The Dark Past Keeps Returning: Gender Themes in Neo-Noir

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"Films are full of good things which really ought to be invented all over again. Again and again. Invented - not repeated. The good things should be found - found - in that precious spirit of the first time out, and images discovered - not referred to.... Sure, everything's been done.... Hell, everything had all been done when I started" -Orson Welles (Naremore 219).

Film noir, an enigmatic and compelling mode, can and has been resurrected in many movies in recent years. So-called "neo-noirs" evoke the look, style, mood, or even just the feel of classic noir. Having sprung from a particular moment in history and resonating with the mentality of its audiences, noir should also be considered in terms of a context, which was vital to its ability to create meaning for its original audiences. We can never know exactly how those audiences viewed the noirs of the 1940s and 50s, but modern audiences obviously view them differently, in contexts "far removed from the ones for which they were originally intended" (Naremore 261). These films externalized fears and anxieties of American society of the time, generating a dark feeling or mood to accompany its visual style. But is a noir "feeling" historically bound? What does this mean for neo-noirs? Contemporary America has distinctive features that set it apart from the past. Even though neo-noir films may borrow generic conventions of classic noir, the "language" of noir is used to express anxieties belonging to modern times. How can we explain that some recent movies exhibit noir-like qualities yet transcend the classic noir context to be entrenched in their own? How does this change our interpretation of the noir "feeling?"

Also, we must account for the fact that noir was an "innocent, unconscious cinematic reaction to the popular culture of its time," but neo-noirs are "self-conscious and more than cognizant of their heritage" (Conley 202). Neo-noir is not only part of a new America, it is very much a part of a new Hollywood that takes advantage of a culturally and cinematically savvy audience, raised on allusion and reference. Neo-noir fits well into a postmodern aesthetic, characterized by filmmakers raiding and referencing both pop culture and high art from seemingly incompatible historical periods with little rhyme or reason; neo-noir is simultaneously very timeless and very much of its own time (Tasker 135).

To characterize neo-noir films with respect to classic noir and what we expect of noir, we must define what is meant by "noir." In addition to neo-noir films, noir lives on in our imagination as a generality - the cast of Whose Line is it, Anyway? leaps into film noir mode as effortlessly as they do "spaghetti western" or "Kabuki theater." Almost everyone, when they hear the words "film noir" can conjure up a pop culture-inspired image that includes tough, loner private eyes, dangerous women, smoke, Venetian blinds, grimy city streets, gangsters, intrigue, deception, alienation, terse, stylized slang, and voice-over narration. But this is a shallow, surface definition. The noir style blends form and content; the dark side of human nature is reflected in the visually dark and menacing world the noir characters inhabit. Noir's expressionistic visual style is used to disorient, conceal, constrict, and dishearten. Murky shadows, smoke, and rain running down windows obscure our view of the noir world and make it clear this is a world of ambiguous morality. Disorienting and claustrophobic mise-en-scene reflects the paranoia and anxiety present in such a menacing world. Anonymous spaces - hotel rooms, diners, and urban streets - reflect the characters' alienation and bleak lives. Themes of greed, corruption, obsession, and deception reflect an entire society's sickness. The protagonist, in the tradition of hard-boiled detective novels, is often characterized as a cynical loner who is psychologically damaged or morally flawed (Naremore 222). He might find himself drawn into masochistic love affairs with captivating, predatory, destructive women - femme fatales. Noir narratives explore "the male protagonist's need to investigate and punish the woman and his equally important need to adore her and be destroyed" (Naremore 264). Often, these are linked when the protagonist cannot destroy the threat that the femme fatale poses without destroying himself, too. The femme fatale's sexuality is linked with her treachery - noir made sex dangerous. Noir also made danger sexy, as in Gun Crazy, where criminal behavior is a turn-on for a pair of outlaw lovers. The narrative itself makes use of a convoluted,
melodramatic plot, the sarcastic wit of the protagonist, and a cool underworld vernacular. Flashbacks fragment the plot and suggest fatalism - beginning the story at the bleak end leaves no room for the audience to hope for a better future, just as noir would imply that the mistakes of a character will forever haunt him with no hope of escape. Voice-over narration links the narrative together, but implies that the entire story is subjective. This can be disorienting, especially when the disembodied voice is of a man the audience knows to be dead, as in Sunset Blvd. This calls into question the reliability of the narrator; recollection of the past is unconsciously censored and revised, and events that are too traumatic might be reworked or repressed altogether to minimize the trauma (Lacey 158). If he can deceive himself, he is probably deceiving us, too.

Complicating our attempts to define a noir genre is that unlike other genres, noir has no property of its own; it mostly borrows its features from other forms, usually from the crime and detective genres, but sometimes overlapping with thrillers, horror, and science fiction ("Shades"). Noir in its strictest definition, as a cycle, has the look of noir as well as other conventions of the genre, but roots them in a particular cultural moment, which included postwar disillusionment, Cold War hysteria, anxiety over women's changing role in society, and the influence of artistic movements which transformed representational systems (abstract expressionism, bebop, jazz). Considering noir a cycle implies that films are understood against the backdrop of the outer culture and are embedded in the mentality of the period.

What about the outer culture inspired films such as these? Many noirs adapted hard-boiled detective novels to the screen and continued the gangster genre of the 1930s (Naremore 40). Artistic movements that marked a change in representational systems - abstract expressionism, bebop, jazz, and German expressionism - broke with realism and fragmented coherent narratives. Noir is commonly associated with post-World War II disillusionment and early Cold War anxiety (Robson). It represented a harsh and cynical version of American reality. Often a noir hero would return from the war to an alienating world. His job might be jeopardized and the stability he expected to return to was absent. Many WWII veterans were disillusioned by the heroism they displayed overseas, which gave them a sense of manhood they had lost during the Great Depression of the previous decade (Robson). During the war, American women were integrated into the workforce in significant numbers, which threw gender roles into upheaval. This is reflected in a lack of normal family relations in noir films; noir is, in part, an indirect response to this assault on traditional family structures and the conservative values they embodied (Kaplan 60). The femme fatale character is sexually assertive and has desires that are traditionally male, such as money and independence (Lacey 149). She uses her sexuality to manipulate men for her own ends, playing into the myth of woman as a threat to male control of the world and destroyer of male aspiration (Kaplan 60). Just as noir's visual style was used to express the anxieties and cynicism of its characters, noir as a movement externalized the mentality of an entire society.

While some neo-noirs simply imitate classic noir, the most compelling use of noir in modern times is to express the anxieties of a modern condition. Everything noir about neo-noir is rooted in a set of cultural factors of a particular moment - not of the 1940s, but of something else. Some films might be political or social commentary, some might just comment on modern life in general. What does neo-noir externalize for modern audiences? What is our condition? Neo-noirs of the late twentieth century exist in a postmodern frame of mind. Most noir is modernist and tries to find truth and make sense of a warped world. In postmodernism, the world is too warped and incomprehensible, and our access to it is so flawed that we cannot make sense of it. The apparent objectivity provided by omniscient third-person narratives and fixed points of view is rejected in favor of relativist interpretations of the world (Chen). Form is fragmented, narratives are discontinuous, and absolute truth is meaningless (Salim). With questionable job security, the public is insecure about the present and cynical about the future, unsure whether it holds anything more than a watered-down version of the present (Giroux). In postmodernism, representations of reality become more important than reality. The shallow emptiness of a culture of consumption is reflected in an obsession with labels and brand names as more important than the products themselves; image is all-important in the postmodernist era (Burke). Many modern films are concerned with looking for meaning in our affluent, decadent consumer culture. With dramatic changes in employment patterns for men and women and increasing gender role reversals involving domesticated dads and working moms, the idea of a masculine identity crisis emerges. Traditionally masculinity is defined as the opposite of femininity. If the definition
of femininity changes and includes aspects of the masculine, what does masculinity become? One film which explores these themes is David Fincher's Fight Club, which articulates the late-90s crisis of masculinity. Fight Club asserts that the shackles of modern life imprison and emasculate men (Ebert). Fight Club links the excesses of consumption with degradation in masculinity. The protagonists, "Jack" and Tyler, represent two opposing depictions of masculine identity. Jack is portrayed as an everyday man; we don't even know his real name. Jack is a repressed corporate drone whose ambitions have been reduced to attaining an image of success fed to him by society and the media, amounting to the acquisition of possessions. Jack represents a form of domesticated masculinity - passive, alienated, and without ambition (Giroux). Jack's emptiness and lack of fulfillment show up in his chronic insomnia, his refrigerator full of condiments (no real food, just frill), and his obsession with outfitting his home with the trappings of IKEA domesticity. Tyler, on the other hand, embodies a masculinity that rejects consumerism and conformity in favor of reclaiming a sense of agency through doing and producing. What Tyler does and produces is mischief and soap, but also destruction and chaos, vandalism and anarchy. Tyler and Jack start "Fight Club," ostensibly an underground boxing club, but the point is not to win fights, it is to experience pain and power in an attempt to regain some shred of manhood. If Jack is the crisis of capitalism repackaged as the crisis of domesticated masculinity, are Tyler and Fight Club the redemption of masculinity?

The first section of the film is a critique of contemporary consumerism and how corporate culture positions men in jobs and lifestyles that are both an affront to their manhood and male socialization (Giroux). Many of the men who eventually become members of Fight Club come from the stratum of workers who serve others: waiters, valets, clerks. However, in Fight Club it is not the social stratification but empty materialistic values that compromises these men's masculinity. Consumerism is characterized as weakening and domesticating men, robbing them of their primary role as producers whose bodies affirm and legitimate their sense of agency and control (Giroux). The movie questions the facade of the American dream and the mythology that anyone can make a fortune or become President. Tyler addresses the members of Fight Club, saying, "We've all been raised to believe that we'll be millionaires and movie idols. But we won't!" The working classes are lulled into cooperating and staying in the service of the upper classes by this implied promise that if they work hard they will achieve greater security and higher status (Redd). They are slaves to their own never-materializing dream, and fulfillment constantly evades them. Jack has everything but is empty.

Jack only gains relief from his insomnia when he seeks refuge in the world of support groups, taking part in the "cult of victimhood" (Giroux). Among disease victims he finds people who are infinitely worse off than himself, and perhaps he's there to make himself feel better or to vicariously feel the release that comes from accepting he has nothing left to lose. The groups personify how masculinity is degraded: one of the men from the testicular cancer group has breasts like a woman, and all of the groups endorse use of the "feminine" qualities of support and empathy rather than the "masculine" attributes of strength and virility to bring men together (Giroux). Ironically, Jack identifies with the testicular cancer group. Emasculated, both they and Jack are desperately trying to salvage their sense of agency and reassert their manhood. Such mutilation represents a physical and existential loss; it is characterized as the greatest loss a man faces. This ideology is revealed when Jack comes home to find his condo exploded and all of his possessions gone. Tyler tells him worse things could happen - a woman could cut off his penis. Castration is also used as a threat at other points in the film. Tyler apparently threatens castration for any member of the group, even himself, who stands in the way of Project Mayhem, Fight Club's paramilitary urban mischief spin-off. He extracts a promise in this way from a police commissioner threatening Project Mayhem. It recalls the concept of testifying, which means to swear under oath; the origin of the word comes from ancient Rome, where a man gave his word by literally promising upon his testicles (Redd).

Fight Club itself emerges from the pent-up anxieties of men like Jack and their need to reclaim masculine identity and to scorn and wage war on all that is feminine - from scoffing at marriage and casting off worldly possessions in order to live in a condemned house to beating each other up and vandalizing symbols of consumer culture. Tyler asserts that the way for men to become agents in a society that has deadened them is to get in touch with the primal instincts of competition and physical violence, and the way to reclaim their masculinity is to literally destroy their present selves (by beating each other up) (Giroux). Tyler says his generation had no Great Depression or great wars in which to prove their worth;
the fights fulfill the men's need to test themselves (Redd). The masculinity crisis is partly the result of men today lacking a mission to manhood, a frontier to be claimed, a clear enemy, or an institution of brotherhood (Chen). However, Fight Club complies with the very system of commodification it is trying to denounce, since both violence and capitalism both rely upon the instant gratification of pleasure, hyper-competitiveness, and the market-driven desire of winning and exercising power over others (Giroux).

Despite the extreme politics and fighting, Fight Club is really about how to become a man. A Buddhist proverb states that on the path to enlightenment, one must kill his parents, his god, and his teacher (Chen). Jack has been told that an education, a good job, and maintaining the right lifestyle will lead to happiness, but he remains unfulfilled despite achieving the American dream. He figuratively kills off the father who left him, realizing his advice was wrong. He then finds a mentor in Tyler Durden, who tells him, "Our fathers were our models for God. And, if our fathers bailed, what does that tell us about God?... You have to consider the possibility that God doesn't like you, He never wanted you. In all probability, He hates you. This is not the worst thing that can happen.... We don't need him.... We are God's unwanted children, with no special place and no special attention, and so be it." Tyler and Jack renounce fathers and God for failing to point out a satisfactory path to manhood. When the violence spirals out of control, Jack rejects the masculine model offered by Tyler and shoots him, completing his maturing process by killing his teacher (Chen).

Another way to define man is as the opposite of woman. Man requires a context, in this case, woman, to give it meaning. By juxtaposing ourselves in binary opposition with each other, we define ourselves (Salim). Woman is not only cast as the opposite of man, she is portrayed as having a disastrous effect on male identity. Jack begins by claiming that Marla, the only primary female character, is the cause of all his problems. Tyler repeatedly tells Jack that men have lost their manhood because they have been feminized, that they have been raised by women, and another woman (a wife) is the last thing they need. Marla appears to exist only to make men miserable and to fulfill their sexual needs. Jack refers to her as a tumor: she's invasive and predatory, taking over Jack's crucial support groups and, when she starts sleeping with Tyler, invading Jack's home. There is an intensely misogynistic streak running through Fight Club; the movie's criticism of consumerism is not so much a critique of capitalism as it is a lashing out against the feminization and domestication of men in a society driven by consumerism (Giroux).

The source of noir "anxiety" in Fight Club is the concept of postmodernism. Postmodernism is difficult to define, which is not surprising, considering its modes of thinking and representation emphasize fragmentation, discontinuity, and inconsistency (Lacey 93). Postmodernism confuses and compresses space and time. In the postmodern era, satellites, cable TV, and the internet create a global village, in which we can instantaneously be anywhere or anytime. Likewise, postmodern films do away with linearity. The sense of fragmentation is heightened by a collection of unrelated references that are not rooted in time or space.

Postmodern life doesn't attempt to substitute one truth with another; it braces itself for a world without universal truths (Burke). Knowledge amounts to interpretation and is therefore completely subjective. Reality is fragmentary and plural; human thought is unable to arrive at any objective account of that reality. Postmodernist texts, accordingly, do away with absolute narratives, which are culturally mediated and are therefore not reality.

Postmodernism is the breakdown between what is real and what merely represents reality. Art was once believed to reflect reality. In postmodernism, the opposite is true: we only know reality through media texts (Lacey 94). In this sense, image becomes reality, and it becomes more and more difficult to distinguish the real from the imaginary. These representations conceal the anxiety that there is no reality, that there is nothing behind the representation (Richards). When Jack realizes that Tyler is his alter ego and not a separate person, everything he remembers since "meeting" Tyler is revealed to be his mind's invention and thus most of what we just watched is merely a fabrication. However, a movie is, by nature, a fabrication. Fight Club forces us to be suspicious of what we see on film and its relation to reality.
How are these themes translated into Fight Club? What leads us to believe this is noir? Fight Club explores the dark side of otherwise normal people. Jack, a mild-mannered Everyman has insomnia and a personal identity crisis. Tyler, his eccentric friend, becomes the leader of a cult of Everyman "space monkeys," ready to sacrifice themselves for some greater good. Obsession is intense; Jack has a lifestyle obsession, both he and Marla become obsessed with support groups and the cathartic effects they have on them, and Tyler becomes obsessed with setting people free from some oppressive societal evil. Fight Club begins on a fatalistic note; by starting at the end, with Jack in a grim situation - gun to his head, buildings about to explode - the movie hints at Jack's frustration and inability to effect change in his life and the fruitlessness of trying to. Throughout the movie, Jack muses that, "on a long enough timeline, the survival rate for everything drops to zero." In the end, even though he renounces Tyler's militia-like terrorism, it's meaningless, and all he can do is watch the buildings explode around him (Giroux). Fight Club is about loss in exaggeration: first Jack's ability to sleep, then all of his possessions, then his identity and his relation to reality. Jack has a sick desperation, leading him to create an alter ego that is a projection of his fantasies of masculinity. An identity conflict results when he realizes that most of his memories are a simulacrum - a representation with no reality behind it (Rovira). Jack himself could be described in the same way - while insomniac, he says that his life has a postmodern feel, everything seeming like "a copy of a copy of a copy." He tries to find his identity as a man in IKEA brochures and self-help gatherings; as a result, his life is not tied to any stable or permanent reality. Like the simulation, Jack's life is all surfaces and no depth (Chen).

Fight Club incorporates these themes using an over-the-top visual style that uses the slick technology and film techniques of the 1990s to externalize Jack's tortured identity. The restless agitation of insomnia is depicted in his office, the people slow moving and inaudible and the colors bland and blindingly pale; like Jack, the world seems not quite asleep, not quite awake. We are treated to a rendering of Jack's apartment that pulls itself straight out of a furniture catalog. Jack walks through his apartment, labels and descriptions floating in midair. The apartment is his attempt to live a life that is prescribed by his mass-mediated society. The transitory spaces he inhabits emphasize his loneliness and emptiness. His job has him constantly on the road, in airplanes, rented cars, and airport hotel rooms; as he observes, everything comes in single servings, including human contact (O'Hehir). The fight scenes, on the other hand, are vivid and alive with action. In contrast with the sterile, bleak world above, the underworld of Fight Club is a dark, dingy, and damp basement with men interacting in ways that are unsanctioned by the society upstairs. As Jack wanders the decrepit urban landscape, he is followed everywhere by the cut and bruised faces of a secret masculine society (O'Brien). This reveals how pervasive Fight Club has become and hints at just how universal the frustrations and anxieties behind Fight Club are.

Fight Club's narrative is as fragmented and complicated as its protagonist's mind. The narrative is non-linear, connected by the voice-over of a narrator who may not be reliable. This film is one of many with a shift in its fundamental logic near the end, requiring the audience to redefine the reality of everything that has gone before; it could be called the "Keyser Soze" syndrome (Ebert). Jack has a psychological meltdown, realizing that the Tyler half of him has been doing things without his knowledge or approval. The lack of an accessible reality in the postmodern is reflected in the narrator's fractured psyche - he doesn't even have access to half of his identity. He has lost touch with the present because of his insomnia, and he's lost touch with the past because of his split personality. Because of his unreliable memories, we don't know what to believe. By the end of the film, everything he has related is revealed to be completely inaccurate.

Fight Club subverts the message it is trying to send in a number of ways. Even though Tyler tries to open his followers' eyes and give them a sense of living every moment fully, the movie implies that they have just exchanged one set of programming for another (Redd). Rather than being slaves to a materialistic culture, they are slaves to Tyler's ideology. None of them grows stronger or freer because of their membership; they are reduced to brainwashed cultists who have been manipulated into serving Tyler Durden and what he sees as the greater good.

Tyler uses "human sacrifice" to open more eyes and terrify people into acting on their ambitions. Tyler pretends to rob a convenience store and tells the clerk he's going to die. Tyler asks what the clerk wanted to be in life; a veterinarian, the clerk replies, but he had to drop out for lack of money. Tyler warns the clerk
that he had better get back on the path to becoming a veterinarian, or Tyler really would kill him. Tyler tells Jack that this will be the most important event in that clerk's life, because he'll have to confront what it means to do something about his future. Tyler's "Just Do It" attitude claims choice is an individual act and that sheer will and initiative cancel out institutional constraints; critiques of oppression are dismissed as whiny victimization (Giroux). Tyler's politics are contradictory, encouraging people to buy into the system he denounces. Fight Club's linking of violence, masculinity, and gender flows directly from the consumer culture it claims to be criticizing. Ironically, this message is in a movie; the American dream is being criticized by, of all people, Brad Pitt, and the movie's lofty, highbrow statement is delivered in the same sleek, in-your-face style of a music video, emphasizing the role of Hollywood in bringing this message to the public (Chen).

John Dahl's The Last Seduction is another neo-noir that deals with the upheaval of traditional gender roles, although in a very different manner. Rather than focus on what it means to be a man, it considers how this shift has affected representations of femininity. On the surface, The Last Seduction is similar to other noirs like Double Indemnity, where the duplicitous woman takes advantage of her sex appeal to lure her dumb but loyal lover into helping her kill her husband. She teases him with promises of happily-ever-after once the job is done, but something goes wrong and everything falls apart. The Last Seduction would be a noir cliché, except for some clever departures from conventional noir, which are only possible in our post-Production Code era. The Last Seduction updates the standard noir format by changing the rules of the femme fatale and doing things from her point of view. In neo-noir, crime isn't always punished, and neither is the femme fatale.

In the 1940s and 50s, the Production Code was responsible for maintaining morality in films. For example, illegal and immoral activities such as murder and extramarital sex were never explicitly shown, but they were often implied, and they could be as long as the movie ultimately punished such behavior. The narrative in noir is a reflection of unconscious male fears and fantasies about women and offers a warning to man about the danger of a beautiful, sexy woman, should he give in to his desire for her (Kaplan 68). Her threat is her sexuality, and this is projected onto her physical form. Man at once admires her and fears her power over him. Drawing man away from his goals, her sexuality intervenes destructively in his life. Marked as evil because of her open sexuality and pursuit of her own desire, such a woman must be destroyed or eliminated (Kaplan 6). In noir, the hero's success depends on whether he can disentangle himself from the spider woman's web. Sometimes the man is destroyed because he cannot resist the woman's lures, despite restoring order through the exposure and destruction of the sexual, manipulating woman (Kaplan 61).

In Albania, there was the tradition of the "Albanian virgin" (Yereshenko). It allowed a woman to drink, smoke, gamble, and do anything men do, on one condition: she'd have to give up sex for good. Perhaps this is a variation on the Madonna/whore complex that many men suffer from, which is basically the presumption that "good" women can't be sexual and sexual women can't be good. This shows that the traditional fear of female strength has nothing to do with motherhood, idealization of a female "delicate nature," or anything else but sex. Most men did not want someone they could be sexually involved with to be stronger or smarter than them. A domineering woman, particularly a sexually domineering one, was seen as a threat. Unlike women, men do not develop mechanisms for protection from a partner who can take advantage of them sexually. If a woman is as strong or intelligent as he, he cannot even use his physical or economical superiority to protect himself.

Classic noir femme fatales are positioned as objects for a specifically male gaze; the protagonist's voice-over narration and the eroticisation of her body establish the subjective look as male (Bruzzi 125). She can gain a degree of subjectivity by manipulating her erotic power. This is a paradox, though, since she can only manipulate her power within the system that designates her a sexual object (Kaplan 59). Noir also subverts the open representation of female sexuality and her use of it to gain independence from male domination. But it's an independence that no one can admire, since it's based on manipulation, greed, and murder (Kaplan 72). She is permitted freedom from traditional femininity, but it's based on moral degradation.
The Last Seduction mocks the notion that femininity requires a woman to abandon herself to male ends. It realizes a male nightmare by granting subjective control of the narrative to its female protagonist. Bridget is a modern woman getting what she wants how she wants it. She conceals her strength in her femininity. Conventionally, femininity denotes passivity, weakness, and vulnerability. When the powerful woman takes on the "masculine" role - owner of the subjective viewpoint, initiator of the action (and the man steps into her position) - she nearly always loses her traditionally feminine characteristics (Kaplan 29). Not of attractiveness, but of kindness, humaneness, and motherliness. She is now often cold, ambitious, driving, manipulating - just like the men whose position she has usurped. We get a hint of Bridget's true nature in the initial scenes, as she squashes the egos of her male employees. She is tough, ruthless, and never lets her guard down. Bridget may come off as detached and a shameless, heartless man-eater; she does what men do, but they are culturally licensed to do it (Natoli 235).

What about The Last Seduction leads us to think of it as noir? Besides the obvious play on the femme fatale, most of the action is motivated by greed, cynicism, and lust. The morality of the characters is dubious. Bridget's husband Clay is a doctor who sells prescriptions to junkies. She convinces him to make a sizeable cocaine deal and proceeds to take off with all of the money. She hides out in a small town and has an affair with local Mike, keeping him at arm's length until he becomes useful to her for something other than sex. He is an ordinary, decent guy and an easy pawn in her plot to kill Clay, who is pursuing her for the money. Were this a typical noir, the story would be told from the point of view of Mike, the poor, unfortunate guy who gets caught up in Bridget's plot. Mike thinks he's going to settle down with Bridget, which is exactly what she promises him if he follows through on the plan. Bridget tells Mike that murder will show his commitment to her. She plays a game, pretending to surrender control to him but in reality is always in control. Bridget's manipulations are logically motivated; she is bound by her simultaneous desires to keep her money and to stay alive. Her manipulations and plotting are in part the result of the desperation of the situation she's in, though sheer, corrupt greed is at work, as well. Bridget is the manipulative mastermind of the film, ruthlessly amoral but charismatic enough to make it convincing. She embodies the self-conscious femme fatale who successfully uses a conventional, overtly sexual image of femininity that acknowledges its cinematic roots and is fully aware of how that image affects men (Bruzzi 127). The Last Seduction confronts the eroticisation of the female body, daring the male characters and audience to desire her (Bruzzi 128). She pushes Mike away, berates him, laughs at him, drags him into her murder scheme, and digs up a past he'd rather not remember, yet he never lets up in his pursuit of her.

The Last Seduction takes advantage of the freedoms of the post-Production Code era to subvert what we'd typically expect from a noir. The sex is more overt and explicit than in classic noir. Sex is also mocked by some of the ridiculous locations and Bridget's casual treatment of it. Also, Bridget makes an object out of Mike, who wants love and intimacy. In the past, the femme fatale would seduce a man in order to destroy him. Bridget, the contemporary sexually liberated woman, is looking to satisfy herself. Bridget lives by her own rules and refuses to apologize for her behavior. She is not an idealized male fantasy; all of the characters are real and believably desperate, scrambling for their lives. Rather than fear the spider woman, we root for her to get away with her diabolical yet ingenious plot.

The most notable divergence from noir is the film's refusal to punish her for her transgression. The femme fatale is not symbolically destroyed at the end - she neither reforms nor is killed. Instead, she fares better than anyone else, riding off with her money, Clay having been killed and Mike taking the fall for Bridget's perfect crime. Not surprising, since her intelligence and conniving are far superior to anyone else's. The traditional insistence that the rebellious female be punished for deviating from her prescribed position in society is not present here (Kaplan 57). The lesson that crime doesn't pay is lost on Bridget.

Femme fatale characters tend to emerge in noir films when there is a change in the power balance between the sexes (Sharp). In classic noir, this theme reflected a society-wide anxiety that resulted from women entering the wartime workplace. The Last Seduction reflects anxieties about current feminist advances, examining masculinity and femininity in light of deconstructed and reconstructed gender roles (San Filippo). There is nothing kittenish about Bridget. Her charm comes from her brazenness; her power derives from everyone else's inability to conceive of a human being who is that rotten (LaSalle).
Now that we include neo-noir in our discussion of noir, how does this change or complicate our definition of noir? How has our old definition been expanded? How does our interpretation of noir need to be revised? Noir may have emerged as a movement associated with the 1940s and 50s in postwar America, but the themes noir expressed are continuous throughout history. Noir has come to be recognized as a language for articulating certain moods: anxiety, pessimism, disillusionment, alienation, and obsession, among others. The only thing that changes is the source of these moods. Noir can be appropriated by any generation. It is a metaphor, an allusion to a time when a film style reflected the anxiety faced by its audience, resonating with the world that produced the film. When we recognize noir patterns in modern neo-noirs, we unconsciously make the analogy between noir's relation to its time period and neo-noir's relation to our time period. Noir is not just noir anymore - its evocative power is a kind of vernacular to deal with the condition of modern culture. Modern noir mirrors personal alienation at the end of the century with the same shadow classic noir cast on cultural alienation years ago. Neo noir takes the formula of classic noir and integrates new ideas and influence from contemporary film styles to provide a new spin on the loneliness and uncertainty that is felt by many of the young and disenfranchised of today (Robson).

Why the lingering fascination with noir, enough to reinvent it for modern audiences? Noir represents our nostalgia for the glamour and style of a long-gone past (Naremore 261). Noir is fascinating because it looks stylish. Its artistic renderings of paranoia and entrapment are compelling and innovative. Alain Silver claims that no cinematic movement has yet replaced the originality of noir, and until filmmakers discover another mirror to hold up to American society, none ever will (Conley 203). Noir is also embraced by the low-budget, pulpy action adventures on cable and late night TV. Noir is, after all, about corruption, murder, greed, fear, and cynicism - all the worst modern society has to offer. In noir, right and wrong are blurred; it feeds our appetite for ambiguity. The themes of the old thrillers - one-way streets and dead ends, mad love and bad love, double crosses and paranoid conspiracies, discontentment with the nuclear family, and perverse violence in every corner of society - are as relevant as ever and still produce good films (Naremore 277). In other words, the dark past never left us.

Works Cited