty of guys.

Nick: Maybe she saw something she's never seen before.

Catherine: She's seen everything before.

Nick: Honey, I thought I'd seen everything before.

However, what Roxy *did* see is never verbalised in the film's Symbolic reality. Rather, the instigator of the Real transgressive look is jettisoned from the film's Symbolic reality while the look is retrieved as an *objet a*. So, Roxy is led to her death because of what she saw. As Catherine tells Nick, "I should have known. I . . . came into the house, when we were down on the beach . . . she [Roxy] looked at me so strangely . . . She left right after you. I . . . I shouldn't have let her watch us". Meanwhile, the gap hovering around what Roxy saw is filled with the transgressive look as fetish. In Catherine's words, as long as Roxy's gaze froze on the look as fetish "[s]he never got jealous before. She got excited". As her gaze tore the veil of the look and saw behind the curtain, so Medusa's head froze her to her death.³

Fragmentation is also signified by Nick himself. When the film opens he is depicted as a broken man and a questionable cop. We learn that his wife committed suicide after he killed some tourists whom he claims got in his line of fire. Allegedly under the influence of alcohol and cocaine but never actually tested, Nick himself is the object of the Other's gaze, being the object of investigation of the Internal Affairs bureau. He is also under psychological evaluation and restrained, having given up his bad habits. So, when the film begins, Nick is

³ Elizabeth Grosz reminds us that "When the veils are lifted, there is only the Medusa" (141).

revealed as castrated, deprived of all *jouissance* and driven by a self-destructive streak, which, according to his partner, Gus, is reflected in his affair with Catherine.

When Nick meets Catherine, she immediately attracts his attention with her phallic qualities. Her money, property, books and wit are all insignia turned visible on the surface of her body, which poses as the ultimate phallus that Nick spies on. Twice we see him watch her naked body unobserved (or at least that's what he thinks). Catherine dares the Symbolic and its male representatives all the time; knowing the rules and how far she can bend them, she gets away with it. So, in the police car she dares Nick by offering him a cigarette although he tells her that he quit smoking, and then later on when she lights a cigarette in the interrogation room she answers her interrogator's reprimand that "there is a no-smoking in this building" with the question "what you're gonna do? Charge me with smoking?" Misrecognising her for the elusive phallus, Nick becomes obsessed with "nailing" her to the Symbolic. Expressing the phallic economy of the heterosexual Symbolic he represents, Nick thinks that if he pins her down as his possession, then he will be proved to *have the phallus*.

Misidentifying the penis with the phallus (a point established theoretically in the sixth chapter), the latter is discussed in sexual terms and is sought in the sexual act. So, Gus's observation that both Johnny Boz and Catherine have a Picasso painting is answered by Nick's "hers is bigger", and when the police specialist announces that the victim's death occurred during orgasm, Gus comments: "He got off before he got offed". Not to mention Gus calling Nick "hose". Every act in the erotic thriller world is misperceived as always already sexual. In this sense, the abundance of sex supports the phallic fantasy of wholeness. Within the frame of this fantasy it is absolutely necessary for the *femme fatale* to pose as the perfect phallus and the male anti-hero to pursue her. Looking at her, he sees a "pair of balls" and wants it. Misidentifying his possession of the phallus with his sexual performance, he experiences phallic wholeness and *jouissance* through the act of sex. He even approaches the

phallic female as sexually adept, like Mike in *The Last Seduction*, who approaches Bridget with the pick-up line “I’m hung like a horse”.

That is why sex with the *femme fatale* is always exceptional. She offers in it the fantasy of what the male hero sees in her “more than herself”. However, this is just a mirage, as she, like any other female, enters the relation as what she *is not*. To retain her subliminal nature, the *femme fatale* always retains her distance, ensuring the preservation of the male hero’s illusory look. That is why Catherine, as a typical erotic thriller *femme fatale*, remains a mysterious figure throughout the film, a flat character whose density is veiled under her absolute visibility. If this veiling distance is ever lost and she is seen for what she really is, she becomes what Žižek calls, “[t]he desublimated neighbour”; “[her] semblance of fascinating beauty is suddenly revealed as putrefied flesh, crawling with snakes and worms, the disgusting substance of life” (Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies* 66). Once that desublimation occurs, the *femme fatale* is doomed to die a violent death; so Rebecca in *Body of Evidence* is shot, thrown off the balcony and drowned, while Heather in *Final Analysis* is thrown off a sea cliff.

Along the line of misercognising the penis for the phallus, the male erotic thriller hero’s Symbolic castration is also signified by sexual abstinence or frustration. Mike’s previous sexual experience in *The Last Seduction* was with a transvestite. We see Frank in *Body of Evidence* performing routine sex with his wife who, according to Philip French, “recognises that his sexual performance improves when he has a big case in court” (56). Frank in *Sea of Love* and Isaac in *Final Analysis* have a blocked sex life until they each meet the *femme fatale*, and Nick in *Basic Instinct* is involved in an unsatisfying sexual relation with Beth. As he rudely tells her, “I don’t owe you anything, and you don’t owe *me* anything. We went to bed what . . . ten, fifteen times maybe. It wasn’t memorable enough to carry an obligation”. Family life and ordinary relationships are revealed to be lacking and castrating

for the male erotic thriller hero as opposed to the transgressive relation he has with the *femme fatale*, who unblocks his access to *jouissance*. Signifying the Reality of the male hero's sexual encounter with the *femme fatale* through aggressive, animalistic sex, erotic thrillers portray it in the colours of fantasy (to be further explored), turning it from potentially threatening into a pleasurable sight. So, Catherine offers Nick aggressive sex that he calls "the fuck of the century" in *Basic Instinct*. In *Body of Evidence*, Rebecca initiates Frank in the pleasures of painful but harmless animalistic sex, offering before the act the fantasy-frame through which the act is to be perceived when she tells him: "Have you ever seen animals make love, Frank? It's intense, it's violent but they never really hurt each other". Meanwhile, in *Sea of Love* Helen and Frank's relation stems from what Helen calls "animal instinct", satisfying all of Frank's aggression and repression through the act of sex.

Although, as I've already argued, violent sex between the erotic thriller hero and the *femme fatale* is staged as an exciting fantasy of phallic plenitude, fragmentation is always already part of it. So, there is always a scene in which the hero exercises the reign of the phallus by sexually assaulting the *femme fatale* or some other female. In *Basic Instinct*, after Nick is titillated by Catherine during and after the interrogation scene, he proves his phallic prowess by sodomising Beth instead. In *Body of Evidence*, suspecting that Rebecca told his wife about their sexual affair, Frank confronts her and when she titillates him he sodomises her. The same happens in *The Last Seduction*, when Bridget/Wendy ridicules Mike for marrying a transvestite. Forced anal sex in its relation to the taboo of male homosexuality, is the prioritised erotic thriller fantasy of fragmentation through sex. However, *even that* is very carefully orchestrated so as not to be too threatening. So in *The Last Seduction* Mike only executes Bridget/Wendy's plan when he responds to her invitations ("I'm Trish [Mike's transvestite ex-wife] rape me"), not knowing that she has already called 911 and is framing him as he proves his virility to her. In *Body of Evidence* the threat of sodomy is incorporated

in the sadomasochistic sex that Rebecca relishes, so by the end of Frank's act of rape, the focus of the camera is on Rebecca's face gradually expressing orgasmic pleasure; and I've already explained the dynamic of the so-called date rape scene between Nick and Beth in the eighth chapter, contending that in the erotic thriller fantasy-machine, anything threatening always appears to convey threat veiled in pleasure.

Incessantly shifting between fantasies of unity and fragmentation, *Basic Instinct* as a representative Hollywood erotic thriller, offers a series of *objets a* that play the *Fort-Da* game of presence-absence, repeating the sexual interchange between *Eros* and *Thanatos*. But, as Ragland Sullivan reminds us, in Lacanian theory *jouissance* cannot be recaptured, even at the moment of repetition, as whatever produces pleasure initially transforms into unpleasure through repetition; *Eros* turns into *Thanatos* (89). On the other hand, any activity "caught in a repetitive vicious cycle" is immediately sexualised (Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies* 71-72), offering *jouissance* "that holds us in a death thrall" (Ragland Sullivan 152). It is through the act of sex that erotic thrillers stage lack and fulfilment, but as Ragland Sullivan points out, *Eros* and *Thanatos* are not in a complementary relation of binary opposition, rather they are mediated by a third term: loss as a thing and their relation to it (162). So, *Eros* in the form of desire strives to fill the lack through *objets a*, while *Thanatos* is the drive that repeats the primordial loss by incessantly circumventing the Thing that would fill the gaping hole around which the Symbolic body is built, both being Symbolically bound through the act of sex which merges them together. However, since they are both structurally dependent on loss, it is the repetition of lack that offers pleasure in the sexual act. In his description of the sexual act as "a momentary extinction of a highly intensified excitation", Freud observed its orchestration of presence and absence through the loss as object, what he called "the pleasure of discharge" ("Beyond the Pleasure Principle" 336-37). It is because of the part that is expelled from the body that the sexual act can be repeated, in the same way that it is due to

the sacrifice of the Real Thing that all other things can be repeated through language. *Basic Instinct*, like all erotic thrillers, obsessively repeats the *jouissance* of loss through the sexual act, the ultimate *objet a* of the erotic thriller world.

10.2. The Myth of One: Fantastic Couplings/Symbolic Triplings

In erotic thrillers, the *ménage-à-trois* is the paradigmatic form that sex as *objet a* takes. In its doubleness the *ménage-à-trois* usually involves the structure of the affair between the *femme fatale* and the male hero and very rarely depictions of threesome sex. Threesome sex is talked about (like when in *Basic Instinct* Catherine asks Nick whether he'd like to join her and Roxy some time) but the act is usually obscured. The only theatrically released mainstream erotic thriller that I know to show threesome sex is John McNaughton's *Wild Things* (1998). Of course it limits it to its phallic facet, keeping its threatening double repressed. So, although in the film the people involved in the getting-away-with-it storyline of sex, murder, and deceit consist of two *femmes fatales* and two male heroes, only one of them is shown sexually involved with the two women. Like lesbian sex, which it always partly includes, threesome sex in the form of two women-one man activates a pleasurable fantasy of sexual plenitude by offering in the act more than one female to verify the male phallic possession.⁴ Producer Andrew Garroni explains the success of this sexual arrangement with male audiences, proposing that it offers in fantasy what very few men can experience in reality, appeasing thus a basic male fear "that the women don't really want you" (qtd. in Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller* 70). Although the *ménage-à-trois* both as structure and as sexual practice definitely flirts with plenitude, it also signifies its reverse, since the third term is always the barrier that obstructs the fantasy of the union of the two in One. As the compromised cop Ray

⁴ On the contrary, threesome sex between two men and one woman never appears in Hollywood erotic thrillers as the image of two men in the same sexual act would immediately activate the taboo fantasy of homosexuality which is, as I have shown in my discussion of the *homme* and *hom(m)o fatals*, too threatening.

Duquette (Kevin Bacon) says to one of the two *femmes fatales* in *Wild Things*, pointing out the impasse that their number poses to the “happily ever after” scenario: “Two’s company, three’s a crowd”.

10.2.1. (3)-2-1

Basic Instinct illustrates one of the two forms the *ménage-à-trois* takes in erotic thrillers in the structuring of the sexual affair. It is what, in the beginning of chapter six, I recorded as (3)-2-1. That is, *Basic Instinct* focuses on couplings and doublings, always keeping the third term veiled, hovering in the background. Neither Catherine nor Nick are involved in any Symbolic coupling when the film begins; Catherine’s fiancé is dead and so is Nick’s wife. In terms of Imaginary couplings, by the time Nick becomes involved with Catherine his affair with Beth is already finished. Catherine, on the other hand, is also free in terms of heterosexual preferences since Johnny is dead. Before she becomes involved with Nick, she is shown to have only one sexual partner Roxy. Very conveniently, immediately after Nick and Catherine embark on a sexual affair, Roxy (the third element between them) is killed, leaving the two of them alone. Similarly, as the film opens Johnny is murdered, so Catherine, Roxy, and Johnny never officially formulate a *ménage-à-trois* in the film’s reality. It is only in its hovering memory that this tripling existed and still it was more like two couplings with Catherine as the meeting point between the two; as Catherine tells Nick, Johnny was intimidated by the idea of threesome sex. When Roxy as the third element between Catherine and Nick gets out of the way, her death allows the full reign of heterosexual phallic unity through the development of the romantic fantasy between Nick and Catherine. Roxy’s death is the point when fucking turns into lovemaking, as Catherine, broken from her loss, falls back on the soothing fantasy of Imaginary unity that the phallic economy offers and asks Nick to “make love to [her]”.

Through the affair between Nick and Catherine, the phallic fantasy of the unity of the two in One is materialized. By the film's end Catherine is exonerated from the suspicion that she is a murderer-*femme fatale* and is presented as a castrated female fearful of losing her beloved. Having lost her air of coolness, she tells Nick: "I can't allow myself to care about you. I can't allow myself to care. I don't want to do this. Please I don't want to do this. I lose everybody. I don't want to lose you, I don't want to lose you". In the lovemaking that follows, the black-widow fantasy is performed as a mechanically repeated act to signify "the fuck of the century", which can never again be retrieved, lacking the fantasy-frame in which it was activated. Aware of this, Catherine asks Nick what will happen to them. When he suggests the Symbolic unity of a family ("Fuck like minks, raise rug rats and live happily ever after"), their Imaginary Oneness starts to disintegrate and we see her reaching for what is, seconds later, revealed to be her ice pick. Nick's immediate exchange of the Symbolic staging of unity for an-other Imaginary One ("Fuck like minks, forget the rug rats and live happily ever after") allows her to renounce the Real unity she was about to unleash through murder. Engulfing the Imaginary unity that Nick offers her by erecting between them another fantasy-frame of sexual desire through sex, Catherine bestows on Nick the Lacanian assumption that "he has knowledge", and so she professes her love for him (Lacan, *Seminar XX* 67) through a fleetingly uttered "I love you" phrase we hear, but never see her say.

Basic Instinct reveals an obsession with impossible Oneness, lost forever in the child's mirror. That is why Catherine is presented throughout the film as a fuller version of Nick. As Nick tells Beth, she knows things about him that he's only told her. She knows the nickname that Nick's wife used to call him by, his vices and guilty past. As Nick tells Gus, "She knows where I live and breathe", and Gus, just like the assistant district attorney in Catherine's interrogation scene, highlights that there is *something* between them, as if they know each other from somewhere – as if they are part of each other. Nick like Catherine has been

accused and cleared of murder. He also beat the lie-detecting machine and has experienced the loss of people he loved. So, when Gus warns him that “everybody she [Catherine] plays with dies”, he answers, “I know what’s that like”. Recognizing Catherine as his kin, he tells Gus that he’s not afraid of her. On the contrary, he doubles her; so in *his* interrogation scene, after the murder of the Internal Affairs officer for which he is suspected, he refutes the accusations by using Catherine’s rationale – that he must have been stupid to attack the deceased in his office and then hours later to murder him – as well as by using actual lines when, lighting a cigarette, he is reminded that smoking is prohibited in the building. Through his relation with Catherine, Nick comes in touch with his Real gaze, which after showing him his whole self in infancy was lost forever. Gradually, his castration, which Beth as the castrated female secured,⁵ is reversed as he takes his Symbolic insignia back (badge and gun) and also “gets the girl” as his phallus. Claiming to love him, Catherine offers Nick the illusion of his Ideal gaze through the image in which she, as Other, sees him. In Lacan’s words,

As a specular mirage, love is essentially deception. It is situated in the field established at the level of the pleasure reference, of that sole signifier necessary to introduce a perspective centred on the Ideal point, capital I, placed somewhere in the Other, from which the Other sees me, in the form I like to be seen. (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 268)

Embracing Catherine as his “lamella” (presented in chapter six) would translate into Nick’s death as a Symbolic subject. So, *Basic Instinct* offers Imaginary unity instead, through the love story between Nick and Catherine. Misrecognising each other for what they *are not* and *do not have*, Catherine and Nick formulate an Imaginary unity of sexual plenitude. *Basic Instinct* is the only erotic thriller that offers an ending of the “happily ever after” type while

⁵ In the light of Beth’s guarding Nick’s symbolic castration (she was his evaluation therapist in the police department) the rape scene can be read as Nick’s revolution – breaking free from his symbolic bondage and engulfing the Real part of himself that Catherine signifies.

retaining Catherine as a *femme fatale*.⁶ Storing Catherine's *fatale* part under the lovers' bed (in the form of her ice pick), *Basic Instinct* veils the threatening Thing and exchanges the Real for the lovers' Imaginary embrace. So, in the final shot of the two in bed, Catherine's arm does not hold the deadly ice pick but rather holds Nick in a passionate embrace that re-commences the act of sex.

Through the optics of love (presented theoretically at the end of chapter six) Catherine and Nick's union is possible. Looking at each other under the illusion of looking at their partner looking back at them, they both see the other in the light of their own gaze as *objet a*.⁷ And this gaze becomes the fantasy-screen erected between them through which the act of sex is misperceived as the act that directly unites the two in One. Through the act of sex, each partner is united with their own image as *objet a* and experiences the duplication of the self, "see[ing] him[/her]self as constituted by the reflected, momentary, precarious image of mastery" (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 142). As Žižek reminds us, "even at the moment of the most intense bodily contact with each other, lovers are not alone, they need a minimum of phantasmic narrative as a Symbolic support – that is, they can never simply 'let themselves go' and immerse themselves in 'that'" (*Plague of Fantasies* 65), as this would reveal the gaping hole between them (illustrated in the first of the two triangles that schematise the lovers' gazes at the end of chapter six).

Offering the Real version of the Imaginary coupling in Catherine's book, *Shooter*, which functions as the lost part that the film sacrifices for its Symbolic existence,⁸ *Basic Instinct* assigns there the Reality that can never be incorporated in the Symbolic, but which underlies it. The revelation of Beth as the psychotic *femme* who kills and her removal from the film's Symbolic reality allows the prevalence of Imaginary order and unity in the same

⁶ The only other erotic thriller I remember which offers a happy ending between the fatal couple is *Sea of Love* but by the film's end Helen is clearly proved to have been a *faux femme fatale* all along.

⁷ According to Lacan "the *objet a* may be identical with the gaze" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 272).

⁸ As I discuss in chapter eight, Catherine's book contains Gus's murder before it actually happens.

way that Nick's murder in the book signifies his Real unity with Catherine and so its Imaginary version allows him to live. But the Real hole will always threaten the Symbolic subject's Imaginary unity through the duplicity of the lover as *objet a*, signifying the desirable presence but only through the staging of absence.

Obscuring triangulation as the Symbolic version of any phallic coupling (discussed in chapter six), *Basic Instinct* fantasizes unity that leads to a whole One. But this One, as we've already seen, is never possible, as it would instantly translate into the subject's death. Meanwhile, the only way there can ever be any coupling is through triangulation, since, as we've already contended theoretically in chapter six, a woman (representing in this thesis the female subject position) always enters any relation with men (as representatives of the Lacanian male subject position) doubled.⁹ *Basic Instinct* offers a paradigmatic *Fort-Da* game between presence and absence reflected in its getting-away-with-it plotline and fantasy, and crystallized in the seeming doubleness of the final shot which offers the film's ending. An image of *Eros* (a close-up of Nick and Catherine's sexual embrace) doubled by an icon of *Thanatos* (a close-up of the ice pick) and between them a fade veiling in darkness the Thing around which both drive and desire will incessantly be activated, seeking for pleasure in the warding off of unpleasure.

10.2.2. 2-3-1

The other form the *ménage-à-trois* between the erotic thriller hero and the *femme fatale* takes is the 2-3-1. This staging of the coupling/tripling reflects the neo-noir storyline of the husband-wife-lover, examined in the first chapter. To depict the dynamics of this type of fatal affair I will use *Body Heat* as my expository ground, the film that, as I have argued in chapter one, signifies the shift of the neo-noir into the erotic thriller. In *Body Heat* the sexual triangle

⁹ This doubleness is usually signified in the erotic thrillers' Symbolic through the *femme fatale*'s double name. Catherine Tramell is also Catherine Wolf (*Basic Instinct*), Matty Walker is Mary Ann Simpson (*Body Heat*), Bridget Gregory is Wendy Kroy (*The Last Seduction*), and Trina Gavin is Jade (*Jade*).

between Matty, Edmund (her husband), and Ned (her lover) functions in two ways. On the one hand, the Symbolic coupling between Matty and Edmund is revealed as fragmented. Edmund is presented as castrated; he's middle-aged, not much of a lover, and away all the time, leaving Matty as his phallus behind. So, Matty poses for the eyes of someone else, an illicit lover who triangulates the conjugal coupling and unblocks the circuit of Matty's desire.¹⁰ Or, it could be that number 2 signifies the illicit affair in which both lovers experience Imaginary unity through the excessive restaging of the act of sex, and the husband triangulates the scene, signifying the perverseness of the illicit coupling. That is, the husband functions as the border that marks the coupling as abjective, an in-between state which "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 4). Killing the husband is the means the transgressive couple always uses as its entry into the Symbolic, exchanging the husband for the lover. Before I proceed to talk about what kind of "1" the illicit lovers strive for, I need to examine the fantasy frame through which they see each other.

When Ned first encounters Matty she embodies the perfect phallus. All dressed in white, she brings a pleasurable sensation of coolness to the hot sticky evening as she stands with her clothes waving in the sea breeze. As opposed to Ned's sweaty second-class lawyer whose professional "weapon" is, in the words of his friend, assistant district attorney Peter Lowenstein (Ted Danson), his "incompetence", Matty is a beautiful, sexy and classy lady. It is her beauty and her sexual provocativeness when she answers Ned's suggestion that he'll rub the cherry stain off her shirt for her with the line "You don't want to lick it?" that activates Ned's desire. However, beauty and sexiness would only make Matty desirable for a night, expendable like the rest of the women Ned is shown to be frivolously involved with.

In his relations with women, Ned is depicted as a narcissist. As the film opens, Ned is watching a fire, presumably after the act of sex, totally indifferent to his lover who is getting

¹⁰ The excess that marks the sexual encounters between Ned and Matty (discussed also in chapters one and nine) signifies a fantasy of sexual plenitude, a staple erotic thriller fantasy.

ready to go.¹¹ Later, when he meets Matty he tells her, “I need tending. I need someone to take care of me, someone to rub my tired muscles, smooth out my sheets”, but when she suggests that he get married, he answers “I just need it for tonight”. Ned is portrayed as successful with women, using sex to reinforce his phallic image of himself. But none of his lovers is shown to activate his fantasy-frame, so he only has sex with them to prove his virility and experience through them his ego as ideal. According to Lacan, “The point of the ego ideal is that from which the subject will see himself, as one says, *as others see him*” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 268). So, how come Ned becomes obsessed with Matty? What is it about her that activates Ned’s desire?

A scene before Ned meets Matty, we learn that he has always been searching for “a quick score”, some way to make big money. Also, we learn that he has a preference for women in uniforms. It seems that manipulating them is his way of outwitting the Symbolic. This characteristic relates to Ned’s Symbolic punishment when a few years ago he was sued for malpractice over the case of a contested will. So, when he meets Matty, she becomes his *objet a*. She is *the* ultimate signifier of Ned’s desire to transgress the laws of the Symbolic and get away with it. Matty is gorgeous, married and rich, clearly out of Ned’s league (the three adjectives that he chooses to present himself to her are: lazy, ugly, horny). She lives in the wealthy area of Pine Haven in a house that takes Ned’s breath away when he sees it and, in the words of Ned, she looks “well-tended”. Being married to a man who claims that if she had a lover, he’d kill him with his bare hands, and desired by all the men who, in her words, “once they get a whiff of [her], they trail [her] like a hound”, Matty is desired by Ned because she is already desired by others. Discussing the masculine version of the Lacanian dictum that “desire is the desire of the Other”, Žižek claims that “what confers the value of desirability on

¹¹ Her words mark his indifference towards her after the act: “I’m leaving. What do you care? You’re watching the fire. You’re done with me. You’ve had your fun, you’re spent”. It is only the final sentence which attracts his attention, and he reacts to it by initiating more sex.

an object is that it is already desired by another” (*Plague of Fantasies* 118). *Having* her would give Ned the phallus he strived to prove he possessed through his sexual activities.

Transgression is the fantasy frame erected between the two illicit lovers. Matty knows it all along as she has planned the whole thing, picking Ned as her victim due to his professional ineptitude and dim wit. Taking advantage of his narcissism she makes herself unavailable to make him come after her. She erects barriers for him to demolish, placing herself as the prize he gets. This immediately bestows a special value on her and so he pursues her. Their meeting dialogue is indicative of Matty’s manipulation of Ned’s desire. Approaching her, Ned conceitedly says:

Ned: You can stand here with me if you want, but you’ll have to agree not to talk about the heat.

Matty: I’m a married woman.

Ned: Meaning what?

Matty: I’m not looking for company.

Ned: Then you should have said: “I’m a happily married woman”.

Matty: That’s my business.

Ned: What?

Matty: How happy I am.

[. . .]

Ned: How about I buy you a drink?

Matty: I told you, I’ve got a husband.

Ned: I’ll buy him one, too.

Matty: He’s out of town.

Ned: My favourite kind. We’ll drink to him.

Matty: Only comes up on weekends.

Ned: I'm liking him better all the time.

Disappearing before he gets back with the wet paper towel to clean up her stained shirt, she knows that Ned will look for her. As the ultimate *objet a*, Matty slips between absence and presence. Highlighting the power of the Symbolic law that orders her inaccessibility, she allows Ned glimpses of her fragmented reality in which she is a miserable, lonely, dissatisfied wife. She offers Ned what he wants to see: herself as desiring but too weak to go against the rules. In this way, she instigates his active response, which feeds his masculine narcissism in a double way, through his attempt to get the girl/phallus and transgress the Law of the Father.

As she is sexually, so she is criminally provocative. First she warms Ned up to the fantasy of Edmund dying so that they could be together with all the money. Then in another incident, she challenges him by offering him the reverse fantasy: them without the money. Knowing that money is part of Ned's attraction to her, Matty informs Ned that she signed a pre-nuptial agreement that leaves her with nothing after a divorce. Titillating his fantasy of wholeness through money and then pushing it off limits, Matty directs Ned to murder.

Edmund's murder remains part of the film's fantasy of wholeness, though. Although Ned plans a premeditated crime, he ends up murdering Edmund in self-defence as the latter has a gun and is ready to shoot. Secondly, by taking the third term out of the way (who we learn was corrupted and not much of a loss for the world) the lovers can experience unmediated coupling, realising the basic erotic thriller fantasy of the union of the two in One. Finally, Edmund as Ned's unsuspecting/all-knowing double urges Ned to the act by offering him the way into the fantasy of success.¹² So, he tells Ned: "They [people] want to get rich. They want to do it quick. They want to be there with one score but not willing to do what's necessary" and he repeats the bottom-line, "I mean do what's necessary, *whatever is necessary*". That is exactly what Ned decides to do.

¹² Edmund shifts between a Symbolic father and the "primordial father", "a *father who knows*". According to Žižek, "The ultimate secret of the parricide is that the father knows the son has come to kill him and accepts his death obediently" (*Enjoy Your Symptom* 159).

The problem is that Ned misrecognises Matty for his phallus. Matty as a paradigmatic *femme fatale* shifts, according to the previous chapter, between a phallic and castrated position, keeping her castrating potential in the background, masked under her claims of unconditional love for Ned. Blaming her sexual voraciousness on Ned, she praises his sexual performance and claims “I never wanted it like this before”, boosting Ned’s phallic image of himself. Having sex with him in any possible way while declaring that he’s the only one she wants for ever, Matty becomes what Ned wants to see: a castrated female who desires “through the Other”,¹³ offering herself as a phallus to him “to have and to hold”. So, Ned enjoys phallic *jouissance* not by directly enjoying Matty’s body,¹⁴ but by contemplating his image of phallic wholeness that Matty supports. This is the One out of two (2-1) that Ned fantasises.

However, as soon as Edmund is removed from the lovers’ picture and before Ned has the time to take up his place, Oscar Grace (J. A. Preston), the police detective, and Peter Lowenstein, the Assistant District Attorney, come in as the third term to signify Edmund’s death as murder and look for the culprit between the two lovers. This is the point when the veils start dropping one by one, to reveal Matty’s Real part and Ned’s castration. Instead of the money and the girl, Ned takes the blame for everything and goes to prison, while Matty stages her death and walks away free and wealthy. This is the particular One out of two (2-1) that Matty had in mind.

Matty manages to get away with it because, according to the crash-course in success that Edmund gave Ned, she knows her bottom-line, which she has recorded in her high-school graduation book: “to be rich and live in an exotic land”, for which she’s prepared to do

¹³ According to Žižek the feminine version of Lacan’s “desire is the desire of the Other” translates into “let the Other do it (possess and enjoy the object, etc.) for me” and “I desire only what he desires, I want only to fulfil his desire” (*Plague of Fantasies* 118).

¹⁴ As already discussed in chapter six, the Lacanian thesis contends that unmediated bodily pleasure is impossible.

“whatever is necessary”.¹⁵ Obscuring her Real part to play the heterosexual game of phallic *jouissance*, Matty is ready to transform into every man’s dream-woman. So for Edmund she became the fallen woman whom he “saved” from the inferior “bad company she was forced to keep” (Chute 51-52), and then, to support Ned’s phallic fantasy she reduced Edmund to a fearful man who was “small, and mean, and weak”. In her absolute flexibility Matty is *the* ultimate fantasy as she literally doesn’t exist; she is the prosthetic womanhood Mary Ann Simpson put on. Offering Matty as her Symbolic part, she then sacrificed her (by killing the actual Matty) as the Real part of hers that had to be punished by the Symbolic for Edmund’s murder, while the r/Real Mary Ann was free to accommodate in the Symbolic her Imaginary view of wholeness through financial affluence.¹⁶ So, the materialization of the dream of One is possible in *Body Heat* because it is not the incestuous One but a fragmented One, the Symbolic “I” that is re-established by the film’s end: Mary Ann as “I” is born, dropping Matty as the excremental surplus that the body must sacrifice in order to live as “*autonomus*”.¹⁷

10.3. Basic Veils

Alternating between sexual triangles and transgressive couples, erotic thrillers look at the sexual act and see the realization of the impossible One, the Thing that (shot from the right distance) is seen as subliminal. Distance is a key term for the fantasy-games that erotic thrillers play. The sexual act, as the ultimate visible proof of the unity of the two in One (2-1), must be always seen from a sufficient distance so that the third term that mutilates the image of perfection in its Symbolic representation can be obscured. That is why, as we saw in chapter eight, the sexual act must always be painted in the colours of fantasy, since what

¹⁵ According to Ned, Matty’s special gift is her relentlessness; echoing dead Edmund’s words, Ned tells Oscar, “Matty was the kind of person who could do what was necessary; *whatever was necessary*”.

¹⁶ As she told Ned at one point, “When you have no money, you have no choices. I don’t care what they say – money is freedom. That’s something they don’t teach you in school”.

¹⁷ See Kristeva’s section on the “waste-body, corpse-body” 108-10.

erotic thrillers are interested in is not the reality of the act, but the fantasy that frames the act and turns it into a desirable icon.¹⁸ The position of the camera and the points of view it offers to spectators, as well as the lighting and the music, all contribute to the transformation of trauma into fantasy. To illustrate my point I will conclude this chapter by focusing on *Basic Instinct*'s black-widow sex scenes.

During the film's opening credits we hear Jerry Goldsmith's now famous music score, the sound that will repetitively hover in the background of the images we are offered throughout the film, signifying through its repetitive tune the nauseating movement of the drive. As the title credits fall, we see a collection of glassy triangles gradually made visible by the orange-yellowish light they reflect, until they all formulate a mirroring surface on which blurred moving figures are hazily revealed. The way these triangles are lit one after the other until they reveal a glassy wall behind which the action is located simulates the approaching movement of an unseen third party (the camera as a stand-in for a child waking up from a nightmare and going to his/her parents' bedroom for comfort). The film's establishing shot casts a mirror image from the top of a bed, offering a long shot of two naked bodies in sexual embrace. Moving closer to the couple, the camera gradually establishes the sexual act that is taking place through medium shots and close-ups of a woman astride a man. Through cuts in the scene and carefully-controlled camera angles, we are offered parts of the female body and face, so the woman is looked at but not sufficiently seen so as to be identified. Bathed in dreamy gold reflections, the aestheticised spectacle of the well-balanced movements and perfect proportions of the female body, which is voraciously consumed by the camera, establishes the pleasurability that the spectacle of the sexual act offers to the onlooker. A close-up of the ice pick as the woman grabs it, followed by medium and close shots of the penetrated male body, and then one more close-up of the ice pick and a long shot of the

¹⁸ According to Žižek, “ ‘real sex’ [. . .] also needs some phantasmic screen – [. . .] any contact with a ‘real’, flesh-and-blood other [. . .] is not something evident but something inherently traumatic, and can be sustained only in so far as this other enters the subject's fantasy-frame” (*Plague of Fantasies* 183-84).

female body from behind represent a shift towards and away from the horrifying castrating act, freezing it on the icon of the ice pick and the female body, retained as fetishes while the music, reaching a crescendo, binds together the pleasure of orgasmic release and the terror of death.

Through physical resemblance and the similarity of sexual repertoire between Catherine and the female of the opening scene, repetition of music, colours, and camerawork, the opening scene is activated as the hovering potential behind the first sex scene between Nick and Catherine. This relation is highlighted by alternating close-ups of Nick's distrustful and Catherine's enigmatic face. As the act progresses to its climax and we are offered a close shot of Catherine's hand potentially reaching for an unseen ice pick, the camera freezes on a medium shot of Catherine's body aggressively falling on Nick and then a close-up of her body covering his. At this point full view is obstructed so we cannot be sure whether the castrating act has been repeated or not. It is only afterwards that a close-up of Nick's face reveals orgasmic pleasure in having staved off the violence of castration.

Finally, the film's closing sex scene triangulates the black widow/primal scene fantasy and introduces it in the Symbolic as sexual routine. The deep golden colour that signified the Real and the Imaginary version of the act respectively, in the previous two scenes, is exchanged for the faded gray-blue of the final scene in which the camera mainly shows the act in medium/long shot (no close-up is allowed in the scene's Symbolic version). A zoom on Catherine's body seconds before she reaches orgasm and menacingly throws herself on Nick, is employed to insert in the picture the anxiety of castration, but, instead of offering us immediately the already established fetishistic close-up of Catherine's body to ward off the fear of castration, this time the camera remains fixed on the gap that Catherine's body establishes as it leaves the frame to fall on Nick, visually establishing the gap around which the desire for fulfillment and the fear of fragmentation are activated.

The movement of the camera plays a major role in the pleasures of veiling/unveiling that erotic thrillers repeat for the sake of their viewers. Alternating between fetishistic close-ups and medium/long-shots, fully-lit and dimly-shot scenes, high-angle omniscient and low-angle distorted views, the mainstream erotic thriller camera is transformed into the *uncanny* eye, which offers flashes of the Real underside of the images it looks at. Approaching the sexual act as a familiar (the Freudian *heimlich*) fantasy, the camera must look away in time as the hidden, threatening (*unheimlich*) part of this familiar fantasy has started to “come to light”,¹⁹ fulfilling the *uncanny* potential of the sexual act.²⁰ That is, by always partially showing what cannot be seen, the erotic thriller camera offers pleasure in its simultaneous incorporation and rejection of the lack, which is to be fulfilled.

¹⁹ The phrase is taken from Freud’s “The ‘Uncanny’” 345.

²⁰ According to Freud, “the uncanny [*unheimlich*] is something which is secretly familiar [*heimlich* – *heimisch*], which has undergone repression and then returned from it” (“The ‘Uncanny’” 368).

AFTERWORD

Not Getting Away With It: *Basic Instinct 2*

In the spring of 2006, three years after what I pronounced in chapter one as the death of the erotic thriller in cinema, *Basic Instinct 2* appeared on the big screens worldwide. Fourteen years after Verhoeven's original and after many false alarms about a sequel, as well as many different suggestions as to who would direct it and play the male lead, *Basic Instinct 2* was finally a reality. Directed by Michael Caton-Jones and transferred to London, *Basic Instinct 2* had no story to tell. Compulsively repeating a checklist of the original's attributes, without Sharon Stone *Basic Instinct 2* would probably have gone directly to video. Transgressing the directives of fantasy that I've been exploring in this thesis and faking the generic make-up of an erotic thriller, *Basic Instinct 2* was doomed to fail. And so it did. Grossing \$3,201,420 dollars in its opening weekend,¹ as opposed to the original's \$15,129,385,² *Basic Instinct 2* was a major flop. In the afterword of this thesis, I would like briefly to examine the causes of the film's failure.

British Film Institute magazine, *Sight & Sound* reviewed *Basic Instinct 2* as their film of the month and of course who else would write the review than erotic thriller specialist, Linda Ruth Williams. In the epigram of her article she writes, "Fun, clever and hilarious, *Basic Instinct 2* is a ludicrously entertaining addition to the 'shrinks and shagging' genre" ("Cupid and Psycho" 42). The problem is that erotic thrillers are not supposed to be fun and hilarious; neither are they supposed to be ludicrous if they are to perform their fantasy roles. My claim is that *Basic Instinct 2* tried to function as both an American erotic thriller and a

¹ See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0430912/business>

² See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0103772/business>

witty European commentary on the American sexual extravaganza at the same time, and failed on both counts.³

Williams writes, “The switchback story of *Basic Instinct 2* manages to reveal the entertaining stupidity of its genre stablemates while delivering a cleverly knowing commentary upon itself” (42). However, erotic thrillers cannot afford to be self-reflective if they want to keep their veils of seduction intact. So, drawing attention to the stupidity of the narrative was a suicidal choice. The sequel also opens with a sexual murder: Catherine Tramell is speeding at the wheel while being manually pleased by a famous athlete in the passenger seat. Reaching orgasm, she crashes the car into the Thames and, leaving her partner immobile, swims to safety. Naturally she is prosecuted for her lover’s murder by the London police. The dialogue between herself and Roy Washburn (David Thewlis), the police detective in the case, echoes her interrogation scene in the original, where she was accused of ice-picking her lover to death.

Roy Washburn: What were you doing at 100 miles per hour?

Catherine Tramell: He was making me cum. And it was 110. We must’ve hit a pothole.

Roy Washburn: Kevin Franks died. You don’t seem very worried.

Catherine Tramell: I’m devastated... I may never cum again.⁴

The murders that follow are irrelevant to the film’s opening crime and the ice pick as the murder weapon is replaced by a leather belt and the practice of sexual asphyxiation. The people murdered are all related to Catherine’s new victim Dr. Michael Glass (David Morrissey), the psychoanalyst the police brings in to evaluate her after the Thames incident, and of course Catherine is reported to have had sex with all of the deceased. Dr. Glass realises

³ In her review for *The New York Times*, Manohla Dargis also considers Caton-Jones’ decision to make two films at the same time: “one, a fairly somnolent procedural with British actors; the other, a hysterically pitched Hollywood star vehicle” (n. pag.).

⁴ For some of the film’s quotes, see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0430912/quotes>

that he's framed for the murders and all the answers are once more in Catherine's new book *The Analyst*. The film's *finale* really is the ultimate revelation of its pretence to have had a narrative all along. Out of the blue Dr. Glass is announced as the film's *homme fatal* and the tongue-in-cheek final close-up of his sinful look is accompanied by flashback shots showing him committing the murders. The problem with Caton-Jones' *Basic Instinct 2* resembles that Verhoeven had with *Showgirls*. Caton-Jones seems irresolute as to what he wants to do. Making fun of the erotic thriller genre while trying to create an erotic thriller, Caton-Jones is ultimately offending his audience by setting them up for an erotic thriller experience he fails to deliver. Both as an erotic thriller and a commentary *Basic Instinct 2* is utterly superficial. Trying to have it both ways and play it smart, *Basic Instinct 2* is finally outsmarted by its own arrogance.

The European-American combination founders on its basis on oppositional principles. The American erotic thriller, as already established, depends for its success on the erection of (sexual) fantasy.⁵ The language of psychoanalysis that the film's British social elite employs, however, is an impossible language when it comes to fantasy-frames, as the aim of analysis is not to erect fantasy but to "traverse" it. Slipping in a lurid erotic thriller narrative a line like: "Even Oedipus didn't see his mother coming", or having an accredited European actress such as Charlotte Rampling play Doctor Milena Gardosh, Dr. Glass's colleague, who, informed about Catherine stopping therapy, exclaims: "She just walked out - how very Lacanian!" seems completely out of place in an erotic thriller, as if the director borrowed footage from another film. As Peter Bradshaw teasingly writes, "If he hadn't died in 1981, Jacques Lacan could perhaps be brought on, like Marshall McLuhan in *Annie Hall*, to discuss [. . .] with Rampling" (n. pag.).

⁵ Supplanting the cop as the *femme fatale*'s potential lover with the film's psychoanalyst, *Basic Instinct 2* moves sexual action to the psychoanalyst's couch. Instead of the car chases and the strong physical attraction between Nick and Catherine, in *Basic Instinct 2* flirtation between the male Symbolic hero and the *femme fatale* takes place thoroughly on the level of language.

Basic Instinct 2 is an excellent example of what happens to the erotic thriller when the game of Symbolic mediation is revealed. In terms of sex this translates into showing without showing. The much-announced shot of Catherine's frontal nudity, which referred to the original's crotch-flash scene, illustrates the point I'm making. Instead of a direct shot of Catherine's naked body, a well-orchestrated editing of shots taken from different angles is offered, allowing partial glimpses but no full view of what the scene obscures. The same happens with the way *Basic Instinct 2* handles its *femme fatale*. Draining the mystery and ambiguity from the film's *femme fatale*, Caton-Jones reduces the source of his film's fascination into a pathetic clown who instead of *being fatale* poses as *fatale* and talks about her fatality all the time.⁶ Carrying her overblown fatality along with her, with little narrative or directorial support, Catherine seems ridiculous. As Manohla Dargis nicely puts it, "To judge by the unflattering lighting and camera angles, Mr. Caton-Jones had no particular love for his star" (n. pag.).

That Sharon Stone, the accredited ultimate *femme fatale* of the '90s, would be unanimously attacked for her failure to offer a repetition of *Basic Instinct* thrills came as no surprise (remember the case of Elizabeth Berkley from *Showgirls*). The role that offered Stone her entry-ticket to Hollywood has just given her her exit cue. The violence of the reviews Stone received proves once more the visceral level on which the erotic thriller functions, especially if it fails to deliver its fantasy goods. Dargis sees Stone as indicative of the degradation of Hollywood actresses over forty (n. pag.), while Ty Burr from the *Boston Globe* is crueller:

Stone is betting that a 48-year-old woman can be as hot and dangerous as the 20-somethings the film industry is addicted to. Bully for her -- in theory.

In practice, Stone appears to have had so much work done that her face

⁶ Although in the original Catherine's power as a *femme fatale* stemmed from her suspected guilt for the film's crimes, in *Basic Instinct 2* she is treated as a sure murderer facing Dr. Glass' attraction to her with the line: "Some guys are into blondes, some guys are into killers".

resembles a tautly made bed, and her unchanging expression of smoldering arrogance seems less an acting decision and more the result of neurotoxins.

The body may be willing but the flesh has been immobilized. (n. pag)⁷

Basic Instinct 2 hovers between the ghostly presence of an absent erotic thriller and an over-present *femme fatale* who, in flaunting her excess, becomes abjective. Attempting to supplant the missing fantasy on the level of the signifier, the film announces in its tagline that “everything interesting begins in the mind” and tries to exchange what Linda Ruth Williams calls “body-fucking” for “mind-fucking” (“Cupid and Psycho” 42). The problem is that speaking the words of fantasy it cannot offer, *Basic Instinct 2* sacrifices the *jouissance* it promises its audiences. Instead of obscuring the third term for the sake of Imaginary Oneness, *Basic Instinct 2* flaunts it by pointing where it cannot go (the only fleeting moments when some shade of fantasy appears on the screen is when the original music score is heard).

The failure of *Basic Instinct 2* once more proves that in the 21st century Hollywood doesn’t “do sex” any more. The moment sex as act is pushed out of the picture, though, its absence hovers behind the images on screen, infecting everything. As I’m closing my thesis the latest Hollywood phenomenon is Ron Howard’s *The Da Vinci Code*. Based on Dan Brown’s best-selling novel of the same title, the film incited serious media hype due to its theme of religious conspiracy as underlying the teachings of Catholic Christianity. Although sex as image and act is totally out of the picture, sublimated through the leading couple’s quest for the True nature of Christianity,⁸ encoded in Leonardo Da Vinci’s paintings, the core story is whether Jesus had sex with Mary Magdalene and produced offspring. Mary Magdalene as the Holy Grail, the receptacle to be filled with male “being”, is signified in the film as the lower part of the pentalpha that the phallic upper part fills. Unified at the level of the signifier, the male and the female are marked as complementary, leading to the production

⁷ qtd. in the studio briefing on the movie reviews in <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0430912/news>

⁸ The film’s tagline is “Seek the Truth”.

of One, the sign of the pentalpha. Incidentally, separating the two triangles that constitute the pentalpha and placing the female under the male, we get the Lacanian rhombus of fantasy, through which, as seen, the Symbolic subject accesses the Real One. It is through the fantasy-frame of religion that the two leads, Tom Hanks as Robert and Audrey Tautou as Sophie, are brought together, united in their common effort to decipher the truth behind the film's opening murder. The sexual attraction between the two, which is allowed no space in the film's narrative, is consummated in their investigative coupling that reveals young Sophie literally being the mystery that Robert as the experienced professor unravels, filling her in on her past. Receding from Imaginary depiction, the sexual act fuels signification in *The Da Vinci Code*, staging the union of the two-in-One on the level of the film's Symbolic reality.

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