



Masters of Arts
(Women's Studies)

Deadly seductions:

femme fatales in 90's film noir

Ingrid Hofmann

Supervised by

Associate Professor Kay Schaffer

Department of Social Inquiry

University of Adelaide

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Thesis Abstract

This thesis examines women in film noir in the 1990's. Specifically it studies how the femme fatales of the 90's are constituted as castrating, transgressive and seductive female subjects, who remain defiant, unrecuperated and unpunished. This characterisation differs from the femme fatales of film noir of the 40's and 50's where they are constituted as phallic women who are castrated.

To support this exploration the thesis utilises feminist psychoanalytical theories of castration, woman as fetish object and scopophilia. It also invokes theories of seduction and femininity as masquerade, which is informed by Riviere, Butler, Doane, Creed and the writings of Baudrillard and applied here to film analysis and the characterisation of the femme fatale in particular.

This thesis utilises feminist film theory techniques, coupled with specific psychoanalytical insights into the dynamics of castration, Oedipal desire and seduction to analyse two films. The films analysed are *Basic Instinct*, released in 1992, directed by Paul Verhoven and *The Last Seduction*, released in 1994 and directed by John Dahl.

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Declaration

This thesis does not contain any material that has been accepted for the award of any degree of qualification in any university or other tertiary institution. To my knowledge the material herein is entirely my work, except where I give due reference to other authors.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Ingrid Hofmann

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Preface

This thesis examines representations of woman within contemporary film noir. Film noir can refer to a period of film production or conventions within the genre. For some critics film noir occupies a specific time period, from 1941 to 1958¹. [Kaplan, 1980: 1-2] However, other critics have demonstrated how film noir conventions continue to be employed in contemporary films. [Gledhill, 1980: 6-21]

Central to film noir is the character of the femme fatale who is usually represented as a sexually knowing and dangerous subject for males. She tends most often to operate as the Freudian phallic woman, a femme fatale who displays her phallic power and is castrated. In film noir this is usually accomplished via marriage or its equivalent, incarceration in prison or the insane asylum and for the really recalcitrant, death.

Laura Mulvey [1990], and other feminist film critics [Creed, 1993; Lurie, 1981] have argued that from the point of view of the male spectator, the construction of the castrated woman provides some relief for men's fears of what woman might do to them. The femme fatale of the 90's, unlike her earlier counterpart, is much more likely to pose the threat of castration herself - because she is not punished or controlled and so offers no relief for the male spectator.

If one can challenge the traditional Freudian position, that men fear women because they are castrated or mutilated in the ways a man would be if he were castrated, it is possible to argue instead that men fear women because they are whole, intact and fully sexual. This extension of Freudian theory enables feminist film theorists to read

¹ Specifically film noir extends from 1941, with *The Maltese Falcon*, up until 1958 and *Touch of Evil*₁

modern film noir in quite different ways. [Creed, 1993; Lurie, 1981] Such an argument begins to explain how the femme fatale is transformed into the femme castratrice. She becomes the agent of castration herself. This thesis seeks to examine how the femme fatale of the 40's and 50's film noir, has transformed into the femme castratrice of the 90's.

The presence of the femme fatale in film noir and other popular fiction reveals much more about male fears than it does about female subjectivity or desire. [Creed, 1993:7; Haskell, 1987: 191] The femme fatales/castratrices of the 90's are even more terrifying than their 40's versions perhaps because men's fears have changed. In the 1990's films the femme fatales/castratrices display their phallic power without being controlled or punished. In so doing they threaten and, at times, metaphorically or symbolically, enact male castration. They do not succumb to recuperation. The femme fatale/castratrice remains defiant and resistant within the symbolic order. That they "get away with it" may speak of male fears about modern women, whose lives have changed through feminism; that they really are out of control and now represent very real danger to the male subject.

Freud developed his theories of western male psychic organisation around the turn of the century. His theories are historically and culturally situated. The lived reality of that time was such that even the most powerful women could be symbolically castrated through incarceration in marriage, prison or the insane asylum; or they could simply be ignored or dismissed. Joan Riviere's [1929] analysis of successful women of the time indicates that powerful, successful, professional women regulated themselves through the use of womanliness as masquerade. Working with these

successful and powerful female clients, Riviere found that the more masculine the women behaved in their profession, the more feminine their masquerade and performance became. She argued that these women engaged in femininity as masquerade to assuage real or assumed male fear of and retaliation against their use of masculine power.

By the 40's social change brought on by two world wars and economic depression had changed lived relations between men and women. Large numbers of women were encouraged to work in paid employment during the Second World War. This new, independent woman may have triggered some of this male fear of women, giving rise, in part, to the emergence of film noir, which could be interpreted as a medium which examines men's fear of sexually potent women. The femme fatale can be read as a male phantasy.

She was playing a man's game in a man's world of crime and carnal innuendo, where her long hair was the equivalent of a gun, where sex was the equivalent of evil. And where her power to destroy was a projection of man's feeling of impotence. [Haskell, 1987: 190 –191]

These women were usually represented as having dubious ethics or being unconventional in their performance of femininity. They were just as likely to be on either side of the law. Sometimes they were represented as women whose very presence signified or invited evil. [Haskell, 1987: 191] But film noir's use of the phallic woman, who is later castrated, can also be read as a vehicle for reassuring men that even powerful woman could be controlled in the end. Very few of the femme fatales of the 40's and 50's film noir went unpunished or unrecuperated. [Place, 1980; Kaplan, 1980, Gledhill, 1980; Haskell, 1987]

Now in the 90's the lived social relations between men and women continue to change and may be triggering male fears again. The difference in terms of changes to the film noir conventions is that some contemporary films now represent castrating women in their most frightening and deadly forms. Films like *Basic Instinct* and *The Last Seduction* represent woman as out of control, staying out of control and causing suffering to the male hero. She has gone from the femme fatale, the Freudian phallic woman to be castrated, to the deadlier femme castatrice, the woman who castrates. In one notable case woman as castrator has been paralleled in real life with the celebrated case of the Bobbits, where Mrs. Bobbit cut off her husband's penis, after repeated abuse and rape. [Valentis and Devane, 1994:146-9]

Like the femme fatale, the femme castatrice is constituted as sexually dangerous, seductive and fatally attractive to men. They both seduce through the use of strategies of appearance, in Baudrillard's [1990] terms. These strategies include femininity (as masquerade and/or performance) as simulacra, one that hides the lack of substance behind the male phantasy of femininity². The femme castatrice, however, seduces and castrates and she goes unpunished. She represents a far greater threat to western male psyche than the femme fatale. Or perhaps it might be said that she figures to undermine the fault-lines in male phantasies and desire.

Using feminist psychoanalytic frameworks, feminist film theory, and the postmodern understandings of seduction and simulation derived from Baudrillard I analyse two

² I use the term phantasy in the Freudian sense where the subject is involved in acts of wish fulfillment in a way that is distorted to a greater or lesser degree by defensive processes. I use this spelling to distinguish between this and fantasy which, in common parlance, can imply a fancy, or a whim. I use the term phantasy to locate the discussion firmly within psychoanalytic discourse.

Introduction

This thesis examines contemporary images of seductive, castrating women in film. Contemporary film still largely represents the sexually knowing woman as a dangerous entity. Exploring this further, it becomes clear that in some cases these types of women are constructed, not as the Freudian phallic woman who is then castrated, but as having phallic qualities, which evoke castrating images for men.

Freud asserted that the fear of castration comes as a result of the Oedipal Complex. This occurs when the boy begins to see the father as a rival for his mother's attention and therefore threatens the exclusive nature of his relationship with his mother. Furthermore, the boy begins to believe that the father will punish him by castrating him if he does not stop competing with him. He can remain in the imaginal world of the mother/child relationship or align himself with the father. By rejecting the exclusive relationship with the mother and accepting her castrated state in deference to the father he avoids castration and knows that he will grow up to be like his father and have a woman of his own one day, thereby entering into appropriate social relations. [Freud, 1953, 1962a, 1963; Creed, 1993; La Planche and Pontalis, 1973: 56 - 58].

However, Creed argues, providing evidence from primary sources, that, particularly in his analysis of Little Hans, Freud had clinical evidence that for some children it was not the father who was seen to threaten them with castration but rather the mother. [1993: 103] Freud repressed or dismissed this kind of evidence when provided by child clients, if it did not fit in with his theory of castration and the Oedipal Complex. [Creed, 1993: 103; Scharnberg, 1993; Masson, 1984] Creed and others claim Freud distorted his clinical evidence in order to prove a theory at the

expense of the actual evidence and experience. Freud repressed the castrating face of femininity, thereby narrowing the range of male castration anxiety, to affirm his phallogocentric model. This was done at the expense of deeper and more complex understandings of castration and sexual difference.

Numerous feminist writers have pointed out that Freud's model is flawed since it focuses on the male psychosexual development at the expense of the female.

[Irigaray, 1985, 1989, 1991; Grosz, 1990; Silverman, 1983; Creed, 1993; de Lauretis, 1991] In this thesis I borrow mainly from Barbara Creed's revision of Freud's castration theories and apply them to film as she has done. However, where she applied it to horror movies, I apply it in detail to two contemporary films, thrillers that use film noir conventions.

I use feminist psychoanalytical tools of film analysis coupled with Baudrillard's writings on seduction and simulation to explore two films in some detail, *Basic Instinct* and *The Last Seduction*. *Basic Instinct*, a Hollywood movie, released in 1992 and directed by Paul Verhoeven, is a detective thriller using film noir conventions. *The Last Seduction* is a low budget alternative film, released in 1994, directed by John Dahl, which parodies film noir conventions and codes of femininity and masculinity. Both *Basic Instinct* and *The Last Seduction* are American and contemporary.

Both films can be categorised as belonging to the genre of film noir although they treat the conventions differently and put them to different uses. The main focus of the analysis of these films is the investigation of the femme fatales to see how these

characters are constituted by these films to use strategies of seduction to accomplish their goals over the male subjects and how they are constructed as castrating images for men.

Feminist film theory needs to be briefly introduced at this point to provide a context for the later discussions of the two films. It will be taken up in more detail in relation to castration and seduction especially in chapters one and two. Contemporary feminist film theory is primarily identified with a shift from sociological to psychoanalytical perspectives. Claire Johnson [1975:25-26] argued that rejection of a sociological analysis of women in films represented a rejection of the view that films reflected reality in a neutral and unmediated way. This represents a postmodern understanding of text where the emphasis shifted to place primary importance on interrogating the text itself, in terms of examining the discursive practices within the signifying practice of film. Feminist psychoanalytic film analysts posit that signifying practices within phallogocentrism, including filmic texts, reveal more about male phantasies, fears and desires than they do about female desires or subjectivity. [Creed, 1987:282]

Meanings are therefore seen as constructed, fluid and multiple, including concepts such as gender. This requires a rejection of the notion of essentialism, or the idea of the innate woman who could be revealed in the text if only it had the chance.

Psychoanalytic and postmodern perspectives argue that gender is constructed through discursive, social and institutional practices. Film is an important instrument in such construction. Film utilises multiple devices - image, sound, lighting, editing, camera angles, voice over, framing, script, music and so on to construct meaning and to

encourage particular subject positions for the spectator. Film as a discursive framework via its narrative and spectacle can either reinforce ideologies or oppose them.

Contemporary feminist film theory is very concerned with the investigation of what ideologies are constructed, how and in whose interest. It is concerned with exposing the construction of meanings in films as signifying practices to reject completely any modernist assumptions that film merely reflects 'reality' in a neutral and unmediated way. Women in film therefore, do not reflect the lives of 'real' women as sociological critics assumed. As Kaplan asserts 'the signifier [women in films] and signified [real women] have been elided into a sign that represents something in the male unconscious.' [1983: 310]

Contemporary feminist film theory shifts attention away from the auteur approach to film analysis, where the director is arbiter of meaning in relation to the film, emphasising the unity of the personal vision of the director with the film. Instead, the movement has been toward an understanding that meanings are produced through complex interactions between the director's intentions, the film as a product, and the spectator's responses to the film. [Erens, 1990: 3] This is important for this thesis because it allows for multiple readings of film. While the film might offer viewers particular subject positions, contemporary feminist film theory posits that viewers actively engage in deciding whether to accept or reject such positions. Indeed, going beyond this either/or choice, spectators can take up split subject positions in relation to films where they accept and reject the offered subject position. They can simultaneously register a range of responses. So, for example, if a film constructs a

woman as an object to be judged, the viewer can accept this position. They can also choose to read against the grain of the film and not judge the woman but the circumstances surrounding her construction.

This shift to analysing film as a signifying practice is also important because it allows for the inclusion of the workings of the unconscious. As Metz [1974, 1982] contends, film mimics the unconscious in many ways. Freud's descriptions of the mechanisms of dreams and the unconscious are similar to those of films. Kaplan argues that:

In this analysis, film narratives, like dreams, symbolise a latent, repressed content, only now the "content" refers not to an individual unconscious but to that of patriarchy in general. [1983: 314]

This psychoanalytic approach to film analysis therefore has the potential to unlock the meanings of films - the conscious, the unconscious, the repressed, the obvious, the slippage and all the many and varied readings possible.

The shift to psychoanalytical perspectives of feminist film theory was marked most specifically by the publication of Laura Mulvey's article 'Visual Cinema and Narrative Pleasure' in 1975. This article had and continues to have a profound influence on feminist film theory. This article articulated the construction of the male gaze, as she called it. Within this theory the pleasure of looking, or scopophilia, was divided into active/masculine and passive/ feminine positions. The masculine was the voyeur and the feminine the object of the gaze or the spectacle. The masculine made meaning while the feminine became the bearer of meaning. This article applied Freudian psychoanalytical theories of castration, fetish, identification and scopophilia to film and exposed the ways films produced images, which supported

heterosexual libidinal economies of desire. Mulvey's article is very important to the work of this thesis and will be discussed more fully in subsequent chapters.

Psychoanalytic theory, as applied to film, has been and continues to be important to feminist film theorists because it allows for a study of desire and audience identification. One important theory to arise from this concept of identification is that of suture. This is most often achieved using the shot-reverse-shot, or by a relay of glances between the characters of the narrative film and the audience. The filmic text sutures viewers into the narrative by encouraging them to identify with the gaze of the fictional character. In the shot-reverse-shot, the spectator is encouraged to identify with the character controlling the reverse shot, which is usually the male protagonist. In film noir, this is usually the detective. This suturing reinforces the agency of the male protagonist and of the female character as spectacle and object of male desire. [Silverman, 1983: 222; Creed, 1987: 294] Popular narrative film, as a phallogocentric signifying practice, reinforces hegemonic codes of femininity and masculinity through its construction of categories of sexual difference. [Creed, 1987: 288-9] One of the most significant ways this happens is through the representation of woman in terms of her sexuality particularly with reference to the filmic treatment of her body, supporting masculine circuits of desire. An obvious place this occurs is in film noir.

The film noir world places women as the central figure of its intrigue, defining them in terms of their sexuality. Desirable but dangerous to men and sometimes deadly, these women represent obstacles to the narrative trajectory for the hero. [Kaplan, 1980:2-3] The film noir world represents a landscape of sexual danger provided by

the femme fatale through which the hero must attempt to pass. Sometimes he is successful and often he is not. Film noir is a particularly pertinent genre for the discussion of the femme castratrice or the castrating woman, because as Janey Place [1980: 36] points out:

...in film noir, it is clear that men need to control women's sexuality in order not to be destroyed by it. The dark woman of film noir had something her innocent sister lacked: access to her own sexuality (and thus men's) and the power that this access unlocked.

It is certainly true that both femme fatales of *Basic Instinct* and *The Last Seduction* had access to their own and men's sexuality, and this is what makes them dangerous in both cases. Both are able to use this access to gain the advantage. Neither hero is able to resist these women because of their sexuality and seductiveness. Other ways film noir conventions support the filmic construction of these women, as castrating seducers will be explored further in subsequent chapters.

Usually the main female character of the film noir, as described in the previous quote, is referred to as the femme fatale. In *Basic Instinct* and *The Last Seduction* in particular, they also operate as femme castratrice, in the ways described by Barbara Creed:

Male castration anxiety has given rise to two of the most powerful representations of the monstrous-feminine...woman as castrator [femme castratrice] and woman as castrated. Woman is represented as castrated either literally or symbolically....

Whereas the castrated female monster is inevitably punished for her transgressions, the castrating woman -usually a sympathetic figure - is rarely punished. She assumes two forms: the castrating female psychotic (*Sisters, Play Misty for Me, Repulsion, Basic Instinct*) and the woman who seeks revenge on men who have raped or abused her in some way. [1993:122-123]

The castrating woman can, of course, assume both forms and be both a 'castrating female psychotic' and a 'woman who seeks revenge on men who have abused her in

some way'. *The Last Seduction* fits into the category of woman seeking revenge on men who have abused her and *Basic Instinct* fits into the category of castrating psychotic female.

Film noir is of particular importance because it is one of the most recognised genres for representing the sexually autonomous and transgressive female subject.

Therefore, the use of film noir conventions in contemporary films positions the audience in such a way as to be ready to receive transgressive, sexually potent images of women. Traditional film noir usually provides the specular space for the femme fatales to display their full power so that they operate as Freudian phallic women where they can then be castrated either literally or symbolically by the filmic narrative. However, as we will see in the analysis of these two films, and particularly *The Last Seduction*, there is no castration of the female protagonists, they remain, to the end, castrators. This represents a marked shift in the representation of women in film and in the ways of reading female subjects in film.

The difference between the two films is that *Basic Instinct* puts the spectator in a position of mimetic identification, while *The Last Seduction* treats the spectator position ironically. It addresses and reveals the ironic distance between femininity as performance and the seduction in which the audience might participate. *The Last Seduction* provides an analysis of seduction and provokes the audience to think about how seduction is employed in this film. *Basic Instinct* on the other hand seeks to seduce the audience through its narrative and spectacle and adherence to realism.

When analysing these two films in depth it becomes clear that these femme fatales seduce in order to castrate. They use, in Baudrillard's [1990] terms, strategies of appearance, one of which is masquerade. Barbara Creed does not use these theories in her book *The Monstrous Feminine*. In her main area of analysis, Creed focuses on the horror film and the monstrous feminine within that realm. My main area of analysis, on the other hand, is the femme fatale as castrating woman. I use Baudrillard's [1990] theory of seduction to analyse the films and explore the femme fatales/castatrices' seductive techniques including masquerade. The discussion of masquerade draws on the work of Joan Riviere, Mary Ann Doane, Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray and is linked to Baudrillard's work on seduction and simulation. As he argues masquerade is a form of simulation, that denies the truth effect of the non-existent truth. [1990; 1983]

I do not take up Freud's seduction theory, as it is related to the development of hysteria in patients who have suffered abuse in their childhood. For Freud, seduction turns on the power relationships between adults and children, which do not exist in the sexual relations which the femme fatale or femme castatrice has with her adult male lovers. Freud's abandonment of this theory, or rather revision of it away from the existence of a real seduction to that of mere phantasy led to the reinforcing of 19th century views that women and children are liars and therefore dangerous. [La Planche and Pontalis, 1973; Masson, 1984; Hunter, 1989; Scharnberg, 1993]

I support Barbara Creed's important assertion that women can terrify men, not only as Freud maintains (because they are seen as castrated) but also, and more terrifyingly for males, in that they themselves can be the agents of castration. The

femme fatale from contemporary film noir is a pertinent subject to explore in relation to this theme. The female protagonists of *Basic Instinct* and *The Last Seduction* do not operate as Freudian phallic women whose purpose is to allay the fears of castration of the male viewing subject, but rather the deadlier femme castatrice or castrating woman, engaged in their own form of deadly seductions.

This castrating female exists in the discursive practices of myth, legend religion and art. Often the castration is expressed through symbolic displacement. [Lucie-Smith, 1991: 227] An obvious example of this is the biblical story of Judith and Holophernes, which appears often in history paintings of the Renaissance period, where Judith seduces Holophernes who is threatening her town and then beheads him, the beheaded male being a common symbol of castration.³ In the tale of Samson and Delilah, castration is symbolically displaced onto the removal of his hair. Another example is of Salome demanding the head of John the Baptist.

Clearly, therefore, myth, legend and art have represented endlessly the male fear of castration at the hands of a seductive woman:

...but whose image has been repressed in Freudian psychoanalytic theory largely because it challenges Freud's view that man fears woman because she is castrated. [Creed, 1993:127]

Lucie-Smith asserts that the fear is so deeply rooted within the male psyche of Western society, that it is rarely directly expressed in visual art. He cites only two

³ One of Caravaggio's most powerful paintings is the image of Judith in the process of beheading Holophernes. It is interesting since the commonly held belief is that Caravaggio was homosexual. Such a powerful image of woman symbolically castrating a man after sex, may reveal an unresolved Oedipal crisis erupting from Caravaggio's unconscious.

examples known to him, namely *Nymph Mutilating a Satyr* c 1543-44 by L D Primaticcio of the School of Fontainebleau and a medieval illustration showing William III of Sicily being blinded and castrated as another. [1991: 227]

There is a possibility that the castration complex and the castration anxieties experienced by males hold both positions, of woman as castrated and woman as castrator. It is limiting to continue to insist on only one position, it is more useful to extend the theory and concede that maybe they both exist and perhaps there are other positions too. Signifying practices such as narrative, art, film, myth, legend and so on seem to have both these female figures represented sometimes in the same female subject. The Medusa can be read as both castrating and castrated. In both cases, this is achieved through symbolic displacement. Her gaze turns men to stone thus rendering them impotent, but she is later decapitated, rendering her impotent.

There is considerable precedent for the exploration of the seductive castrating woman or femme castatrice. This is the primary focus of the exploration of the femme fatales in the two films, *Basic Instinct* and *The Last Seduction* in chapters three and four. This analysis specifically looks at issues around castration and seduction. This thesis utilises feminist film theory techniques, coupled with specific psychoanalytical insights into the dynamics of castration and Oedipal desire and Baudrillard's writings on seduction and simulation.

Chapter One

La Femme Castatrice



This chapter provides an overview of pertinent psychoanalytic theory, feminist response to it and its application in film theory, to explore from a theoretical point of view the ways that woman can be represented as a castrating image in film, and particularly those that use film noir conventions. Chapter two explores Baudrillard's theories of seduction and simulation and how the castrating woman uses such strategies to seduce her man. It focuses on the castrating woman's seductive techniques of consciously manipulating codes of femininity through masquerade and performance. Chapters three and four then apply this theoretical underpinning to the films, *Basic Instinct* and *The Last Seduction*.

Some contemporary theorists have argued that there are different types of phallic women: one who is powerful and then castrated; one who is phallic and remains a castrating woman. According to La Planche and Pontalis [1973: 311], the phallic woman is represented as having an external phallus or phallic attribute, or as having somehow incorporated the phallus within her.

During the phallic phase the child discovers that the phallic mother, assumed to be in possession of the phallus by the child, does not have a phallus, and is then seen as castrated. In the case of the boy, this means he identifies with his father to avoid castration and defers having his own woman until he grows up. For the girl the resolution takes a different form, namely the transference from the mother to the father/men as the love object thus opening the future promise of the phallus or its symbolic equivalent of, a child. [La Planche and Pontalis, 1973: 309-311]

There has been considerable debate within feminist circles about this psychic organisation of sexual difference which is so phallogocentric, ignoring completely the possibility of any primary intuitive knowledge of the vaginal cavity. Karen Horney, Melanie Klein and Ernst Jones assert that the phallic phase is nothing more than a secondary formation serving a defensive function. [La Planche and Pontalis, 1973: 312] While it is important to note these debates, it is not within the scope of this study to explore them further. The difference between the Freudian phallic woman and the castrating woman is that the phallic woman is in possession of a phallus and has it removed, in other words she is castrated or is deemed to possess phallic attributes and is then symbolically castrated. The woman who castrates may also be phallic or have phallic attributes but she is not castrated, she becomes an agent of castration. The Freudian phallic woman who is later castrated provides some relief for male fears of castration but the castrating woman provides no relief, she becomes a site of sexual difference.

In traditional film noir, the phallic woman is usually the femme fatale with the gun/knife in her purse. She is the dangerously powerful woman who displays her power but only in order for her to be destroyed. In this way, the phallic woman operates to shore up the phallogocentric ideologies of masculine and phallic power. [Place, 1980: 45] She is allowed to borrow the phallus so long as she is destroyed either literally or symbolically, thus restoring order and operating as a cautionary tale of the dangers of women being allowed to possess phallic power. As Creed argues:

The archetypes of the phallic and castrating woman are quite different and should not be confused; the former ultimately represents a comforting phantasy of sexual sameness, and the

latter a terrifying phantasy of sexual difference. [1993, 157-158]

If the child does not initially believe that mother is phallic, then she/he cannot later believe in her castration. In this way, the phallic woman is pivotal to Freudian theories of castration.

Freud asserts that once the boy has accepted the castration of women, fear of his own castration leads him to one of two responses:

...which will permanently determine the boy's relation to women: horror of the mutilated creature or triumphant contempt for her. [Freud, 1953: 252]

But, as Barbara Creed [1993: 115] points out, there are other ways the boy could respond. The boy may imagine that the woman feels triumphant contempt for him after she has castrated him, leaving him a mutilated creature. The image of the mutilated male creature is a common theme in horror and thriller films as well as myth, legend, Gothic literature and art.

The image of the female castrator, as whole and complete, is not threatened with lack or absence; rather she makes that threat herself. In the face of women's genitals, men could just as easily fear castration of themselves by the women, either literally or symbolically, as fear the sight of women's genitals as a site of castration. Surely, from a masculine subject position the real horror would be of castration for themselves rather than castration of the woman.

Freud uses the myth of the Medusa and her decapitation by Perseus to illustrate his theory of female castration. In his essay 'Medusa's Head' he writes:

...in the case of the horrifying decapitated head of the Medusa...a representation of woman as a being who frightens and repels because she is castrated...[the head] takes the place of a representation of the female genitals, or rather...it isolates their horrifying effects from their pleasure giving ones. [Creed, 1993: 110]

The pubic hair of the female genitalia is, through Freud's interpretation, symbolically displaced onto the writhing serpents of the Medusa's head. These snakes, according to Freud, have a double function, they terrify in and of themselves but they also replace and therefore act as a reminder of the absent penis. The 'multification of penis symbols signifies castration.' [Freud, 1953: 273] The Medusa's head becomes a fetish object, because it disavows female castration confirming the absence of the penis through its symbolic displacement onto the snakes. [Creed, 1993: 111]

For Freud, the men turning to stone upon gazing on the Medusa's head, becomes a metaphor for having an erection. This provides them with some comfort by reminding them of the presence of their own penis and the knowledge that they are still in possession of it. [Freud, 1953: 273] However, it is also possible to read the Medusa as a symbolic representation of the female castrator. Many of the representations of the Medusa, such as Caravaggio's *Head of the Medusa* in the Uffizi in Florence, [Lucie-Smith, 1991: 234] show a large lolling mouth agape with teeth showing and surrounded by a mass of snakes with their mouths open exposing sharp pointed fangs.

As Barbara Creed [1993: 111] points out, this is a particularly unpleasant version of the male castration fear of the *vagina dentata*. Freud seems to ignore this version, possibly since it would so deeply challenge his own theory of woman as castrated.

However, as Creed argues:

If we stretch our imaginations, the multiplication of the woman's imaginary phallus; they more clearly represent that genital in its castrating aspects. Representations of the snake coiled in a circle, its tail/phallus in its mouth/vagina is a ubiquitous symbol of bisexuality found in all cultures. Freud isolated the phallic and ignores the vaginal significance of the snake as a sexual symbol. To argue that the Medusa's severed head symbolises the terrifying *castrated* female genitals, and that the snakes represent her fetishised and comforting imaginary phallus, is an act of wish fulfillment *par excellence*. Freud's interpretation masks the active, terrifying aspects of the female genitals - the fact that they might castrate. The Medusa's entire visage is alive with images of toothed vaginas, poised and waiting to strike. No wonder her male victims were rooted to the spot with fear. [1993: 111]

There is another important point to consider here which supports Barbara Creed's assertion that it is possible to see the Medusa's head as castrating rather than castrated. Freud's analysis of this myth is limited to one aspect of the myth, which is taken out of context. This is partly because the most common versions of the tale of the Medusa are from the masculine point of view of Perseus and does not provide the details of how she came to be in this state.

Medusa, a beautiful woman who served the temple of Athena, was courted by Poseidon whom she refused. Assuming a different form, he finally seduced her in the temple of the Virgin Goddess Athena. Looking on in disgust at the desecration of her holy temple Athena took her vengeance on the woman, turning Medusa into the hideous monster we are all familiar with, whose gaze turns men to stone. [Valentis and Devane, 1994: 187-191] The alternate reading that springs to mind is that the Medusa turns into the enraged woman she is and her rage manifests on her body and she cannot hide it. All that men can see is female rage, stirring up their pre-Oedipal fears of the great all-powerful phallic mother. It is also interesting to note that in

some versions of the myth it is not the sight of the Medusa that turns men to stone, but rather her gaze. [Valentis and Devane, 1991: 187-191] She must then be decapitated so she can no longer kill men with her gaze. In traditional psychoanalytical theory, Medusa's gaze was excised. This absence of the castrating gaze, as Laura Mulvey [1990] argues, is also absent from most mainstream Hollywood films. If one retains the portion of the myth which describes how Medusa became what she was, one registers archetypal feminine rage at the heart of this story concerning abuse suffered by women at the hands of rapacious men. She becomes the vengeful castrating female, turning men to stone with her look. This challenges Freud's use of this fragment of the myth to support his theory of castration and supports Creed's view that men fear women because of the threat of castration.

Freud [1964] predicated his castration theory on his theory of fetishism, which is linked to female genitalia as a sight/site of castration. In this theory, upon realising that the mother is castrated and recognising the threat to his own genitals, the boy is faced with two choices: either to accept or reject the possibility of castration. If he rejects the possibility of castration then he can remain convinced that the phallus is really there, it just can not be seen. Something else is then substituted for it, often, according to the theory, the last thing glimpsed before the dreadful discovery. This could be legs, shoes, underwear, fur or velvet as a further substitute of pubic hair. [Creed, 1993: 116; Mulvey, 1989: 10-11] In film noir the fetishistically draped femme fatale in her furs and lace, with emphasis on her long legs, high heels, or accessorised with phallic objects, such as long cigarette holders, long nails, knives, guns or ice picks, operates as a Freudian phallic woman. She is a response to the

fetishist's disavowal of the woman's castration. [Creed, 1993: 116]

The phallic woman is created in response to the fetishist's refusal to believe that woman does not possess a penis ... The phantasy of woman as castrator is as terrifying as - if not more terrifying than - that of the castrated woman. It can also be used to explain why the male might desire to create a fetish, to want to continue to believe that woman is like himself, that she has a phallus rather than a vagina. In this case, the fetish stands in for the *vagina dentata* - the castrating female organ the male wishes to disavow. [Creed, 1993: 116]

Creed maintains that seeing woman as both phallic and castrated and as castrator in no way invalidates Freud's theory of fetishism. Rather, it simply provides another way for man to continue to believe that woman has a phallus, which stands in for the more terrifying image of the *vagina dentata*, which the male seeks to disavow. It could, therefore, be argued that phallic woman as fetishised woman opposes and disavows the existence of both the castrated and castrating woman. In this way then the exploration of male castration anxiety as represented via such narrative signifying practices as film can be broadened to include the more actively terrifying image of woman as castrator. [Creed, 1993: 116-117]

Lurie [1981: 55] argues that when the male does discover that female genitalia is not a lack, but a whole, a presence, the problem for men becomes worse. Female genitalia do not present as vulnerable in the same way that a penis does. When the dynamics of sexual intercourse are brought into play the penis is imagined as disappearing into the vagina. Its similarities with a mouth are not lost on the male psyche, evoking fears of the devouring feminine and the *vagina dentata*. Lurie [1981: 56] asserts that the phantasy of the castrated woman is necessary to heterosexual masculine libidinal economy in order to assuage the complex male dread of women.

Such a phantasy operates as a defence mechanism by guarding against the fear of absorption and guaranteeing woman as powerless to hurt him. Lurie, posits that the phantasy of the castrated woman is necessary when he wishes to have sexual intercourse with women, and this desire will not be relinquished as it was in relation to his mother in the Oedipal complex.

It is the woman as lover whose castration must be accomplished before she is safe for male desire. The proliferation of efforts to 'castrate' women - both literal and metaphorical - in preparation for marriage, love, sex, argues vigorously against the hypothesis that men regard woman as *a priori* castrated. [Lurie, 1981: 56]

Masculinity within Freudian psychoanalysis is constructed as an ongoing struggle and site of endless psychological conflict. Tacey [1997: 197-9] argues that after the resolution of the Oedipal complex males are forever on guard against the power of the feminine. This would agree with Lurie's conjectures that phallogocentric psychoanalytical constructions of women as castrated are male phantasies acting as defensive mechanisms to protect a fragile masculinity, which fears it will be castrated through contact with femininity. Lurie's argument therefore, challenges the Freudian model where men fear women because they are castrated and posits instead that men fear women because they are *not* castrated.

Feminist film critics have been particularly interested in psychoanalysis as a framework for film critique because it allows them to study audience identification with various characters and its relationship to desire. Jacques Lacan's theories of psychoanalysis have influenced much of contemporary feminist psychoanalytic theory and its application to film theory. His theories, especially from a political point of view, have been very attractive because he emphasised the discursively

produced constructions of masculinity and femininity through social and institutional practices. This broke with Freudian psychoanalysis that was predicated on physicality. Lacan's explanation of sexual difference within the imaginary and the symbolic realms, rather than Freud's biological basis, allowed for the oppression and exploitation of women to be seen as contingent rather than biologically determined.

[Mulvey, 1987: 9]

For Lacan, the term 'penis' simply refers to the anatomical sex organ of the male. He uses the term 'phallus' to refer to the privileges of the male within the symbolic order. Within his theory, Lacan extends the notion of lack to include male as well as female subjects through this distinction between the penis and the phallus.

[Silverman, 1983: 139]

As Susan Lurie points out, however, this difference in approach may not vary as much in effect:

Like its objective forerunner, the penis, the symbolic phallus is engaged in a struggle to force significance, a struggle against "castration" at the level of signifier that becomes an effort to contain the dynamic processes of meaning that can displace and condense signifiers. The significance desired both for the object penis and for the symbolic phallus have in common the insistence on the certainty of immutable metonymic and metaphorical figures, respectively. While the penis enforces the metonymy that makes it *the* part that determines *the* whole (human body), the symbolic phallus is the privileged term in a metaphorical configuration, collapsing all the other terms into a metaphorical whole named and shaped by the "phallus".

[Lurie, 1981-2: 57]

However, the Lacanian theory of sexual difference, defined by having or not having the phallus, places the feminine in a negative relation, defined as non-masculine.

Mulvey [1987: 9] points out that Lacan's theory 'brilliantly describes the power

relationships of patriarchy but acknowledges no need for escape'. Perhaps he has no real motivation to do so.

For Lacan, the subject is constituted through language. [Rose, 1983: 31] The social and institutional practice of naming a child male or female based on their genitals leads to a whole range of meanings, behaviours and expectations which are related to categories of masculinity and femininity, which predate the child. The child does not have an understanding of sexual differentiation until it is imposed on him or her by the symbolic order via social and institutional discourses and practices.

The imaginary, in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, refers to the pre-Oedipal identification of the infant with its reflected image in a mirror, which is made manifest through the eyes of the mother reflecting the infant back to him or her. The theory of the mirror phase accounts for a process of separation of the child and its mother and the beginnings of the child's social and linguistic identity. [Grosz, 1990: 74] This subjectivity can only be accomplished with the successful resolution of the Oedipal and castration complexes.

The mirror phase involves the child imagining his mirror image as perfect and more complete than he experiences his own body. Therefore misrecognition overlays recognition because although the image is recognised as a reflection of the self, it is misrecognised because it carries projections of superiority or an ideal ego. This separated subject is then reintrojected as an ego ideal and allows for future identification with other ego ideals experienced in reality and through representation. [Mulvey, 1990: 31]

The Oedipal phase, through invoking the Father, leads the child to the knowledge that there are positions within society, which are separate from the mother. The Father in Lacanian theory can be the actual father or masculine authority operating in and through systems of the culture in which the child lives. The child's entrance into the symbolic order/Law of the Father is the force that sunders the dyadic relationship of mother and child of collapsed ego boundaries and jouissance. This happens during the mirror phase when the child learns its name, enters into the symbolic order of language, and experiences the self through the mis/recognition of the specular image. As Grosz points out:

Like Freud, Lacan concentrates on the boy's symbolic development. The apparently complementary processes in the girl remain obscure. [1990: 75]

Woman, except as an empty category, is totally absent from Lacan's theory. '*She is positioned in the symbolic order as a spoken exchanged object, not as a subject who is a partner within exchange.*'⁴ [Grosz, 1990: 75] Nevertheless, Lacan provides us with an important reappropriation of Freud. Feminist scholars have revised both Lacan and Freud in their development of feminist psychoanalytic frameworks. [Irigaray, 1985, 1989; Creed, 1993; Mulvey, 1990; Silverman, 1983; de Lauretis, 1991; Grosz, 1990; Steffensen, 1996]

Laura Mulvey, in her essay 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' draws on psychoanalytic theory and asserts that it is ironic that phallogentrism requires the image of the castrated woman to assure meaning and order to its world. [1990: 28]

⁴ Italics appear in original text

Mulvey posits that classic film texts differentiate strongly between male and female subjects, particularly in relation to vision. Men watch and women are looked at, he is the voyeur and she is the spectacle by virtue of her exhibitionism. [Mulvey, 1990: 33] This sets up an opposition of complementarity, which reinforces dominant, discursively inscribed, subject positions for men and women. Voyeurism, the active form of the drive of scopophilia, is assigned to men, and exhibitionism, the passive form of the same drive, is assigned to women. This is achieved via the use of camera work, lighting, editing and so on. The male subject becomes, within this paradigm, the imagined source of the gaze. It is from his point of view that the vision of the film is constructed. The female subject becomes the imagined object of the gaze. In this sense, Catherine Trammel [Sharon Stone] in *Basic Instinct* becomes for viewers the spectacle of the castrating woman.

Mulvey [1990: 39] posits three gazes: firstly the gaze between the characters within the screen illusion; secondly the gaze of the audience viewing the film; and thirdly the gaze of the camera which produces the images with which the viewer identifies. Shots that align the viewer with the gaze of the male subject, accord the viewer potency and authority. One's inscription in culture provides some guarantees that the male as hero of the film is culturally and symbolically afforded potency and agency. It is that figure which then becomes the figure of identification for both male and female viewers taking up masculine spectator positions. Silverman [1983: 204] posits a fourth gaze - the transcendental gaze of the Other - a controlling, castrating gaze, which has all the qualities of the 'mythically potent symbolic father; potency, knowledge, transcendentalism, self sufficiency and discursive power'. So while the

male subject comes to be inscribed with power and control through vision the female subject signifies:

...the lack which properly belongs both to the male and the female viewers, who are spoken, not speaking, and whose gazes are controlled, not controlling. She also signifies lack within the fiction of the film, a fiction, which inevitably duplicates dominant cultural values. She signifies, that is, the absence of the phallus (of control, power, privilege). As usual, her body provides the means for representing this deprivation. She simultaneously attracts the gaze - appeals to the senses - and represents castration. [Silverman 1983: 223]

Classic cinema constantly replays this primal scene of the rediscovery of the female subject's lack. While this constant replaying of the lack of the female subject offers identification of the male subject with attributes of power and agency it can also have another effect and that is of fear, fear that he too could be castrated. Therefore, the sight of lack in a woman can be both affirming and terrifying for male subjectivity both within the fiction and for male spectators. [Silverman, 1983, 1990]

Mulvey [1990] suggests that there are two ways of resolving this uncomfortable situation. The first is to assign the blame for the female subject's lack to her own depravity or sickness, and the second requires a fetishisation of the sight of female lack. The first solution is associated with sadism and the pleasure of finding and punishing guilt. The second solution allays the fear of castration in male subjectivity by the substitution of a part of the woman's body or clothing for the missing phallus. This displacement provides the more comfortable position for the male spectator that the woman really is not castrated at all. The privileged zone is often overvalued to compensate for the lack. Mulvey [1990] sees the first as a means to progress the narrative and the second as a means of disruption to the narrative. The disruption

occurs through woman as spectacle becoming a focus of erotic pleasure, a focus that does not necessarily progress the narrative.

Film theorists often attend to two different aspects of the filmic text, the narrative and the spectacle. Narrative is understood to be the story of the film articulated through the action and script, whereas spectacle operates either to confirm the narrative or to disrupt it. [Metz, 1982; de Lauretis, 1982; Silverman, 1983; Mulvey, 1990] Mainstream film combines narrative and spectacle so that woman as spectacle becomes an indispensable element of such narrative films. This happens even when her visual image tends to slow down the narrative development. Here woman as spectacle, displayed as a sex object, interrupts the action to provide a moment of erotic contemplation and in this way woman as spectacle engages the male gaze and signifies male desire. [Mulvey, 1990: 33]

Traditional psychoanalytic theories of castration may continue to assert that men fear women because they are castrated. But through Creed's work, in particular, we can see that this coherence was achieved only through repression of clinical data and interpretations of myths and legends, which did not support phallogocentric psychoanalytic theories of male castration anxieties. However, signifying practices such as myth, art, legends, and film continue to provide spaces for these eruptions of the fear of castrating women to occur. Film theories themselves, predicated on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic models, account for the playing out of the Oedipal crisis through filmic techniques, notably theories of the gaze which support this model of masculine activity and feminine passivity.

However, when applied to film one can still find instances where the gaze does not guarantee masculine power and agency but rather undermines and disrupts it. One can also find instances where the sight of woman's lack becomes not an affirmation of men's agency, but rather decentring and uncomfortable. Representations of some women, especially castrating women, decentre phallogocentric fantasies of primacy and control. This will be discussed and revealed in the chapters analysing *Basic Instinct* and *The Last Seduction*.

Chapter Two

Seduction and Masquerade

This chapter examines and explores Baudrillard's theories of seduction and simulation to uncover the seductive techniques femme fatales/castatrices are likely to use. Since Baudrillard sees seduction primarily as a strategy of appearances the chapter then goes on to examine a number of theories of femininity as masquerade or performance.

Within the genre of film noir we find representations of the sexually autonomous female subject in the guise of the femme fatale, the seductress who will divert the hero from his narrative trajectory inviting him into her imaginary world where the male subject is powerless. Feminist film theorists maintain that, within film noir, woman as a subject can be said to be still trapped within phallogocentric discourse.

However, Jean Baudrillard [1990: 14], following from French feminist theories of feminine alterity, offers another approach to this dilemma. For him, woman's absence is her power. For him her seduction is the greatest weapon against phallogocentrism. Femininity can use seduction as its ultimate tool. Femininity is more powerful than we think because of its absence from phallogocentrism. Therefore femininity can take up its position of absence in a powerful way and entice people out of the symbolic order. Baudrillard [1990: 6] warns against the sexual revolution inside phallogocentrism, claiming that for the female this would result in her being contained within a structure that, when strong, discriminates against her and, when weak, condemns her to a derisory triumph. Instead, he claims that:

The feminine, however, is, and has always been, somewhere else. That is the secret of its strength... the feminine seduces because it is never where it thinks it is, or where it thinks itself... There is an alternative to sex and to power, one that psychoanalysis cannot know because its axiomatics are sexual. And yes, this alternative is undoubtedly of the order of

the feminine, understood outside of the opposition masculine/feminine, that opposition being essentially masculine, sexual in intention, and capable of being overturned without ceasing to exist. This strength of the feminine is that of seduction. [Baudrillard, 1990: 6-7]

Seduction, as Baudrillard speaks of it, entails a strategy of appearances. Baudrillard takes the Latin meaning, *sedure*, to mean diverting from one's goals. Those who use seductive techniques employ strategies of appearance to divert the objects of their seduction from their goals. [1990:22] This is certainly played out in *Basic Instinct* and *The Last Seduction*, with differing results and through utilisation of differing tactics.

Seduction, according to Baudrillard, is a never-ending exchange of ever increasing challenges to higher levels of enjoyment and pleasure. It excites the libido and desire. There is a difference between the libido as described in psychoanalytic terms by Freud and the ways woman gets positioned inside masculine circuits of desire, and feminine desire, as Irigaray [1985, 1989] analyses it beyond phallogocentric and psychoanalytic models. Irigaray's feminine desire, although not explicitly analogous with Baudrillard, presents another way to come to terms with a similar dilemma. Is there a mode of interacting in the body around desire that has not been appropriated through psychoanalysis? A mode, which cannot easily be subjected to psychoanalytic models that might give us some way of reaching beyond these models to tap into something like feminine desire or seduction exceeding the Oedipal dynamic?

Seduction can be said to be post Oedipal in the sense that it is a series of exchanges between at least two subjectivities. However, seduction, as Baudrillard describes it, is beyond the Freudian model of subjectivity. Indeed Baudrillard asserts that the most

damaging realisation for psychoanalysis is that the unconscious seduces via dreams and the voice of the id. [1990:55] He asserts that:

... the shroud of psychoanalysis has fallen over seduction, the shroud of hidden meanings and of a hidden excess of meaning, at the expense of the surface of absorption, the superficial abyss of appearances, the instantaneous and panicky surface of the exchange and rivalry of signs constituted by seduction...[1990: 57]

Baudrillard claims Freud replaced seduction with interpretation and sexual repression in a bid for objectivity and coherence. [1990: 57]

Seduction, as a series of exchanges, relies on mutual projection and identification. As Baudrillard points out the offer of 'I'll be your mirror' does not imply a simple reflection; rather it implies deception. [1990: 69] Seduction involves projecting an image onto the other that is not the other. One is seduced by the image one creates and which stands in front of the other, that is, it is the simulation that seduces. The image is more idealised and therefore more seductive. Baudrillard posits:

The strategy of seduction is one of deception. It lies in wait for all that tends to confuse itself with its reality. And it is potentially a source of fabulous strength. ... It even lies in wait for the unconscious and desire, by turning them into a mirror of the unconscious and desire. ... the enchantment begins only after one has been taken by one's desire. [1990: 69-70]

The seducer can become a mirror of the seduced's unconscious desires. This imagined reflection is what seduces. It is thus auto-seductive and narcissistic, because the seducer seduces the object of their seduction through access to their own unconscious desires. Baudrillard's understanding of the imaginary in this process is located within postmodern perspectives on subjectivity and so it exceeds Freudian psychoanalytic understandings.

There is the possibility of seeing women in film noir not as actors but as projections of male phantasies, which seduce males and collapse the bounds between the 'real' and the 'imagined'. Annette Hamilton [1990] provides an example of how this happens in Australia with reference to racial difference. White Australians now look to Aboriginal culture as the holy sacred mystical Other or to the revered images of Asia as picked up by the New Age movement. We take up our images of what we think they are, we project that onto them and then we are seduced by the image we have projected onto them. This concurs with Baudrillard's position on seduction, that it is the male phantasy of the feminine that woman can use to seduce men by adopting the masquerade of that phantasy. Baudrillard sees it as a very powerful position to take. He says that:

Woman is but appearance. And it is the feminine as appearance that thwarts masculine depth. Instead of rising up against such 'insulting' counsel, women would do well to let themselves be seduced by its truth, for here lies the secret of their strength... [1990:10]

Baudrillard argues that seduction is not the exclusive domain of sex, but rather that sex is contained within seduction. [1990:47] Seduction is something other than the sexual act - it is broader than that - it is a series of exchanges that can lead to sex, but does not have to. In the contemporary world, there is an over emphasis on sex and orgasm to the point where our understanding of sexuality has become reductionist, mechanistic and masculine. Seduction has been stripped bare and made redundant in contemporary society. It is as though we have become so saturated with sexuality that there is no place left for seduction in our lives anymore. Baudrillard [1990] claims this saturation has achieved the diminishing of seduction more effectively than earlier religious discourse. While seduction does not always have to lead to sex

and love, the over emphasis of sexuality and orgasm in contemporary circulation of discourses has led, in Baudrillard's view, to sex being removed from seduction.

Baudrillard [1990: 85-6] points out that the seductress derives her power from her ability to eclipse any will or context. She turns desire itself into a trap. Love and sex can become instances of seduction but Baudrillard claims love together with sex is only so much seductive finery.

"I do not want to love, cherish, or even please you, but to *seduce* you - and my only concern is not that you love or please me but that you are *seduced*." The game of the seductress involves a certain mental cruelty, towards herself as well as others. Any affection on her part is a weakness relative to the ritual imperative. [Baudrillard 1990: 86]

This is precisely how the two femme castratrices of *Basic Instinct* and *The Last Seduction* operate. They both seduce without allowing affection to become a weakness, if even present, in their rituals of seduction. Baudrillard's theory allows for woman as seductress to be examined as the subject rather than the object of desire. These films can be viewed as studies in seduction.

If we accept Baudrillard's point, that seduction is concerned with appearances, then we can see a connection with the concept of femininity as masquerade. Discussion of this concept within feminist psychoanalytic theory is derived mostly from the work of Joan Riviere, a psychoanalyst writing about 'Womanliness and Masquerade' in 1929. In her article, Riviere wrote about real female clients who were successful in male dominated professions. The article was written in response to Ernst Jones' article 'The Early Development of Female Sexuality' where he discusses the development of types of female sexuality, dividing the types firstly into heterosexual

and homosexual and then further qualifying these with intermediary types. [Riviere, 1929: 303] Riviere believes her article; 'Womanliness and Masquerade' presents evidence of one of these intermediary types. She asserts that:

... women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men. [1929: 303]

Joan Riviere was the first to theorise about femininity as masquerade. She posited that this was a form of reaction formation, or defence mechanism against the fear of retribution from men for the transgression of woman in the masculine sphere.

However, it is her idea of femininity as masquerade that feminist theorists have taken up and applied to visual representation.

Mary Ann Doane [1990: 48-50], in particular, has used Riviere's theory and applied it to film theory and thought femininity as masquerade could be used as a resistant and defiant strategy. She states that masquerade acknowledges the artifice of femininity, that it is simply a mask which conceals no identity. [Doane, 1990: 48]

Doane first took up this argument in 'Film and the masquerade: theorising the female spectator' [1990].

Later in 'Masquerade reconsidered: further thoughts of the female spectator' [1988-9] she revises her earlier remarks on femininity as masquerade and asserts that there is no possibility of using masquerade as a destabilising force. For this conclusion she draws on the work of Lacan and Irigaray whose views, she believes, are that masquerade specifies a norm of femininity. [Doane, 1988-9: 42]

For Lacan, this adoption of a masquerade specifying a norm of femininity occurs when the girl acknowledges her castration and desires the penis she lacks. Lacan emphasises that the phallus is not the biological organ, rather it represents access to the signifier of authority and desire. As a result of the girl's acceptance of castration, she:

... comes to acquire the traits associated with femininity under patriarchy - passivity, seductiveness, the renunciation of active clitoral sexuality and its transformation into passive vaginal sexuality. She is not constructed, as is the boy, as an active, desiring subject but as a passive, desired object (of other's desire). [Grosz, 1989: 75]

In contrast to Doane, my reading of Irigaray is that Irigaray is more critical of masquerade specifying a norm of femininity. Irigaray points out that this role/performance/image is constructed by, and imposed on, women by phallogocentric discursive and social/institutional practices. She warns that in this masquerade the woman can lose herself by playing on her femininity. The masquerade of femininity requires an effort on the woman's part, since it is something, which must be learnt and accepted. [1985: 84]

However, she does point out that women can use mimesis in a more resistant fashion. She posits that mimicry is the initial phase of a complex undertaking of “*destroying*” *the discursive mechanism*’ [Irigaray, 1985: 76] which constitutes the female sex in discourse:

One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation and thus to begin to thwart it. Whereas a direct feminine challenge to this condition means demanding to speak as a (masculine) “subject.” That is, it means to postulate a relation to the intelligible that would maintain sexual indifference.

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by

discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself - inasmuch as she is on the side of the "perceptible," of "matter" - to "ideas," in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. [1985:76]

She is suggesting, therefore, that such playful mimesis reveals the performative masquerade of the feminine as a means of phallogocentric discursive positioning within the oppositions of masculinity and femininity. For the oppressed to mime their stereotypes back to the oppressors brings attention to the mechanism of oppression. It is important to note that, in this case, the oppressed are miming these constructions located inside the phallogocentric oppositions of masculinity and femininity rather than being subjected to them. Irigaray posits that women can mimic femininity in a way, which knowingly parodies their construction within the symbolic order. In this way, Irigaray is positing mimicry as a destabilising and revelatory practice.

Irigaray distinguishes between masquerade and mimesis. For Irigaray, femininity as masquerade is similar to Baudrillard's strategies of appearance in that it exists within phallogocentrism as subject positions into which woman can move. But for Irigaray this is a problem because it is how woman can lose herself. When she speaks of mimesis on the other hand, it is more like Baudrillard in that it becomes an area of play and the conscious miming of femininity and has the potential to expose the structures which underlie its so called normalcy. This mimetic strategy calls attention to and mimes back to the oppressor the stereotypes that have caused the oppression, thereby bringing attention to the mechanisms of oppression. However, that is not what Baudrillard is asserting when he posits seduction as a strategy of appearances.

Baudrillard is not talking about woman consciously miming inside the symbolic order in order to parody it. He is talking about a different way of being which Irigaray, when she describes feminine alterity beyond masculine/feminine binaries, is also addressing, but not when she is talking about mimesis. Here she is describing the positions available to women within the symbolic order where woman figures in a relationship to masculinity: whereas feminine alterity is a position available to both men and women. It is a space of alterity, which would theoretically, at least, allow for different subjectivities to be constituted and different ways of understanding sexualities. That is what she is working with in her ethics of sexual difference. [Grosz, 1990] Baudrillard would not understand feminine alterity in the same way but at least he gestures towards that space. This uncovers some important theoretical differences between Irigaray and Baudrillard for the purposes of this thesis.

Returning to Doane, in her later article she points out that in both Riviere's article and her first article, one of the problems of femininity as masquerade is woman's active role in taking up masquerade to attract the male gaze. This would seem to activate an understanding of woman as spectacle. [Doane, 1988-9: 48] But if woman takes it on knowingly through 'playful repetition' then her spectacle becomes a screen through which she enacts seduction.

Judith Butler has an interesting view about women's active role in taking up femininity as masquerade. For her, gender is performative and requires constant repetition. Through Butler we can broaden the theory of femininity as masquerade to include performance, which is inherent in Riviere's first article and in Doane's reflections although neither had the vocabulary or recourse to 1990's theory to

make this explicit. The active performance of various gestures, acts, positions and attitudes is critical to the masquerade. Butler asserts:

... because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is thus a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the incredibility of those productions - and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction "compels" our belief in its necessity and naturalness. [1990: 140]

The active role women take in adopting feminine positions is in line with Butler's theories of the performative nature of gender construction. For Butler gender is performative for both male and female and its performance is culturally and historically situated. Butler asserts that the psychoanalytic concept of gender identification is constituted by a fantasy of a fantasy. She contends that gender parody reveals that gender models itself on an imitation without origin. [1990: 138]

Butler's position on the parody of femininity, while not exactly the same as Baudrillard's, is suggestive of Baudrillard's contention that 'to over-stimulate femininity is to suggest that woman is but a masculine model of simulation.' [1990:14] He extends this position of gender parody by pointing out that when men dress and behave like women, they are actually acting out femininity as they imagine and phantasize it. [1990: 14] There is not a tightly fitting equivalence between these things but there are suggestive features about each of them that I have found useful in bringing together the way I use seduction in my film analyses.

If femininity is seen as masquerade, we have to ask ourselves, masquerade of what, for whose benefit and in whose image? Here we return to Baudrillard and his

theories of simulation. He asserts that femininity, as masquerade is a simulation, a truth effect that hides the non-existence of the truth. For Baudrillard, masquerade is an artifice of seduction through which others can be seduced into believing they know who we are and into wanting what we want. [Baudrillard, 1990: 10-11] He contends that within phallogocentric discursive frameworks the female subject is a phallic phantasy, something that does not, in fact, exist, that it is a phantasy of what masculinity imagines is femininity. Given this, then, femininity as masquerade is an artifice of seduction, through which we seduce people into believing they know who we are, and into wanting what we want. [Baudrillard, 1990: 10] Baudrillard, quoting Joan Riviere [1929: 306] saying that 'whether femininity be authentic or superficial, it is fundamentally the same thing' concludes this is a fundamental claim containing seduction within it. [Baudrillard, 1990: 10] Baudrillard claims this can only be said about femininity because within phallogocentrism, masculinity is certain and femininity is insoluble and reversible. [1990: 10-11] This lack of distinction between authenticity and artifice within the feminine also describes the space of simulation.

Baudrillard states:

Here too one cannot distinguish between reality and its models, there being no other reality than that secreted by the simulative models, just as there is no other femininity than that of appearances. Simulation too is insoluble. [1990: 11]

'It is not an ideology, i.e., it does not hide some truth; it is a simulacrum, i.e., it is a truth effect that hides the truth's non-existence.' [Baudrillard 1990: 35]

Is it possible to represent such power within the media of film in such a way that it both challenges dominant discursive positions and provides a new space that can be taken up by female subjects?

In the films, *Basic Instinct* and *The Last Seduction*, the femme fatale/castatrice types consciously use femininity as masquerade to seduce men to accomplish their goals. This is particularly transparent in *The Last Seduction* where the filmic techniques invite us to see femininity as masquerade and performance, which can be willfully and actively manipulated. *Basic Instinct* within film noir conventions and *The Last Seduction* beside them can activate a critique of these premises.

Chapter Three

Unsafe Sex:

Exchanges with a Deadly Seductress

in 'Basic Instinct'

Introduction

The film *Basic Instinct*, first released in 1992, directed by Paul Verhoeven, is a detective thriller, quoting film noir. It tells the story of a femme fatale killing her lover and the investigation of that murder by detective Nick Curran [Michael Douglas]. The dramatic opening scene of two people making love in beautiful, multi mirrored and luxurious surroundings reveals the lovers, first glimpsed through their reflections, engaged in erotic, sado/masochistic sex games. The woman is astride her lover and ties him to the bed with an expensive white silk scarf. At the climax, the unknown blonde woman reaches behind her and repeatedly thrusts an ice pick into her lover's body, an act that seemingly excites her to higher intensities of orgasm. Johnny Boz [Bill Cable] is the victim.

A team of police detectives then investigates this crime, which includes an interrogation of the main suspect, Catherine Trammel [Sharon Stone] including a lie detector test. Catherine Trammel is an independently wealthy, beautiful woman who writes murder mysteries, one of which bears an uncanny resemblance to the circumstances of the murder with which the film begins. This lends weight to her being a suspect in the murder of her lover, Johnny Boz. Detective Nick Curran becomes increasingly obsessed with the investigation of this murder and eventually he becomes more interested in investigating Catherine Trammel than the crime. Nick Curran has been under investigation by Internal Affairs for shooting some tourists. There were some allegations that he shot them while under the influence of cocaine and that he was an addict. He was cleared of suspicion by passing a lie detector test. However, he must undergo counselling with the police psychologist, Dr Beth

Garner [Jeanne Tripplehorn]. For a time, they were lovers and she has a lot of difficulty letting go of him. She is often in his life, trying to protect him and encourage him to give up his vices. The newspaper reported his case extensively and Catherine Trammel uses this reportage to begin her research of him as a character in her new novel. A detective from Internal Affairs, Lieutenant Nielson [Daniel Van Buren], is shot dead after Nick had confronted him in his office. Nick, under investigation for two prior killings, becomes the main suspect and his colleagues interrogate him. He is relieved of duty, pending an outcome of this case. After this occurrence, he is an outlaw. His investigation of Catherine continues and becomes overtly sexual. Their first sexual experience bears an uncanny resemblance to the original murder sequence, minus the murder. After watching this sexual encounter, Roxy [Leilani Sareli], Catherine's lover tries to kill Nick but is killed herself. Later, Gus [George Dzundza], Nick's partner, is killed with an ice pick and Nick shoots Beth, thinking she is the murderer. Evidence in her apartment seems to support this. Evidence in her apartment also implicates her in the death of her husband and a university lecturer.

As the narrative unfolds it becomes clear that this film represents all of the women as deviant and duplicitous, both sexually and criminally. As the love affair progresses Catherine seems to clear herself of any wrongdoing. It is possible to read Catherine as partly redeemable through the possibility of her becoming a suitable wife for Nick, hinted at in the last scene. The film ends in a scene, which parallels the opening of two people making love, this time it is Nick and Catherine. The final shot reveals the ice pick under Catherine's side of the bed.

Under the spell of basic instincts

The name of this film requires some attention. From a psychoanalytical point of view it is possible to read the title of this film, *Basic Instinct* as referring to the two primary fundamental drives through which, according to Freud, human life can be understood: eros and thanatos. [Freud, 1955b: 38-42] Caputi encapsulates these drives in the following description:

...eros, "the true life instincts" moves forward with sexual energy and impulse; thanatos holds that impulse in check given its retrograde tendency, its longing for an earlier state of things. [1994: 50]

In the character of Nick Curran, we can see the playing out of both of these drives in his relationship with Catherine Trammel. If we understand eros as the drive that operates in life in such things as communing with others, experimenting with new things and the arousal of interest in life through sexual desire, then we can see Nick's interest in Catherine as erotic. He enters the world of her community and tries new things she introduces him to and of course, they have sex. If we understand thanatos to operate in life through such things as the rejection of the community, a desire to regress to the repetition of past states or experiences then again we can see that his relationship with Catherine Trammel encourages such things.

Through his relationship with her, he loses contact with his community of police officers after he is placed on probation. He takes up several of his old and self-destructive habits, notably smoking and drinking. The very fact that he continues to pursue, both as a detective and as a prospective lover, a woman whom he strongly suspects kills men at the height of their orgasm can be read as eliding the erotic

with self destructive death wishes. One could say that in this way Nick is operating at a purely instinctual level, rather than intellectual. He is under the spell of his basic instincts.

'Basic Instinct': modern film noir detective thriller

Right to the end, it remains unclear to the viewer as to 'whodunit'. In the classic 'whodunit' structure a murder occurs and the rest of the film involves an investigation of the murder from the position of the detective, with the detective enjoying a certain immunity from suspicion. He, or she, enjoys the power of this position and, in Lacanian terms, stands in for the Law of the Father. *Basic Instinct* as a thriller transgresses from the model of the 'whodunit' on three counts. Firstly, the detective is brought into the action and is exposed to risks, including suspicion that he is also criminal or somehow outside the law. Secondly, the form of the thriller is of suspense, anticipation and anxiety, rather than of simple reconstruction of the crime. Finally, it does not guarantee that an outcome of recovered truth will occur.

There is also a change of spectator position when compared with the classic film noir thriller. In the classic 'whodunit', the audience is encouraged to identify with the detective through filmic techniques, such as point of view shots, framing, editing, voice over and especially through the suturing effect of the shot-reverse-shot.

[Gledhill, 1978:465] The detective usually controls the specular and aural narrative.

This thriller uses the same kinds of filmic techniques to encourage audience identification with the detective, Nick Curran. However, as the narrative unfolds, the detective, with the audience as his identificatory partner, is transposed from a subject

who is supposed to know, to one who does not and is also an object of suspicion and investigation himself. [Hart, 1994: 126]

Using this model, we can make the claim that *Basic Instinct* is a thriller. However, we can go beyond this to show that it is a film noir thriller, particularly through the use and function of the femme fatale and her impact on the hero's narrative trajectory throughout the course of the film. Christine Gledhill points out that in film noir:

Woman becomes the object of the hero's investigation. Thus the place of the female figure in the puzzle which the hero has to solve often displaces solution of the crime as the object of the plot; the processes of detection - following clues and detective intellection - are submerged by the hero's relations with the women he meets and it is the vagaries of this relationship that determine the twists and turns of the plot. [1980: 15]

This description encapsulates the broad narrative structure of *Basic Instinct*. This film, like many films noir, probes and explores female sexuality and male desire within structures of dominance and submission. The investigation of Catherine Trammel and Nick Curran by the police finally comes to concentrate on the emotional state of the hero and femme fatale, particularly in relation to each other. This is very evident in *Basic Instinct*.

The plots of film noir thrillers are often difficult to fit together, even if the narrative of the film reveals the criminal secret. This is partly due to the many interruptions to plot linearity and partly to the displacement of much of the detection from the crime, as central to the film, to other features, most often the investigation of the femme fatale. In these ways too, *Basic Instinct* can be said to be a film noir thriller. The ambiguous ending of this film, paralleling the beginning, invokes narrative closure in

an uncomfortable way, rendering the ending 'uncanny', in the Freudian sense of representing the familiar in unfamiliar ways. [Freud: 1962] Thus, the ending operates within phallogocentrism, where this quality of the uncanny becomes embodied by the threat of femininity and the fear and desire evoked by the maternal/female body. [Kuhn, 1985:95] Finally, film noir often includes frequent instability in the characterisation of the femme fatale and employs expressionistic visual styles, which emphasise the sexuality of the femme fatale. [Gledhill, 1980: 14; Place, 1980: 35-36] This applies to *Basic Instinct*, particularly in relation to camera treatment of Catherine Trammel.

I've got nothing to hide: woman as castrator in 'Basic Instinct'

This thesis understands film to be a signifying practice, emphasising the construction of meanings within the text [film]. It does not assume that film reflects the 'real' world in neutral or unmediated ways. Given this, how does *Basic Instinct* represent woman? How is Catherine constructed as the Other in this film and what power lies in this position? If she is the Other, she is very powerful in this film. After all, on all other criteria, except gender, she is in a privileged position. She is rich, educated, white, self employed as a successful writer. From this privileged position she can take drugs, engage in non-heterosexual activities, possibly kill people, associate with murderers and speed. She can get away with all this 'deviance' because she belongs to that privileged group. Although she is not male, she is more phallic than the men in this film are, she plays men's games better than they do and this signifies danger for the audience. The film plays into patriarchal fears and justifies them.

One of the most striking features of this film is that it portrays all the women as killers or suspected killers. As the film progresses, noticing the information gleaned about each of the four women who feature in this film, one can register deviance and transgression in a number of ways. Catherine Trammel is bisexual. She likes Roxy, her lesbian lover, to watch her making love to other people. She wears no underwear, is exhibitionistic, takes drugs, speeds with impunity and is suspected of killing not only her lover Johnny Boz, but also her parents and a university lecturer. Her lover Roxy also likes to watch Catherine have sex with her lovers. She was convicted, as a young girl, of killing her brothers and attempts to kill Nick Curran. Hazel Dobkins [Dorothy Malone], a friend of Catherine Trammel who helped Catherine (as a writer) to understand the impulse to murder, was convicted of murdering her husband and child. Even Beth Garner, the police psychologist, eventually comes under suspicion of possibly killing her husband, while also being a suspect of the Johnny Boz and university lecturer murders. She finally reveals she had a lesbian encounter with Catherine Trammel while at College. The more you watch the film the more you realise all these women are dangerous, each using a phallic and or penetrative weapon: an ice pick, a knife, daddy's razor, an expensive sports car, or a bullet. Hazel is potentially the more threatening to male subjectivity because she moved seemingly without provocation from one category, married woman, to the other, dangerous killer. Hazel is not necessary to the plot of the film but is vital to the excessive emphasis placed on woman as deviant within a male imaginary, which becomes the world of this film noir thriller.

The penetrative nature of each of these murder weapons and of the ice pick used during sex, especially, is significant. For here, we have symbolically represented the difference between the Freudian phallic woman and the castrating woman as defined by Barbara Creed. Creed asserts that men fear women's ability to castrate them not because of an infantile belief that woman is phallic, but rather because she has access to the penis or its symbolic equivalent, such as a gun, an icepick, a knife, a car and so on. This film is full of castrating women and their attendant tools, not only Catherine, but also Roxy and Hazel.

Roxy, in particular, is important because she is mistaken for Catherine in the early part of the film. This identification is pre-empted by the use of mirrors in the opening sequence of the film. The opening shot is revealed as a reflection in a mirror, an important film noir convention in relation to the femme fatale. [Place, 1980: 40] The use of mirrors in this way also calls to mind Baudrillard's theories of simulation where the image is a copy. This use of mirrors in the first few minutes of the film iterates into film noir discourse the belief that woman is duplicitous and therefore not to be trusted. Place points out that in film noir:

Values, like identities, are constantly shifting and must be redefined at every turn. Nothing - especially woman - is stable, nothing is dependable.

The visual style [of film noir] conveys this mood through expressive use of darkness: both real ... and psychologically ... Characters (and we in the audience) are given little opportunity to orient themselves to the threatening and shifting shadowy environments. Silhouettes, shadows, mirrors and reflections (generally darker than the reflected person) indicate his [the detective's] lack of both unity and control. They suggest a *doppelganger*, a dark ghost, *alter ego* or distorted side of man's personality, which will emerge in the dark streets at night to destroy him. The sexual, dangerous woman lives in this darkness, and is the psychological expression of his own internal fears of sexuality, and his need to control and repress it. [Place, 1980: 41]

When Nick and Gus go to question Catherine at her house, they mistake Roxy for Catherine. Roxy's appearance is typical of the first appearance of the traditional femme fatale. She dominates the frame as she descends a staircase; our point of view is from the detective's, namely below her. She is thereby framed as the femme fatale, the spider woman of film noir, someone not to be trusted. [Place, 1980: 42-45] She is a character who is not to be pushed around. She challenges the two detectives and finds them wanting. She represents the phallic, castrating woman looking down on them, invoking the phallic mother of their infancy. This encounter with her 'double' positions the detectives and the audience in relation to Catherine before we/the detectives have even seen her. The film constructs mirror images literally, as in the opening sequence, and metaphorically, as in this incidence of Roxy being misrecognised for Catherine, and its metaphorical use continues with other pairings in the film.

The two main female characters, Catherine Trammel and Beth Garner, also operate as mirrors in the form of binary oppositions. While they share some qualities (college education, majoring in psychology, thus being more skilled or knowledgeable about reading and manipulating people) they also differ in many quite important ways. The film codes Catherine as rich, classically beautiful in terms of Hollywood conventions, i.e. blonde, sexually active, orgasmic, desiring and provocative. She is also dangerous and brilliant. Beth is coded as middle class, attractive, sexually passive, non-orgasmic and accommodating. She is safe and intelligent. However, the film constructs a more enlightening opposition between these characters. Beth operates as the Freudian phallic woman, who is later castrated, while Catherine

stands in for the femme castatrice, who offers the terrifying model of sexual difference and danger.

Dr Beth Garner demonstrates her power in a number of ways. As the police psychologist responsible for giving expert testimony to Internal Affairs, she has the power to keep Nick under surveillance for as long as she deems necessary. She attends meetings in a position of some power during the investigation. The detectives keep her abreast of the investigation. In these ways she operates as the phallic woman, symbolically castrated in a scene where Nick virtually rapes her and, more finally, at the end when Nick kills her. She is allowed to display what power she has in the film in order for her to be destroyed later. However, she never really reaches the full stature of the femme fatale, because firstly she also exhibits qualities of the redemptive woman, the foil to the femme fatale and secondly, she is not shown as desirable on her own account. Nick has already rejected her as a lover and the only time Nick has sex with her in this film is after he meets Catherine. In this scene he displaces his erotic tension towards Catherine onto Beth.

The film represents Catherine, on the other hand, as much more powerful than Beth in a number of ways. She seems to occupy a position largely outside phallogocentric, and perhaps middle class, mores for women. She operates from a resistant and defiant position within phallogocentrism. Catherine is not concerned with most people's ideas of sexuality or how she should live her life, leaving her freer to do and say what she thinks and wants. She has sex for pleasure, rather than only as an expression of love and therefore the men see her as cold. She is honest about this and this, too, is seen as transgressive. She is more actively masculine in her pursuit

approach to sexuality. When men question/interrogate her, she points out their own hypocrisy:

Nick: ...you didn't love him
Catherine: that's right
Nick: Even though you were fucking him
Catherine: That's right, you still get the pleasure. Didn't you ever fuck anybody when you were married Nick?

She resists the detective's attempts to reposition her within phallogocentric discourses on femininity as sexually passive and remains defiant and actively sexual.

She is more phallic than the men are. In her presence, they appear largely castrated and impotent. In her relationship with Nick Curran, she is in control of what happens, when and how. She controls much of the action through language even though the filmic technique is consistent with the techniques of dominant cinema, which would construct the feminine as spectacle. For example, in the scene when Nick and his partner Gus go to question her for the first time, the camera angles position her as looking up at the detectives and position the detectives as looking down on the woman. This use of camera angles would usually connote power and authority for the men. [Monaco, 1981; Creed, 1987; De Lauretis, 1984; Mulvey, 1990, Metz: 1982] However, in this scene and most of the scenes she shares with these men, she takes control manipulating the situation through her words, actions, gesture and gaze. One of the most obvious examples of this is the scene where the detectives investigating the case and the Assistant District Attorney, John Corelli [John Knight], interrogate her. She plays games with them, she gives them answers they did not expect and for which they usually do not have a response:

Correlli: Would you tell us of the nature of your relationship with Mr Boz?

Catherine: I had sex with him for about a year and a half. I liked having sex with him. He wasn't afraid of experimenting. I like men like that, men who give me pleasure - he gave me a lot of pleasure.

The shot-reverse-shots in this scene serve to indicate that she is in control too. She subjects them to her controlling and challenging gaze. As she speaks the camera closes in on the detectives, showing Correlli, in particular, licking his lips and becoming completely involved in the pictures she is painting for him. In this scene and others where Catherine is talking in the presence of at least two men, the men are often shown looking at each other after such responses. This could be seen to indicate that:

...she functions as an organising spectacle, as lack, which structures the symbolic order and sustains the relay of male glances. [Silverman, 1990: 309]

However, there is another possible reading of these exchanges. It could be posited that the filmic point of view indicates, instead, that they are attempting to check their responses with each other, signifying a lack of power in the men themselves rather than in her. Her interrogation scene might be analysed in relation to the insecurity of masculinity, especially when confronted by this actively sexual femme castratrice.

In her interrogation scene, Catherine renders the men speechless by her words as well as her actions. She flashes them her crotch [her Medusa's smile] turning them all to stone, stiffened by desire and fear and rendered speechless. This introduces mythic and psychoanalytic codings, which are both within and surpass the text. She presents herself to these men as castrating. She shows them what they most want to see, but in such a way as to render them impotent to take up the desire they obviously

feel. Nevertheless, she also remains a spectacle for viewers. This scene recreates the primal scene of the discovery of the female subject's lack. The sight of this lack can be both affirming and terrifying for the male subject, both within the narrative and for the audience.

Mulvey [1990] offers two ways of resolving this. The first way is by blaming the woman [and in Catherine's interrogation scene the detectives certainly try to do this albeit unsuccessfully]. The second method involves the complex process of fetishising the sight of female lack in an attempt to disavow male fears of castration. Mulvey posits that the first strategy is a means to progress the narrative and the second is a form of disruption.

In the scene of Catherine's interrogation in *Basic Instinct* we find the two coming together to both progress the narrative and to disrupt it. This scene on the level of spectacle fetishises Catherine through emphasis on her high heels, her long legs, her smoking cigarettes and presents her as object of male gaze and desire. However, this scene certainly does not provide reassurance of a male subjectivity in its position of power and authority.

When Catherine Trammel reveals her 'lack', through the now infamous close up shots of her naked crotch as she uncrosses and crosses her legs, she also flaunts it in such a way as to unnerve the men and the audience. Ironically, she tells the detectives she has nothing to hide as they are walking into the interrogation room and in this scene she proves it to them. She is deliberately and actively exhibitionistic. The gesture is a tool in her arsenal to decentre men's' supposed primacy in power

relations and her technique is quite successful. She uses her display as a means of tyrannising these men rather than surrendering to their gaze. [Silverman, 1986: 139]
She subjects them to her controlling gaze.

They attempt to dominate her by interrogating her to find out in what ways her castrated condition is linked to her own undoing and she confesses much more than they initially intended to find out. She actively invites the gaze both visually and through her speech. She wants to get these men's attention. Throughout this scene and others she is able to both resist the passive role inhered within the provided ritual, such as the interrogation scene, and actively invite or demand the male gaze, only to turn it back on itself. Kaja Silverman provides an interesting insight into this dynamic:

...the identification of the female subject with specularity and the male subject with vision does not necessarily assure the latter a dominant position. The construction of woman-as -fetish carries with it certain dangers for male subjectivity. Not only does the construction facilitate the detachment of the female image from narrative control, but it can challenge the very assumption upon which the existing symbolic order depends - the assumption, that is, that woman is castrated or lacking. [Silverman, 1983: 229]

On a narrative level, the film positions Catherine as powerful but on the level of spectacle it positions her differently. A female viewer can read her positively if she pays attention to the narrative and identifies with her social position, strength and agency. However, she also operates as the main spectacle of this film. In terms of spectacle, as Laura Mulvey [1990] describes it, Catherine is locked into the male gaze. Although she is a desiring subject, she is caught by the camera as an object of desire. This means for women, to suture themselves into the film's narrative their

identification has to shift from Catherine as ego ideal to Catherine as object of the male gaze in which we participate. This interrogation of her body by the camera's gaze may make some female viewers nervous. In the end, however, the film allows them to be comforted in the classic film noir way. Either they were right, she is dangerous and he needs to get away, or she is redeemable and capable of changing her ways through the love of a good man.

The film places her character outside patriarchal control. This may account for Nick's obsession with her. Catherine is, in effect, the femme fatale, but, unlike most of classic film noir, she is not wholly recuperated into the patriarchal symbolic order. She is incarcerated neither in prison nor in the insane asylum, she is not killed and she is not married off (although this possibility is suggested in the ambiguous ending).

However, unlike the traditional femme fatales of film noir, she also operates as the femme castatrice, she threatens castration as well as sexual gratification. This theme is indicated by the opening sequence of the film (if we believe she is the killer) and repeated through the narrative in her book, repeated again in her first sexual encounter with Nick and reintroduced in the final scene. The film constantly repeats this connection of sexual gratification carrying the threat of castration for the male subject. At the end of the film, the audience is lead to believe she might be becoming Nick's lover on a more permanent basis. However, the ending sequence, showing the ice pick under the bed, indicates this may well only be a temporary arrangement, and he is still well within her control.

The deliberately ambivalent ending of the film will provoke different responses in viewers. Viewers with knowledge of film noir are likely to produce a different reading of the ending than those situated within Hollywood's romantic expectations. The film is constructed to provide the space for this character to play once again with the 'rules', go with the flow but only as long as it suits her. Barbara Creed refers to the ice pick under the bed in the final shot of the film as a metaphorical reference to her *vagina dentata*, hidden nearby. [Creed, 1993:124] This haunting image of the ice pick underlines the point that any alliance with a femme castratrice is a dangerous, easily dissoluble and reversible arrangement.

If one reads *Basic Instinct* as a film noir detective thriller, it is one that defies its conventions. The character of Catherine Trammel is not wholly recuperated into the symbolic order. She remains resistant and defiant. Nor is the potency of male sexuality left unchallenged. It is a film where the power of the gaze does not reinforce male primacy in the power relations of heterosexual libidinal economies but rather disrupts and decentres the usual construction of male mastery and the male gaze. Furthermore, it is a film, which represents la femme castratrice in a variety of forms. Each of the women proves deadly in the end, thus further decentring any masculine phantasy of primacy and control. The film's insistence on the duplicitous nature of woman, especially as castrator, speaks to male castration anxieties in much broader terms than is allowed within Freudian theories of castration, where woman can only be seen as castrated.

The seductress and her use of masquerade in 'Basic Instinct'

This film allows the character of Catherine Trammel to act as the femme castatrice, using the skills of a seductress as Baudrillard [1990] defines them and employing femininity as a masquerade. The film continually shows her provoking a desire in Nick that he did not know he had. She has no aim other than to see how far she can push him, and to see how far he will follow. Catherine can be read as an absence, which seduces, by operating as a surface upon which Nick can project his phantasies by which he will be seduced. Her masquerade provokes this process of seduction. Here we have an example of the series of seductive exchanges of which Baudrillard speaks. [1990]

Baudrillard quotes Vincent Descombes in *L' Inconsient malgré lui*, who posits:

What seduces is not some feminine wile, but the fact that it is directed at you. It is seductive to be seduced and consequently it is being seduced that is seductive. [1990:68]

Catherine begins her ritual of seduction with Nick from a very early part of the film and it becomes most obvious in her interrogation scene, obvious to his colleagues as well. She speaks directly to him of what she likes in a lover and asks him about his sexual experiences. The audience registers that he is flattered by her attention, that he finds her seduction seductive. In the end, he succumbs.

Like all film noir detectives, Nick is lured out of the safety of patriarchal values by the sexually dangerous femme fatale, the seductress. As he follows her into the outlands in which she dwells he loses control and becomes suspect. His heroic quest, according to the narrative structure of classic film noir [Kaplan, 1980:1-5],

requires that he resist her temptations and bring her to justice. He claims he will do this even if he falls in love with her. This does not necessarily happen in this film.

One registers that the meaning of her last name implies this will not happen.

According to the *New Shorter Oxford Dictionary* trammel means among other things: 'an impediment to free action, a constraint, a hindrance.' [Brown, 1993:3364]

One can read her character as constantly constraining his actions, through her seduction and his susceptibility to seduction.

He moves from his world increasingly into hers. This is reflected on the level of spectacle and narrative. For example, if one analyses the framing of the two interrogation scenes, one registers that Nick, when he is being interrogated, occupies the same place in the frame as Catherine did during her interrogation. On the level of narrative, when told not to smoke by the detectives interrogating him, he mirrors her, using her literal words, 'what are you going to do charge me with smoking?' He explains that attacking Nielson on the day he was killed would be stupid and he was not stupid. This utterance paraphrases her earlier statement but he alters it to fit his particular circumstances. In this scene his act of copying her is pointed out by his boss, Lieutenant Walker, [Denis Arndt]. He responds to the above comment, saying to Nick 'Like writing a book about killing a guy gets you off the hook for killing him?' Walker underlines the parallel for the audience when he lets Nick know that he knows Nick is using the same form of defence as Catherine had earlier. No one else in the interrogation gets this private joke, but the audience does. This scene offers the most definitive point of paradigmatic relationship between Catherine and Nick both on the level of narrative and spectacle. The framing and lighting of this scene mimics

the earlier interrogation scene with Nick occupying the same area of the frame as Catherine did in the first interrogation scene of her. Thus the film positions him as her mimic on the level of visual, narrative, lighting, editing and script. This scene is pivotal to his coming over to her side, to showing how effective her seduction of him is becoming.

In one of the final scenes of the film after Gus has been killed, Nick has shot Beth, and the police find a trail leading to Beth, Nick is silent. It is as though he is not convinced that Beth did it. He returns home and finds Catherine. In this last phase, even if he still suspects her, he takes her side. She is not recuperated back into the symbolic order via the Law; rather he has abandoned the law and gone over to her side. The film links him with her repeatedly throughout this film, right from very early scenes. However, Nick, as the film noir detective, ends up investigating not so much the crime as the girl. He goes from being the only one who thinks she is the murderer, being seduced into thinking she isn't, and back to a position of vacillation in which he wishes to believe that she is not. Unlike his earlier promise to her, he does not 'nail her' in the sense he intended, but rather accepts her as his sexual partner and becomes, at least partially, like her. He copies her.

This film quotes film noir conventions by containing forms of both extremes of the female archetype, with Catherine standing in for the deadly seductress and Beth as the rejuvenating redeemer. [Place, 1980: 52] Catherine controls not only the language, the gaze and the action but eventually the character of the detective too. She leads and he follows. She seduces him; she provokes a desire in him that he did not know he had. He was on the road to redemption lead by Beth, giving up his

vices. Catherine tells him, 'it won't last' and it doesn't. It starts with the cigarettes and then the drinking, where he copies her use of the ice pick. He does not return to his cocaine habit, but this might have more to do with Hollywood conventions and censorship than the narrative. Finally, she seduces him sexually. The more he succumbs to her seduction the more out of control he becomes. This inversion of male vulnerability is a central motif in film noir, supporting Baudrillard's assertions that seduction is the ultimate weapon against patriarchy. [1990:11]

Catherine employs femininity as masquerade and performance to seduce Nick especially in the scene after Roxy's death when Nick comes in to find her alone and crying in front of the fire. She looks dishevelled and vulnerable. This is so out of character that it commands renewed audience attention. The film does not make it obvious whether this is a deliberate ploy on her behalf to seduce him further. Nevertheless, we can register the feeling that this is just another strategy in her game of seduction through the artifice of appearance. He seems to be completely taken in by this. He comforts her and comfort soon turns to sex.

Another scene shows Nick following Catherine as she returns from visiting her friend Hazel Dobkins. It is dark and when he gets to the house, he finds the gate open, allowing him partial access to her. He goes into the garden and is able to observe her in the lighted windows of her house and particularly her bedroom. She undresses and there is a sense of her knowing she has an audience for which to perform. This scene could be read as voyeurism but it could also be read as a seduction, where both Nick and the audience are sutured into a position of seeing woman as illusion or woman as a projection of phallic phantasies and therefore

object of desire. Her undressing and the way the scene is framed, edited and lit, as well as the musical overlay of her musical motif, the same incidentally as used in the murder, linking her aurally to this act, suggest femininity as performative masquerade - all for his benefit. This is obviously a form of seduction where her nudity is just as much a masquerade as her clothes. She seduces the audience, through its identification with the detective's point of view, as well. Interestingly, this also further iterates Nick's position as voyeur - but it does nothing to support the notion of her as passive object of the male gaze. This is performance of femininity with all the activity this implies.

There is another very important scene where Nick visits Catherine to question her and finds she is researching him for the detective of her new book. She has already told him the plot for this new book that the detective gets involved with the wrong woman and he is killed. Given his suspicions of her having carried out her last novel's murder, it is surprising he still wants to play with her, but then seduction does not operate in the realm of the rational. She begins to ask him questions about what it felt like to kill the tourists when he was all coked up. She continues along this line while getting closer and closer to him in a parody of a teasing possibility of a kiss. From a narrative point of view, she is provoking him to see what will happen. The seductive level of this scene is played out more on the level of the spectacle. If you do not pay attention to the words, it looks like a highly charged erotic interchange between two people, who want to be, but are not yet, lovers. The spectacle does not so much subvert the narrative as add another dimension. One registers as we watch this how far Catherine is prepared to push this game of

seduction and how exciting she finds it to push until she gets a response. She is not emotionally attached to the outcome, it is just a game to her and this is what makes her so seductive and him so vulnerable. Spectators with access to Baudrillard's theory of seduction can read *Basic Instinct* as a study in seduction. Catherine Trammel operates like the seductress he describes where she exists only for seduction. She is not present in this film except in the presence of, or under the watchful eye of Nick Curran. She uses femininity as performative masquerade and since she is not emotionally attached to her rituals of seduction, she is in the powerful position. He, because he is seduced by what he wants to see in her, is more vulnerable because he is emotionally and sexually affected by her. Catherine Trammel in *Basic Instinct* seems to be more engaged in pure seduction for its own ends with no aim other than how far can she provoke the detective, Nick Curran's desire and watching where it will lead. In this way she takes up the more active scopophilic role vis á vis Nick, she provokes his desire and watches his reactions, then she increases the stakes and provokes him further.

This film illustrates the power of seduction and how dangerous it can be for the masculine; it is reversible, as evidenced by the ice pick under the bed in the last scene. The realist mode of this film does not of itself instil an idea that femininity is a masquerade which can be consciously mimed and played with, rather it presents Catherine's seductive behaviour as congruent with her character. Reading this film, as this thesis has, against the grain, provides the potential to view it as a study in seduction, and derive enjoyment from that resistant viewing position.

Chapter Four

Rituals of Seduction and Castration

in 'The Last Seduction'

Introduction

The Last Seduction, directed by John Dahl and released in 1994, is a low budget alternative film which tells the story of a couple, Bridget [Linda Fiorentino] and Clay Gregory [Bill Pullman] who plan and carry out a drug deal. They have an altercation after the drug deal and he slaps her. She leaves with money and he spends the rest of the film attempting to get the money back. She kills him and the film ends with her free of him and able to keep all the money. The poster, advertising this film, states 'she wants it, she wants it all and she wants it now'. This sums up the film quite well. [See Appendix A for plot details.] I am not going to provide a full outline of the plot of the film in this chapter. It is more important to note that the film is not so much a film about a crime per se but about the nature of seduction or an analysis of seduction itself. The film sets up a number of scenarios where the woman's seductive wiles are employed against men. It plays with classic seductive myths and takes the audience through them so we have to become aware of different mythic constructions of sexuality and of seductive techniques available to women. From the outset, it is clear that this is not a classic thriller film noir. Rather it is one, which plays with its conventions and challenges the audience to regard it with a certain ironic distancing from known filmic conventions of the genre.

An important area to consider is its name. Why is it called *The Last Seduction*? Is it because, in terms of the plot, it is the last seduction she needs to perform because she got everything she wanted? Perhaps it refers to the last seduction, in a long series of seductions, she will continue to engage in. Alternatively, is it the ultimate in seduction because as a woman the heroine has pushed seduction to its limits and

beyond? On the other hand, it could be understood in a more critical way: that once you see this film you will never be seduced again. In other words, like a Marxist investigation of consumer capital, if this is a psychoanalytical investigation of seduction, once “false consciousness” has been exposed through the film and the veils of illusion fall you will never fall prey to its false allure again. From a psychoanalytical, rather than a Marxist, point of view we would have to laugh at that proposition because such a view implies a rational process and desire is not rational. The film exposes this. In terms of the plot, the male characters drawn into the world of the seductress know that they should resist her. They even say that she is no good but somehow they still press on. Seduction is not a rational process. It engages areas of the psyche that are impervious to rational forms of liberation.

The Last Seduction as a critique of seduction, even more than *Basic Instinct*, implies a masculine audience. There are no other females of any significance in this film. Bridget, the seductress by title and action, occupies central stage. She is constituted by the film as the solitary, dangerous, castrating, seducing, inconsistent phallic phantasy arising out of male castration anxieties par excellence. This film might be read more as some form of extreme cautionary tale to men of how dangerous modern, ambitious, sexual woman can be. To signal its non-mimetic form, however, there is no consistency to this female subject. Bridget is not “real”, nor constituted to produce “real” effects. She is a filmic construct employed to provide a vehicle for exploring the archetypal mythic dangers of the seductive castrating woman for man.

The Last Seduction is a study in seduction. It sets up categories that serve as a means to an end, namely to explode a range of myths about sexualities and masquerade.

This film cannot be understood or read mimetically. It employs ironic distancing. Read in this way it becomes a film about transgression and male fears of seductive, sexual, castrating dangerous women who use masquerade and any other technique to get what they want. Bridget plays at seduction. Through her the film explores and explodes these myths and forces the audience to think about what the film is doing.

The film employs something like a Brechtian technique of distancing to disallow emotional identification with this woman. It accomplishes this very well and forces the audience to consider this study of seduction on a more intellectual and analytical level, and to critique the ways in which seduction occurs. Baudrillard is our most useful theorist to help us with this analysis of seduction.

Difficult Pleasures

Firstly, it is important to note a difference in form between this film and the last. *The Last Seduction* is a parody of film noir. It plays with the convention of characterisation of the femme fatale. Unlike *Basic Instinct*, it refuses audience identification with the woman as ego ideal from the outset. *Basic Instinct* allows for a shifting audience identification with Nick Curran and/or Catherine Trammel both through the narrative and with her as spectacle through Nick Curran.

The film represents the female protagonist of *The Last Seduction* as a dubious character from the outset, outside the Father's Law. She is constantly transgressive of phallogocentric codes of femininity. For some viewers this will create an uncomfortable viewing position, but the sheer repetition of her transgressions and

their excessive nature will eventually clue the audience to the fact that this is not a realistic film, it is ironic. Because of all the past reading practices and desires spectators will bring to this film it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment the audience is likely to register this ironic distancing. It will happen at different times for different viewers. When it does happen it requires a retrospective re-evaluation of everything that went before. Mulvey points out that strategies like these depend on 'acknowledging the dominant codes in the very act of negating itself'. [1987: 8] It can only be through the audience's knowledge of dominant codes of filmic representation that this kind of alternative film can achieve meaning and significance.

The opening sequence sets up the film as alternative because the audience is presented with a reversal of hegemonic power relations between male and female protagonists. There is also a reversal of the treatment of male and females within the framing shot: she is dominating and he is dominated. Her reaction to his slap exceeds most expectations set up by previous Hollywood films. She provokes him, he slaps her, and she leaves. She does not wait for the abuse to escalate to an unbearable level. She leaves immediately. This also alerts the audience to the fact that this filmic character is very different to anything seen before.

The film alerts the audience in the opening scenes to the fact that this film intends to present a transgressive woman in order to provoke some thinking about codes of gender. For most people this character may evoke some discomfort at least until it becomes obvious that this is extreme caricature designed to draw attention to femininity, how it is constructed and in whose interests. Bridget is never ever

contained within the realm of the proper. Even when it looks like she might be, we find she has adopted this role for her own gain or she steps quickly out of it, drawing attention again to the performative nature of gender.

Bridget is transgressive because she constantly breaks with audience expectations of appropriate feminine behaviour. She spits, she calls men eunuchs to their faces, she actively seeks out sex for her own pleasure and release rather than it being associated with love or relationships such as marriage. She is ambitious and ruthless. She acts immediately when her husband raises a hand to her. She shifts in and out of feminine roles. She exploits feminine myths. She breaks almost all of the taboos for women and at the end she is not punished but rewarded. She rids herself of the men and keeps all the cash. The film allows for, encourages an examination of conventional codes of femininity, and encourages the audience to consider whose interests are served by the adoption of such codes.

One of the main differences between the two films is that *Basic Instinct* utilises classic Hollywood realism and *The Last Seduction* parodies it. Bridget defies not only audience expectations but also the place of women within the symbolic order. The film does not portray her as 'real'. The film portrays her as a caricature with which the audience cannot identify as a classically unified subject. Rather she is a figure on screen that calls attention to a non-unified construction of femininity. She defies in an anti realist manner. This film is non-realistic in its effects.

The Last Seduction does not invite identification with the protagonist, Bridget Gregory, through either the narrative or the spectacle, and in fact at times it makes it

very hard to identify with her at all. In my analysis, I pay particular attention to the first five minutes of this film because it is during this time that the spectator has to negotiate their viewing position in relation to *Last Seduction*. Ultimately my reading of this film depends on the adoption of ironic distance.

The Last Seduction also parodies the kind of film noir where the femme fatale is married, like in *Double Indemnity*. Bridget Gregory is already confined within a marriage and she wants more. Her main transgression is her ambition and the use of her sexuality to get what she wants. [Place, 1980:46]

This film differs from *Basic Instinct* and other film noir where, usually the male detective moves the narrative via his investigation, while the femme fatale is there to be investigated and finally recuperated. [Gledhill, 1980: 14-15] In this case, while Bridget is certainly pursued by her irate husband, there are many scenes where she is not with her pursuing husband or his private detectives. There are a number of scenes where she is alone or with other people, mostly men. This contrasts with *Basic Instinct* however, where Catherine Trammel is only ever seen either with Nick, or being watched by Nick, which conforms more to film noir conventions. In some respects, within that film, Catherine does not exist outside Nick's gaze, enunciated by the camera framing of him, where he is either with her or watching her.

Therefore, the framing of Bridget in *The Last Seduction* is a significant difference. It moves the female subject position of the femme fatale/castatrice further outside recuperation within the symbolic order in terms of its filmic technique regarding narrative and spectacle.

La Femme Castatrice in 'The Last Seduction'

The film calls attention to Bridget Gregory as a femme castatrice, or castrating woman, from the very beginning, through both narrative and spectacle. The film opens with a parallel montage of Bridget at work and her husband doing the drug deal.

The first shot shows her in the world of work as a tough, dominating, rude, castrating bitch, completely uncaring of the men she bosses around. She calls them eunuchs referring literally to their powerless, castrated position in relation to her as castrating woman. She is in control and has authority. She occupies what is usually a masculine subject position. The use of low camera angles pointing up at her further inscribes her authority and power. She dominates the frames. She moves around, the men do not. She talks loudly. They do not. She times their performance of selling over the telephone and finds them wanting. Right from the start she is established as the main character, as 'castrating bitch', who determines the trajectory of the narrative. This produces a distinct discomfort for the audience.

The opening sequence continues with a series of shots of Bridget at work which are intercut by the establishing shots of her husband Clay, engaged in a drug deal, and it serves to reveal their relative power. Unlike his wife, who is in charge and in control, the film represents Clay as weaker, intimidated, not in control and castrated. When the drug dealers will not give him the brief case as he demands, he presumes he is to be shot and assumes a kneeling position for his expected execution. It turns out that, in a reversal of his (and the audience's) expectations, the drug dealers just did not

want to relinquish their much more expensive brief case. His assumption of positions of subservience at many points in the narrative of the film establishes him as a weak, castrated character and previews his eventual demise.

The establishing scenes of both characters position the audience to see Bridget as castrating and bearer of the gaze and Clay as castrated. This view is almost never decentred by sequences in the rest of the film. Even in the few occasions when a decentring does seem to occur, the film has already primed us to recognise this as only a slight aberration that will not last, and it does not.

The opening series of parallel montage scenes continue. One series shows Bridget purposefully going home and the other series shows Clay battling to get there. In her scenes, the use of low angles continues to construct her as having greater authority. Low, wide, long shots of her walking by herself across streets encode her, as confident, solitary and independent, qualities often perceived as masculine. On the other hand the scenes of the husband returning home employ high shots looking down on him as he is jostled by the crowd looking uneasy, continuing to indicate his lack of power when contrasted with hers. From the opening scenes of the film, she is already constructed as more phallic than any of the men are. These scenes set up an uncomfortable and uncompromising position for the audience, with expectations that she will continue to be castrating, dominating and in control, and for him and all other men to be weak, castrated males.

Bridget is in no way recuperated back into the patriarchal symbolic order. She remains out of its control. She is located outside phallogocentric conventions of

femininity but can invoke them and subvert them, when it suits her purposes. She is very careful about her professional reputation, the means by which she enters the symbolic order, if only partially. This concern for her professional reputation may account for her over-determined aggression when dealing with her male employees and Mike, her 'designated fuck' as she calls him. The film engages the audience in a fantasy of a transgressive woman who is not recuperated into the symbolic order.

There are a number of ways the audience can be sutured into this film: horror or anxiety for some male spectators, amusement for other male spectators; pleasure for some female spectators and displeasure for other female spectators, or combinations of these. There is likely to be a level of discomfort for both male and female viewers unless they take up a position of ironic distance from its realist effects and enjoy it as a study of seduction and transgression. Female displeasure signals for women in the audience, especially feminists, the degree to which classic film sutures them into masculine circuits of desire or into feminine positions activating a desire to be desired. However, identification with Bridget as an object of desire is not available in *The Last Seduction* and so the usual activation of the 'desire to be desired' is absent, possibly producing some discomfort for some female viewers. Metz provides a useful description of spectator's reactions to films when he asserts that:

... if a subject is to 'like' a film, the detail of the diegesis must sufficiently please his [sic] conscious and unconscious phantasies to permit him [sic] a certain instinctual satisfaction, and this satisfaction must stay within certain limits, must not pass the point at which anxiety and rejection would be mobilised. [1982: 111]

The transgressive nature of this film is designed to push the limits risking anxiety and rejection. It is possible to watch this film feeling uncomfortable and anxious

for some time and then register that the character of Bridget is so excessive that it must be read with irony. Then pleasure can be regained. Perhaps this is adopting Laura Mulvey's contention that:

The satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represent the high point of film history hitherto must be attacked. Not in favour of a reconstructed new pleasure, which cannot exist in the abstract, nor of intellectualised unpleasure, but to make way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative film. The alternative is the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire. [1990: 30]

The Last Seduction certainly does not provide the 'ease and plenitude of the narrative film'. Rather this film challenges the audience to dare to give up their expected pleasure and find new ways to relate to it, if not entirely within Mulvey's terms to locate a 'new language of desire', at least in order to regain their pleasure.

One of the ways it refuses ease and plenitude is that at times *The Last Seduction* offers a lack of suture. Bridget does not follow the rules, and the film does not actively invite identification with her as a character. The audience, located within classic Hollywood heroic narrative, can pity the man and yearn for him to put her in her place, but this does not happen.

What recourse does the audience have when its desires are not met? They can reject through frustration or they may be pushed into thinking more deeply about the premise of the film. In a way not anticipated by Mulvey [1990], but foreshadowed in the last paragraphs of her article, this film forces a different kind of audience identification, one that involves a passionate but detached dialectic.

The film represents Bridget's desire for independence by constructing her as self absorbed, quoting film noir conventions, but not in the usual way. Traditional film noir tends to reinforce the femme fatale's narcissistic tendencies through devices such as having her absorbed with her own image in the mirror while ignoring the man she will use to achieve her aims. [Place, 1980: 46] In *The Last Seduction*, we find this self absorption displaced onto her concern for her image as a corporate, independent woman. She will not allow anyone to tarnish that image, especially Mike, the man with whom she is having sex.

Two scenes show this clearly. In the first scene when, after having sex with Mike, she sees him at the office, she pushes him into the women's toilet - a transgressive act - thus placing the man in a tabooed space where he is rendered passive and vulnerable. While she is urinating she threatens him and tells him 'not to fuck with her reputation' - more transgressive acts. In the second scene, as Bridget and Mike are approaching the front doors of their office building, he touches her and she slaps him loudly telling him not to touch her. She then makes comments to the other workers about being in the corporate dark ages. In traditional film noir, the femme fatale's narcissism is reflected in her concern for her beauty as power. In this film, it is the protection of her professional reputation as power that motivates the contemporary femme fatale/castatrice. These scenes, especially the second, are also examples of public, symbolic castration of Mike at the workplace.

In terms of the narrative, she, like Catherine Trammel, is more phallic than the other male subjects in the film are. She plays with all of them. Her husband tellingly says to her after she successfully manoeuvres to have the detective from New York

killed, 'wow you're really dangerous'. She removes any man who gets in her way by whatever means necessary. She will try to remove them in less deadly ways but if they insist then she will move to deadly force. However, she is clever enough to make their deaths look like accidents or like someone else did it.

She gets even with her husband for slapping her, although she admits to him that revenge for the slap might just be an excuse. She tells him that she gets to slap him back. She adds, "slap him hard", after he has hung up the telephone. By this time, the audience has had time to form the opinion, based on previous action in this film, that she certainly means to 'slap him back hard'. The audience now knows she will castrate him if she can and is left only to anticipate how.

The film often plays with the audience by setting up unfulfilled expectations that the film will objectify Bridget's body through classic film techniques. For example, in one scene the camera pans along her naked body in a classic treatment of the female subject. But then surprises the audience by revealing her busily engaged in looking through the classified ads for a place to live, providing a visual shock technique and thereby further inscribing her independence as a masculine subject. In terms of plot, it disrupts the conventional narrative/spectacle positioning of woman as object of desire or in Mulvey's [1990:33] terms 'to be looked-at-ness'.

This scene plays with the our knowledge of filmic conventions and then uses them to build our expectations along one trajectory, namely that Bridget is being displayed as an erotic spectacle and then refuses these expectations by providing something else. This is just one of the ways that this film operates as a parody of the film noir thriller.

Potentially, once we take up a position of ironic distancing and begin to 'enjoy' the play with conventions, this parody increases our pleasure in viewing the film.

This film does not objectify Bridget in the ways that women usually are. This makes her character both impossible to identify with as ego ideal and positions her as more dangerous within the filmic narrative. She is treated differently visually and through the narrative, therefore she can be read as transgressive and enjoyed from a distanced, ironic audience position. Laura Mulvey [1990: 39] advocated that alternative film needs to free the look of the camera but also the 'look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment.' This film repeatedly challenges the audience to adopt a different position in relation to this film, one, which requires critical and detached examination of the ways film usually, construct sexual difference and desire via the narrative and the spectacle.

This is complemented by the film's treatment of Mike. He becomes the castrated anti-hero, always placed in a feminised position. For example, in the opening scene of Mike, the camera's treatment of his body is much more like that of a female character, particularly a sexualised female character. The camera lingers on his body in close up of his hands and face. As he walks away from the bar to rejoin his friends the film is slowed down to connote a languid and sensual movement usually reserved for sexual women. His behaviour in this scene might be coded as masculine, having a drink with his buddies, but the camera treatment feminises him. This is a good example where the spectacle subverts the narrative. This can draw the audience's attention to the fact that mainstream Hollywood film codes the erotic spectacle as female. [Mulvey, 1990: 30-33] The reversal of this usual order challenges this

code, and offers a challenge to the audience to think about filmic conventions, sexual difference and desire.

In the scene, when Mike first meets Bridget in the bar, Mike is further castrated and feminised. When trying to interest her in him he tells her 'he is hung like a horse' (an attempt at seductive reversal). She transgresses, adopting a masculine position, saying, 'let's see' and in a scene designed to shock, proceeds to inspect his penis in terms of size and odour, while interrogating him about his past sexual experience and current circumstances. She has not attempted in any way to be pleasant and yet he persists with his pursuit of her. In terms of audience identification, this represents a transgression in both narrative and spectacle.

It is ironic that Mike, in the scene prior to meeting Bridget, lets his buddies know that he will only be staying in town long enough 'to grow another set of balls'. Then, when they ask him what he sees in her, he replies 'a new set of balls'. Of course, he could not be further from and closer to the truth. Bridget, as a classic phallic woman, castrates him just as she does all the other men she meets. She is dangerous and although he does not know this yet, the audience does. 'Bad girls' could come to like this film.

Mike is located within a feminine subject position vis á vis Bridget (or Wendy as he knows her) in other words as a castrated male. The film accomplishes this placement both visually and through the narrative. He complains that she treats him as a sex object, she tells him to 'live it up'. He wants more from the relationship than just sex; he wants to talk, share things, and go out on regular dates. She tells him he is her

designated fuck. If he does not like it, she will simply designate another. She distances - he pursues. She leaves, he is left. This manoeuvre occurs, repeatedly, both visually and on the level of narrative. For example on the morning after their first sexual encounter, he is the one still in bed the next morning. He comes out to look for her and she dismisses him telling him she is having a private telephone call. He leaves. In the next scene he is lying obediently and expectantly in bed and is then surprised to hear her leave without even saying goodbye. There is only one reversal of this order. In a scene when she thinks her husband is closing in on her, she appears to be frightened. However, the audience suspects deception and Mike does not take this seriously because she has never shown this side of herself before.

One could interpret this film in relation to Richard Dyer's assertion that:

...film noir is characterised by a certain anxiety over the existence and definition of masculinity and normality. This anxiety is seldom directly expressed and yet may be taken to constitute the films' 'problematic', that set of issues and questions that the films seek to come to terms with without ever actually articulating. (To articulate them would already be to confront masculinity and normality as problems, whereas ideology functions on the assumption that they can be taken for granted). [1980:91]

Unlike classic film noir, this film directly challenges the existence and definition of masculinity and normality. This produces discomfort and anxiety for male and female viewers alike. In this, it effectively calls attention to sexual difference as a construction and performance. For example, in presenting Mike as a weak and effeminate man, so naive that he married a man robs him of so called attributes of masculinity and normality.

This is further enunciated by the film when the character Bridget goads him at the end, reminding him of his inability to recognise the physical differences between men and women and calling him a faggot. Bridget thereby let us him know that she knows he married a man. So his fear of not being masculine or normal, which was first indicated by his decision to stay in Beston until he had grown 'another set of balls', is here exposed. At this highly charged disclosure, he loses control. Dressed in her parody of a man's suit, even wearing men's underwear beneath it, exposing his fears of his own sexual development, Bridget effectively castrates him. This film only has one femme castatrice and she is articulated as such. She is determined and relentless in the pursuit of her goals.

The Seductress and her many wiles in 'The Last Seduction'

This film can be read as a study in seduction, exposing the techniques, strategies and their effects. Baudrillard maintains that while seduction may include sex, seduction is not exclusively sexual. [1990: 47] This film exposes the many ways the seductress can seduce her hapless victim into doing what she wants. She may use sex to help her accomplish her goals, but sex itself is not the goal of her seduction. Bridget's seduction of Mike is to convince him unknowingly to kill her husband for her. In fact, her seduction of Mike does not even begin until after they have had sex a number of times. It is incidental to her plans for him. The film exposes the ways that for the seductress, 'the power of man's desire is a myth that she uses in order to both evoke and destroy it'. [Baudrillard, 1990: 87] The style of seduction in this film parodies film noir in that usually the seduction of the femme fatale is somewhat subtler. However, this film does not try to hide from the audience the fact that the

character of Bridget is calculating. The film represents this character as:

...well aware of all the mechanisms of reason and truth people use to protect themselves from seduction; but she is well aware that from behind the shelter of these mechanisms they will nonetheless, if handled correctly, let themselves be seduced. [Baudrillard, 1990: 87-8]

The film reveals this especially when the closing shot of a scene returns to her knowing look after she successfully or unsuccessfully manipulated someone. The quick change of expression to whatever is required also cues us for reading her as a performer of the role of consummate manipulator or seducer, one the audience is invited to investigate via classic psychoanalytic theory. *The Last Seduction* investigates sexuality and seduction; it does not mime it in a realist fashion. The film presents the character of Bridget as ruthless and relentless in her manipulation and seduction of people until they do what she wants them to do. Bridget operates in this film as a figure much like the seductress Baudrillard [1990: 86] describes, who is engaged in a game of seduction involving mental cruelty, where any affection by her is seen by her as a weakness. The film excessively constitutes her as an incredibly determined character. She uses all possible angles to get what she wants. This includes using so called feminine wiles when she needs to, especially femininity as masquerade, which she employs on numerous occasions in the film, where she:

...turns herself into a pure appearance, an artificial construct with which to trap the desires of others. [Baudrillard, 1990: 86]

The most striking example of this is the scene where a local detective, hired by her husband, is parked outside her home to watch over her. She wants to go to Buffalo to dig up some dirt on Mike. She employs an interesting manoeuvre to stop the detective following her. This scene is particularly enjoyable for the 'knowing'

audience because we are allowed to participate in and enjoy her deception. She decides to play with the codes of femininity and adopt the role of the 'good little woman'. She does this so well that she catches the detective unawares. We enjoy this scene because the rest of the film constitutes her as a woman who does not usually act the role of the 'good little woman'.

The film encourages the audience to recognise that Bridget performs a conscious masquerade of femininity. The scene opens with a close up of her hammering some nails into a long thin strip of wood. It pulls back to show her wearing a lace apron and making cookies. This marks a total contrast to anything the audience has ever seen of her before, eliciting surprise from the audience and perhaps confusion. The contrast of her hammering nails, which the audience by now accepts as congruent with the character, is momentarily decentred by the confusion of the apron and cookies. It then cuts to her walking outside in this feminine costume carrying a plate of cookies with the piece of wood dangling off her apron strings behind her. Now the spectator can see, understand and enjoy her behaviour, because now we can anticipate how this seeming contradiction is to be used to her advantage. She approaches the car and offers the detective the biscuits but drops one. As she bends to retrieve it, she slips the wood with nails under the tyre, gets up and says she will leave the last cookie to his discrimination. She leaves and we are left with a mid shot of him sniffing the cookies, hesitatingly trying and then eating one. We are invited to enjoy the consternation of the detective knowing her costume is an artifice of seduction and that it will succeed. There is a cut to a taxi pulling up outside her place. She exits the house and waves to the flummoxed detective on the way to the

taxi. He smiles and as he pulls off to follow her, his tyre blows out, as we know it will, and he knows he's been duped. This is a good example of how this film, through the character of Bridget, explores how the seductress artificially reworks her body in order to seduce. [Baudrillard, 1990: 87]

In this scene, the film uses a very conservative image of woman to expose the mechanisms of seduction. The film engages the audience in an investigation of the limitations of masculine phantasy about the 'good little woman', whom Bridget invokes through her masquerade and performance. This masculine phantasy of the 'good little woman' does not include the concept of dangerous. Bridget exploits this discursive weakness to get under the detective's guard and we participate in this subversion of female codes.

Joan Riviere describes this behaviour in these terms:

Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert reprisals expected if she was found to possess it. [1929: 306]

However, this film does not set up masquerade as the defence mechanism described by Riviere. Instead, through the character of Bridget, the film invites an investigation of the resistant and defiant use of femininity as performative masquerade, which she as seductress par excellence executes to perfection. The film constitutes her as adept at the use of seduction as a strategy of appearance, in the ways that Baudrillard [1990: 11] posits. In another scene where Mike is badgering Bridget to open up to him, she plays 'vulnerable hurt woman afraid of being hurt again'. She does it so well you can see him melting. The audience is momentarily seduced by her

masquerade, but also drawn into an investigation of woman's positioning within masculine circuits of desire. Then she abruptly turns the performance off and says to him 'will that do? Fucking doesn't have to be anymore than fucking'. Again, the audience may initially be perplexed by her behaviour. It may even feel relief to know that she can be a 'woman' after all but only if it expects to be sutured into classic identificatory postures which this film continuously disallows. Nevertheless, as soon as she stops the performance in such a decisive way, the spectator is reminded that she is very clear about how to use femininity as masquerade. Potentially the audience can enjoy both of these scenes because the film encourages us to participate in the subversion of feminine codes.

The film consciously explores the proposition that subject positions can be taken up and discarded at will. It does this in a number of ways, such as through showing Bridget adopting a new name and life at will, for her own ends. During the interview for her job in Beston, she plays the role of injured wife running away from years of domestic violence. There is some truth to her claim, her husband did slap her, but she allows her new boss to imagine a much worse situation than the audience knows about. Thus, she is able to elicit the empathy and cooperation of her new boss, in helping to conceal her real identity. She is able to do this by playing up to rural myths about the evils of the city (New York) and the men who live there. He is not surprised and believes her because her story has some congruency with his expectations about city living. This scene exposes one of the mechanisms of seduction; that absence seduces. In this case her absence of details seduces the boss, she provides a rough outline and he provides all the details of his own making. He is

seduced by his own projections of domestic violence in marriages in the city. This examples and the ones to follow the film represents her using strategies of seductive deception. These examples illustrates Baudrillard's assertions that the seductress becomes a mirror of the seduced's unconscious desires. [1990: 69-70]

At another point she has to deal with the black detective, Harlan sent by her husband from New York to find her and get the money back. She does this by letting him think she is really taken in and fascinated by myths about black men and the size of their dicks and sexual prowess. Here the film engages the audience in an investigation of white myths about black men's potency and sexual allure. This scene provides an opportunity to expose black myths about white women's bodies as well. She cleverly engages Harlan in a discussion about whether white myths about black men and the size of their dicks is right and convinces him she really wants to see it. He knows he is being conned but seduction and desire do not operate on the level of the rational. He finally succumbs to his desire for her desire - constituted through the myths of black male potency - and pulls it out. At this point she deliberately crashes the car into a tree and is saved by the airbag but he dies with his penis exposed. In the hospital after the accident, when a police officer is interviewing her, she plays the role of the poor white woman, horrified and abused by the black man's sexuality.

She is able to elicit the sympathy of this country police officer by appealing to his racist beliefs and fears about what black men will do to white women. She was successful because she assumed the right role as far as the police officer was concerned, just as she was successful in assuming the right role as far as her boss in Boston was concerned. She achieved harmony with his unexamined unconscious

expectations of a white woman caught in such a situation with a black man. This scene parallels the earlier scene with her boss because in both cases she uses strategies of seductive deception where she acts coy and lets the men use their imagination to fill in details of her situation. This scene explodes the racist myths of small town America and is underscored by the fact that Harlan's appearance at her work site provokes so much comment about his colour. She was able to use this with Harlan in the first place to lull him into a false sense of security through her pretence of empathising with his exasperation at such backward attitudes to colour. Yet, she who pretends to be cool about colour proves to be the deadlier player. This scene exposes the complexity of race relations and racially inscribed desires and its nexus with sexuality.

Through these examples and others, the film shows her to be multiply organised and to consciously take up subject positions and discard them as quickly and as easily as she needs them. In these scenes and others, Bridget is positioned by the film as the empty screen upon which these men can project their phantasies only to be seduced by their own projections. As Baudrillard [1990: 10] points out, there is no point pitting one truth against another, and no point becoming entangled in such procedures 'when a *light* manipulation of appearances will do.' In these scenes, the film exposes seduction through constituting Bridget as exploiting the effectiveness of the 'light manipulation of appearances'. The film constructs her character as the mistress of the strategies of appearances in opposition to the force of being and reality.

This film represents the character of Bridget/Wendy as self absorbed and only interested in Mike for sex and nothing more. However, as the narrative progresses, her desire for the money sans husband begins to become enmeshed with her interaction with Mike. She increasingly plays him as her patsy. She works very hard at trying to convince him that she wants a relationship of equals. This is just another of her attempts to get him to murder for her, and the audience knows this.

Sylvia Harvey [1980] points out that while the representation of the institution of the family often serves as the instrument whereby desire is fulfilled, in film noir it is shown as a site of frustration or abuse, a place from which to escape. In *The Last Seduction*, married life is shown as a place from which Bridget wants to escape. She uses Mike her 'designated fuck', as she calls him, to help her completely dismantle this barrier to her desire to be free, rich and independent. Often the only types of women represented in film noir are either the dangerous, sexually desiring, single, childless and exciting women (such as Bridget), or the boring, marrying, potentially childbearing, safe women. The film recognises these conventions through the presence of the character of Stacey [Donna Wilson], a young woman who frequents the bar Mike and his buddies patronise. Mike calls her an "anchor", just before he meets Bridget, because he claims she will not have sex with men unless it will lead to marriage.

In *The Last Seduction*, there is no possibility of romantic love let alone it leading to the usual fulfillment of that desire in marriage. Bridget refuses any contact other than physical sex; she is not interested in anything more intimate. This narrative is 'structured around the destruction or absence of romantic love and the family.'

[Harvey, 1980: 25] This is underlined further in that even though Mike might think he is going to be delivered of the satisfaction of marriage and family with Bridget, because she lets him think this, so he will do what she wants, he never really possesses her. In the end, all hope of possessing her are denied him through his being found guilty of the murder of Clay and Bridget's rape. The film invokes the character of Bridget to employ, once again, the strategies of the seductress, allowing the object of her seduction to believe whatever it is he needs to believe in order for him to do what she wants. Through her, we witness the provocation and deception of masculine desire.

According to Dyer [1980: 92] film, noir divides the world into two categories: the unknown and unknowable, which is the realm of the femme fatale/ and the known, which is masculine. It is the femme fatale's unknowability, which is deadly to the males in film noir. This film investigates sex differences through the conventions of film noir. Mike tries in vain to get to know Bridget. He never succeeds. It is her unknowability, which in the end undoes him. It is in the realm of the Father's Law, the apartment of her husband, that Mike realises the extent to which he really does not know her. Her husband, Clay's, partial knowledge of her, in finding her alias and then in luring her up to the apartment, however, did not help either of these men. She remains unpredictable and therefore treacherous.

The character is shown to be able to think quickly in effectively changing any unpredictable circumstances to her advantage, locating her in the masculine realm of the rational and intelligent. Once again, the film codes her with both masculine and feminine qualities. If this film were classic film noir this, of course, would tend to

be even more threatening to male subjectivity. It is because of her unknowability that the film in its construction of a femme fatale/castatrice enables us to register that this female subject is able to assume the many necessary postures of the seductress. As Baudrillard points out:

The prismatic effect of seduction provides another space of refraction. Seduction does not consist of a simple appearance, nor a pure absence, but the eclipse of presence. Its sole strategy is to be-there/not-there, and thereby produce a sort of flickering, a hypnotic mechanism that crystallises attention outside all concern with meaning. Absence here seduces presence. [1990: 85]

This would seem to be, in part, what the film allows us to register and that Bridget in a performance of feminine seduction achieves. Through the allure of her unknowability, she seduces. She uses her body as a tool in her seduction because the film allows an investigation of masquerade and performance that are vital to her achieving her ends. She is shown to use artifice in the ways she speaks, dresses, and behaves. In this way, the film exposes masquerade and artifice as simulation in the ways that Baudrillard [1983] has propounded. To simulate is to pretend to have something one doesn't [Baudrillard, 1983: 5] and the simulacra is that which conceals that truth and the truth does not exist. [Baudrillard, 1983: 1] What truth is hidden here but that of femininity as a display of a masculine phantasy through the repetition of visual and behavioural cues and codes?

The film uses the character of Bridget to exploit these elements in her seduction and manipulation of all the men she has contact with, thereby inviting critical thinking about the very nature of seduction. This is another way in which this film is a parody because it reveals femininity as masquerade, as simulacra. The film shows Bridget

using masquerade as a form of resistance. This character steps out of her usual behaviour, which does not conform to the masculine phantasy, to occupy space within this discursive field, only to step out again. She remains unmoved by it, but the male subjects in the film are taken in because Bridget embodies a masculine phantasy of femininity. She remains defiant, unrecuperated and unpunished to the end.

The final scenes of this film show Mike in jail, and Bridget driving off in a chauffeur driven limousine, reaping the benefits of her successful campaign of seduction. She is rewarded because she transgresses all the codes of femininity, denying them their truth effects and manipulating their simulations assiduously. In these ways the film plays with the subversion of feminine codes and exposes them as strategies for use by the seductress/femme fatale/castatrice. The film also challenges the audience to think seriously about whose interests the adoption of phallogocentric codes of femininity serve. This woman is rewarded *because* she refuses to be positioned in this way. Makes you think doesn't it?

The Last Seduction can be viewed as a study in seduction, where Bridget Gregory can be read as the mistress of seduction. Seduction, as Baudrillard describes it, involves the seducer projecting onto the screen of the other an image that is a more idealised version of the self. The mirror image or ego ideal is projected over by the seducer in such a way that it exceeds the original ego ideal completing a circuit of desire. Bridget Gregory interestingly does this with Mike, but in reverse she projects an ego ideal with whose position Mike does not want to align and refuses for some time. This negative inversion however evokes a lot of castration anxiety for him.

This is an example of how this film exposes seductive and castrating mechanisms working together.

Masquerade can operate as both a concurring and resistant position within phallogocentrism. The way *The Last Seduction* sets up the character of Bridget Gregory, suggests strongly that she is consciously using masquerade as a resistant technique against her position in phallogocentrism - in so much as she is not a passive acceptor of femininity as it is understood within phallogocentrism. In Lacanian terms she does not fully accept her castrated position, leading to her accepting the phallogocentric construction of femininity as passive, demure, object of male desire. Instead, through the character of Bridget *The Last Seduction* provides us with an investigation of the power of the resistant and transgressive woman within phallogocentrism, one who refuses lack.

This character is shown continuously throughout the film consciously understanding and using the knowledge that femininity as masquerade is a game within a larger game and the film's strategy is to exploit this. This film, through its constitution of Bridget, consciously explores the thesis that subject positions can be taken up and discarded at will, underlining the idea of multiply organised subjectivity. Those among the audience, still sutured into Hollywood constructions of closure may feel themselves denied since they do not see her put back in her place. She transgresses unscathed. She remains uncontained to the end.

Conclusion

The main aim of this thesis has been to develop ways of reading the representation of women in contemporary film noir as transgressive in so far as they are images of seductive castrators for male viewers. To assist this process I have brought together pertinent ideas and insights from psychoanalysis, feminist film theory, relevant French feminist theory and post structural understandings of text linked with Baudrillard's post modern theories of seduction and simulation to support an analysis of the femme fatale/castatrice in the two films, *Basic Instinct* and *The Last Seduction*.

This combination of theoretical perspectives has been rewarding. It has enabled me to move beyond the modernist view that film is a neutral and unmediated mirror onto the world and to invoke theoretical perspectives, which emphasise the reading of film as a text, and as a discursive signifying practice. These theoretical positions allow for an understanding, with reference to the films, of such complex issues as; the dynamics of desire, audience identification, pleasure, scopophilia, woman as fetish object, woman as object of desire, woman as spectacle and so on. These perspectives also provided a way of investigating whether or not films can offer uncomfortable positions but still be pleasurable at the same time. These perspectives have enabled an analysis of the dynamics of seduction both within the narrative and between the film and its spectators. In addition there has been an exploration of a number of different theoretical positions on femininity as masquerade both within and outside of phallogocentric constructions of femininity and their respective uses.

Through engaging with this complex set of theoretical positions this thesis has uncovered some important and exciting theoretical points of difference and intersections between the work of Luce Irigaray and Jean Baudrillard in relation to

masquerade, alterity and simulation, which could be an important area for further feminist research. Furthermore Baudrillard's writings on seduction will still yield many very interesting feminist projects of inquiry and thought particularly around his assertions that sex is a residue of failed seduction and its connections to desire.

[1990: 40]

Film in this thesis has been understood to use multiple devices - images, sound, lighting, editing, script and so on - to construct meaning and to attempt to provide subject positions for viewers which they can either take up, reject or do both simultaneously. Film creates subject positions for the characters within its narrative/spectacle and within particular discursive frameworks, which either reinforce dominant ideologies or oppose them. Meanings are understood to be multiple and fluid. Meaning arises out of a complex interaction between the film and its spectators and in particular is reliant on the discursive frameworks to which the spectators have recourse. Phallogocentrism is a meta-discourse in which all viewers are steeped and is therefore their primary meaning making resource.

The paradox of phallogocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world... it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies.

[Mulvey, 1990: 28]

Mulvey's quote points to the irony that phallogocentrism needs the image of the castrated woman to guarantee its meaning. In *The Last Seduction*, meaning is not guaranteed; it is subverted and parodied. Bridget lacks lack therefore she is more in keeping with Baudrillard's concept of seduction. This thesis has attempted to address this ironic paradox in its investigation of the representation of the transgressive,

seductive castrating woman. The phantasy of the castrated woman, necessary to phallogocentric psychoanalysis can be read as a defence mechanism against the feared power of woman. Phallogocentric psychoanalytic theory might continue to assert that woman is feared by men because she is castrated. However, phallogocentrism can only achieve such coherence, through the regulation of its own discursive framework by repressing all that opposes its dominant discourse.

I have used Creed's [1990] rereading of Freud's pivotal case studies, in relation to castration, which reveals that this internal coherence has only been achieved through repression of significant data that challenges Freudian theories of castration. Creed's primary assertion is that man fears woman not because she is castrated but because she is an agent of castration herself. Lurie's [1981-2] view that men fear women not because they are castrated but rather because they are *not* castrated challenges Freudian psychoanalytical theories in another direction. Lurie argues that the phantasy of female castration is required to ensure the sexual passivity thus rendering the woman safe for trade within heterosexual libidinal economy. In this thesis I have used both these challenges to Freudian theory in order to analyse films where the woman is not castrated.

I have been specifically interested in locating spaces and cracks in phallogocentric discourses as it is applied to signifying practices such as film. While phallogocentric psychoanalysis may continue to circulate a discourse of men fearing women because woman is castrated; the analyses of the two film's *Basic Instinct* and *The Last Seduction*, borrowing from such challenges to Freudian psychoanalysis, indicate that erupting through the phallogocentric unconscious is another fear. This fear, which is

often represented through displacement; is that of woman as castrator, *la femme castratrice*. Another concomitant fear revealed in signifying practices such as film, art, myth and legend is a little more complex. Male castration fears can be broadened to include fear of the seductive castrating woman. That is to say sex with a woman can be dangerous and even fatal. This is particularly taken up in analysing the *femme fatales/castratrices* powers of seduction and use of masquerade, or the light manipulation of surfaces. Furthermore I was particularly interested to explore this in contemporary film noir because it has been traditionally a genre in which transgressive representations of women have proliferated. It is here in contemporary film noir that representations of castrating women who are neither recuperated or punished is a strong feature. This differs significantly from the *femme fatale* of the traditional film noir who operates as the phallic woman, displaying her power only to have it removed through symbolic castration. Erupting out of the grip of phallogocentric discursive regulation are representations of sexually active and assertive women who castrate. This leakage challenges the internal coherence of Freudian psychoanalytic theories of castration and broadens our understanding of male castration anxieties.

This thesis maintains, however, that signifying practices such as film, located within phallogocentric symbolic order, cannot but construct phallic phantasies of the female subject, both consciously and unconsciously. Therefore, these eruptions of male fears from the collective male unconscious are not surprising. It is important however to remember that they tell us more about male fears and desires than they do about female subjectivity and desire.

Contemporary feminist film theory has enabled an investigation of the construction of the gaze linked to Freudian theories of castration and fetish. Under most situations mainstream Hollywood film constructs the gaze through the camera's framing and capturing of image, through the gaze of the characters within the narrative and through the gaze of the spectators of the film. Film and its productive gaze, via the camera, fetishises woman's lack through framing her as an iconographic image; woman as spectacle through the objectification of her body. However, in both films the constitution of the gaze has not guaranteed male power and agency. In *Basic Instinct* the gaze has been decentred and in *The Last Seduction* it is refused. Even though films like *Basic Instinct* support heterosexual masculine libidinal economy and desire on a conscious level, the unconscious male fears of seduction at the hands of a sexually assertive and seductive woman still erupts through. This rupture occurs especially when the operations of the gaze fail to reinforce male power and potency, but instead decentre it. As feminist viewers of mainstream Hollywood films it is amusing and satisfying to recognise these chinks in the phallogentric fortress.

Classic cinema embedded in conventions of realism and verisimilitude attempt to naturalise these phallic phantasies. Whereas anti realist films like *The Last Seduction*, through invoking ironic distancing techniques and refusing audience identification, provide a study of gender construction, and the ways that femininity as masquerade can be employed in seduction. In order to engage fully with such a project however, the audience would have to have some recourse to oppositional and post modern discourses about seduction, gender construction, gender performance and multiply organised subjectivities.

Through the detailed analysis of these two films it has been possible to show that the femme castatrice operates in modern film noir using strategies of appearance in terms of seduction, masquerade and simulation, and how such a figure challenges traditional phallogocentric psychoanalytic theory. As Baudrillard points out:

... seduction represents mastery over the symbolic universe, while power represents only mastery over the real universe. The sovereignty of seduction is incommensurable with the possession of political or sexual power. [1990: 8]

The analysis of these films shows that they illustrate this point well and challenge the assumption that woman is castrated. The analysis reveals the vulnerability of male subjectivity especially in relation to sex and power. It speaks to the extraordinary lengths phallogocentric signifying practices will go to protect phallic phantasies of masculine power, potency and agency against the passive, impotent female subject, required to give meaning and order to the phallogocentric symbolic order. Nonetheless, leakage, slippage, eruptions from the unconscious still occurs.

Femininity as performative masquerade, split subjectivity, and other post modern understandings of femininity and subjectivity are consciously exploited in *The Last Seduction* but not in the same way as in *Basic Instinct*. Of course, as I have demonstrated in Chapter three, it is possible to read mainstream Hollywood films like *Basic Instinct* against the grain and adopt different and resistant subject positions in relation to the film. All texts, even the most progressive can be read conservatively and conservative texts can be read in a pro-active way. This relies on the discourses to which the audience has recourse. However, the fact remains that the film is constructed to elicit a dominant subject position that we can either accept or reject.

Both femme fatales are effective in their seduction because as Baudrillard contends they do not 'attach any meaning to what [they do], nor suffer the weight of desire'. [1990: 87] Coupled to this both women operate as mirrors of the men's unconscious and desires. They both use deception as a strategy of seduction. Neither of the female protagonists of these films is interested in forming any kind of loving attachment to the objects of their seduction. They are engaged in seduction to please themselves. Bridget Gregory in *The Last Seduction* seduces to achieve a very particular aim, lots of money and no men to share it with. Catherine Trammel in *Basic Instinct* could be read as having no goal in mind other than seduction itself. From Baudrillard's [1990] point of view, she may be the greater seductress. They are however, both engaged in deadly seductions. That is the people they seduce tend to come to a sticky ending at some point. This is an application of Baudrillard's theory, which is not really taken up in his study. He asserts that the strength of the feminine is its seduction, and in the case of these two films we can see this demonstrated to its most powerful, and non-reversible conclusion, the death of the seduced.

It is important to note that these films can be interpreted as studies of seduction not just from the point of view of their respective narratives but also as a study of seduction in terms of the ways it seduces the audience. *Basic Instinct* through suturing the audience into identificatory partnership with Nick, the detective, the audience can derive vicarious pleasure from his seduction by Catherine Trammel. In *The Last Seduction* however, pleasure does not come from being seduced too through audience identification with the men, but rather through the adoption of ironic distancing to critique her style of seduction. For those spectators who never take up

this ironic distance, the film may provoke too much displeasure to be enjoyable. But for those who do, it produces pleasures, albeit difficult ones.

Whereas in *Basic Instinct* there is very little of this because it adopts a realistic mode, within which it is hard to intellectually examine such constructions of femininity. A knowing audience, that is an audience with recourse to post modern understandings of construction of gender, split subjectivities and so on, can bring such a deconstructive reading to this film by reading it against the grain. However, this is not the dominant subject position offered to the audience by this film, because *Basic Instinct* is much more realistic in its mode and *The Last Seduction* is not.

The more duplicitous Catherine Trammel becomes the more harshly the audience is invited to judge her because she is not playing games they readily identify with as a large part of their enjoyment of the film because it investigates femininity. Rather the film sutures the audience into Nick Curran's investigative position and then more and more into the film noir expectations that the audience, like the detective, is there to solve the crime of femininity run amok. It conforms very closely to those conventions in terms of the way it evokes judgmental responses from the audience.

The Last Seduction doesn't position the audience like this - the pleasure of this film is in identifying with the character's ability to play games and rituals of seduction and to continually escape her containment. It is an investigation of femininity too, but from the position of exploding myths about femininity and encouraging the audience to think seriously about the merit of unquestioningly accepting the performance and masquerade of femininity within phallogocentrism. After all

whom does it benefit? Bridget Gregory escapes exactly because she transgresses this containment.

This thesis has located and analysed two examples of films which act as objects of provocation. They challenge their spectators to think about codes of femininity, masquerade, desire, seduction, simulation and male castration anxieties. The films do this through the constitution of their female protagonists as sexually assertive, seductive and castrating and using femininity as masquerade to their own ends. They can do this because they are represented as understanding that femininity as masquerade is a simulation of male phantasies. Femininity as masquerade is a series of subject positions into which one can step and leave at will, as a series of defiant and playful repetitions. They are represented as understanding that absence seduces and so allow themselves to become the empty screens upon which the men project their phantasies only to be seduced by their own projections of their unconscious desires and fears. They are shown to use seduction as 'an ironic, alternative form, one that breaks the referentiality of sex and provides a space, not of desire, but of play and defiance.' [Baudrillard, 1990: 21] Both of these films allow for these readings and the women remain thus, defiant and uncontained – transgressive.

Appendix A

The Plot of

'The Last Seduction'

The Last Seduction, directed by John Dahl and released in 1994, is a low budget alternative film which tells the story of a couple, Bridget [Linda Fiorentino] and Clay Gregory [Bill Pullman] who plan and carry out a drug deal. The proceeds will provide them both with enough money to live comfortably until the husband's income from his doctor's practice increases. The husband must pay off the loan shark for the money they borrowed to finance the drug deal as soon as possible. The drug deal takes place, the husband returns; they have an altercation where he slaps her. She is shocked; he tries to placate her. She lets him think he has and while he is in the shower, she leaves with the money. The rest of the film involves him trying to track her down and her using various ploys to keep away from her husband in order to keep the money.

Acting on advice from her lawyer, she spends some time hiding out in a small town called Beston. She works at managerial level under an assumed name of Wendy Kroy for an insurance company. The assumed name is an anagram of the spelling of New York. She has a knack of writing backwards. She convinces her new boss to allow her to use an assumed name because she is running away from a terrible situation of domestic violence. She will live and work there while she divorces her husband with the intention that she will not have to share money with her husband. However, the husband, pursued vigorously by the loan shark for repayment, hires a private detective to find her, offering him half the money recovered. They find her location through tracing a telephone call. The husband works out the name she will be using based on his knowledge of her skill in backward writing.

Appendix A: The Plot of 'The Last Seduction'

In the mean time, she has been having sex with a naive country boy, Mike Swale [Peter Berg], whom she meets in a bar and then finds he works at the same company that employs her. She calls him her designated fuck. She tricks him into trying to kill her husband so she can keep all the money. She invents an elaborate scheme of killing unfaithful or wife battering men for their wives and a share in the profits of the husbands' insurance payout. She tells Mike this is how she has fun and if he wants to relate to her he has to enjoy her kind of fun.

Using the money from the drug deal, she convinces Mike that she has already killed one of these men and collected on it. If they are going to have the relationship of equals, as he professes he wants, and then he must do the same. He resists the game for a long time, since killing people is obviously abhorrent to him. She is able to push him over the edge once she finds out that the woman he had married, Trish Swale [Sereena], while living in Buffalo, was actually a man. Bridget sends Mike a letter from Trish saying she was going to come and live in Boston. He is terrified that his buddies will find out she is actually a man and finally agrees to Bridget's plans. Bridget allows him to believe they will live happily ever after, once he has completed killed the man.

Bridget plans the whole murder, as she earlier planned the drug deal. She drives him to New York. However, in the course of the attempted murder he realises this is actually Bridget's husband. The two men conspire to let her think Mike has killed Clay and she comes up to their apartment to find the husband still alive. She then kills the husband with her mace, wipes it off and begins to taunt Mike into raping her. She finally succeeds in getting him to rape her when she tells him he is a

Appendix A: The Plot of 'The Last Seduction'

faggot for marrying a man. Meanwhile she has dialled 911 and the operator at the other end hears him raping her and saying he killed her husband. He is in jail with no hope of proving his innocence or her guilt.

The final scene shows her driving off in limousine burning the only remaining piece of evidence he may have been able to use. She rids herself of the husband and the lover, keeps the money and gets away with it all. The poster advertising this film states, 'she wants it, she wants it all and she wants it now'. This sums up the film quite well.

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