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The Representation of Women in Film Noir: An
Approach to American Society in the Forties

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to explore the representation of women in American *film noir* of the forties. Through the examination of the historical background and the analysis of three *noir* movies, this paper looks critically at *noir* women characters in order to demonstrate that *film noir* questions issues relevant to women in American society in the forties.

By analyzing the three *noir* titles *Double Indemnity*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and *Out of the Past*, with a focus on their women characters Phyllis, Cora, and Kathie, this study will illustrate the ways in which the female figure embodies issues regarding sexuality and gender roles, such as motherhood, marriage and family. This way, this paper will show that these women challenge the male-dominated society by not following the standard societal roles. Ultimately, this study will consider the implications *film noir* has for the exploration of relevant matters in the study of women.

Keywords: *Film noir*, women, United States, society, gender roles, analysis.

RESUMEN

El presente estudio tiene como objetivo analizar la representación de la mujer en el cine negro norteamericano de los años cuarenta. A través del examen del contexto histórico y del análisis de tres películas del cine negro, este trabajo estudia los personajes femeninos del cine negro de forma crítica para demostrar cómo éste explora cuestiones relevantes acerca de la mujer en la sociedad americana de los años cuarenta.

Al explorar tres títulos del cine negro como son *Perdición*, *El cartero siempre llama dos veces*, y *Retorno al pasado*, poniendo el foco en las protagonistas Phyllis, Cora, y Kathie, este trabajo pretende ilustrar la forma en que la figura de la mujer representa cuestiones sobre la sexualidad y roles de género, tales como la maternidad, el matrimonio y la familia. De esta forma, este estudio va a demostrar que estas mujeres desafían la sociedad machista al no desempeñar los roles que les son asignados. Finalmente, se va a considerar la implicación que el cine negro supone para el análisis de aspectos fundamentales para el estudio de la mujer.

Palabras clave: Cine negro, mujeres, Estados Unidos, sociedad, roles de género, análisis.

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INTRODUCTION

The term *film noir* was forged by film reviewer and critic Nino Frank in 1946. It refers to a film form that appeared during World War II and the postwar years in the United States. Most critics agree that *film noir's* foundations were laid in 1941 and consider *The Maltese Falcon* as the pivotal movie of this cinematic genre. They also argue that it started to fully develop and flourish at the end of the decade of the 1940s and early 1950s, with titles such as *Double Indemnity*, *Out of the Past* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Moreover, it is acknowledged that the direct antecedents of *film noir* are found in the 1930s, with the German expressionist cinema and the hard-boiled fiction narratives as the most prominent cinematographic and stylistic sources.

The appearance of *film noir* in the United States was influenced by the social and historical circumstances of the 1940s. American culture and society underwent radical and rapid changes as a consequence of a series of national and international historical events –the Great Depression, World War II– which are portrayed in the artistic representations of the period. Thus, Hollywood will play an important role in reflecting American culture and society, acting “as a mirror” (Park 83), and *film noir* will become one of the most revealing cinematic forms, evoking the new American sociocultural circumstances of the 1940s.

Stylistically, *noir* movies are shot in black and white and are visually characterized by chiaroscuro lighting, low-key lighting, shadows, and dark scenes. Moreover, these stories are set in gloomy, dark, rainy and foggy urban streets. Regarding the subjects, they portray urban characters that embody a general pessimism and cynicism: there are no heroes, but what we would call anti-heroes: vulnerable and weak men that feel trapped in their society and end up committing crimes through their obsession with the female heroine.

As this study will reveal, *noir* women are central figures to *noir* narrative plots. Although they convey the figure of manipulative and dangerous women, who cause death to the male character and to themselves by the end of the movies, they also prove to be strong, intelligent, ambitious, self-determined and independent. In this way, through the portrayal of women, *film noir* reveals to explore key social issues and articulate interesting questions on the situation of women in the United States in the forties. As this study will try to validate, *film noir* acts as a reaction against the traditional roles attached to women in a patriarchal society as subjected to male authority.

Film noir is considered one of the most significant and influential cinematic genres, and it has been widely discussed over the past few decades. The first book ever written about the topic, *A Panorama of American Film Noir*, was published in France in 1955. From the 1960s onwards, the English speaking world has been exploring *film noir*, and a wide range of studies have addressed the topic from diverse perspectives. Some approaches deal with the genre/no genre issue, such as those written by Borde and Chaumeton, who claim that *film noir* is a series; or Paul Schrader, who considers it a group of films defined by tonality and mood. On the other hand, the views held by Krutnik, Biesen, and Lingeman are based on historical and socio-cultural discourses in order to account for the formation of *film noir*. They argue that these films are representative of their period and place, and that the climate found in the US during the 1940s, one marked by darkness, uncertainty and anxiety, was to be reflected in *noir* films narratives, mood, and psyche. The 1970s will see a shift in *film noir* criticism with the emergence of feminist scholarship on the topic. A fundamental book on the question of women in film noir is Kaplan's *Women in Film Noir*, a collection of essays that will develop an innovative feminist discourse on the debate on gender roles and sexual identity. However, the representation of women in *film noir* proves to be critical for the exploration of possible gaps that need to be reconsidered.

The present study intends to take a social and historical approach in order to analyze the representation of women in *film noir*. The main objective of this paper is to look critically at *noir* female characters in order to reveal how they offer a particular perspective regarding women in the United States during the forties. This way, I seek to reveal how *film noir* hints at important issues regarding the traditional roles and place for women in American society such as gender roles, sexuality, family, marriage and motherhood.

In order to achieve this objective, the main resources that will be used will be the cinematic productions of the 1940s that fall within the scope of the *film noir* genre. As American *noir* titles during this period are numerous, to include all of them would require a detailed and expansive methodological analysis impossible to undertake presently. Therefore, this study aims to address only three *noir* titles that best fit for its purpose: *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), and *Out of the Past* (1947). The three main female characters in these movies – Phyllis, Cora and Kathie – will prove to bring into focus questions of sexuality, gender roles, family, marriage and motherhood. I will argue that these women are positioned against the standard societal norms of the forties in the United States. This way, I attempt to verify that they can be considered symbols of defiance against the male-dominated society of the United States.

Consequently, this paper will be structured as follows. The first part will discuss the historical, cultural, and social background of the United States in the forties. It is essential to emphasize these aspects in order to understand all the profound changes the United States went through in this period, when the country participated in different crucial international events. The country experienced a transformation at different levels –economic, social, and cultural– which would continue to shape the US throughout the coming decades.

The second section deals with the theoretical and contextual issues regarding *film noir*. In this chapter, I will analyze in depth the different crucial elements that characterize this cinematic genre, as well as the sources and antecedents found in the 1930s. Moreover, I will argue that *film noir* is an artistic creation that was born out of this specific context, and that acts as a vehicle to represent the shifting cultural and social realities in the 1940s. My presupposition here is that cinematic representations and specifically Hollywood *film noir* assimilated the cultural and social aspects that defined the US. Therefore, this chapter will provide information about how *film noir* was created, in which contexts, and the different aspects that influenced to shape this genre.

Lastly, the third section of this paper will be a comprehensive examination of women in *film noir*. My main goal in this last chapter is to investigate the role of *noir* females as non-conventional for the socio-cultural context of the 1940s. Thus, this part is especially relevant for it will act as an illustration of the matters examined in the previous chapters. For this end, I will make a detailed analysis of the female characters depicted in the selected films for my study, with a focus on the ideas of wifeness and motherhood conveyed in these films. Finally, this will serve to illustrate the attitudes those female characters have towards the social reality for women in the United States during the forties.

STATE OF THE ART

Hollywood *film noir* has been the subject of a large amount of research over the past decades. Since the appearance of the first book on this topic –*A Panorama of American Film Noir* (Borde and Chaumeton, 1955)– there has been an increasing interest on *film noir*, and studies, books, and essays have considerably widespread. However, it was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s when English-language discussions appeared, and Anglo-American scholars started to explore this subject. Since then, the term *film noir* has established itself in diverse film literature and criticism.

A central issue for the study of *film noir* has been on the attempts to find a definition for the concept. Even nowadays, this area is still the focus of a debate and discussion among film critics, who have not come to any agreement on whether to categorize the term as a genre, a movement, a phenomenon, or a cycle. For instance, Borde and Chaumeton argue that *film noir* is considered to be a series, “a group of nationally identifiable films sharing certain common features” (1). In a similar fashion, later studies would address this issue through different approaches and perspectives. Schrader in “Notes on *Film Noir*” (1972) summarizes the main stylistic and thematic elements of *film noir* and divide it into three periods –the wartime period, the postwar period, and the period of psychotic action-. However, it is interesting how he attempts to analyze *film noir*, not as a genre, but as a group of films defined by style, mood, and tone, by reducing it to its fundamental stylistic and cultural elements. Thus, he considers that *film noir* can be explained through “four catalytic elements”: war and postwar disillusionment, post-war realism, German influence, and hard-boiled tradition.

This subject is also treated by Janey Place in her essay “Women in Film Noir”. She aims to show that *film noir* is a movement particularly linked to the American culture of the period, which in fact, “touches every genre” (37). She argues that movements tend to reflect the contemporary cultural mood of the place and time they are set in, exactly what *film noir* does. According to her, *noir* is a movement in that it emerged out of a particular culture, in a specific period and place “in response to a particular crisis of

some kind” (39). Therefore, she considers World War II to be a key factor that changed the socio-cultural climate of the US, which *film noir* was to reflect on the screen.

Frank Krutnik in *In a Lonely Street*, attempts to locate *film noir* in history. He advocates for the categorization of *film noir* as a phenomenon, a product of the changing production, cultural and ideological contexts in the US in the forties. Consequently, *film noir* can be described through a historical approach that evokes cultural and historical determinants: “film noir is either explicitly or implicitly regarded as a reflection of the various social and cultural upheavals experienced by the US during the 1940s” (56). Similarly, this view is shared by Barton Palmer in “Moral Man in the Dark City”. He relies on “the dark mirror theory” to explain the emergence of *film noir*. He argues that *film noir* is “a cultural symptom of postwar mood” (187) and mentions that the cultural adjustments after World War II created a certain national anxiety and dark mood that had to be represented on the screen by Hollywood industry, making the sudden appearance of *film noir* inevitable.

It is worth highlighting the approach provided by Borde and Chaumeton on this subject. These authors upheld the idea that *film noir* is a cultural creation that emerged out of the social climate of postwar America, and thus, sought to place *film noir* within its historical background. Their book provides a fundamental commentary on the American socio-cultural reality of the 1940s in relation with the emergence of *film noir*. A reflection on postwar society dominated by violence and crime, “film noir is linked to a much wider social context, and the depiction of the criminal milieu derives from the everyday reality of the USA” (20).

Approaching this issue from a slightly different perspective, Biesen in *Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir* draws on the historical and production contexts. *Film noir* is to be placed not only within the social and historical conditions of the US during and after the war –returning veterans, McCarthyism, the Cold War–, but also the cultural changes Hollywood underwent during the wartime years: “the sex, violence,

crime topics, and tabloid-style cinematic realism of wartime *noir* films benefited from changing patterns of censorship.” (7).

Richard Lingeman in *The Noir Forties: The American People from Victory to Cold War* proposes a similar discourse and argues that *noir* reflects the culture of the forties in the US, when the nation’s morality was subject to several transformations. He points at the same national and international challenges that the country had to face during this decade –the return of war veterans, McCarthyism, communism, and the Cold War– as the sources of the dark mood found in *film noir*. Thus, from Lingeman’s viewpoint, “film noir was born at the end of the war, the product of a confluence of several social, political, and artistic developments” (193). He also explores the main themes of *film noir*, violence, despair, tragedy, as a reflection of the current social spirit of the United States, horrified by the past war and anxious about an uncertain future.

Since the 1970s, *noir* female characters have attracted much of the scholars’ attention, and the question of women and *film noir* has increased as a central issue on film criticism. This new female discourse has explored gender issues, the depiction of gender constructions and female identity and sexuality in *film noir*. Approaches on this issue have proved to be diverse and highly influential for future debates about women and *film noir*. In order to address this issue some critics provide a historical perspective and discuss how these female characters reflect the social climate of the period. However, psychoanalytic discourses have also been put forward for the discussion of women and *film noir*.

The most fundamental book on *film noir* and gender is Ann E. Kaplan’s *Women in Film Noir*, a collection of essays that review this new discourse. This anthology considers *noir* as a cinematic space for the exploration of the representation of women. For Kaplan, *noir* females were a symbol of sexual freedom, independence, and strength, and although they were depicted as immoral and manipulative, in most cases they were intellectual equals to men. From a positive viewpoint, critics have discussed the power

and potential of *noir* female characters and elaborated on the complex depiction of women in *film noir*.

Janey Place's approach provides a good example. Her article "Women in Film Noir" intends to address the patriarchal archetypes that *film noir* created for women's identities: the "spider" woman and the "nurturing" woman. She argues that the new postwar anti-feminist mentality thought it necessary for the first one to be destroyed or punished, since it represented female models whose existence in American society was impossible. However, what is most determinant in *film noir* with regard to women is that these characters were "active, not static symbols... intelligent and powerful if destructively so, and derive power, not weakness, from their sexuality" (35). From a social perspective, *film noir* acts as a mirror for the changing social attitudes towards women in the 1940s. For Place, *film noir* heroines reflect the shifts in women's identity, place and role constructions caused by the change of discourse during and after World War II. The new job opportunities outside the domestic sphere during the wartime years disappeared once the war had finished and they were forced to return home.

Along the same lines, Sylvia Harvey explores the socio-economic shifts –the introduction of women in the workforce and the changing economic structures– that affected the situation of women and gender dynamics in the US, as the main influence for the representation of women in *film noir*. She argues that the displacement of the patriarchal family and the absence of family relations in *film noir* reflect the changes of traditional social values: "Film noir captures and magnifies the rumbles that preceded one of those earthquakes in human history that shift the hidden foundations of a society, and that begin the displacement of its characteristics and dominant systems of values and beliefs" (22).

Moreover, Harvey argues that the objectification of women in *film noir* comes from this sense of alienation and helplessness found in contemporary society, where men's desires and needs cannot be fulfilled. *Film noir* offers satisfaction to the male protagonist, if only temporary, since these films are distinguished by the absence of

possessions such as a nuclear family, a wife, or children. With regard to the eventual punishment or death of these sexually free and strong women, Harvey declares that they nevertheless remain a danger for the proper order of things.

Frank Krutnik also elaborates on a social approach, and offers an overview of the situation in the US in the 1940s, in order to discuss the depiction of women characters in *film noir*. The redefinition of women's place led to new gender constructions, which were destroyed in the postwar period. *Film noirs*, he argues, depict the challenges women were confronted with in the postwar period, when they were again constraint to the domestic sphere. Women in *film noir*, as women in the social reality of the US, were characterized by the search for self-definition outside marriage and family.

As discussed above, *film noir* has provided a great amount of research from a variety of perspectives during the last decades, and the discourse on *film noir* has been subject to constant evolution since the term was introduced in France in 1946. Nowadays, there is a clear interest in the question of gender roles, gender identity and sexuality in *noir*. However, this is a controversial field, and there is still plenty of disagreement among scholars to provide a unique view about *film noir*'s attitude towards women. Therefore, the controversy that this field has arisen calls for a re-examination and re-consideration of the questions of women in *film noir*.

1. AMERICA IN THE FORTIES: AN OVERVIEW

The decade of the 1940s was a crucial time that determined and shaped the history of our world. The United States was culturally and socially transformed by a series of events at an international level, which would have important implications for the future of the country in a global context.

1.1. America and a world in crisis

During the 1930s, America was mainly concerned with domestic affairs. President Roosevelt, who started his presidency after winning the elections in 1932, put the economic interests of the United States at the core of his policies. During his first term, he would put all his political efforts towards the economic recovery of the United States with the New Deal. Nevertheless, from 1937, his attention moved towards foreign affairs in a time when aggressive and radical governments started to rise in Europe. As Sellers points out, the international events taking place at the end of the 1930s, “were to affect the United States even more profoundly than the New Deal” (346).

At first, the nation’s mood was isolationist; the society in the United States was not foreseeing that another war would come, and Americans thought greater economic problems were happening at home. For this, the government applied a series of measures -the Neutrality Acts- to keep the country out of any European war. Yet, from 1938, although the public opinion was opposed to an intervention of the US, Roosevelt started to take measures in order to fight fascism in Europe sending military help to the Allies. In 1940, when all the Allies, except Britain, had been defeated the aid from the United States intensified with the “lend-lease” program, which allowed the US to send war material to Britain (Boyer et al).

Nevertheless, the United States was not only to have enemies in Europe, but also in the Pacific. On December 7, 1941, Japan’s aggressiveness at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, was to

force the United States to enter the conflict in a direct way. From this moment until 1945, however, America focused all its efforts in defeating Germany.

For this, American industry began to specialize in military production, and young men were sent to Europe as volunteers. The final victory arrived in September, 1945, after the liberation of France.

Although President Roosevelt did not live to see this day, during his administration, and especially in his second and last terms, he proved to be an efficient wartime leader for the Americans. His great accomplishments in domestic as in foreign affairs restored the economic and social prosperity of the country.

The intervention of the United States in World War II had profound implications for the future of the nation. The fact that it came out of the war “physically unscathed” (Boyer 104) made it possible for America to become a superpower; the economic and military powerhouse of the world. (Jenkins 317).

The second half of the decade of the 1940s was marked by another confrontation, the Cold War, which broke out just one year after the end of World War II. In 1946, Russia denounced “Western imperialism” and capitalism, which was considered in America a declaration of war. This new circumstance of tension is defined in *The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People* as “a new form of international rivalry in which the United States and the Soviet Union avoided direct military conflict by using all their resources to thwart each other’s objectives” (Boyer et al. 750).

Although the Cold War, unlike World War II, was not a direct military conflict, as a result of it, the United States found itself involved in different foreign conflicts, such as a civil war in Greece, Turkey’s instability, or the Korean War. Apart from this, America’s society, economy, and politics would change due to its influence and commitment in major foreign affairs. For instance, under Truman's administration, the United States put forward the Marshall Plan, in order to help rebuild postwar Western Europe.

Therefore, not only would World War II have an effect in America in the 1940s, but also the emerging Cold War. These two major events transformed an isolationist America, concerned for national matters, into an interventionist nation, due to its commitment in foreign affairs. Thus, this period is extremely important, since America would undergo profound transformations, which will continue through the upcoming decades until today and that will change its role and influence internationally. As Goldberg states, these two conflicts “lay the foundation for [America’s] current dominant role in economic and military affairs worldwide” (xii).

1.2. American society in the forties

The interventionism of the United States during the 1940s brought with it social and economic change and the nation would become the richest in the world. As Boyer points out, the wartime period was to alter the social discourse of America at different levels:

By 1945, in a war-shattered world, its domestic politics reshaped by the New Deal of the 1930s, America stood preeminent. In these same years, intellectuals, social thinkers, and cultural creators challenged their predecessors’ moral certitudes to forge a modern, cosmopolitan society. (90)

As opposed to the 1930s, American society in the 1940s saw a new prosperity, which could be visible in all aspects of life. It was a time in which the unemployment rate was radically reduced, the traditional family structure completely changed, and in which social unity emerged. American people in the 1940s saw new opportunities that made their lives much easier, they “lived and ate better than ever before” (Sellers 365).

As for other businesses, new developments took place in America, such as a rapid process of urbanization or technological and electronic innovations.

These advances, together with the economic prosperity, meant a profound revision of American culture and society, which would be characterized by an extreme consumerism. Therefore, although this was a period of tension, “the wartime mood in the United States was buoyant and upbeat” (Goldberg 26). After the periods of the Depression and the war, Americans had great hope in the new era, and were optimistic that the new prosperity would make all their dreams come true.

As it tends to happen at the end of wars, World War II had a social, economic and cultural impact in those countries affected. In the United States, even though a postwar depression was predicted, these changes were far from negative. As Boyer et al. point out, World War II would have a positive impact in internal as in world affairs. In internal matters, the unemployment and low productivity of the Depression year disappeared; and in global affairs, the United States was to have a central role.

History’s greatest armed conflict proved as much a turning point in American personal lives as in world affairs. Gone were the high unemployment and low productivity of the Great Depression ... Gone too was the world in which the United States played only a peripheral role. (Boyer et al. 718)

While other countries in Asia and Europe were suffering the negative consequences of the war, American society stood at the peak. At home, America experienced a huge economic boom due to the creation of new industries and the postwar baby boom also had consequences in the internal structure of American life. The new postwar America was defined by the newly acquired power, the creation of suburbs, and the increasing consumerism: “It was arguable that the postwar American society, with its vast new middle class, its burgeoning suburbs, and its high-paid labor, was not only the richest but the most equalitarian society the world had seen” (Sellers 386-7).

The economic sector in the United States underwent massive changes in the war period. Mobilization during the war ended joblessness and brought with it the return of economic prosperity. Unemployment, a problem of the Great Depression years, practically disappeared in America and new levels of production were reached. As Goldberg claims, during the wartime years, more than 15 million people entered the workforce and the military. Moreover, he argues that “the number of jobless people dropped from 9 million to 1 million” (28).

These figures show how unemployment had almost vanished during the wartime period due to the economic growth. As a consequence, wages would become larger, profits would increase, and businesses multiply.

Another important factor would be the entry of minorities, women, and the elderly into the labor force, which would have a tremendous impact in the internal way of life of millions of Americans.

1.3. The place of women

A direct motive for the increase in the employment rates during wartime was the growth in the number of women who entered the labor force, served in the military effort and joined volunteer organizations. As young men enlisted to fight for their country, large numbers of women were needed to abandon their traditional domestic sphere and to adopt new roles in the public domain outside the home. During the war years, there were more than 6.5 million women workers in the US (Boyer et al. 732). Yet, by the end of the war, more women were working outside the home sector, and this number increased to 18 million (Hoesley 6).

The access of women to the labor market meant a redefinition of women’s place in American culture and society, and a radical change in women’s roles. These new roles

for women had an immediate impact on the foundations of the family, since they were no longer expected to exclusively take care of theirs at home.

The new sphere they moved about proved to be essential in the changing role of women during the 1940s, away from the wife-mother role:

With the mass drafting of men into the armed services, one of the consequences of the wartime expansion of the national economy was that women were overtly encouraged, as part of their 'patriotic duty', to enter the workforce rather than devoting themselves exclusively to home and family. (Krutnik 57)

These wide-scale changes meant new opportunities for women and a reorganization of the traditional sexual role, which brought major social and economic transformations during the war. Nevertheless, these changes proved to be temporary, since, once the war ended, the social discourse on women's functions changed once again. As a large percentage of women workers were married, society attempted to reconstruct their responsibilities and place in American culture. Therefore, concepts such as family, marriage and domesticity were re-emphasized during the postwar period, and women's roles were confined again.

After the war, women were often displaced and forced out of their jobs, and popular culture helped to reconstruct the traditional duties for women in American society: the mother-at-home role in a highly restricted domestic sphere. This view can be exemplified by a comment made by Frederick C. Crawford, board chairman of the National Association of Manufacturers, in 1946: "From a humanitarian point of view, too many women should not stay in the labour force. The home is the basic American unit" (Krutnik 61). However, although this pre-war mentality re-appeared, and many women were ejected from the higher-paid posts, a great number of them still worked, taking jobs mainly in positions conventionally regarded to be women's fields.

Therefore, it can be said that the decade of the 1940s had profound implications for women, and that both men and women gained new perspectives as to the capabilities of the latter in the communal sectors. These new opportunities made women aware of the fact that their place should not be limited to the home and family spaces, so they started to seek recognition outside the domestic sphere.

Overall, in the decade of the forties, American society was marked by rapid transformations at different levels. In general, for the United States this was an optimistic era, in which economy and businesses expanded, as well as birth and employment rates. Moreover, leisure industries grew, consumption rapidly developed, and suburban America appeared. On the other hand, women's role radically changed throughout this period due to the shifting social conditions. During the war years women were displaced from their traditional domestic sphere due to the increasing need for women workers in factories. However, the postwar patriarchal mentality with regards to women would reappear and society will dictate that home is women's natural realm. Nevertheless, from this period onwards, women would acquire new attitudes that will challenge their imposed status in society.

2. FILM NOIR: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

As a consequence of the economic boom, there was a revival in the world of entertainment. Cultural forms such as cinema, radio or TV would live a period of apogee and leisure facilities would multiply during the 1940s. For instance, a huge number of Americans went to the movies –more than 90 million people every week– (Goldberg 25).

Moreover, as Biesen states, cinema practices were to be influenced during the wartime period due to the transformations in American culture and society:

World War II's influence on America was far reaching and multifaceted- culturally, politically, ideologically, economically, socially, industrially, technologically, and aesthetically. The global conflict and military mobilization in the United States affected myriad wartime considerations and Hollywood filmmaking practices. (5)

Particularly, *film noir* would be affected by the socio-cultural contexts in the United States in different ways. The style, the lighting techniques, the story lines, and the subjects of the movies will all be shaped by these circumstances. Specifically, as this study will reveal, the female characters in *film noir* will be central figures for the exploration of social issues regarding American women in the forties. Women characters will address the social shifts that took place during this period, and that affected the traditional constructions of gender roles and challenged the conventional place for women in society. Therefore, *noir* women's attitudes will serve to put forward fundamental questions about American society of the forties with regards to women.

2.1. Definition and origins

Film noir is said to have begun during World War II, with films such as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *I Wake Up Screaming* (1941) or *The Big Shot* (1942).

The genre flourished in the last stages of the war and immediately after it had ended, with *Laura* (1944) and *Double Indemnity* (1944). However, the period of apogee of *film noir* was to arrive in the second half of the 1940s, during the postwar years, with titles such as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), *The Killers* (1946), *Gilda* (1946), *Out of the Past* (1947), or *The Lady From Shanghai* (1947).

The origins of *film noir* can be traced back to the decade of the 1930s. Their immediate sources can be found both in literature, with the hard-boiled detective novels, and in cinema, with German Expressionism: “Like the German expatriates, the hard-boiled writers had a style made to order for the film noir; and in turn they influenced noir screenwriting as much as the Germans influenced noir cinematography” (Schrader qtd. in Krutnik 33). Most of the films are adaptations of American hard-boiled fiction – twenty per cent of the *noir* thrillers produced between 1941 and 1948, according to David Bordwell (Krutnik, 34)–. To cite some of them, *The Maltese Falcon*, for instance, was previously a novel written by Dashiell Hammett in 1930. The same happens with other titles such as *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, both based on 1943’s James M. Cain’s novels of the same names.

The key stylistic antecedent of *film noir* is found in German Expressionism. It is important to highlight that most of the directors of *noirs* were German immigrants: Billy Wilder (*Double Indemnity*), Otto Preminger (*Laura*), or Fritz Lang (*The Woman in the Window*). All of these filmmakers will be influenced by the expressive visual elements of German expressionist cinema of the 1920s and 1930s.

The term *film noir* was first coined by French film critic Nino Frank at the end of the 1940s, when, by the end of World War II, five Hollywood films –*The Woman in the Window*, *Laura*, *Phantom Lady*, *Double Indemnity*, and *Murder my Sweet*– were released in Paris (Leitch 126; Krutnik 15).

Most critics (Coursodon; Naremore, *More Than Night*; Naremore, “El Cine Negro”; Ryan and Kellner; Sklar) often provide a description of the key visual and narrative

traits that the term *noir* –or “dark”– entails. Stylistically, *film noir* is characterized by a series of visual and lighting techniques, such as low-key photography, high-contrast lighting, chiaroscuro, oblique camera angles, and a gloomy atmosphere. Connected with this, the settings of the films are infused in darkness: night scenes –usually images of dark urban streets–, rainy and foggy shots, nightclubs or diners, wharfs, and tunnels.

As for the narrative content of these films, *film noirs*' plots carry certain gloom through the portrayal of a cynical and pessimistic perspective of the human condition. At its thematic level, this idea is visible through the representation of the films' characters. As Coursodon and Leitch argue, these films lack a hero, and often portray solitary male characters powerless drifters, weak and impotent anti-heroes. The real heroines, however, are considered to be the female characters, salient *noir* figures often described as manipulative, dangerous, and attractive, who seduce men into committing crimes. As Ryan and Kellner put it, “these films frequently feature detectives who operate on the edge of the law as hard-bitten loners only marginally able to relate to women (who are frequently the source of evil)” (83).

2.2. Film noir in context

In order to explore the factors that contributed to the appearance of *film noir* in a specific time period –the 1940s and 1950s– and place –the United States– the historical and socio-cultural contexts need to be taken into account.

From the very start of the decade, in 1941, the political and historical were connected to *film noir*, since, as Borde and Chaumeton (30) write, this year was key for both American history –with the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor – and Hollywood –with the release of *The Maltese Falcon*–.

Consequently, *film noir's* historical background is an important factor that helps us understand the reasons why this cinematic genre emerged. International convulsions played an essential role in determining the main aspects of this new corpus of films.

Moreover, the American intervention in World War II and the later formation of alliances will result in the US becoming economically prosperous. As a consequence, Hollywood became one of the most important cultural centers and the primary cultural and artistic medium to faithfully represent the newly born nation.

The conflicts that arose during this period as well as their consequences will be portrayed in *film noir* narrative and stylistic aspects. Most critics acknowledge that *noir* subjects and sensibility sustain the general mood of anxiety and chaos that appeared in post-war America. For Rich, this is visible in the dark urban atmosphere portrayed in *film noir* that depicts the wicked and corrupted American city. The evidence shows that the dark, hostile, gloomy and pessimistic aspects of *film noir* are, in fact, a clear representation of America's spirit in the 1940s. Similarly, those socio-cultural conditions will be reflected in *noir* characters and narrative plots. As Naremore puts it, these films are about vulnerable male characters stuck in the midst of a corrupted modern American society, where they meet "the others: sexually independent women, homosexuals, Asians, Latins, and black people" (*More Than Night* 220).

It can be argued that these "sexually independent women" that appear in *film noir* are a direct response to the nation-wide changing attitudes towards women's role and gender constructions. Changing roles of women in the US during the forties will cause the agitation of men, who will feel threaten by the new independent working woman. The war and post-war mentalities with regard to women in the US, together with the subsequent disorientation of society, led to the need of reaffirmation of gender aspects. *Film noir* will try to capture this reconstruction and re-evaluation through *noir* female characters.

Therefore, a huge number of circumstances and factors gave shape and influenced *film noir*. In a nation that had undergone strong changes –social, political, economic, and cultural– the film industry felt the need to represent this new world in specific and distinguishable ways: through the general atmosphere of the films, the lighting techniques, and the portrayal of its subjects.

3. WOMEN IN FILM NOIR: AGAINST A PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

The female character in *film noir* is one of the narrative elements all scholars and critics mention as part of the defining components of this cinematic genre. For this reason, a fundamental part of the study and exploration of *noir* films must contemplate the gender issue and the significance of the portrayal of the feminine characters. It can be argued that these films are women-centered in that they depict a female heroine at the core of their narratives. In this way, titles such as *Double Indemnity*, *Out of the Past*, *Gilda*, *Laura*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* or *The Lady from Shanghai* are considered to be instances of complex examinations of the representation of women.

The socio-cultural climate in the 1940s that affected women's lives would have an impact in the portrayal of women in *film noir*. For this, it is important to explore the ways *film noir*'s representation of women engages with and is determined by the profound shifts in society's values and beliefs.

As aforementioned, women's situation changed drastically when they were introduced in the labor market during World War II. As a consequence, family relations were profoundly affected. During the wartime years, the divorce rate increased and family settings were scarce (Boyer et. al. 732). These circumstances would also have an impact on women's attitudes and traditional assumptions on gender roles and women's place in society. Consequently, this period of American history is a great site for the exploration of the shifting attitudes towards the place of women in society. As Place suggests, "nothing –especially woman– is stable" (41).

The shifting cultural identities for women in the forties will be reflected in *film noir*'s female roles. Therefore, the representation of women in *film noir* can be located in and engages with American history and culture.

Film noir articulates America's concerns represented by women who seek independence and definition outside the patriarchal social space. For this, *noir* women challenge the traditional constructions of women in the 1940s. The thematic and narrative characteristics of the female roles in *film noir* reveal the non-traditional attitudes that these convey. The female protagonists represent powerful, strong, and sexual women, whose ultimate goal is to achieve self-determination and independence. Although they are part of a patriarchal society with misogynist attitudes towards them, they embody the type of women that emerged out of the social climate of the war years, a woman who saw her capabilities outside the domestic space and her limited roles of being a mother and a wife:

These economic changes forced certain changes in the traditional organization of the family; and the underlying sense of horror and uncertainty in film noir may be seen, in part, as an indirect response to this forcible assault on traditional family structures and the traditional and conservative values which they embodied. (Harvey 38)

One of the defining features in the depiction of women in *film noir* is, according to Harvey, the presentation of the institution of the family (23). As family and marriage are the grounds where the constructions of gender and gender roles are formulated, in order to analyze the depiction of women in *film noir*, these must be the first sites of exploration. The representation of family relations is significant since it constitutes the dismissal of the long-established roles for women as mothers and wives, thus breaking with the expectations in a dominant patriarchal society. *Noir* acts as an attack on the traditional views on marriage and domesticity by portraying non-conventional family relations, images of childless couples, elderly husbands, and extra-matrimonial relationships. The institution of marriage is at odds with the desires of independence and sexual and economic freedom of the female heroines. *Noir* women reject domesticity, marriage and motherhood, the most critical symbols of the traditional patriarchal values that defined American society.

Various *film noirs* approach this by portraying family relationships as broken, or as non-existent, as in the case of *Out of the Past*; and marriage as unsatisfactory for women. *Film noir* depicts elderly husbands that cannot fulfill women's desires. In *Double Indemnity*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and *Out of the Past* the three female protagonists are married to elderly husbands that have them confined to the domestic sphere. For instance, Phyllis asserts that "he keeps me on a leash so tight I can't breathe". These marriages reflect, as Harvey states, "oppressive social relationships" (23), where women were certainly subordinate to men. In order to escape this situation, the only solution available for them is to get rid of those men, symbols of the patriarchal and misogynist American society. This way, *film noir*, through the act of killing the male figure, provides a direct attack on conventional family and domesticity values.

3.1. Phyllis Dietrichson: *Double Indemnity* (1944)

In *Double Indemnity*, Walter Neff, an insurance salesman, meets Phyllis Dietrichson as part of a routine house call. From the very first scene, when Neff sees Phyllis wearing only a white robe, he falls for her. While a romantic affair develops between them, Phyllis makes him know that she intends to kill her husband in order to get the accidental death claim. Although in the beginning Neff does not want to be involved in that crime, Phyllis persuades him to help her, and they finally work out a murder plan. Once the husband is killed, Neff will learn that Phyllis has never cared about him; she was seeing another man and intended to escape with him. When they meet again in the house, Phyllis shoots Neff in the shoulder, hurting him, and tells him she's been using him. However, Neff tells her "goodbye, baby" and shoots her to death when they are hugging for the last time.

Phyllis in *Double Indemnity* presents several characteristics that reveal herself to be a progressive women figure against male dominance. Firstly, she is highly sexualized; she always appears scantily dressed, showing that she is not ashamed of her own sexuality. Some visual clues, as her first appearance in the movie only wearing a white towel or her anklet, act as symbols of her sexual freedom.

WALTER. You'll be here too?

PHYLLIS. I guess so, I usually am.

WALTER. Same chair, same perfume, same anklet?

PHYLLIS. I wonder if I know what you mean.

WALTER. I wonder if you wonder.

Therefore, the first picture we get of her is that she is open, free of gender expectations and independent. Moreover, her sexuality helps Phyllis to get what she wants: to kill her husband and get money. By manipulating Walter through her sexuality, she intends to escape her oppressive marriage and to be economically independent. These two aspects reveal Phyllis as the strong and ambitious woman characteristic of *film noir*, who by exhibiting a “perfidious sensuality” intends to get away with her crime (Borde and Chaumeton 69), as Walter eventually realizes: “How could I have known that murder could sometimes smell like honeysuckle?.”

Clearly, the movie shows Phyllis as treacherous and criminal, but her main driving force is her desire to free herself from her husband. She certainly feels trapped in a marriage with no romantic love. Phyllis always appears alone in the colossal mansion, she feels ignored and mistreated by her husband, of whom she says: “He’s so mean to me. (...) He never lets me go anywhere. He keeps me shut up.”

Lastly, even though Phyllis’ desires are destroyed and she ends up dead, the film also punishes Walter, who fails to obtain the permanent satisfaction –sexual and economic– he was seeking: “Yes, I killed him. I killed him for money -and a woman- and I didn't get the money and I didn't get the woman. Pretty, isn't it?”

Ultimately, what remains is the power Phyllis exhibits by her ability to reject the dominant ideology that regards marriage and women's dependence to their husbands as imperative. The theme and portrayals of gender and sexuality within the film suggest recognition of marriage as simply a way to maintain the status quo of femininity being equated with motherhood and masculinity being equated with patriarchy.

3.2. Cora Smith: *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946)

The Postman Always Rings Twice presents a drifter, named Frank, who starts working at a diner owned by Nick and his young wife Cora. Soon after they met, Cora and Frank start a romantic affair behind Nick's back. As seen in *Double Indemnity*, the woman character uses her sexual attributes in order to manipulate her lover into committing a crime. Frank Chambers feels trapped by Cora's sexual hold over him: "She had me hooked, and she knew it". Although Nick's assassination goes unpunished, sometime afterwards, Cora dies in a car accident. Though innocent this time, Frank is accused of having murdered Nick and condemned to the electric chair.

Cora is a strong female figure who desires independence and an active role in her marriage. Moreover, she also seeks a place outside the domestic home by portraying an economically ambitious woman. When she becomes involved in a romantic affair with Frank, she reveals her dream of being the only owner of the diner. Nonetheless, as Cora says, if she divorces Nick "he'll keep the Twin Oaks and everything." Thus, the only solution for her "to make something of this place" is to murder Nick with the help of Frank:

CORA. Listen to me, Frank. I'm not what you think I am. I want to keep this place and work hard and be something, that's all.

FRANK. But they'd hang you for a thing like that.

CORA. Oh, but not if we do it right and you're smart Frank. You'll think of a way. Plenty of men have.

FRANK. He never did anything to me.

CORA. But darling, can't you see how happy you and I would be together here, without him?

FRANK. Do you love me, Cora?

CORA. That's why you've got to help me. It's because I do love you.

However, in this case, Cora does not want to kill her lover as well, but to begin a relationship with him. She also proves to be even more ambitious than Phyllis since she wants a business of her own and having his partner work hard there.

FRANK. Cora, Cora, look. Maybe, maybe you could sell the place and we can go away somewhere and start fresh, where nobody knows us.

CORA: Oh no! You've been trying to make a tramp out of me ever since you've known me. But you're not going to do it. I stay here.

FRANK. All right. I'm gonna stay too.

CORA. Well, let me tell you something. If you do stay, there's gonna be a lot of hard work done around here because I've got ideas for this place. I'm gonna fix up a nice spot out there under the trees and then I'm gonna get a license to sell beer...

FRANK. You're in the hamburger business...

CORA. Can't you get it through your head that I'm gonna amount to something? So, if you want to keep your job, you'll have this place cleaned up and open for business tomorrow morning at seven.

FRANK. OK. OK, Mrs Smith.

CORA. That expresses it perfectly.

Cora Smith, in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, illustrates a courageous and ambitious woman who wishes to run away from her constraints and be economically independent. She is married to an older man who treats her as her servant: she washes

the dishes and serves the food and even dances for him whenever he asks her to. Moreover, she shows her desire for independence when Nick tells her he is selling the place without consulting her:

NICK. [about his plan to sell Twin Oaks and move to Canada to take care of his sister]

My mind's made up.

CORA. So, you've given it a great deal of thought, your mind's made up? Without even talking it over with me, your mind's made up. Well, mine isn't!

In this sense, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* addresses concerns regarding the place and roles of women during the forties by portraying a woman, Cora, who is determined to succeed economically and socially outside the private sphere. Cora aspires to eliminate an aging husband, a symbol of the patriarchal society, and earn some money. Not only has she attacked directly the institution of marriage, but also of motherhood, by asserting that “he wants to have a baby... How'm I gonna do that, Frank?”

3.3. Kathie: *Out of the Past* (1947)

Jeff Bailey is the owner of a local gas station who lives a quiet life and has a girlfriend, Ann Miller. A man from his past passes through and tells Jeff that Whit Sterling, a gangster, has news for him. Then, in a flashback, Jeff confesses his past to Ann. He once worked as a private investigator and took on a job for Whit, whose girlfriend, Kathie, had run away with \$40,000 stolen from him after shooting him. Jeff was sent to track down Kathie, and finally found her in Mexico, where he fell in love with her. Eventually, they ran away to San Francisco and lived an underground life in a wood cabin. However, Kathie left Jeff behind when she shoots Jeff's old partner, who had tried to blackmail them.

Flashing forward, Jeff arrives at Whit's and sees Kathie is living with him again. Whit hires Jeff for another business. Nevertheless, he finds out that Whit and Kathie had been planning to frame him for a murder. Kathie has also told Whit that Jeff had killed his

partner. Later on, Jeff finds out that Kathie has also killed Whit. She tells Jeff that if they do not run away together she will testify that Jeff killed the three men. On the way to the airport the police block the road and Kathie realizes Jeff has double-crossed her. The police finally kill both Kathie and Jeff.

Kathie, the female heroine in *Out of the Past* also depicts a strong and desirable woman who seeks economic independence, and whose power derives from her sexuality. She is described as a sexual goddess by Jeff when he first meets her in a bar. He instantly felt attracted to her by “a kind of magic” when “she walked in out of the moonlight, smiling”.

Moreover, Kathie does not represent the prototypical woman of the forties, since she takes action to confront her obstacles. Kathie is driven by self-defense in a patriarchal world that treats her as an object. In particular, she fights against a repressive marriage to an older husband who objectifies her by comparing her to a racehorse:

JEFF. Anything happened to her?

WHIT. She ran out on me.

JOE. With 40,000 bucks.

WHIT. I want her back.

JEFF: Or the money?

WHIT: You know, I once spent \$40,000 on a horse that ran a bit less...

Like Phyllis and Cora, she is not willing to respect a world in which she is abused and reacts accordingly. Kathie seeks liberation from an older husband whom she asserts she “hated him”. Her character clearly depicts an anti-domestic woman struggling for freedom outside the private space of marriage and family: she does not want “anything of his or any part of him”.

Although she can be regarded as vicious and heartless, in fact, she wants to take control over her own life without being mistreated by Whit, and the only way she finds plausible to end with this patriarchal relationship is by killing him. She does that through the use of her alluring and mysterious sexuality:

JEFF. I never saw her in the daytime. We seemed to live by night. What was left of the day went away like a pack of cigarettes you smoked. I didn't know where she lived. I never followed her. All I ever had to go on was a place and time to see her again.

Hence, we see how these women feel trapped in abnormal family relations and marriages, and how their power to manipulate men derives from their sexuality. Their sexualized attitude, together with their desire to gain independence, has terrible consequences for the male figures as well as for themselves. Sexuality and crime, pleasure and death, are two elements that are closely linked in the portrayal of women in *film noir*. In a society dominated by a patriarchal mentality, as American society in the forties was, the only medium available for women to obtain freedom and independence was through their physical attributes. The figure of a strong, desirable, sexually free, and independence-seeking woman whose manipulative actions cause the male character to act corruptly or even cause him death is a main feature of *film noir*. She is defined by Luhr as “a character that seduces, exploits, and then destroys her sexual partners” (30). Therefore, *noir* women are more than ambitious; they behave against the social norms and manipulate, through their sexuality, the men with whom they have an affair.

Moreover, these women connect marriage with boredom and unhappiness; they seek power and independence outside family relations. For this, they make use of their eroticism and sexuality, which lead them to a fatal conclusion: they are either killed in a car accident, like Cora, shot by the police, like Kathie, or killed by their lovers, as Phyllis was. However, as Harvey points out, the men who fall for these women are also victims and meet a similar end.

In all these pictures, we see how the traditional valued American home and family life is non-existent. *Film noir* portrays childless couples, unhappy homes, sexually ignored wives, and the institution of marriage as an imprisonment for women.

The *noir* woman poses a threat to the men that get involved with her; she is regarded as dangerous, and that is the reason why she is punished in the end. As Tasker (353) claims, these women are "mysterious, ambiguous, often entrancing and at times duplicitous". It is easy to regard them as a type of monster: they manipulate their male victims into committing murder, which leads them into punishment or death. However, they are not much punished due to their criminal acts, but for their desire for independence and their resistance to their social duties as wives and mothers. In fact, those punishments display the unacceptable transgressions of gender roles they intend to make: "she is a threat to patriarchy and the ideal family it is sustained by" (Fairfax).

As seen in the analysis of these movies, *film noir* evidently articulates concerns that result meaningful for the exploration of women issues, such as sexuality, marriage and family. The rejection of family and domesticity by *noir* women, their desire to be economically independent, and to gain sexual freedom outside the traditional sphere, provide a progressive view of the roles and places conventionally attached to women. The anti-family and anti- domesticity attitude of *noir* women is a direct attack against the traditional place for women in the United States in the forties. In addition, *film noir* can be said to respond to the shifting socio-cultural situation for women, since, as Lingeman (201) asserts, *noir* women were the ambitious and independent women of the forties in the United States, "those Amazons unleashed by the war who worked at men's jobs, had sex with whomever they wanted, and rejected home and motherhood." Moreover, the absence of normal family settings and relations acts as a suggestion for the possibility for women to perform non-traditional social duties in the public sphere.

The films present such women as intelligent competitors with the men. They do not want a comfortable dependence upon the men but rather self-determination on their own terms. They seek what men seek- money, power, independence, social status. (Luhr 60)

There is an interesting displacement going on with the representation of these females in that they do not wish to fulfil the normal expectations for women as desiring to have children and building a family. Their attitude and nature promote a progressive, feminist view of women in society. They feel stuck in relationships without love with older husbands that have them constraint. In this light, marriage is seen as a loveless institution in which they become bored, unhappy and feel rejected. They are depicted as wanting to break off the roles assigned for them by society and not to play the role of devoted wife and mother. In fact, they exhibit an image of strength and power that challenges male dominance. As Westcombe argues, the noir woman “takes action to get what – and whom – she wants with a directness and aggression previously reserved for male players.”

Overall, *noir* women oppose the social prescriptions of female roles. They covet a life of their own, reject domesticity, and undermine patriarchal power, or at least try to (Lingeman 201). In this line, they confront the traditional roles of wives and mothers, for, as we have seen, marriage is confining and limiting whereas they seek independence. Although in the end they are punished and destroyed for their crimes, both metaphorically and literally, their transgressions prevail, being regarded as strong, powerful and self-determined women.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to examine the portrayal of women in American *film noir* of the 1940s. For this, it has initially addressed the historical and social backgrounds in order to offer an introduction of the surroundings of the development of *film noir*, and how they influenced and shaped this cinematic genre.

Particularly, I have sought to verify that *noir* women represent symbols of rejection of American patriarchal society. In order to reveal how these figures challenge the traditional place linked to women, my analysis has centred in the depiction of three social trademarks that constitute the basis of any patriarchal society: wifehood, family and motherhood.

In order to achieve this objective, the main resources used have been American *noir* productions of the forties. As the amount of *noir* titles from this period was particularly large, this study has focused on three pictures and their women characters that I considered fit my purpose: Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*, Cora Smith in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and Kathie Moffat in *Out of the Past*.

Firstly, through a socio-historical perspective, this study has shown the circumstances in which *film noir* flourished. This approach has confirmed that the decade of the 1940s was tremendously consequential for the United States. International conflicts, mainly World War II, were to radically alter American society and reorient the future of the nation at a global level. In fact, after this event, the United States would become the powerhouse of the world, which meant prosperity at a national and domestic level. In addition, by analyzing *film noir*'s historical and social influences, I have attempted to reveal how this cinematic genre addresses contemporary social and cultural concerns, since "one cannot know a culture without knowing its fiction" (Barnes-Smith 22). Although this is not a historical film genre as such, the historical background has a key role in *film noir*. As seen in this paper, these movies reveal the connection between cinema and history.

Purposefully, this study has emphasized the transformation found in the places attributed to women during and after the war, which led to a reconstruction of the traditional social roles attached to them. Due to the massive number of women entering the public sphere and taking men's jobs, the long-established constraints of women to the domestic sphere started to be questioned. The "new woman" who emerged out of the war can be considered the birth of an ongoing fight for women's equality in the United States. Wartime women will become aware of their potential outside the private sphere, and will start to reject the place assigned for them by a patriarchal society. The possibilities offered by the conflict enlightened them about their capabilities to achieve things on their own, as men did. This was illustrated in society by the lack of family structures, the boom of divorces and the disinterest for having children.

This study has offered clear evidence that *film noir* brings the female character forward, giving her a great deal of prominence in the stories. Through the analysis of *noir* women, it has been verified that *film noir* questions important social issues regarding women's roles and place. The three issues explored here – motherhood, family, and wifehood – have served to reveal that the women portrayed in the films defy the male-dominated American society of the forties. They have proved to be symbols of contempt towards male's authority, reflecting the attitudes starting to surface in contemporary American women. *Noir* women had a sense of potential; they strived for independence, and pursued their own goals refusing their husbands or lovers' consent. The women analyzed in this paper opposed the standard female roles as stay-at-home mothers and wives by her reluctance to have babies and wanting to break the chains of their marriages. The family structure seen in these films is abnormal, as the husbands are old men who are incapable of having any child with their young wives.

Apart from representing childless couples, *film noir* depicts marriage as confining for women. *Film noir* illustrates this by presenting women who revolt against their husbands by planning how to get rid of them through murder. It is evident that this

attack on the male figure symbolizes their attempt to break the chains of marriage and consequently of the society they lived in.

Finally, the analysis of women in *film noir* productions reveals they will gain a prevalence never attained before in the history of American cinema. As Luhr states, this is the first time in which we see independent and strong women depicted by American films (60). This way, it has been confirmed that female figures in this cinematic genre are crucial for the plot. Moreover, although their ultimate goals are not achieved and they are destroyed, these women are “active, not static symbols, are intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive power, not weakness, from their sexuality” (Place 35).

Ultimately, the examination of women in *film noir* has taken an innovative approach and has demonstrated that cinema works are a significant historical source. The findings offered in this paper demonstrate that the three characters analyzed represent ambitious and independent women who seek to break off from a patriarchal society. This leads us to consider it relevant to further investigate the implications *noir* females have relating to matters on gender issues such as sexuality and gender roles associated with women in society throughout history.

APPENDICES

I. FACTSHEETS

Double Indemnity

<i>Director</i>	Billy Wilder
<i>Production</i>	Paramount Pictures
<i>Release year</i>	1944
<i>Running time</i>	107 minutes
<i>Screenplay</i>	Raymond Chandler
<i>Music</i>	Miklós Rózsa
<i>Cinematography</i>	John Seitz
<i>Cast</i>	Fred MacMurray, Barbara Stanwyck, Edward G. Robinson, Jean Heather

The Postman Always Rings Twice

<i>Director</i>	Tay Garnett
<i>Production</i>	Metro- Goldwyn- Mayer
<i>Release year</i>	1946
<i>Running time</i>	113 minutes
<i>Screenplay</i>	Harry Ruskin and Niven Busch
<i>Music</i>	George Bassman Erich Zeisl
<i>Cinematography</i>	Sidney Wgner
<i>Cast</i>	Lana Turner, John Garfield, Cecil Kellaway

Out of the Past

<i>Director</i>	Jacques Tourneur
<i>Production</i>	RKO Radio Pictures
<i>Release year</i>	1947
<i>Running time</i>	97 minutes
<i>Screenplay</i>	Geoffrey Homes (Daniel Mainwaring) James M. Cain
<i>Music</i>	Roy Webb
<i>Cinematography</i>	Nicholas Musuraca
<i>Cast</i>	Robert Mitchum, Jane Greer, Kirk Douglas

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