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Moderating Glamour: Selling the Femme Fatale in Fashion and Beauty Media

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'Femme fatale' is an enduring and evocative term connected with femininity, glamour, danger and sexuality. Although it is most often theorised in relation to cinema, literature and art, 'femme fatale' is also used in advertising and online shopping, as well as lifestyle media, reality competition shows and beauty tutorials. Here I examine a range of these examples and argue that such appearances not only produce meaning about the femme fatale as an idea about femininity, but also allow us to think about the movement of fictional figures and archetypes across different forms of media. The examples I discuss reveal anxieties around feminine respectability, and also mobilise the imagined whiteness and middle-classness of the past in producing a classy, nostalgic and commercially appealing version of femininity. 'Femme fatale' thus becomes a tool for securing nostalgic whiteness, as well as a risky point of reference that must be carefully rendered respectable. However, in other instances, the term can also be an optimistic figuration of the possibilities of glamour. This article explores the points of gravity and attraction around which the term hovers in consumer culture, and the precarious relationship that the figure has with respectable femininity.

The femme fatale character type is most commonly associated with mythology, literature, fine art and cinema, but the term 'femme fatale' has also moved beyond these contexts into more commercial territory to appear as a reference point for advertising, branding, and in fashion and style media more broadly. In this article, I analyse a diverse range of media texts from the past fifteen years: Google Image search results, television fashion design competition *The Fashion Show: Ultimate Collection* (2010), e-commerce copy from small and large fashion retailers, cosmetic product names, and online lifestyle guidance from *Wikihow* and *allwomenstalk* to consider the deployment of the femme fatale as a glamorous idea used in the selling of consumer goods. In doing so, I argue that the femme fatale functions as an often-nostalgic attempt at embodying an idea about the past, largely understood through the lens of classical Hollywood cinema, and one which initiates the negotiation of ideas about race, class, respectability, vulgarity and glamour. While definitions of the figure are frequently contested[1], 'femme fatale' most frequently refers to seductive women who use sexuality as a tool to gain fortune or revenge, manipulating and betraying men to reach their goals, and often meeting violent or tragic ends. Femme fatale figures can be found in mythological and biblical contexts and their artistic and literary adaptations (Circe; Sirens; Lilith; Salome; Delilah), in cinema (vampire women in horror films; backstabbing women in film noir), and in historical accounts (Cleopatra; Mata Hari), all associating feminine sexuality with attractive but deadly danger.

The figure of the femme fatale is understood as both enduring *and* historically specific. Popular histories like Scott Meslow's overview of the figure for *The Week* (2016) tend to trace an enduring western lineage from classical mythology and the Old Testament, to Romantic poetry and late Victorian art through to the vamps of early cinema and the noir women of classical Hollywood. At the same time, much of the research into the figure has focused on historical particularities. Scholarly accounts consider how the changing sexual politics of the fin-de-siècle, post-war or post-second wave feminist periods have informed different versions of the femme fatale, and how scholarship has also been shaped by contemporary concerns. For example, Helen Hanson outlines how feminist scholars in the 1970s demonstrated a particular attachment to the film noir fatales of the 1940s (2010), and Virginia M. Allen notes that in art history, the earliest femme fatale-type characters are significantly older than the phrase used to describe them, as the term gained prominence in the 1970s to refer to nineteenth century images of ancient mythological or biblical figures (1983: vii). The various historical slippages at work mean that understandings of the femme fatale take on a timeless quality in dialogue with a few key historical reference points.

[1] Elsewhere, I elaborate further on defining the femme fatale (Farrimond 2018), and on the figure's historical location (Katherine Farrimond 2023).

Figure 1: Barbara Stanwyck as Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* (1944) Directed by Billy Wilder [Feature Film]. USA: Paramount Pictures.

In many of the materials surveyed for this article, the primary reference points for the femme fatale are the style and performances of actresses like Barbara Stanwyck (see **Figure 1**), Lana Turner, Gene Tierney, Marlene Dietrich and Veronica Lake in classical Hollywood noir films and their precursors. Such figures have been read in opposition to the wholesome noir 'good girl'[2], critically associated with metaphorical darkness and seen to act as symbolic outlets for anxieties about women's social roles during and following the second world war (Place, 1978). In foregrounding Hollywood noir, I do not aim to erase the term's other resonances, or to claim noir as the origin point for the figure. Indeed, it has been argued that the ubiquity of the figure in film noir has been considerably overstated (Grossman 2009). Rather, I understand the femme fatale as a figuration that is imaginatively attached to a range of historical and cultural moments, but that in many popular cultural iterations is dominated by Hollywood noir. For example, Google image search results are dominated by images of feminine, thin, white or white-appearing women in a particular style: 1940s Hollywood film stars (Rita Hayworth, Lauren Bacall), contemporary stock images of models in the style of 1940s film stars, and images from neo noir thrillers from the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s (Kathleen Turner, Sharon Stone, Rebecca Romijn). In my searches, the images were largely black and white, and textured with sequins, fur, satin, cigarettes, stockings, pouting lips, peekaboo hair and chiaroscuro lighting. Search engines like Google are not, of course, objective or politically benign research tools. Rather, a Google image search is a commercial, advertising-driven enterprise with significant limitations for the way that the world is algorithmically presented to searchers, as has been extensively demonstrated by Safiya Umoja Noble (2018). Using this tool to view the

[2] For more on noir's 'good girls' see Phullar 2016.

femme fatale, therefore, provides a sense of how the femme fatale is 'pictured' within those commercially driven, highly limited parameters. 'Femme fatale' thus functions as an idea about the past, and nostalgia for 1940s and 1950s noir glamour appears at the core of the term's commercial uses.

This is not to imply that nostalgia is an inherently conservative instinct. Indeed, many accounts of nostalgia identify a wide range of political potential, including conservative efforts to restore an idealised past *and* attempts to draw on the resources of the past in the creation of progressive futures (Boym, 2001; Eichhorn, 2015). As will be explored, the femme fatale has many potential links to different historical imaginaries. However, in privileging particular versions of the figure, as the Google Search results do, only a very limited picture emerges which prioritises thin white-appearing women as the glamorous occupants of an idealised past. As Ulrika Dahl points out, the adoption of mid-century retro style has often unspoken connections with 'an always already racialized and gendered past' (2014: 605). This does not mean that mid-century glamour is an exclusively white or middle class aesthetic, rather that an insistence on this as the primary reference point for the femme fatale within commercial contexts may reproduce a very restrictive version of the past.

'Femme fatale' is a term that contains a set of ideas about femininity; narrow enough to act as shorthand, and also flexible and available to be put to a wide range of commercial uses. As André Jansson argues, 'most kinds of consumer goods have become increasingly image-loaded, taking on meanings in relation to media texts, other commodity-signs, entire lifestyles, and so on' (2002: 6). The femme fatale offers an insight into this relationship between goods and images, and the way figures travel away from their apparent homes into different areas of media and culture. 'Femme fatale' provides products with an aura that has the capacity to enliven older myths of femininity, and specifically those attached to power and glamour, promising a way of embodying past femininities. Buckley and Gundle describe glamour as a 'glittering display of image, ostentation, sex, commerce and culture' (2000: 336). 'Femme fatale' forms part of this display and is used to lend a veneer of glamour to differentiate a lipstick from a hundred almost identical commodities, layering fantasy over the economic exchange. As Caroline Evans argues, 'the seduction of the commodity form lies precisely in its ability to veil the real, commercial nature of the transaction with seductive "dream worlds" in which the consumer loses him or herself in fantasy and reverie' (2000: 95). The figuration of the femme fatale thus works to summon fantasies of glamorous and powerful women. What I am interested in here is the particular shapes that those fantasies take, and what their limits and exclusions are.

In making sense of how the figure of the femme fatale moves from fictional, artistic or mythological contexts, and into the world of shopping, branding, and instructional

media, the concept of 'figuration' is useful. In her work on 'the child', Claudia Castañeda states that:

> 'This concept of figuration makes it possible to describe in detail the process by which a concept or entity is given particular form – how it is figured – in ways that speak to the making of worlds. To use figuration as a descriptive tool is to unpack the domains of practice and significance that are built into each figure' (2002: 2).

Figuration, therefore, offers a way of thinking about the relations between the artistic representation of the femme fatale as deadly woman, and the circulation of 'femme fatale' in relation to material practices of consumption, style transformation, consumer objects and social relations. The ways that the femme fatale is figured in fashion and style cultures is not only about summoning a cultural memory of characters from film noir or Victorian literature. Rather, the attachment of the term to objects and practices is generative and reshapes the meaning of 'femme fatale'. As Castañeda suggests, figuration sets into motion a making of worlds shaped by the associations, possibilities and limits implied or stated in the term's usage. Just as, for Castañeda, each figuration of 'the child' 'brings a particular version of the world into being' (2002: 2), each figuration of 'femme fatale' does the same.

As I will demonstrate, the femme fatale's glamorous figuration within fashion and style media contexts functions in dialogue with norms, anxieties and ambivalences about race and class, filtered through the prism of Hollywood noir glamour. The femme fatale is imagined as a classy, nostalgic and commercially appealing version of femininity in ways which may also mobilise the imagined whiteness and middle-classness of the past. In the examples discussed here, 'femme fatale' becomes a tool for securing nostalgic whiteness and middle class respectability, but can also be an optimistic figuration of the possibilities of glamour. In this article, I argue that the use of the term in consumer culture has much to tell us about the way that archetypes are remembered, reframed and sold.

Race and the femme fatale

The femme fatale's attachment to racial politics has a long history.[3] The Otherness of the figure in the colonial imaginaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been the subject of much critical discussion, and the whiteness of the cinematic femme fatale has been both noted and challenged. The femme fatale has been understood as both an Orientalist fantasy *and* a fantasy of insistently white femininity, a figure that Caputi and Sagle describe as 'paradigmatically a woman

[3] For a longer account of this history, see (Farrimond 2023).

of color' (2004: 91), even as Antônio Márcio da Silva observes that 'imaginaries concerning the traditional femme fatale are associated with whiteness' (2014: 37). Despite her association with spectacular whiteness in Hollywood cinema and its criticism, the femme fatale has a long history as the personification of Oriental exoticism and as embodied by women of colour.

Fantasies of sexually voracious, fecund and terrifying women in Africa, Asia and the Americas emerged in the Renaissance (McClintock 1995: 22), representations of 'pale harem women' were depicted in Orientalist art of the early nineteenth century (Berry 2000: 132), and promiscuous and treacherous figures appeared as temptation and threat to colonial explorers in literature and the visual arts into the late Victorian period and early twentieth century (Dijkstra 1996: 128). Hollywood's silent and early sound films also made connections between ethnic exoticism and sexual voracity through the marketing of 'foreign' vampish actresses like Theda Bara and Pola Negri (Negra 2002: 379; Berry: 110), or in films where the 'Oriental' settings offered an alibi for increased sexual display of white actors (Shohat 1991: 69–70). These visions of the East as a space of sexuality also became entangled with commoditisation. In the nineteenth century these fantasies were deployed in respectable and muted ways to promote desirable products in department stores and advertising to Euro-American female consumers (Lalvani 1995: 282), and later, the 'exotic' style of early Hollywood stars functioned as a tool for marketing cosmetics to female audiences (Berry 2000: 94–141).

In Hollywood film noir, this tendency continues, as white femme fatale characters are presented in relation to a metaphorical 'darkness' where 'blackness in film noir is suggested through the cinematography and the visual style, but the femme fatale herself remains a light-skinned woman' (Da Silva 2014: 21). The genre's titular darkness is placed in opposition to moral goodness and respectability, and, for the central characters, a fall from whiteness (Diawara 2003: 899; Lott 1997: 551). In some Hollywood noir films, the white femme fatale's knowledge of, or adjacency to, Blackness, Latin America, Eastern Europe or East Asia in films like *Out of the Past* (1947), *Cat People* (1942) and *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948) (Kaplan 1998) acts as an indication of the figure's inscrutability, moral bankruptcy and potential threat to American values and patriarchal norms, and the femme fatale's association with 'the exotic or alien Other' (Blyth 2017: 33) contributes to the sense of her moral depravity. In early and classical Hollywood cinema, then, the femme fatale occupies an ambiguous racial position: both insistently and spectacularly white, but also displaying a sexuality and mystery that is informed by 'exotic' settings, an ethnicised star image, or marked by a proximity to racialised Others. However, despite the centrality of white noir fatales in the popular imaginary of the figure, there does exist a simultaneous history of women of colour associated with the femme fatale in film and literature (see Parreñas Shimizu 2007; Mask 2009; Da Silva 2014; Caputi and Sagle 2004; Crawford 2006; Bastiaans

2008; James 1995), as a means of essentialising hypersexuality and untrustworthiness onto the bodies of women of colour, even such representations might also offer glimpses of resistance. Across art, culture and consumer goods, then, the figure has been entangled with racialised Otherness. Despite this complex legacy, however, the contemporary commercial image of the femme fatale prioritises white femininity. As my next examples indicate, there do exist some ways in which the supposed whiteness of the femme fatale might be challenged in fashion and style media and merchandising. However, overwhelmingly, picturing the femme fatale in these arenas largely involves a doubling down on the whiteness of the image.

Race, Fashion and Media

'Femme fatale' is regularly used as a point of reference and inspiration in fashion-themed reality competition shows. For instance, in *Project Runway*, the words 'femme fatale' are repeatedly used by designers who are gesturing towards a 40s-ish influence for their tailoring or evening wear when the designers must complete a look inspired by Marlene Dietrich (Project Runway 2008), are challenged to create looks inspired by film genres including film noir (Project Runway 2009), or make reference to a 'strong, dark femme fatale, like villains of the cinema' when trying to decide a theme for their collection (Project Runway 2014). The implicit whiteness of the femme fatale in mainstream fashion and style, and the limits of the term in relation to nostalgic reference points, is made particularly clear in the 'Femme Fatale' episode of the US design competition, *The Fashion Show: Ultimate Collection* (2010).

In this episode, the challenge is to work in teams to create collections of 'nightlife looks' inspired by the femme fatale, and is introduced by presenter and model Iman as follows:

> 'Seductive, alluring, mysterious and dangerous. The femme fatale is a character who has captivated our attention throughout history. A woman who is impossibly charming, but whose charms could prove deadly. There was Mata Hari, Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*, and the quintessential femme fatale, the vampire – a woman who sucks you in and then sucks you dry'

This introduction frames the figure as existing 'throughout history', but also linked to specific figures *in* history. As Iman introduces the challenge, the designers look up at a stage where three white-appearing models are styled in an approximation of these figures: a performance costume with gold bra, intricate jewellery and diaphanous skirt for Mata Hari (see **Figure 2**), a fitted wool skirt suit and fur for Barbara Stanwyck (see **Figure 3**), and a long dark gown and candelabra for the vampire (see **Figure 4**). This presentation of the femme fatale, therefore, is clearly informed by the ethnic history of

the figure in the western imagination. The styles displayed reference Orientalist fantasies of the harem and Mata Hari's 'pale exoticism' (Berry 2000: 134), fears and desires about eastern Europe associated with the vampire of Victorian literature and classical horror cinema, as well as the frosty whiteness of the American mid-century noir fatale.

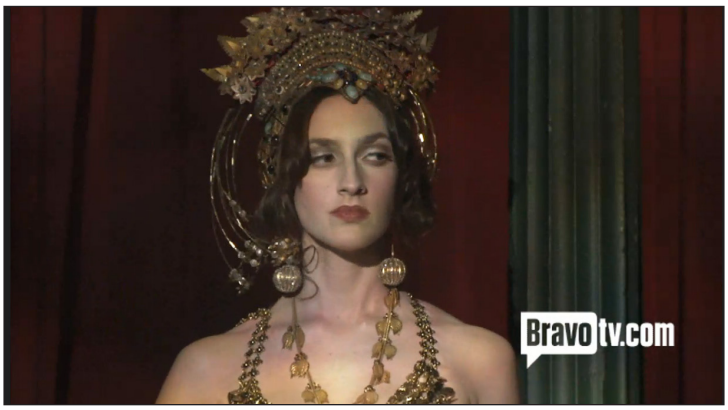

Figure 2: 'Mata Hari' in *The Fashion Show: Ultimate Collection* (2010), [TV programme] 'Femme Fatale' Series 2, episode 3. Bravo, 23 November.

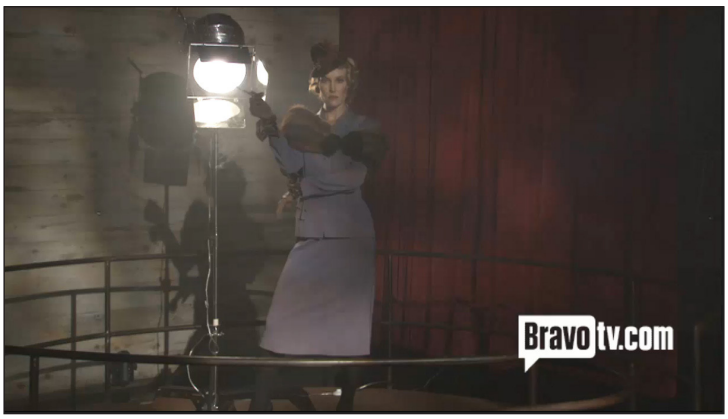

Figure 3: 'Barbara Stanwyck' in *The Fashion Show: Ultimate Collection* (2010), [TV programme] 'Femme Fatale' Series 2, episode 3. Bravo, 23 November.

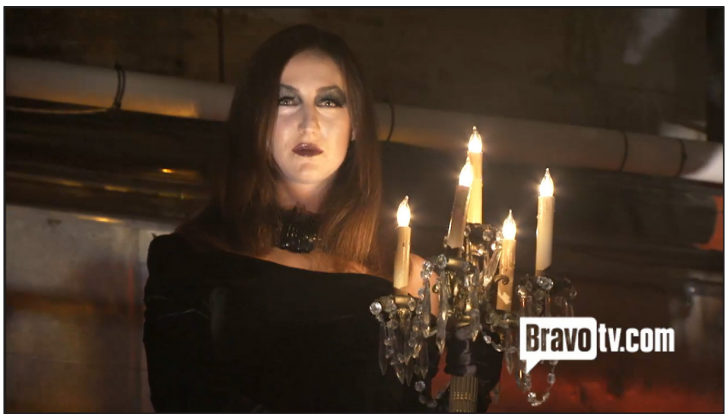

Figure 4: 'The Vampire' in *The Fashion Show: Ultimate Collection* (2010), [TV programme] 'Femme Fatale' Series 2, episode 3. Bravo, 23 November.

Although this introduction infers the femme fatale's history of gesturing towards ethnic otherness, the figure is ultimately understood in still narrower terms by the judges and contestants. The designer who is eliminated in this episode is Tamara, a contestant who designs a belted red leather jacket, tight red trousers and a black lace bra-top (see **Figure 5**). From the outset, the other designers on her team are sceptical about her choice of a fabric (red leather) that does not fit in with the plans for the rest of the collection. A narrative about Tamara's lack of fit is established, as she explains in her confessional interview: 'I really don't fit in this house, our design styles are totally different'. She explains that the 'femme fatale' task reminded her of Mary J Blige, and her look is dismissed by other contestants as having a 'hip-hop/street direction' and being 'just not femme fatale'. The judges also find fault with it: Iman says 'it doesn't conjure anything about femme fatale. What it conjures is a swashbuckler', while burlesque performer Dita Von Teese, the guest judge introduced as a 'femme fatale in her own right', says 'I was thinking North Beach Leather, 1982, sale rack'. With these comments, each judge suggests that Tamara's look references the *wrong* time and place, that her interpretation of the femme fatale does not match the version that they had in mind. Tamara explains her own reasoning: 'I saw something different, I saw a strong woman who wants to be seen without the idea of being too super sexy', but despite its immaculate construction and use of noir style aesthetics: black lace, peplum, wide shoulders and narrow waist, Tamara's look is simply not legible to the judges and other contestants as relevant to the femme fatale. In the final judging, the whole team are criticised for poor fabric choice, and contestant Golnessa's retro wiggle dress is described as badly constructed and impractical, but it is Tamara who is sent home due to her lack of 'fit'.

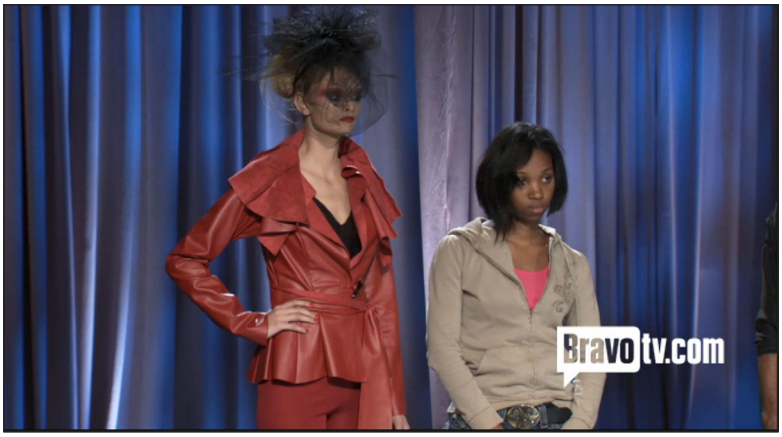

Figure 5: Tamara's Femme Fatale Look. *The Fashion Show: Ultimate Collection* (2010), [TV programme] 'Femme Fatale' Series 2, episode 3. Bravo, 23 November.

Creative reality tv competition shows like *The Fashion Show* are structured around a final scene of judgement, usually by a panel of industry insiders with a public profile. Such shows present taste and style as neutrally and objectively measurable, and in

passing judgement within these conditions conceal their underpinning norms of taste, producing ejectable taste outsiders in the process. As Aiden James Kosciesza observes, such competition shows 'present themselves instead as a descriptive meritocracy, a place where rewards are, in actuality, distributed based on individual merit' (2021: 1690), while Stijn L. Reijnders et al note that reality tv judges 'control one of the keys to talent quests: determining the ranking within the group and identifying the norms on which this is based' (2007: 278). In this case, the judges' decision seems to confirm Tamara's work as objectively not appropriate for the femme fatale task. Tamara here functions as a familiar figure found in the early stages of such competitions, what Reijnders et al describe as 'chaotic' scapegoats, sacrificed to restore order: 'by identifying someone as being responsible for the chaos, and then eliminating them, peace and order can be restored' (Reijnders 2007: 280). In *The Fashion Show*, this is evident in the assertion of Tamara's lack of 'fit' with the brief and the rest of the team, which conceals the meaning of 'femme fatale' in this context that informs the judges' decisions.

The boundaries of the femme fatale's figuration are tested and shored up in *The Fashion Show*. The figure is presented as relevant 'throughout history', but the presentation of the three models at the start of the episode also tethered her embodiment to specific references to Orientalist fantasies, and to white Hollywood femininities, rather than, for example, the vampire women played by women of colour in *Queen of the Damned* (2002) or *Vamp* (1986). During the contestants' confessional interviews and the judging, the definition of the term is narrowed still further, and Tamara's creation is read as dated, cheap and oppositional to the femme fatale. Further, Dita Von Teese's position as a specialist guest judge privileges a version of the femme fatale, one linked directly with a nostalgic, mid-century pin-up style, rather than the 90s and 00s references drawn on by Tamara. This makes the alignment with the other candidate for weakest look – a dark green, knee length wiggle-dress with sheer sections in black dotted Swiss – more straightforward, despite its poor construction. Despite being well-made and having clear aesthetic links to the brief, Tamara's refiguration of the femme fatale is not easily legible or absorbable within that aesthetic. The elimination of Tamara and the commentary about her design points towards the whiteness of the femme fatale in the mainstream imagination.

Whereas *The Fashion Show: Ultimate Collection* established clear, apparently unbreakable links between whiteness and the femme fatale through reality competition features like judging and contestant narration, in some fashion media there is an attempt to invoke the femme fatale in relation to a relative diversity of women. An example is the website of a vintage-inspired British lingerie brand, kissmedeadly.com. In 2019, the front page featured the tagline 'Sarcasm, wit, feminism... and damn good retro lingerie. Femme fatale style for those of us who prefer the evil queen in the fairytales' (Kiss Me

Deadly 2019). The feminism referred to in the brand's tagline is in evidence in their product lines, including their Steinem and Fawcett ranges, and in their blog, featuring entries on body size, diversity in modelling, female orgasms, disability and invisible illness. The brand's name references the film *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), drawing a direct line between its retro underwear and classical Hollywood noir, while the website's retro boudoir-style photography reworks that version of the femme fatale with models of various ethnicities and body sizes in noir-inspired scenarios. The company responded to criticism about the site's levels of diversity by outlining their history of working with diverse models, arguing that the site has consistently worked with models who fall outside the parameters of the industry standard because of their height, age, body modifications, disability, proportions and nationality or national heritage (Clavering 2016). At *Kiss Me Deadly,* the femme fatale is repurposed for a commercial enterprise which claims a popular feminist image by representing (and talking about representing) a variety of bodies which in some cases fall outside industry standards.

The femme fatale, then, has a lengthy and complex relationship with race and ethnicity. Previous scholarship has identified the often-unhappy ways that the figure is linked to the representation of ethnic otherness and women of colour. Yet at the same time, the contemporary cultural memory of the femme fatale is primarily one of nostalgic and spectacular whiteness, and it is this legacy that the uses of the figure in style media and marketing most frequently tap into. What the examples discussed in this section demonstrate is that the parameters within which feminine styles might be legible as 'femme fatale' are very narrow within these contexts, despite some efforts to expand what 'femme fatale' looks like by companies like Kiss Me Deadly. And, as I will explore in the next section, this narrowness encompasses issues of respectability and class.

The Femme Fatale, Class and Glamour

The femme fatale is also figured through a connection with classiness, luxury and wealth. As Sarah Elsie Baker points out, the figure is central to contemporary understandings of Hollywood glamour: 'This history is summed up by the glamorous vision of the femme fatale – a woman wrapped in silk gowns and diamonds, who lived in a lavish home decorated in the Moderne style, toyed with men, and ignored the law" (2017: 55). However, much like the figure's relationship with race, this relationship with social class is ambivalent. The noir fatale's cinematic predecessors, the vamps of silent cinema, not only evoked ethnic otherness, but also class ambiguity. As Diane Negra observes, such star images 'personified a whole category of newly arrived immigrants who (in the eyes of some Americans) called up these economic and social anxieties. [...] The cinematic vamp of the 1910s and 1920s was, in essence, a thinly

disguised incarnation of the threat of female immigrant sexuality' (2002: 379). The sexually licentious, working class immigrant from southern and eastern Europe looms large over these representations, and these class anxieties continue into film noir.

As both Jans B.Wager (2005: 165) and Samantha Lindop (2015: 31–33) have observed, the film noir femme fatale's motivations are often driven by dire or precarious financial circumstances, or by bourgeois aspiration. For example, in the James M Cain adaptations *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) and *Double Indemnity*, the femme fatale is represented as a working class figure whose manipulation and wrong-doing is driven by her aspiration to something beyond her circumstances. Alternatively, femme fatales are figured as women driven to rebel against the constraints of normative middle-class femininity, as in *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945). As Julie Grossman observes, such characters often 'evince [...] the desire to exact richer lives (in terms of experience generally) than poverty or modern middle-class existence affords women' (2009: 44). Although the femme fatales of film noir are not consistently marked by a specific class position, they are united by a desire for *more*.

The femme fatale, then, carries association with working class aspiration, class anxiety *and* with luxurious glamour. The relationship between class and glamour is therefore significant in analysing the figuration of the femme fatale in contemporary consumer culture. What does glamour have the potential to do? What are its risks? Despite its associations with wealth, glamour is far from a securely middle-class aesthetic, and I will return to this point below. However, glamour also has the potential to be strategic, transformational, and optimistic in transgressing the constraints of middle-class femininity. As Baker suggests, 'the aesthetics of glamour can be about purposefully not "knowing your place", and a way of transgressing bourgeois norms of moderation and measure' (2017: 56). Glamour's excesses, therefore, can be precisely the tools with which to challenge classed expectations of femininity. Beverley Skeggs suggests that glamour offers a way that the sexuality associated with working-class women, and the feminine respectability associated with middle-class women might be held together, without risking the accusations of vulgarity and tastelessness associated with former, or of pretentiousness and the requirement of caring practices associated with the latter (1997: 100–111). Additionally, as Skeggs explains:

> 'the recognition of oneself as glamorous serves to engender an identification, enabling femininity to operate as a disposition *and* a form of cultural capital, even if only momentarily and always tied to performance. It is the attitude that makes the difference. It gives agency, strength and worth back to women and is not restricted to youth. They do glamour with style. Glamour is about a performance of femininity *with* strength' (1997: 111).

Glamour, therefore, figures the possibility of subjectivity, agency, and cultural capital. As Baker explains, glamour is an 'optimistic attachment' (2017: 67), and 'a fantasy about a place where women have time to spend on themselves' (2017: 58).

Class, Fashion and Media

This optimism becomes apparent in the use of the term 'femme fatale' or 'fatale' in cosmetics branding from budget to luxury products that have been sold historically as well as those currently on the market.[4] These products almost exclusively fall into the following categories: eye colours by Tarte (blacks, greys, bronzes and shimmers), Nyx (black, taupe and red), Avon (smoky neutrals), AmorUs (metallics and berry shades) and Nars (red); lip colours by Laura Mercier (plum), Nyx (black), Smashbox (dark berry), Ilia (burgundy), Lola (matte red), Too Faced (metallic red), and Lip Land (red-black); and nail colours by Michael Kors (dark blue), L'Oreal (red), Ulta (burgundy) and Wet n Wild (fuchsia). In these examples, 'femme fatale' is applied to shades designed to add rich colour, and to exaggerate and darken features. Femme fatale shades are largely unsuitable for a respectable 'natural' look, and stand in opposition to the 'ideology of "naturalness"' described by Faye Woods in relation to upper-class, implicitly white glamour (2014: 204).[5]

In this respect, 'femme fatale' cosmetics stand in contrast with items like foundation, powder, colour correctors and concealer which serve the purpose of evening out skin tone and texture, setting other products, and covering blemishes and dark shadows. Those products are more commonly marketed as looking natural: 'weightless', 'bare', 'sheer', 'your skin but better', or as workhorses: 'superstay', 'stay-in-place', '24 hour', 'longwear'. The marketing of those products gestures towards the hiding of perceived flaws, or the functional *work* of supporting other products, in a way that purports to be undetectable to the outside gaze. The kinds

[4] Here I used a combination of searches to try to capture cosmetics that have been sold historically as well as those currently on the market. Products currently available were found by searching the websites of department stores and high street chemists, as well as larger retailers like Amazon. Products no longer on the market are harder to capture, but review sites like makeupalley.com and temptalia.com, as well as searching sales on Ebay, and using commercial search engines to find reviews by beauty bloggers enabled me to gather a sense of historical products.

[5] Such dynamics can also be found in the contemporary dissemination of competing 'clean girl', 'dark feminine' and 'mob wife' makeup aesthetics on social media. It is also worth noting that these associations are operating within Euro-American cosmetics industries that have historically privileged lighter skin tones. Histories of cosmetics and their associations vary significantly in different contexts, and the association between dark colours and exotic glamour are certainly not universal. At the same time, femme fatale-inspired makeup trends have been taken up by beauty influencers with a diversity of skin tones on social media. It can also be noted that the colours of 'femme fatale' cosmetics overlap with kohl and other products appropriated from Middle Eastern, South Asian and North African contexts, indicating that the fantasies of glamour share some continuity with the Orientalist imaginaries that framed the femme fatale in earlier times.

of products typically named ‘femme fatale’, on the other hand, are about adding artificial theatricality and depth. This is not to say these divisions are inherent: there is certainly nothing ‘natural looking’ about the neutral tones of soft glam makeup. However, the packaging and promotion of such products is what is of significance here. These femme fatale cosmetics are therefore associated with spectacle and drama rather than labour and function.

The femme fatale is not attached to mundane, ‘hard working’ products but to those connected with drama: to showing off, rather than concealing. The naming of the femme fatale cosmetic implies a woman who dazzles, rather than drudges, and whose life exists after dark in glamorous settings. By contrast, the complexion product is framed as either a classily discrete ‘natural’ beauty, or as a domestic labourer who tidies away the unsightly and makes sure everything stays in its proper place while blending in unnoticed. Skeggs does not expand on the relationship between glamour and caring, which she positions as a key part of femininity, but thinking about the relationship between the femme fatale and glamour allows for another significant function of glamour to emerge in relation to social class. Crucially, the femme fatale *doesn’t care*, both in the sense of concerning herself with others’ opinions of her, and of doing the work of caring for others, or, at least, she resents such labour. Some key examples from film noir include the Phyllis’s (at best) negligent nursing of the first Mrs Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*, or Ellen’s dispassionately fatal supervision of Danny’s swimming lesson in *Leave Her to Heaven.* Glamour therefore not only enables sexuality and respectability to be held together, but also does so in a way that abdicates the feminine responsibility of caring, however temporarily. The femme fatale cosmetic, then, indicates the way that ‘glamorous objects work as powerful imaginative resources’ (Baker 2017: 49). What is being sold in these products is the promise of what glamour can offer, the possibility of dramatic elegance, at the same time as an imagined disassociation from the care and labour associated with femininity (see also Farrimond 2018).

However, alongside the potential of glamour to transcend expectations of working-class labour, and transgress norms of middle-class femininity comes the risk of such transgressions. The femme fatale’s glamour is precarious and risks tipping into gaudy excess (Lukszo 2011: 62). Writing of the 1950s, Carol Dyhouse argues that ‘glamour might be viewed by the socially secure as brash and aspirational. For all its associations with luxury and privilege, it was something middle-class England disapproved of, suggesting women on the make, who wanted too much, knew too much, wore too little or the wrong sort of clothes, and “were no better than they looked”’ (2010: 4). Glamour is regarded with suspicion, and the respectability of clothing and appearance has been

policed within many mainstream contexts. As Ruth Holliday and Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor note, the sexual frisson of glamour risks troubling middle-class notions of beauty: '"true" beauty has been desexualized, bringing respectability for white, middle-class women through their distance from 'other' sexualized women' (2006: 184). The pleasures of glamour, therefore, go hand-in-hand with its risks.

The ambiguity around glamour becomes particularly apparent in the promotion of femme fatale goods to wealthier clientele, and here it is instructive to look at how 'femme fatale' is figured on the website of the luxury UK department store Harvey Nichols, where the term has been used a number of times in the copy describing products in recent years. For example, a black Stella McCartney evening dress was promoted as follows during Autumn/Winter 2017:

> 'Deep down, everyone loves a bad girl. Or at least, that's what we tell ourselves when we slip into Stella McCartney's mesmerising gown. Trimmed in lace for a delicate finishing touch, this piece simply screams femme fatale' (Harvey Nichols 2017a).

Here, the text indicates that the femme fatale is an admired and compelling figure ('everyone loves a bad girl'), and that putting on the gown allows the wearer to occupy this desired position. However, the language used also raises the alarm: this knowledge is a risk, the dress may be too much of a statement (it 'screams' femme fatale) and might draw attention. The use of 'we' positions the copy as girlfriendly advice, at once supportive, confessional and disciplinary (Winch: 2013). 'We' must do some work to reassure ourselves that the risks are worth it, and that the only attention will be positive, indicating both the desire not to care what others think *and* the impossibility of truly not caring, at least for the respectable well-off customer who might buy a (relatively staid) strapless Stella McCartney gown from Harvey Nichols.

During the same season, a collection of leather skirts was featured on the site. The skirts, priced between £260 and £1880, came in various dark shades and monochrome patterns, were largely cut below the knee and ranged from pencil shapes to more voluminous flared cuts. The caption for the collection read: 'strike a pose in a flirty leather skirt this season. Balance the femme fatale fabric with cosy knitwear and crisp cotton shirts' (Harvey Nichols 2017b). This copy imbues leather with an internal 'flirty' sexuality, but its power must be moderated with the 'cosy' respectability of jumpers and cardigans, and the prim, 'crisp' professionalism of a cotton shirt. While the wealthy customers of Harvey Nichols may wish to flirt with the figuration of the femme fatale, these examples demonstrate the requirement that the boundaries of respectability must be policed. In this example, 'femme fatale' is used to signify a potential display

of sexuality that risks tipping over into tawdriness and must be moderated with clearer signs of taste and respectability.

These concerns about taste and respectability are also in evidence in the episode of *The Fashion Show: Ultimate Collection* discussed above. The designers struggled to tread the boundary between expensive, luxury, sexy evening wear, and clothing that might be read as trashy. One of the show's judges, Isaac Mizrahi, warns that the use of red and black lacy fabrics has the potential to look very 'rich' or very 'cheap', indicating the perilous balancing act that the femme fatale figure embodies in relation to class. In her work on the dressed body, Joanna Entwistle notes that 'clothes are often spoken of in moral terms, using words like "faultless", "good", "correct"' (2001: 48). This moral component of clothing becomes very clear in these examples, as 'femme fatale' occupies a potentially risky position, teetering between the pleasures and possibilities of glamour, and the possibility of vulgarity and social abjection.

Anxieties about the boundaries of class and classiness also emerge through online tutorials. Wikihow hosts community-generated how-to guides, offering advice that is alternately very useful or hilariously unworkable, and features a 'How to be a Femme Fatale' article. The 2021 version of the guide suggests a number of approaches to the task, but one subsection offers advice on how to 'be sexy not trashy'. The authors suggest that 'you can show off a bit of your legs, wear low-cut tops, or show off your gorgeous back, but you should also make sure to leave something to the imagination', and, in an echo of the Harvey Nichols copy, that 'if you're wearing a more revealing top, then wear a more conservative skirt with it, and vice versa'. Makeup and other consumer choices are also identified as ways of producing a sophisticated image: 'avoid wearing glittery or shimmery makeup if you want to be a femme fatale. That may look too young and playful for the mysterious look you're going for'.[6] Relatedly, the guide advocates particular drinks: 'avoid overly girly or fruity drinks like a Cosmo, Sex on the Beach, or a piña colada'. The language of being 'not trashy' is combined with warnings about 'girliness', and the guide as a whole points to the labour of choice involved in constructing an appropriately classed, gendered image.

A similar, although less extensive tutorial is offered by allwomenstalk.com, which publishes a wide variety of content aimed at women, including fashion, lifestyle and life advice. Their '10 Step Tutorial For Creating a Femme Fatale Look' (Kati Blake 2010) offers similar advice to that found on Wikihow, and again emphasises a 'classy'

[6] Relatedly, makeup artist Lisa Eldridge produced a tutorial which advocates 'updating' the femme fatale look by swapping Hollywood-style matte foundation for a more 'youthful' dewy base. This again indicates again the tricky balancing act – the femme fatale should be luminous but not too sparkly, neither too matte or too glittery, not too old and not too young (2016).

approach to glamour. Here, the suggestions hinge on tasteful colour choices ('Femme Fatales don't wear bright yellow or fluorescent pink'), femininity ('trousers and other pants are out!'), and sophistication ('Avoid glitter and bright teenage make up at all costs'). Readers are advised to: 'invest in a classic and high quality foundation, eyeliner and lipstick', 'buy clothes that flatter your figure, but don't reveal too much!', and 'never expose your bare legs no matter how toned. Invest in a lot of fish nets, or plain suspenders'. Taste, respectability, and shrewd financial investment are presented as fundamental to the femme fatale look in this tutorial, and the picture emerges of a woman who has carefully self-scrutinised at the stages of buying, selecting and wearing clothing and makeup. Glamour is again precarious, and must be carefully monitored for flaws and missteps at all stages of the process to avoid the risks of revealing too much or being too brash, bright or unpolished. Significantly, the power and freedom of a figure that is described in the tutorial as 'that dangerously seductive woman who owns the room when she walks in' is immediately contingent on conforming to strict, classed rules about not to wear, and how not to behave.

Conclusion

Consumer culture's use of the femme fatale brings the figure into the world in the form of material goods and styles of the body. It is tied predominantly to film noir, and thus to a nostalgic vision of 1940s and 1950s Hollywood glamour, and a fantasy of embodying a historical imaginary of powerful femininity. The western history of the femme fatale is tied to the fear of and attraction to ethnic Others, and the exploitation of these anxieties and desires, often embodied by morally questionable white women. The figure also claims a precarious class position, representing luxury as well as a desire to transcend one's given status and material conditions. As I have demonstrated, these ambivalences are connected with danger and excitement, but as a result the femme fatale is at risk of challenging white middle class values and overlapping with denigrated racialised and classed identities. While this means that the figure has the potential to challenge these values, in the cautious fields of mainstream style media and culture, evocations of the femme fatale in consumer culture use respectable femininity to protect themselves against the possibility of classed and racialised vulgarity while retaining a trace of the femme fatale's attractive danger. The optimism of glamour indicates the potential of the femme fatale as an imaginative resource. However, the frequency with which the figure is associated with whiteness and managed with middle class respectability in consumer culture and style media indicates the limitations of its current use within those contexts.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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