

Femme Fatale in French Film Noir

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Abstract: The term film noir was coined by two French film critics Borde and Chaumont in 1956 to describe American detective stories made in the 1940s. Noir films were seen as a counter-cultural movement within Hollywood at that time, and the French new wave continued this feature in the 1960s. Therefore, the term noir itself connects the Frenchness and Americanness. This paper tends to map out the film noir sensibilities in French content through unfolding the characteristics of femme fatale in two French noir films Jean-Luc Godard's *A bout de souffle (Breathless)* (1960) and Jean-Jacques Beineix's *Diva* (1981).

1. Introduction

Genevieve Sellier states that the spider-woman fatale in American noir is almost entirely absent in classic French film noir [3]. This rule can also apply in Jean-Luc Godard's *A bout de souffle (Breathless)* (1960) and Jean-Jacques Beineix's *Diva* (1981), two films are highly inspired by classic American film noir and all centre American female characters. Two historical moments have great impacts on the female representations in those two films; one is the Americanisation in France after the first World War, another one is the May 1968. Kristin Ross claims that France was the world's biggest film supplier up to 1914, but well-capitalised American studios were "quick to pick up on the assembly line and scientific marketing technique worked out in the auto industry" [4]. After the Occupation, Hollywood production flooded into France, by 1947, American films had overrun the country. The films came along with American political, military and economic superiority, the spread of American capitalism and consumerism caused anxieties in French society which reflected in French films. Another crucial historical movement was the May 1968. It was a call for cultural, political and social liberation. In the film industry, filmmakers raised a campaign against censorship, asked for the right to speak freely, and many reflective political films were made under that circumstance. Jill Forbes suggests that the May 1968 provided the impetus for the women's movement in France [5], followed by that was the sexual revolution, then it was the legalisation of abortion, generalised availability of contraception pills and the popularisation of feminism in the post-May 68 period. This essay will focus on the sexual politics portrayed in *A Bout de Souffle* and *Diva*, argue that the femme fatales in those films indicate the progression of the representation of female sexuality, reflecting a relatively positive attitude towards female liberation in France, at the same time, suggesting the anxieties in French society in the post-war period. The first part of the essay will focus on the representations of femme fatales in *Breathless* and *Diva* and the second part will discuss the meaning of the Americanness in the films.

2. The characterisation of Femme Fatales

Regarding the influence of Americanisation and the Americanness of Patricia Franchini (Jean Seberg) and Cynthia Hawkins (Wilhelmenia Fernandez), those two femme fatales cannot be read without considering American noir tradition. Both *Breathless* and *Diva* portray ambivalent femme fatales, they are sexually seductive, ambiguous and vulnerable in the male gaze, but more importantly, the films offer strong contrasts to American femme fatales, suggesting the progression of female liberation in France. In *Breathless*, Patricia is labelled as an attractive femme fatale by the transgressive hero. Michel steals a car, kills the policeman then comes to chase Patricia, the girl who sells New York Herald Tribune on the street. Her sexual attractiveness and vulnerability are fully exposed in the hotel room sequence. The room is full of frames, the mirror frames Michel and Patricia, the posters on the wall, close-up of the naked women on the magazine and close-ups of two protagonists intercut with medium shots. Throughout the sequence, Patricia is shown as an object for desire, the senses of fetishisation and isolation are implied through the close-ups of her. Only her face is captured in the mirror when two characters standing in the bathroom, and there is a close-up of her when Michel's hands circle her neck threatening her to smile from off-screen. Later, the camera tilts down to her waist when Michel touches her bottom while she hangs up the printing of Renoir, the camera also pans to her body from her face when Michel touches her in the bed. Douglas Morrey writes that it is a significant problem in Godard's depiction of women that women on film are presented from a masculine point of view, and this is also particularly true in film noir [6]. Same as spider-woman, she inevitably sleeps with the hero near the end of the sequence. Although Patricia seems passive in the image, but arguably it is Patricia who controls the outcome since she sleeps with the hero only when she is ready. Overall, the femme fatale is both fetishised and manipulative.

Same as Patricia, Cynthia Hawkins in *Diva* is also portrayed as an object of desire. Cynthia enters into the film in a montage sequence in the opera house. It starts with a medium close-up of Jules surreptitiously recording the performance, then it cuts to his point of view shot showing Cynthia coming to the stage. Then camera cuts to a close-up of the sunglasses of the Asian man who comes for the recording of diva's performance. In the reflection, diva in the white dress stands out from the dark background. All three shot indicate the propriety of the gaze of the male. Cynthia is frequently framed and isolated; camera always captures her alone in the medium close-ups when she is on the stage or in the hotel room, and there is a poster of her in Jules' room; Jules steals her rope and hires a black prostitute to wear it; he records her voices, the act which she considers as "theft" and "rape". As Will Higbee emphasises, the film thematises a split between female sound and image, so that Jules can construct the diva as his object of desire [7]. I suggest through the fetishisation, an Oedipal relationship between two characters is established. After the concert, Jules comes back to his room, the sequence is predominately blue. It is the colour associated with diva throughout the film, as Higbee argues, blue suggests the safe and calming maternal qualities of the diva [7]. Bathing in the lighting, Jules sinks into the chair and covered by diva's dress, surrounded by the reproduced sound, the camera pans to Jules touching the turning table which replays the sound. Kaja Silverman implies that by producing a surrogate object, Jules is able to fill in for the absent and impossible, by doing so, he disavows his castration [8]. It implies that Cynthia is the symbolic mother, it is the similarity between classic femme fatale and Cynthia, there play the same role in the Oedipal Complex

However, both *Breathless* and *Diva* offer sharp contrasts to the conventional femme fatale, suggesting a positive attitude towards female liberation, indicating that French society did not experience a wide-reaching crisis of masculinity. The endings of two films provide counter-arguments against the tragic fate of sexually desirable femme fatale. As Fiona Handyside illustrates, Patricia escapes narrative determination, refuses to be labelled by the hero and remains independent and subjective [9]. Patricia gives Michel away to the police because she claims that she does not like

him anymore. At the last sequence, Michel comes out of the house and meets his gangster friend who offers him a chance to run away and gives him a gun, he turns down his offer and throws the gun. The camera violently cuts to a close-up from a medium long shot, he turns into the camera communicates with the spectators, saying “I had enough, I’m tired”. It indicates his willingness to die as a noir hero who often framed by a woman. It can be read as his attempt to label Patricia as the classic spider woman to complete his noir fantasy. Then the camera shows the arrival of the policemen and the shooting. After a series of running, Michel lies on the floor; he says to Patricia, “you are a real louse”. Then it cuts to a close-up of Patricia, she too turns and stares directly into the camera, asks what does “dégueulasse” mean. The failure of understanding the French language marks a refusal of being labelled as a fatal femme fatale. She turns back to the frame remains unreadable.

3. The Frenchness and Americanisation in the Films

One could argue that the ending of *Breathless* remains the doom of noir, whereas the ending of *Diva* offers a complete contrast to the tragicness of classic noir, it ends with an open resolution. The film starts with the diva’s voice and ends with the reproduced voice. Same as the opening sequence, the last scene takes place at the opera house; diva stands in the middle of the stage surrounded by the technological reproduction, Jules comes to the stage ask for forgiveness. With him coming onto the stage, the camera zooms into diva, as if to obsessive her reaction, however, the distance is emphasised by the shot scale, we cannot get closer to diva to read her. Then it cuts to a shot-reverse-shot showing the conversation between her and Jules. She says in English, “But I’ve never heard myself sing.” The camera then cuts back to the long shot again, showing two characters kissing, then it tracks out until the frame is frozen. There are many readings on the ending, Fredric Jameson describes it as “a curious mixture of old and new”, he explains that it is difficult to decide whether it is a repressive or conservative recuperation or an “imaginary solution of a real condition” [10]. The openness of the film strongly contrasts the doomed closure of classic noir. The returning of diva’s stolen voice and Jules’s confession humanise diva to certain extent; the male gaze is prioritised in the beginning, but the relationship between Jules and diva are in balance in the end.

Furthermore, *Diva* offers a new approach to the representation of female sexuality, Alba can be read as a representative liberated post-May 68 female. In comparison with Patricia and Cynthia, Alba is more mobile and powerful. Alba is introduced to us at her shoplifting; she steals an album then the cashier asks to check her portfolio, her nude photos are revealed when the cashier opens it. Alba asks “Can I dressed now”, her nudity strongly contrasts to the dress losing of diva. She uses her nudity to get away with shoplifting, whereas diva’s rope has been stolen passively. Same as diva, Alba is always captured in the frame or reflected in the mirror, but as Carina L. Yervasi argues, Alba repeatedly places her representation right out of the present moment and eternalise it [11]. In another word, she escapes the framing because of her mobility, and she has more control of her sexuality. Gorodish and Alba’s flat is introduced with a montage sequence. In the sequence, there is a close-up of her standing next to her nude photograph, the composition of the frame is almost the same with the shot of Patricia standing next to a Renoir’s printing in the hotel room. Patricia has just been touched by Michel before that shot, whereas Alba is juxtaposed with the minimised objects in the flat and other profiles of her. Patricia is sexually vulnerable in the male gaze, but Alba moves around the flat with her roller shoes, escaping the frame. Her mobility is stressed by contrasting the still images of her and her free movement. Furthermore, the classic impressionist printing is juxtaposed with nudity of a young girl, it is a juxtaposition of high art and popular culture, suggesting a sexual liberation and the progression of feminism in the post-May 68 period, modern women could live beyond frame rather than being fixed in the male gaze.

Comparing with diva, Alba is also more subjective and aware of the situation. Alba can access to diva’s voice through the type Jules made, she observes the poster of diva on the wall, and she is aware

of Jules' criminal behaviour which diva does not know until the end of the film. In the scene Jules comes over to Gorodish's flat, there is a shot showing Alba staring at herself in the mirror with Jules looking at her in the reflection. High key lighting foregrounds their facial expressions. She asks "Don't you think I'm starting look like an old woman?", Then after Jules answers, she slips out of the frame, only Jules is left in the frame. Later in the film, Jules comes to diva's apartment, they are also shown together in the mirror when they are having breakfast. However, only diva's facial expression is captured in the mirror, Jules sits with his back towards the mirror, remains hidden. There are many mirror scenes in her apartment, but it seems diva cannot realise that she is framed. She is more passive than Alba since she is not aware of Jules' guilt. I suggest that one could not argue that Alba is a fully progressive female character since she is under Gorodish's control, and looks for a way to fit in the patriarchal society, but her mobility and her ability to control her image prove the progression of female representation in the 1980s in France.

Three female characters in those films are all immigrants living in Paris for different reasons, the French fears of Americanisation might be implied through the female representations, but at the same time, *Diva* also offers a conservative political point of view. The Americanness of the femme fatales are juxtaposed with the Frenchness of the male protagonists. In *Breathless*, Michel holds a bear toy in the hotel room and the fact that he is obsessed with the tragedy of noir; all suggest that he wants to be the "Frenchman" who is played by Jean Gabin in *Le Jour se Leve*. As Phil Powrie argues, *Diva* shares with the other films of the cinema du look a quintessential Frenchness, and he reads Jules as a representative of traditional French left populism [12]. The interactions between French men and American women reflect a sense of anxiety. Arguably, Michel's obsession with American popular culture leads him to the death; he is attracted to American cars and classic noir figure, Humphrey Bogart, he wants to be a transgressive hero because of the influence of American culture, he chases an American girl who betrays him and causes his death. In *Diva*, the fear is associated with modernisation. Cynthia's fear is about the development of the technological reproduction; she fears the high art will eventually become one of the products to sell in the consumer society. However, the type which recorded her voice is mixed up with another type of incriminating testimony. The fear of the reproductive machinery is intertwined with the political corruption, reflecting the floating political and social anxieties in the 1980s in France. Considering the Americanisation/modernisation aforementioned in the introduction, I suggest that the Americanness is associated with anxieties about the cultural and political invasion of American. However, different from *Breathless*, as a post-May 98 film, *Diva* conveys more conservative values. John Izod suggests, Patricia is a white tourist who comes to Paris to enjoy mildly rebellious kicks, whereas Cynthia is a black American who come to Paris to perform opera, through her, *Diva* depicts seamless wedding of French and American culture [13]. As Forbes states, diva transmits a little of beauty to Jules by the kiss, momentarily allowing Jules to enjoy "the lush beauty of America" [5]. Furthermore, the Asian region of Alba and the blackness of diva offer new female representations, through them, the film portrays a multi-cultural French society. The image of diva might be problematic since she is the passive one who lost the voice. However, Higbee notes that the fact the African-American female is not presented as an exotic/erotic colonial body, but as a diva in French/Western visual culture, regarding race, *Diva* emerges readily and subversive manner [7]. It reflects the racial liberation in the post-May 1968 period.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, both *Breathless* and *Diva* have classic noir sensibilities, the femme fatales are depict as objects to desire, they have certain sexual power over the hero and involved in hero's transgressive fantasy or Oedipal Complex. However, they offer strong contrasts to classic film noir, both femme fatales are not punished because of their sexuality at the end of the films. Furthermore, the progressive

female presentation of Alba in *Diva* indicates the female liberation in the post-May 1968 period. The second part of the essay argued that the Americanness in the films is associated with anxieties. *Breathless* reflects traditional French anxiety about Americanisation; *Diva* suggests fears of the modernisation, however, in terms of the representations of race, *Diva* implies a liberated attitude towards the racial problem. Overall, unlike America, France did not experience masculinity crisis in the post-war period, and as Alistair Rolls and Deborah Walker argue that France retained a more solidly patriarchal society [14]. They suggest there might be three reasons for the lack of spider-women in French cinema, one is French films tempted to evoke a particular French Catholic sensibility, which might be more “open in allowing the expression of both male and female sexuality”. Secondly, the Occupation had traumatic effect on French as a nation and French women did not play important economic and political roles during that period to threaten the patriarchal society. Thirdly, the majority of women’s organisations in the post-war period focused on “blistering women’s procreational role as wives and mothers within the patriarchal family unit”. The self-reflectivity of *Breathless* and *Diva* offer us a chance to observe the changes of French society and gender politics in history.

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