Chapter 5
Seduction and Mutually Assured Destruction:
The Modern “Femme Fatale” in “Gone Girl”

Ana Cabral Martins
Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal

ABSTRACT
In cinema, the most prevalent representation of the figure of the seductress has been the femme fatale or the “vamp”. This chapter will explore the femme fatale in various incarnations in American cinema throughout its history. This chapter will also overview several definitions of femme fatale, and its connection with sex, seduction and destruction, in cinema’s history, principally the American silent film’s “vamp”, personified by the actress Theda Bara; and the 1940s film noir’s femme fatale, personified by actresses such as Rita Hayworth and Barbara Stanwyck. In an attempt to trace a connection between different embodiments of the femme fatale in American cinema, this chapter will focus, in particular, on David Fincher’s cinematic adaptation of the pulp fiction novel Gone Girl (2012), by Gillian Flynn. Not only does Gone Girl (David Fincher, 2014) offer one of the most recent interpretations of the traditional film noir trope, it also provides a modern update of the femme fatale.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0525-9.ch005
INTRODUCTION

In cinema, the most prevalent representation of the figure of the seductress has been the *femme fatale* or the “vamp”. The objective of this chapter is to examine David Fincher’s cinematic adaptation of the pulp fiction book *Gone Girl* (2012), by Gillian Flynn. Not only does *Gone Girl* (David Fincher, 2014) offer one of the most recent interpretations of the traditional *film noir* trope, it also provides a modern update of the *femme fatale* and its connection with sex, seduction and destruction, in contemporary cinema.

This study will be delimited to American cinema, which has, specifically within the history of the *film noir* and the thriller genres, explored the figure of the seductress, of the *femme fatale*, throughout its history. Having said that, I focus my analysis on Theda Bara’s “vamp”; the *film noir* of the 1940s and the *femme fatale* as personified by Phyllis Dietrichson (*Double Indemnity*, 1946) and Rita Hayworth (*The Lady from Shanghai*, 1947), among others; and, finally, the modern *femme fatale* as symbolized by *Gone Girl*’s Amy Dunne, the most recent iteration of the quintessential “deadly woman”. The idea behind this overview is tracing a connection, a through-line between the “first *femme fatale*” played by Theda Bara during the teen years of the twentieth century (Longworth, 2014), and its culmination in the modern and decidedly twenty-first century representation and reinterpretation of the *femme fatale* in *Gone Girl*.

REFLECTIONS ON THE CINEMATIC *FEMME FATALE*

I would like to start this examination by exploring different definitions of the *femme fatale* figure, including readings that align it with either with misogynistic or feminist interpretations, to determine the place that the *femme fatale* has had in American cinema, and in *film noir* in particular.

Generally speaking, the *femme fatale* is a “seductress” (a woman who seduces someone, usually one who entices a man into sexual activity), which can be a “temptress”, “enchantress”, “siren” or “vamp”, adding a deadly component to the formula. The *femme fatale* is the quintessential embodiment of lust and danger (or, at least, of the dangerous nature of lust). This expression denotes the employment of a woman’s sensuality, sexuality and intelligence to either further her own agenda or to advance her quest for power.

In the introduction to *Femme Fatale: Cinema’s Most Unforgettable Lethal Ladies* (2009), Dominique Mainon describes the *femme fatale* as being a “quintessential part of our collective imagination” going back to the Judeo-Christian Bible, where Eve (the very first *femme fatale*) lures Adam into committing a sin. Dominique
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