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On the Teenage Femme Fatale of Postfeminism

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The flourishing of the femme fatale character in noir and, later, neo-noir films is no coincidence. The period during and after World War Two was a time of rapid and profound social changes, which also had a significant influence on gender relations. Faced with the lack of a male workforce, women were forced to enter a broader labour market. In this context, there appeared the femme fatale of film noir, who, like her predecessor from the end of the 19th century, when the femme fatale made her big entrance in the canon of Western culture, was a manifestation of the social fears of patriarchal society due to the changing power relations. The main presupposition of this fear is that women can gain power only on account of the weakening of men. The turn of the millennium is considered a similarly turbulent period of rapid changes. It was a time of the establishment of the global economy, the rise of consumerism and a political shift toward neoliberalism, whose main goals were the dismantling of the old social institutions, individualisation and the fetishisation of entrepreneurship. This dismantling and globalisation, on the one hand, and the expansion of consumerism, on the other, had, among other things, a long-term impact on the definition of girlhood, which became synonymous with consumerism. The end of the second wave of feminism saw the establishment of the so-called postfeminism, whose "*constructions of contemporary gender relations are profoundly contradictory*."[1] All

1 Gill, Rosalind. 2008: "Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Postfeminist Times".

this is reflected in the distinctly bipolar understanding of girlhood, on whose wings the new teenage femme fatale can be considered at the turn of the millennium.

Katherine Farrimond already noted something similar in her *The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and American Cinema* (2018), connecting the rise of the new teenage femme fatale with the so-called crisis of girlhood, originating in the tension between understanding girls as our hopes for the future, on the one hand, and representing girls as weak and in trouble, on the other.[2] She sees the clearest and most interesting manifestations of this new fille fatale in *Cruel Intentions* (1999) and *Pretty Persuasion* (2005). Farrimond's remarks about the presence of the new femme fatale in films are confirmed by the fact that, today, against the backdrop of socio-political changes at the turn of the millennium, we can notice a new form of the femme fatale, which, like its predecessors, demands an in-depth analysis.

How should the femme fatale be understood?

The femme fatale is a character without a fixed definition as it repeatedly appears as a response to the given social reality and, as such, exists in many materialisations and media. The revival of its archetype is especially noticeable during "*periods of women's struggle for their rights and equality with men – particularly in terms of gender and sexuality – as well as during capitalist economic crises, which are often understood as crises of masculinity*."[3] Despite the different periods and media in which they appear, the different renditions of the femme fatale thus share, above all, the impossibility of imagining the femme fatale figure without the fundamental presupposition of gender inequality.

In addition to this fundamental presupposition, the following four factors are significant in the case of the cinematic femme fatale: (1) the given socio-political reality and the related fears of the changing gender relations felt by patriarchal society: the femme fatale cannot exist if there are no gendered expectations and gender inequality in society. But the character of the femme fatale is not one that passively accepts the given reality, for it can be understood as a "*'performance' that threatens and challenges the hegemonic roles patriarchy establishes, dictates, and endeavors to maintain*."[4] But because the given socio-political reality has an impact on the shaping of social expectations, the ways in which the femme fatale is transgressive change together with them. At the end of the 19th century, the femme fatale thus appeared as an answer to the fear that the so-called new woman[5] "*is no longer woman*

Subjectivity, vol. 25, no. 1, p. 442.

2 Farrimond Kathrine. 2018: *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*. New York: Routledge, p. 67.

3 Silva, Antônio Márcio da. 2014: *The "Femme" Fatale in Brazilian Cinema*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 8.

4 *Ibid*., p. 5.

5 New Woman is connected primarily with the first wave of feminism and the suffragette movement.

as nature meant her to be. She incarnates destruction rather than creativity. She has lost the capacity for love, and with it her function as wife and mother."[6] Similarly, the femme fatale of film noir also embodies the patriarchal social fears of the war and post-war period. It involves criticism of the special independence or "*women's indifference towards sacrificing any of their personal desires to come forward in place of men called to war*."[7] An in-depth examination of the character thus always requires an analysis of the socio-political reality of the time in which it appears. (2) Western beauty standards: if one of the defining characteristics of the femme fatale is her ability to gain power over the male subject through seduction, she has to be defined as beautiful. "*Femme fatales are exclusively under forty, and conform to normative standards of beauty and body type. Her power derives from her ability to meet patriarchal standards which the majority of women are unable to meet themselves.*"[8] This is all the more true of US and European films, regarding which Caputi emphasises that "*much of the standard imagery associated with the white femme fatale is actually rooted in colonialist and racist projections about the women of color*,"[9] for, according to the colonialist understanding, the characteristics that make a woman or the femme fatale noir – especially lust, sexual aggression, violence, promiscuity, duplicity, betrayal and the like – are precisely the ones attributed to women of colour. (3) The character of the seduced has traditionally always been represented as male. In the context of the struggle for equality, this can be understood as male anxiety about the loss of social power since the presupposition regarding feminism and the struggle for equality is often that women gain power at the expense of men. This presupposition was also transferred to the femme fatale figure, who is fatal only in the presence of a male protagonist. In noir and neo-noir, femmes fatales "are treated as evil objects due to what their bodies can do to men,"[10] while the seduced man is often the ideal of the traditional model of hegemonic manhood, reduced to "*heterosexuality, whiteness, physical strength, suppression of emotions such as sadness, empathy or regret (being emotionally stoical), athleticism, risk-taking and competitiveness*."[11] What is, at least traditionally, important for the femme fatale is that, with her sexuality, she endangers a man who meets the hegemonic model of manhood, for only such a man has access to social power, which she herself strives for. Put differently, the gender of the seduced is actually less important than the fact of them having access to social power, unlike her, which is actually most

6 Ridge, George Ross. 1961: "The 'Femme Fatale' in French Decadence". *The French Review*, vol. 34, no. 4, p. 353.

7 Večeřová, Monika. 2021: "The African American Femme Fatale: How Black Hard-Boiled Fiction Encourages Misogynoir". *Theory and Practice in English Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, p. 24.

8 Farrimond 2018, p. 10.

9 Caputi, Jane. 2004: *Goddesses and Monsters*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press. p. 52.

10 Večeřová 2021, p. 31.

11 Douglas, Susan J. 2019: "Media, Gender and Feminism". In: Curan James, David Hesmondhalgh, ed. *Media and Society*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, p. 47.

often manifested in the relationship between the active male protagonist and the femme fatale. Nevertheless, there are rare cases of the femme fatale with bisexual or homosexual tendencies, which is most often just a way to depict the femme fatale as even more corrupt since she endangers both hegemonic genders.[12] (4) Genre: both the way in which the given social fears manifest in the femme fatale and the character of the seduced depend on the genre of the film in which they appear. Genres such as thrillers and action films require and are more open to their heroes being vile, treacherous, corrupt and manipulative, which builds additional tension in the film, providing the environment in which the femme fatale most often finds herself. Some people thus even equate film noir, permeated with the stated characteristics, with the femme fatale.[13] At the same time, this also means that certain other genres are, at least prima facie, incompatible with the manipulative and corrupt world of the femme fatale.

All four factors affect the femme fatale in film noir (1940s) and later neo-noir. Although they are rarely explicitly named, they can be observed in many analyses of the femme fatale. In view of this, the turn of the millennium and its new sociopolitical reality should entail a new manifestation of the femme fatale, which Farrimond observed in the character of a teenage girl. "*Teenage girls did appear in classic-era film noir, but did not operate as femme fatales. Instead, when teenage or less mature young women did feature, their existence often served to illuminate the wickedness of the femme fatale.*"[14] In the 1990s, teenage girls also became the centre of broader media attention. In the US at the time, teenage girls thus became a crisis generation. "*Although not scapegoating girls for broader social problems, it is clear that the press constructed girls themselves as a social problem.*"[15] If, in the first half of the 20th century, a young woman or a teenage girl in the role of a seductress – a good example of which is *Lolita* (Kubrick, 1962) – was not considered controversial, the attitude towards her changed in the 1990s. The responses to Kubrick's *Lolita* were relatively positive, with the audience finding the relationship realistic and possible:

> Mrs. Juanita Harper, 27: It could happen in real life. I wasn't shocked though... Mrs. Anna Casa, 42: There are lots of girls like that one, lured on by men... Mrs. Barbara Puleo, 24: I think it was the mistake the mother made, having all those men around her, that accounted for the daughter. The girl never had any supervision... Miss Virginia Venturini, 15: I think the girl took over the older man and I felt sorry for him... Albert Scarkilli, 48:

12 Silva 2014, p. 131.

13 Hanson, Helen, Catherine O'Rawe. 2010: "Introduction: 'Cherchez la femme'". In: Hanson Helen, Catherine O'Rawe, ed. *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 2.

14 Farrimond 2018, p. 59.

15 Mazzarella, S. R., & Pecora, N. 2007: "Girls in crisis: Newspaper coverage of adolescent girls". *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 31, no. 1, p. 21.

> The story is understandable, a middle-age man goes overboard for a young girl. I would say she took him over... Charles Puleo, 27: This was something that could happen to anybody. I felt sorry for the stepfather – an older man hooked up with a girl like that.[16]

Contrary to this, quite a scandal broke out even before the release of *Lolita* (Lyne, 1997). Hatch ascribes to these discourses regarding the appropriateness of films such as the two *Lolitas* the role of reinforcing the idea of innocent childhood and the adults' role in maintaining it. All of that happens "*in the face of the radical social changes of the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly the redefinition of womanhood and the diminishment of patriarchal authority, the controversies surrounding these films serve as a means of reinforcing women's maternal role and of articulating concerns about men's sexuality*."[17] The teenage femme fatale thus begins to develop in the period when "*the adult woman now inhabits the same world as the man, but the child-woman moves in a universe which he cannot enter*."[18] Hollywood's fascination with the sexuality of girls was also a result of the acceptance of psychoanalytic theories in the general consciousness of the post-war period – especially the Oedipus complex. This led to the popular belief "*that a girl's sexuality was properly developed in relation to a patriarchal family structure*."[19] Alongside the development of the first wave of the new fille fatale, there emerged a movement whose purpose was to protect children from sexual abuse. On the one hand, this movement developed from right-wing opposition to LGBTQ rights and the slogan *Save Our Children*, and, on the other hand, from the new feminist wave, which focused on the problem of rape and pornography. Consequently, there was also a shift in the understanding of the role of the father: "*No longer was an adult man responsible, by virtue of his role as father, for the development of a girl's sexuality. Instead the girl was susceptible to his dangerous gaze*."[20] Despite the father's role in her development changing, the fear that the fille fatale embodied remained the same. The disintegration of the nuclear patriarchal family was supposedly a result of the possibility of women entering the professional sphere. "*If adolescent girls' sexuality was perceived to be in jeopardy, adult women were blamed for leaving them vulnerable to the male gaze*."[21] Where male self-control used to be presupposed, now the woman is the one who has supposedly disavowed young girls with the 'renunciation' of her maternal function.

16 Hatch, K. 2002: "Fille Fatale: Regulating Images of Adolescent Girls, 1962–1996". In: Gateward, Frances, Murray Pomerance ed. *Sugar, Spice and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, p. 164.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 164.

18 Beauvoir, Simone de. 1962: *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome*. Trans. Bernard Fretchman. London: The New English Library LTD. p. 14.

19 Hatch 2002, p. 166.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 172.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 174.

At the end of the previous millennium, teenage girls could already appear as fully fledged femmes or filles fatales. Farrimond claims that this rise of the fille fatale occurred on the basis of an expressly bipolar perception of girlhood characteristic of that period. This perception developed against the backdrop of the socio-political climate that, together with the other three mentioned factors, shaped the new fille fatale of the 21st century.

1. Neoliberalism and postfeminism of the end of the millennium and their fears

The predominating factors in the new construction of girlhood noted by Farrimond are neoliberalism, which came to the fore with the rise of Margaret Thatcher at the end of the 20th century, and postfeminism at the turn of the millennium. Both factors are strongly intertwined. Gill sees the two as so similar and intertwined that she wonders whether neoliberalism itself is perhaps not "always already gendered", with women "constructed as its ideal subjects."[22] The set of neoliberal policies, which, toward the end of the 20th century, shifted increasingly from the sphere of political economy to the dismantling of the welfare-state policies, is permeated with the idea of individualism. Neoliberalism is increasingly more often understood as a producer of subjects who are entrepreneurial, reasonable, calculating and above all self-regulating, with precisely women repeatedly being called to this role in public discourse. This new neoliberal subject also has numerous similarities with the subject of postfeminism, which is also active, free in its choices and self-redefining.[23] The freedom of neoliberalism becomes a paradoxical coercion; the woman has to constantly choose, self-reform and redefine herself, for it is only thereby that she can remain relevant in the new imperative of constant self-improvement through consumption. This means, of course, that she is coerced to renounce precisely the freedom and autonomy lauded by neoliberalism.

Postfeminism from the 1980s onwards was a direct response to the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, when women realized that formal equality "*can prove chimerical when civic and political structures which permit such processes of equality already work in favour of the dominant group, and demonstrate that in fact the discourses of power assume relations of inequality at their very roots*."[24] The struggle was thus concentrated primarily on the dismantling of deeper systems of inequality and on bodily autonomy. In the field of culture, it involved especially the questioning of the representation of women in mass culture. There emerged the desire to depict real women, which manifested itself especially in (semi)documentary films. With both its form and content, feminist culture opposed mass culture, whose discourse was considered

22 Gill 2008, p. 443.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Whelehan, Imelda. 1995: *Modern Feminist Thought*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. p. 1.

distinctly patriarchal. Despite this oppositional position, with the growing popularity of women's studies and the concrete achievements of the movement, feminism also entered mass culture. The concrete heritage of the second wave of feminism was "*a climate in which some feminist concerns had been 'incorporated' into mainstream political, cultural and legislative frameworks*."[25] Contrary to second-wave feminism, postfeminism has often been represented in popular culture and frequently presented as a belief about the redundancy of feminism since all its demands had already been met, which makes it superfluous today. Postfeminism has turned the organized political struggle characteristic of feminism into an individual consumerist project. "*In part to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism; crucially, it also works to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer.*"[26] The neoliberal and the postfeminist subject complement each other so nicely since "*values such as entrepreneurialism, individualism, and the expansion of capitalist markets are embraced and adopted by girls and women as a way to craft their selves*."[27] With the neoliberal exhaustion of the responsibility of the "*old social institutions of family, education, medicine and law, which have historically been charged with the responsibility of producing and reproducing the category of girl as a certain kind of subject*,"[28] consumer society has taken firm root, and so "*commercial values now occupy a critical place in the formation of the categories of youthful femininity*."[29] The socio-political context in which girls have new, increased buying power has led, on the one hand, to new studies of girlhood and, on the other, to the understanding of girls as empowered, endangered and vulnerable at the same time.[30] This duality in the perception of girls is already inscribed in postfeminism itself since feminist ideas are both expressed and denied and so its "*constructions of contemporary gender relations are profoundly contradictory*."[31] As new consumers, girls have also become part of the media landscape – since approximately the 1990s, "*girls have become central figures within media culture, where they play an especially key role*."[32]

In this socio-political climate, Shields-Dobson identifies four conditions of postfeminism:

25 Hollows, Jane and Rachel Moseley. 2006: "Popularity Contests: The Meanings of Popular Feminism". In: Hollows Jane, Rachel Moseley ed. *Feminism and Popular Culture*. Oxford: Berg. p. 7.

26 Tasker, Yvonne, Diane Negra. 2007: "Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture". In: Tasker Yvonne, Diane Negra ed. *Interrogating Postfeminism*, Durkhaim, London: Duke University Press, p. 2.

27 Banet-Weiser, Sarah. 2018: "Postfeminism and Popular Feminism". *Feminist Media Histroy*, vol. 4, no. 2, p. 154.

28 McRobbie, Angela. 2008: "Young Women and Consumer Culture: An Intervention". *Cultural Studies*, vol. 22, no. 5, p. 532.

29 *Ibid.*

30 McDermott, Catherine. 2022: *Feel-Bad Postfeminism*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, p. 15.

31 Gill 2008, p. 442.

32 McDermott 2022, p. 15.

> 1) continued and prominent objectification of female bodies in Western visual culture, now framed as "chosen/agentic"; 2) the prominence of "new femininities" in culture and representations that construct and address girls and young women as strong, confident, capable, and fun-loving subjects in contrast to earlier models of weak femininity; 3) highly publicized debates about the sexualization of girls and young women in Western cultures, which have positioned girls and young women as in need of protection, surveillance, and regulation; and 4) the psychopathologization of femininity.[33]

The key conditions for the new social fears were the representation of women, girls and young women as strong and confident and the discussions about the sexualisation of girls. Over time, there developed the belief that the empowerment of girls had gone too far. Feminism thus became "*implicated in the story of girls' aggression and meanness, signaling the complex infusion of feminist discourse into the contemporary 'postfeminist' 'gender regime'*."[34] The narrative of both postfeminism and neoliberalism blames the newly discovered aggression of girls on the unsuccessful results of feminist goals. It claims that "*we are witnessing the social costs of a pathological femininity that has entered into the public sphere through feminist gains for women*;"[35] or, put differently, the fille fatale is the embodiment of a pathological aggressiveness of femininity, understood as a consequence of feminism. At the same time, there came a new wave of the sexualisation of women's and girls' bodies with minimal change. The sexualisation of the female body is now represented as desired and chosen. Despite the postfeminist representation of women as subjects with sexual desires and drives, "*they are still on display, and it is in part the representation of women's supposed desire and active choice-making that positions female bodies as desirable within the postfeminist cultural context*."[36] Alongside the granting of sexual freedom and power to girls and young women, especially through cultural presentations and public discourses, we can also observe "*panicked protectionist and moralist discourses about cultural sexualization and its supposed effects on girls and young women*."[37] Girls and young women thus find themselves in a cultural landscape that encourages them to actively approach their sexuality,[38] otherwise they are often understood as frigid, but, at the same time, there are still mechanisms that punish women for such an approach to sexuality.

The broader social context of neoliberalism and postfeminism is where Kimberly (*Pretty Persuasion*, 2005) finds herself, bending over backwards to become an actress,

33 Dobson, Amy Shields. 2015: *Postfeminism and Digital Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 29.

34 Ringrose, Jessica. 2006: "A New Universal Mean Girl". *Feminism & Psychology,* vol. 16, no. 4, p. 414.

35 *Ibid*., p. 415.

36 Dobson 2015, p. 30.

37 *Ibid*., p. 35.

38 In this context, it remains heterosexual of course.

but the agents simply see no potential in her. Kimberly, however, knows very well how the system works, which is why she decides to cause a scandal. Together with two friends, they accuse their drama teacher of sexual harassment. Each of them has her own goal, but above them all is Kimberly's wish to become the girl everybody is talking about. The hoax is revealed in court, but it turns out that this had been Kimberly's plan all along, for, in the end, she gets the desired role, although at the expense of her friends. We first meet her at an audition, where she provocatively dances in front of two middle-aged men, who watch her with an exceptionally stoic gaze. Compared to the other candidates for the role, who we will discuss later, we soon realize that the role is incredibly sexualised, which is further confirmed by the dialogue in which one of the two agents says: "You're a little Gallic hottie", "and Cody, naturally, wants to get all up in that ass soup", "you wiggle your little tushy in front of the audience... as you bend over to pick it up, and presto! A star is born." But Kimberly wants that, she wants to be an actress, so, in the context of postfeminism, her sexualisation is chosen, active and desired. Farrimond claims that both films, *Pretty Persuasion* (2005) and *Cruel Intentions* (1999), "*do not pointedly condemn and vilify these characters, but instead ask questions about agency, sexuality and social acceptance, leaving space for a sympathetic reading of the plight of the teenage femme fatale despite the final downfall she is given by both narratives*."[39] A sympathetic reading of the femme fatale is by no means new though, as Mary Ann Doane points out in the case of (neo) noir films when she notes that the femme fatale – "*like any representation – is not totally under the control of its producers and, once* disseminated*, comes to take on a life of its own*,"[40] and it is precisely in her new life that the possibilities for a sympathetic reading of the figure open up. What is truly new in these films is the understanding of sexuality itself. With the new understanding of women as capable of desire, the sexual pleasure of the femme fatale is no longer only apparent.[41] Sex scenes focusing on her pleasure are more frequent, which is further supported by the depiction of such moments: with her partner Barry being totally cut out, we see exclusively Kimberly. Nevertheless, this does not mean that she no longer uses her sexuality to gain power over the male protagonist.

It is about "*acknowledging sex not only as a means for girls to get what they desire, but as an expression of desire in itself*."[42] Kimberly is promiscuous, but the sex scenes are often directed toward her pleasure. It is particularly noted that the sexual relations between her and Barry are always focused on her pleasure. Still, her desire is not punished. We learn later in the film that she also wanted to take revenge on her

39 Farrimond 2018, p. 67.

40 Doane, Mary Ann. 1991: *Femmes Fatales*. New York: Routledge, p. 3.

41 Bronfen, Elisabeth. 2004: "Femme Fatale: Negotiations of Tragic Desire". *New Literary History*, vol. 35, no.1, p. 106.

42 Farrimond 2018, p. 70.

friend, whose current boyfriend is her ex, who had left Kimberly precisely due to her promiscuity. From the conversation between Kimberly, Randa and Brittany at Kimberly's, we learn that Kimberly is much more experienced than her two friends, as confirmed by the flashback in which we briefly see Kimberly and her ex-boyfriend during intercourse, but there is no room for Kimberly in this shot. A similar shot is used twice more: during the intercourse between Kimberly and the journalist and Josh and Kimberly. Although the film does show the beginnings of her sexuality and pleasure, they are quite marginal, for her sexual pleasure mostly remains only apparent.

In this regard, the final message of the film, which was released just before the expansion of the #MeToo movement, is not insignificant: it suggests that, with the new power provided by feminism, girls and young women have become mean. With false accusations of sexual violence and their newly discovered sexuality, they destroy men and their patriarchal nuclear families.

Similar social pressure, especially between desire and what is considered excessive desire, whose boundary is not only unclearly delineated but also changes according to the gender of the subject of desire, is something that Kathryn in *Cruel Intentions* (1999) also experiences. She and her stepbrother are known seducers, popular and smart teenagers. Importantly, the film suggests that there is a certain degree of attraction between them, which allows Kathryn to exercise a degree of dominance over Sebastian. We meet Kathryn as a sort of tutor to the younger Cecile, who is to enrol in Kathryn's school in the autumn. When Cecile and her mother leave, we realize that it was all pretend, that Kathryn is as corrupt as her stepbrother and that she uses the fact that he is attracted to her to her advantage. As Farrimond notes, "*sex for Kathryn in this film is not about binary oppositions of male pleasure and female success, but a complex interweaving of her own desires, both sexual and material, and the erotic manipulation she employs to realise these desires*."[43] Like Kimberly, she too experiences that, for a woman, sexual desire has certain limits that cannot be crossed. The double standard that Kathryn is aware of is also repeatedly referred to in the film. When Kathryn asks Sebastian to seduce Cecile, she explicitly says why she will take her revenge on her and not her ex, Court Reynolds: "*Because if there's an attack made on Court, it could be traced back to me. I can't allow that to happen. Everybody loves me and I intend to keep it that way.*" She is aware that she can live the life she currently has, both sexually and otherwise, only as long as others allow her to, as long as others consider her diligent, pleasant, "pure". This can also be observed in her clothes, which often conceal who she really is. When Kathryn engages in conversations with other adults or wants to be taken seriously, she is dressed much more maturely than when she is alone or with her brother. On such occasions, she more often wears more revealing clothes.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

On the other hand, Sebastian can afford to have the reputation of a seducer, and it costs him nothing: "Can you imagine what this would do for my reputation? Screwing the new headmaster's virginal daughter before school starts?"[44] So Kathryn needs Sebastian to take revenge in her place as she would risk too much, and she gains power over him with her sexuality. The film's message again reflects the fear of feminist goals. Following the final revelation and Sebastian's death, all the blame for the deceits and exploitation falls on Kathryn. She is thus punished not only for her mistakes but also for Sebastian's, thereby becoming a sort of scapegoat and proof that feminist empowerment has gone too far. For young women have become mean, nasty and malicious not only toward men but also toward their female peers.

The new femme fatale thus finds herself in a new, more complex understanding of female sexuality, which now enables women to desire, but this possibility is still limited. The unclear but important differentiation between a vulgar and an empowered woman suggests "*that standards of appropriate sexuality for women vary enormously based on the public perception of the woman's sexual experience and identity*."[45] At the same time, her sexualisation and objectification are now depicted as voluntary and desired but, nevertheless, intended for the male gaze. She still becomes fatal through violating patriarchal norms, especially those related to ambitions and sexuality. In this period, however, the figure most often appears as a manifestation of the belief that feminism has gone too far and that, with the lack of patriarchal control, women have now become pathologically aggressive and mean.

2. Western beauty standards

In terms of her appearance, the postfeminist femme fatale minimally diverges from her noir predecessor. Because the postfeminist femme fatale is white, young, slender and beautiful, she is a continuation of the racial and class presuppositions of the femme fatale figure, which postfeminism and neoliberalism do not dismantle but even solidify. This can be seen in the fact that "*postfeminism is white and middle class by default, anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self. It is thus also a strategy by which other kinds of social difference are glossed over*."[46] Both Kimberly and Kathryn are white, young girls from the upper class, which enables their lifestyle and, consequently, the achievement of beauty standards. Only their higher position in society enables their access to financial, cultural and educational means and, above all, time to pursue the given beauty standards. This further proves the exclusionary nature of postfeminist consumer markets. This is also confirmed by Kathryn and Sebastian, who criticise new female social climbers

44 *Ibid.*

45 Farrimond 2018, p. 71.

46 Tasker, Negra 2007, p. 2.

as easy and boring, and they are often even depicted as childish. Compared to the elegant Kathryn, Cecile is distinctly immature. Even though there is an age difference of a couple of years between them, Cecile, as one of the social climbers, is depicted as distinctly naïve and childish, which we can see both in her behaviour – for example, when she drinks "iced tea" in Sebastian's bed, she kicks, rolls around and makes faces – and in her clothes and her room, which is full of toys, especially dolls and teddy bears. Compared to her, Kathryn, who is a fully fledged representative of the upper class, is much more elegant both in her behaviour and in her clothing.

Pretty Persuasion (2005) does include a few non-WASP[47] characters, but they are often subjected to a stereotypical and simplified understanding of their identities, serving primarily to sharpen the satire, on the one hand, and to preserve the white patriarchal status quo, on the other, which postfeminism does not even try to challenge. Also at work is the postfeminist visual culture with the tendency for women's bodies to be "*emphatically feminized, objectified, and disciplined through hyper-feminine fashion culture*."[48] We can already notice that in the first minutes of *Pretty Persuasion* (2005), when the camera moves through the audition waiting room. The underage girls in the waiting room are dressed in noticeably revealing clothes and are merely available to the gaze, which shows the hyper-feminisation and objectification in visual culture. The school uniforms serve precisely this purpose – the tight grey skirts and tight light pink shirts. We can see that their purpose is precisely hyperfeminisation and objectification when drama teacher Anderson gives his wife the same skirt, only slightly shorter. His wife quickly notices the similarity and even emphasises it. Even though we have to do with very young girls, their clothes additionally emphasise this throughout. The uniforms, which present girls as very young, also sexualise them, while the film additionally solidifies the sexualisation with many other innuendoes, for example, the way girls talk about cigars or the way Kimberly, in particular, eats a cake or reads her essay and the like, which establish the message that the girls are clearly aware of their sexualisation and deliberately choose it. Later, during the court proceedings, Kimberly wears distinctly girlish clothes, which additionally suggest that she is a young girl and could be even younger. The clothes are light pink and adorned with sequins and small crystals; she also often wears a pink bow in her hair. Despite her clothes trying to indicate "pure" girlhood, they are extremely tight and expose her body to the male gaze in particular. We can observe something similar in Kathryn, even though her clothes are not girlish; they are actually close to the other extreme. They are very elegant and make her look older than she is. But her clothes also remain tight and, like in the case of Kimberly, expose her to the male gaze. Often, her gestures intensify this, especially the position of her hands, which frequently direct the viewer's gaze toward her body, often toward her breasts.

47 White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

48 Dobson 2015, p. 31.

What is important for the femme fatale is not to question beauty standards since violating them would take away her only path to power. The only way for her to achieve domination over the man and consequently power is to surpass her "opponents" and get closer to meeting the beauty standards that ordinary women (both in the film and in everyday life) cannot since they are conceived in such a way as never to be met.[49]

3. The character of the seduced

In this regard, Kathryn is a relatively traditional femme fatale. As mentioned, her victim is Sebastian, whom she seduces in order to carry out a revenge she cannot enact herself. Even though he does not meet all the criteria of hegemonic masculinity that we can find in noir and neo-noir heroes, Sebastian possesses significantly more social power than Kathryn. If Sebastian can claim power despite or precisely because of his cunning, corruption, manipulativeness and promiscuity, those same traits would completely strip Kathryn of power if revealed. We can see this at the very end of the film. Despite Sebastian's journal revealing the deceptions of both, all their school friends, as well as the broader society, take Sebastian's side, while Kathryn becomes an outcast. He is the hero, while she is evil. On the other hand, Kimberly does not seduce the teacher; she only uses him, but she does seduce the journalist, Emily Klein. If we look at Kimberly's relationship with the teacher, it quickly becomes clear that, due to the type of film they find themselves in, he has no power, not only over her but also in general. It is a postfeminist film, whose purpose is to show that, under the wing of feminism, women and girls have gained too much power, which has revealed their inherent evil nature, and that nobody has the power to stop them. She does use and destroy the teacher, but she actually does not need to put any effort into it because he is an extremely passive character. Whereas Elhallaq notes that "*to identify a female character as a femme fatale, a naive male protagonist must be present*,"[50] she overlooks that this is not actually the basic presupposition. The basic presupposition would be that the femme fatale requires a naïve character with social power greater than her own. Although, in Western patriarchal society, that is most often a man, specifically, a white man, the point is that men possess the social power that the femme fatale does not have; we thereby return to the initial point that the most important thing for the femme fatale figure is that the society in which she appears is characterised by gender inequality. If we return to Kathryn and Sebastian, Kathryn has the upper hand only as long as Sebastian is prepared to use his social power for her benefit; in return, Kathryn offers him the only thing she can, her sexuality. Whenever Sebastian rejects her, she resorts to her body and sexuality. We can see this at the very beginning, and even more explicitly when she asks him to

49 Gill 2008, p. 442.

50 Elhallaq, Ayman Hassan. 2015: "Representation of Women as Femmes Fatales: History, Development and Analysis". *Asian Journal of Humanities and Social Studies,* vol. 3, no. 1, p. 86.

expedite their plan a bit. She sits in Sebastian's lap, speaks in a lower and whispering voice and kisses his hand.

Similarly, Kimberly seduces the journalist, who has the power to manipulate public opinion through her reporting. She also directly tells her that this was her intention: "*While all the other little pundits with microphones... are going to be clamouring for my head on a stick... the most popular and influential reporter in town... is going to be marching to quite the different drum. You are going to be my lone champion...*" In the last confrontation between the two, we learn that not only did Emily have the power that Kimberly lacked, she was also incredibly naïve. "*Do you know I thought that you were like I was in high school? A loner, smarter than everyone else, just misunderstood. But you're not. My God, you're just another one of the mean ones... who called me names, who made my life miserable.*"[51] Importantly, this last confrontation occurs on a staircase, with Emily standing below and Kimberly a few steps higher. Thus, the film also visually positions Kimberly above Emily. So Kimberly used her sexuality to seduce Emily and thus, through her, access the power she did not have. Only then could she turn the situation completely to her advantage. What is also significant in the case of Emily is the fact that she is a lesbian or, rather, that her depiction as a lesbian is extremely problematic. This is especially endemic to the depiction of lesbians in Western visual culture, where they are most often presented as violent and as non-women.[52] Emily does not escape this trap. The representation of her aggressive desire through her active, almost aggressive search for a topic to report on and her exceptionally aggressive manner of kissing her love interest constantly establishes her desire as almost male, but certainly not female. Throughout history, desire has been inseparably related to manhood, on the one hand, and aggressiveness, on the other.[53] So despite postfeminism now offering women the possibility of sexual desire and, to an extent, also sexual freedom, it does not offer it to all women equally.

4. Genre

Even though both films were made in the same period and reflect the same reality, they tackle its representation differently. *Pretty Persuasion* is essentially a satire, whose purpose is to mock the given social climate and thereby criticise it. The main criticism of the film, which combines satire and post-feminist doctrine, is that feminism has taken its goals too far – and now society has problems with girls who have gained power at the expense of men, but this power has corrupted them, making them mean. Their meanness is ascribed to their gender. *Pretty Persuasion* tackles the depiction of its criticism through the subversion of power, which is very common in satire. Most male characters, but especially Mr. Anderson, are depicted as distinctly

51 *Ibid.*

52 Hart, Lynda. 1994: *Fatal Women*. London: Routledge. p. x.

53 Hart 1994, p. 10.

passive. When a colleague urges Mr. Anderson to let him defend him, he wearily answers: "I don't... What's the point? Nobody's going to believe me. I'm never gonna beat this." Such an understanding of adult men additionally confirms the fact that Mr. Anderson in particular, as well as other men in the film, are viewed from a higher position. When Mr. Anderson is sitting at the table while Kimberly is reading her essay, she looks down at him, since he is sitting while she is standing. Something similar also happens in court. On the other hand, Kimberly is depicted as a distinctly active character, whose actions and intrigues drive the narrative. If, due to its characteristics, the film does not allow Kimberly to develop as a femme fatale alongside Mr. Anderson, she does so alongside Emily, who, in view of the satirical subversion of roles, is the only one with the power that Kimberly does not have but strongly covets. On the other hand, the genre determinations that define the plot of *Cruel Intentions* are somewhat broader. It is a drama, whose conventions are quite loose and do not dictate characterisation. At the same time, its serious tone allows the build-up of a certain amount of tension similar to that in noir and neo-noir films. As a character, Kathryn thus finds herself in a world of deceit, corruption and pleasure, an environment most closely associated with the character of the femme fatale. The first half of the film thus diligently builds her character in the direction of the femme fatale. In the second half of the film, when the relationship between Sebastian and Annette comes to the fore, Kathryn gets somewhat lost in the background and her role moves closer to the role of a jealous woman, causing the sharp features of her character to diminish. The film's classical structure, whose central event is deception, thus puts Kathryn in a subordinate position in relation to Sebastian, who holds most of the "cards" and power. Kathryn can attain social power only by seducing Sebastian. As Farrimond already pointed out, the femme fatale does not belong only to a certain genre or type of film but can appear in a broader range of film forms. Nevertheless, the film in which she appears strongly limits and dictates the boundaries of her manifestation.

Conclusion

The femme or, better yet, fille fatale from the turn of the millennium finds herself in the period of post-feminism and neo-liberalism, which create an environment in which feminism becomes a consumer good and is socially considered a thing of the past, something obsolete, with its goals achieved. Within this social climate, girls are understood as all-powerful, on the one hand, and endangered and in trouble, on the other. Based on this, a new conception of female sexuality is formed, acknowledging female sexual desire but, on the other hand, preserving the mechanisms for its limitation. The sexualisation and objectification of the female body continues, with the minimal change of it now being presented as desired and chosen. So the new fille fatale cannot evade the continuation of objectification. She is still scrutinised by men and in order for them to desire her, she has to meet the prevailing beauty

standards. Like with her predecessors, they remain strongly anchored in Western beauty norms. The seduced is also still a man, even though he now somewhat deviates from hegemonic manhood; the important thing is that he still holds more social power than the fille fatale. In certain more post-feminist genres, women occasionally also appear in the role of the seduced, but that still has a similar function as in the case of the traditional femme fatale, that is, to emphasise her corruption. The role of the seduced and the femme fatale herself are often limited by the genres they appear in. Now, the femme fatal appears in a broader range of genres, especially post-feminist genres, where she represents the belief that feminism has gone too far and has thus corrupted our girls and women, whose new-found power has made them mean.

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