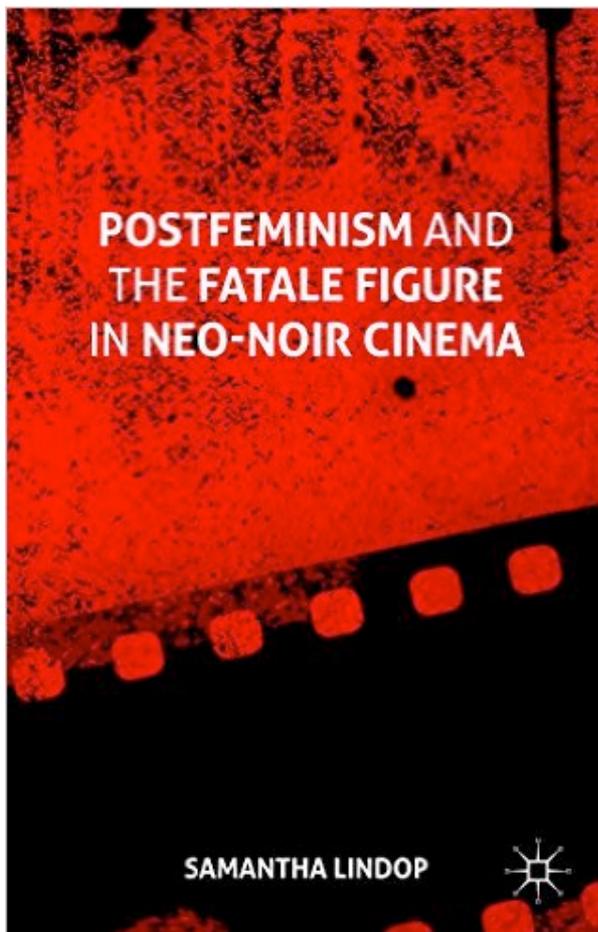


**BOOK REVIEW**

*Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema*  
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*Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema.* Samantha Lindop. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015

Samantha Lindop's *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema* (2015) addresses the roles of the *femme fatale*, as well as her young adult and male counterparts (*fille fatale* and *homme fatal* respectively). While her ancestry of the deadly figure in *noir* develops from classic examples of the 1940s and 1950s era, the book places a particular emphasis on filling the gap on research on the figure in *neo noir*. Lindop traces the regeneration of the genre through two cinematic cycles: the mid-1960s-1970s, and the 1980s and 1990s. Crucially, the latter cycle allows for the exploration of the book's leading point of inquiry: the interactions between the *fatale* figure and postfeminism. Lindop characterises "dominant postfeminism [as] a patriarchally grounded, media inspired concept that promotes the individualistic, consumer driven rhetoric of neoliberalism, while shying away from political engagement, instead functioning as a closed loop rhetoric that begins and ends with the media, popular culture, and advertising" (Lindop, 2015: 11). She further considers postmillennial *noir* in order to contemplate on (potential) challenges to postfeminist discourse. *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema* aims to present the *fatale* figure as a useful lens through which to view the various mechanisms with which postfeminist discourse seeks to undermine the feminist project and collective action against patriarchal power structures. Her analysis is therefore also concerned with the impacts of neoliberalism and intersections of inequality, including race and class.

The first two chapters offer an outline of the *femme fatale* in classic *noir* cinema, as well as in the period of her re-emergence along with postfeminism (1980-1999). The most important concepts are outlined in an accessible way, and include the role of psychoanalysis, American culture following World War II, issues of race and ageing, the popular structure of the rape revenge narratives of 1970s cinema, and the (apparent) transgression of the deadly woman in the period following 1980. Here, the book manages to include readers who are yet to familiarise themselves with gothic fiction and/or (feminist) film theory.

Whereas the classic *noir* film did not often stray into the mainstream, the *neo noir* period, as Lindop argues, demonstrates the representative potential of film, as "the 1980s and 1990s *fatale* acts as a medium for emergent popular discourses" (Lindop, 2015: 44). In this vein, Lindop skilfully guides the reader through the use of the *femme fatale* as a figure which seeks to alleviate masculine fears of female sisterhood (in the form of the lesbian vampire) (Lindop, 2015: 46), and undermines feminist efforts by presenting the deadly woman's extensive economic and sexual independence as the prerequisites of her deviance. Lindop here introduces the concept of 'femininity as masquerade', as developed by Mary Ann Doane (1991) as a strategy for women to function within a patriarchy, whilst thus making personal gains which are individualistic rather than the result of collective, feminist, action (Lindop, 2015: 51).

An interesting section in Lindop's analysis is the focus on rape-revenge narratives which, although usually viewed as portrayals of feminist stances against rape culture, instead also work as "an articulation of masochistic, paranoid male fantasies about the implications of feminism" (Lindop, 2015: 55). This is evidenced by the use of motifs such as false allegations of rape and *reductio ad absurdum* of physical violence and imagery in *neo noir* depictions of sexual violence. Myths about female fantasies of rape are mentioned by Lindop as another form of the destabilisation of feminist activist efforts on this issue. However, Lindop makes the important observation that many of the postmillennial narratives "do not undermine discourses of female victimisation [...]" in this way (Lindop, 2015: 57).

Another way in which the *femme fatale* is produced in regard to postfeminist discourse not only includes her objectification, packaged as self-objectification-by-choice, but also the marginalisation of authentic queer desire. Having in the 1980s-1990s been constructed within the realms of softcore pornography catered to the male gaze, lesbian relationships and queer desire in a postmillennial (and postfeminist) context is given more narrative complexity; however, this desire is also constructed as ultimately deviant or pathological (Lindop, 2015: 69), rooted in narcissism and therefore in need of destruction to re-centre heterosexuality within the narrative (Lindop, 2015: 75).

In Chapter 4, Lindop subsequently deepens her focus on the *femme fatale* in the postmillennial period and "the way dominant postfeminist discourse weaves its own agenda into established conventions of *noir*" (Lindop, 2015: 76). The strength of this chapter lies in its astute account of the differences between post- and third-wave feminism, and the corresponding messages which films may subsequently deliver, such as postfeminist devaluations of the efforts and achievements of second-wave activism through an uncritical cinematic portrayal of the apparently extensive range of choices available to women. Her investigation of *Derailed* (Mikael Håfström, 2005), *Sin City* (Frank Miller, Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino, 2005), and *Descent* (Talia Lugacy, 2007) deals with the question of the work/family balance, and therefore rightly addresses one of the most significant ways in which postfeminism and neoliberal ideologies seek to unsettle the gains of feminism. Her analysis of *Sin City* (Frank Miller, Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino, 2005) places an emphasis on sex workers as 'working women', an issue which is anticipated and hoped to be addressed when reading previous chapters. The contradictions and limitations of sex work as a 'choice' within a patriarchal system are well-presented here. The chapter also features important reflections on race, with *Descent* (Talia Lugacy, 2007) marking for Lindop a move away from postfeminism towards third-wave feminism, with a refusal to portray non-white female figures as exotic sexual 'others'. Lindop's observation that a female filmmaker may have significant impacts on non-objectifying portrayals opens up further areas for practice-based research.

Lindop then begins to offer a more differentiated perspective of the *noir* narrative, as she considers the deadly girl, or *fille fatale*, in great depth and therefore offers some new directions in this area of film theory. Her account of the deadly girl in relation to postfeminism emphasises the girl's covert sexuality, which is complicated (mostly for her corresponding male character) by a pretence and ambiguity of childishness (Lindop, 2015: 96). Maintaining the analytical view upon the *fille fatale*, Lindop continues with explorations of this figure in postmillennial *noir* cinema through the films *Stoker* (Chan-wook Park, 2013), *Hard Candy* (David Slade, 2005), and *Brick* (Rian Johnson, 2005). These films, she argues, develop on the adolescent deadly female with a refusal to have her lethal potential be dispersed through sexual objectification, instead presenting a new kind of subjectivity of the 'cool', self-controlled psychopath. Lindop aligns the protagonists of these films with Clover's (1992) analysis of the final girl of the horror genre<sup>1</sup>, who demasculates the man, often a perpetrator of violence against women and girls, as is the case in *Hard Candy* (David Slade, 2005), where Hayley employs a mask of childishness as an active strategy of exposing the male protagonist's paedophilia. Though this is not mentioned explicitly, this strategy also exposes the usual myths surrounding child sexual abuse which denounce the victims as Lolita-like figures in order to excuse perpetrators' actions. At the same time, male tensions and anxieties around the disruption of patriarchy remain just as visible as they always have been. Importantly, Lindop argues that these girls/women symbolise a "masochistic male paranoia that the power afforded to young women is too great" (Lindop, 2015: 112). An interesting point is Lindop's reservation of viewing Hayley as a purely feminist icon, as her self-reliance and vigilantism are suggested as neoliberal formulas of the deconstruction of feminism as a collective movement of female solidarity which challenges misogyny on a structural level (referencing Stringer, 2011 and McRobbie, 2009). Again, Lindop here draws elucidating connections between gender and economic structures as they are expressed in film.

Moving onto her analysis of *Brick* (Rian Johnson, 2005), Lindop begins to set the scene for the following two chapters' discussion of the *homme fatale*. This film presents a *fille fatale* of the character's recognisable strategic expertise, yet the focus is on the male protagonist, as the film presents evocations of classic *noir* and the hardboiled detective genre in a contemporary Californian high school setting. Outlining the male figure of the hardboiled detective, whose aggression and psychopathic tendencies have been linked to the (threat of) breakdowns of gender hierarchies according to (partly) economic events, such as World War II, Lindop discusses various Anglophone films depicting "protest masculinity" (Lindop, 2015: 120).

Given Lindop's discussion of the tension between masculinity and the domestic sphere in the female investigator *noir*, her points bring Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) to mind, in which the male protagonist is the main investigator, though his broken leg restrains him to the domestic sphere of his apartment, leading to his lover (who repeatedly pressures him to enter marriage) to take on some of the investigative responsibilities. This is not to be viewed as an oversight by Lindop, especially as the film was released in the mid-1950s; rather, it demonstrates how her attention to constructing an ancestry of the *fatale* figures leads the reader being able to make connections.

*Brick* (Rian Johnson, 2005), maintains a link to a postfeminist environment, where gender relations do not bring the male hero any closer to the deadly girl. Instead, he remains detached from her due to social class and the hierarchies of contemporary US high school life. Though the *fille fatale* is punished for her actions – in contrast to *Stoker* (Chan-wook Park, 2013) and *Hard Candy* (David Slade, 2005), – and indeed sexualised in the style of 1990s *noir*, her agency is no less pronounced. The third case study is therefore well-positioned within the text as it introduces the more in-depth analysis of male characters in *noir*.

Lindop again offers an ancestry of the character of the deadly male, as Chapter 7 traces the *homme fatale* to Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) as well as positioning him within classic *noir* of the 1940s. The shift in the representation of the deadly male is again during the 1980s and 1990s, as the formula of the psycho-thrillers with a female protagonist working in law enforcement enjoys particular success. According to Lindop, this demonstrates that as women began to engage in the public realm more, postfeminist pressures orientated (female) safety in the domestic home (Lindop, 2015: 135).

Chapter 8 presents an in-depth analysis of the *homme fatale*, and also outlines the use of psychoanalysis in film studies. For some readers unfamiliar with psychoanalysis as such a methodological concept, this may be positioned a little late in the book, and an evaluation of the applicability and extent of contemporary relevance of psychoanalysis would clarify the author's position. Concepts of fatherhood are particularly significant here. Lindop argues that in *Mr Brooks* (Bruce A. Evans, 2007), the *homme fatale* is able to generate "empathetic response from the viewer, creating incongruence that makes it easy to forget the fact that the protagonist has just shot someone in the forehead or decapitated them with a spade" (Lindop, 2015: 153). However, one may argue that there is also space to consider the importance of highlighting that violent males are also able to function as 'respectable' fathers and family members, an important part of feminist activism relating to violence against women in which 'humanising the monster' is a valuable step in critically examining gender roles.

Lindop's final analysis of *In the Cut* (Jane Campion, 2003) is particularly noteworthy, as it examines cinematic resistances to conventions of the male gaze: the *homme fatale*

facilitates explorations of female desire as expressed through visual power (Lindop, 2015: 159). The case study rounds off the wider inquiry into the fatal figure (be it woman, girl, or man), with a continuous insistence on addressing the tensions of postfeminism and patriarchal responses as the guiding concept.

Following on from this case study, a conclusion drawing together the overarching findings and thoughts would have brought a cohesive close to the book. This could include an outline of the use of the noir and neo-noir genre as a way of destabilising the normatively gendered characters in other cinematic genres. It could also have reflected further on the discursive role of the “fatale” figure within feminist film theory, in which this figure had previously been viewed as subverting hegemonic dynamics of the (cinematic) male gaze, whilst more recently addressing and challenging the white and liberal feminist subject as promoted by postfeminist discourse. Nevertheless, the book is well-structured and makes for accessible reading, presenting a good introduction to the relevant concepts for analysing film, including the psychoanalytic tradition. However, this tradition, as Lindop argues, provides only a partial analysis of the issues at stake in cinematic portrayals of deadly women. Instead, she invites the reader to consider the *femme fatale’s* most tacit experiences of a lived reality within patriarchy: sexuality, the family, and the workplace. It is especially her continuous insistence on considering the economic circumstances of the figure as presented on film which distinguishes this book. Furthermore, her consideration of the fatal male, in relation to family and the male paranoia of a world in which women and girls are empowered, are crucial and topical aspects of the analysis, corresponding well to the present backlash to feminism and the idea of “men’s rights”. In terms of engaging the reader, Lindop’s analysis of the chosen films leads to a desire to (re)watch them, in order to reflect on how far viewers take on mainstream, patriarchal perspectives, and whether a focus on the way in which feminism is played out offers a wholly new experience of consuming the narratives of *neo-noir*.

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