

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Female Subjectivity, Film Form, and Weimar Aesthetics: The Noir Films of Robert Siodmak

by

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## Abstract

This thesis concerns the way complex female perspectives are realized through the 1940s *noir* films of director Robert Siodmak, a factor that has been largely overseen in existing literature on his work. My thesis analyzes the presentation of female characters in *Phantom Lady*, *The Spiral Staircase*, and *The Killers*, reading them as a re-articulation of the Weimar New Woman through the vernacular of Hollywood cinema. These films provide a representation of female subjectivity that is intrinsically connected to film as a medium, as they deploy specific cinematic techniques and artistic influences to communicate a female viewpoint. I argue Siodmak's iterations of German Expressionist aesthetics gives way to a feminized reading of this style, communicating the inner, subjective experience of a female character in a visual manner.

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## Introduction

The central aim of this project is to understand how female characters are articulated cinematically in *film noir* and how these characters can be read as powerful expressions of female subjectivity. Two key themes will be central to this thesis: the representations of complex, multidimensional female characters, and the articulation of a subjective female viewpoint through expressionist *mise en scene*. These traits are recurring features in the work of director Robert Siodmak, whose films will be the subject of analysis for this project. My interpretation will be concerned with recognizing historical contexts and aesthetic principles that govern their expression, synthesizing these perspectives into an analysis focused on the female subject within Siodmak's work. In addition, I will suggest women in *noir*, and Siodmak's films, echo the cultural ideal of the Weimar New Woman, by means of Hollywood cinema.

Through a close analysis of three *noir* films, I will suggest that Robert Siodmak utilizes an expressionist visual style to convey female subjectivity. Through specific cinematic techniques, Siodmak creates a conceptual space aligned with a multifaceted female subject. In this space, ideas related to the female experience of modernity are ignited. Tracing the impulse of early 20<sup>th</sup> century German Expressionist art through 1920s German cinema, towards 1940s American *noir* cinema, the frantic, externalized representation of a subjective female is illuminated. Siodmak's structural emphasis on female subjectivity can be demonstrated through several recurring traits that my analysis will highlight: expressionist aesthetics, the narrative devices of flashbacks or dream sequences, departures of female protagonists from conventional stereotypes, and the visual motifs of staircases and mirrors, in addition to other elements specific to each film.

Paying attention to the way that these texts highlight female subjectivity and present complex female characters has a significance that goes beyond an analysis and understanding of Robert Siodmak's films. This thesis will integrate Siodmak's articulations of female subjectivity into a historical trajectory of women in *film noir*. Moving away from a psychoanalytic investigation of the figure of the "femme fatale", I will focus on reading these characters in terms of the filmic structures and artistic influences that govern their construction. Reflecting on these films and their delineation of the female as worthy of complexity and identity illuminates their lasting significance in today's media landscape. The intersection of historical circumstance and critical analysis of film form provides a fresh interpretation of these films, refuting the notion that these women are static products of the past. I hope to draw attention to the way that female characters are uniquely and sympathetically expressed in Siodmak's films, something that has been overlooked in most literature on his work.

### **Women and Noir**

At the end of World War II, an inventory of Hollywood films made their way to French cinemas, accumulated over the years that European markets were closed off to America. Seeing this group of films concurrently, French critics and film viewers observed a pervasive dark resonance, a stark difference in mood and outlook on American life. This group of films came to be known as *film noir*, a phrase deployed in 1946 by Nino Frank to describe the new type of dark psychological detective films that Hollywood was producing.<sup>1</sup> Some of the films that these French critics were reacting to included *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), *Double*

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<sup>1</sup> Nino Frank, "The Crime Adventure Story: A New Kind of Detective Film" in *Perspectives on Film Noir*, ed. R. Barton Palmer (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996), 23.

*Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *Murder, My Sweet* (Edward Dymtryk 1944), and *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944). In their essay “Toward a definition of *film noir*”, Borde and Chaumeton attempt to delineate a single theme that runs through these films and characterizes them, eventually determining “the moral ambivalence, criminal violence, and contradictory complexity of the situations and motives all combine to give the public a shared feeling of anguish or insecurity, which is the identifying sign of *film noir* at the time.”<sup>2</sup> As *noir* developed over the years, a combination of thematic/narrative conventions and a distinct visual style came to be associated with films in this category. *Noir* films often reflected variations of several historical influences: French intellectual theory, visuals of German Expressionism, narratives of hardboiled detective fiction, anxieties of a post-World War II society, disillusionment with American ideals, existentialist philosophy, and tones of pessimism and paranoia. Writing in 1972, Paul Schrader noted that *noir* underwent three broad phases: the studio wartime period (1941-1946), the post-war realist period (1945-1949), and the final self-aware phase of “psychotic action and suicidal impulse” (1949-1953).<sup>3</sup> James Naremore offers a condensed perspective on these revolving and variable influences that characterize *noir*, suggesting it is both a dynamic historical and contemporary category, defined by ever-changing ideas and approaches. Naremore writes, “it has less to do with a group of artifacts than with a discourse- a loose, evolving system of arguments and readings that helps to shape commercial strategies and aesthetic ideologies.”<sup>4</sup> Supporting Naremore’s assessment, this project will perform an analysis on female representation in

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<sup>2</sup> Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton. "Towards a Definition of Film Noir." *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 1999), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Schrader, “Notes on Film Noir” in *Film Noir Reader*

<sup>4</sup> James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008) 11.

Siodmak's films which is contextualized by the related discourses of art-historical and filmic contexts.

As *film noir* was evolving in Hollywood cinema, so too were the female characters that populated these films. *Noir* dislodged traditional American values, including those related to gender roles. In early *noir* films like *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, and *Murder, My Sweet*, the women were read as malicious and vengeful, calculating, and emotionally cold, despite the variations these characters contained. Jean Pierre Chartier condemned the morality of *noir* and the women in it, writing in 1946, "Even if [*Double Indemnity* and *Murder, My Sweet*] make room for the appearance of a young woman who shifts the hope for progress to the next generation, the female characters are particularly horrid."<sup>5</sup> The term "femme fatale," or fatal woman, came to encompass these connotations in *noir*, stemming from a history in art and literature that referred to a seductive figure who was often responsible for the downfall or death of the male protagonist. Borde and Chaumeton defined the femme fatale as "this new type of woman, manipulative and evasive, as hard bitten as her environment, ready to shake down or trade shots with anyone-and probably frigid- has put her mark on 'noir eroticism,' which may be at times nothing more than violence eroticized."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, *noir* provided several examples of women who fit the violent and manipulative femme fatale archetype, such as Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) in *Double Indemnity*, or Vera (Ann Savage) in *Detour* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945). But more often, *noir* provides us with women who are fiercely intelligent and aware of their circumstances, lacking characteristics that fully deserve the categorization of the femme

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<sup>5</sup> Jean Pierre Chartier, "The Americans Are Making Dark Films Too" in *Perspectives on Film Noir*, ed. R. Barton Palmer (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996), 25.

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, 22.

fatale, such as Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney) in *Laura*, or Debby Marsh (Gloria Grahame) in *The Big Heat* (Fritz Lang, 1953). In the 1970s and onward, new modes of *noir* criticism emerged, coinciding with feminist theory and psychoanalytic analysis in film. My intent is to point to scholars who fall between ridged interpretations, who see both progressive and problematic traits within the noir woman and attempt to read her in a more nuanced fashion. Contradictory traits exist within the female characters I discuss in Siodmak's work, a factor which initiates their complexity and subjectivity.

In her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey examines these two concepts and analyzes how they operate in film. Mulvey argues that patriarchal bias is transmitted through classical Hollywood cinema, positioning women as objects of the male gaze (both male protagonist and viewer). Adopting psychoanalytic terms, Mulvey views the process of identification and scopophilia (deriving pleasure from looking) as central components of creating these gendered structures of narrative cinema. Mulvey's analysis extends to film form. She understands cinema as an advanced representation system, one which uses images, narrative structure, and camera techniques to convey codes of power. In her analysis of the films of Alfred Hitchcock, Mulvey observes that the process of identification and the pleasure of voyeurism combine to situate the audience in exact cohesion with the male protagonists' perspective. This is especially relevant in *Vertigo* (1958), which Mulvey notes makes use of the subjective camera to highlight the "implications of the active/looking, passive/looked-at split in terms of sexual difference and the power of the male symbolic encapsulated in the hero."<sup>7</sup> Mulvey herself and critics like Tania Modleski later acknowledge the lack of attention to the female spectator and

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<sup>7</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema," in *Critical Visions in Film Theory*, ed. Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White and Meta Mazaj (Boston, New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011), 723.

protagonist, and the ways that female characters can be understood separate from a masculine mode.

Mulvey's work is particularly interesting when placed in comparison to the work of Mary Ann Doane. In her book, *Femme Fatales*, Doane theorizes that the femme fatale is a personification of the complicated relationship between the visible and the knowable. She discusses the "masquerade" of femininity, serving to align the female subject with "deception, secretiveness, a kind of anti-knowledge or, on the other hand, situate them as privileged conduits to a – necessarily complex and even devious- truth."<sup>8</sup> Here, Doane's work demonstrates that women in film are characterized by their appearance, and women in *noir* complicate straightforward interpretations due to their hidden knowledge. Overall, Doane's work is unconcerned with providing a specific theorization of women in *noir* and cinema more broadly, centred on psychoanalytic interpretations rather than focused historical contexts. Doane's work is useful for my project in the way that it highlights the importance of vision and seeing in terms of reading female characters. However, my work will build upon these notions concentrated on specific representations of female characters in Siodmak's films.

Mulvey and Doane are primarily concerned with the visual and how it is transformed into ideological meaning. Offering a similar but alternate perspective, Karen Hollinger interprets the femme fatale and her "femaleness" sonically instead of visually- through the male standard of the voiceover.<sup>9</sup> Hollinger's analysis of the voiceover addresses a central conflict in representations of women in *film noir*: the conflicting perspectives of the male voiceover

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<sup>8</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, and Psychoanalysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Hollinger, Karen. "Film Noir, Voice-Over and the Femme Fatale," in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1999), 245

narration and the characterization of the femme fatale. She observes that these perspectives are often at odds with each other. Instead of the voiceover functioning to unify the film with a central point of view (as it does in classical Hollywood filmmaking), this conflict fractures it. Hollinger's work is helpful for understanding the conflicting perspectives that *noir* ignites, something that is specifically useful for my analysis of *The Killers*. In this film, multiple narrators recount flashbacks to piece together a single story. Although these flashbacks do not contain first-person voiceovers in the way that Hollinger theorizes, her work can be appropriated to theorize the perspectives of the narrators. Due to their various perspectives, a fracturing takes place, and we are not aligned with a single character during the film. This quality, combined with the use of several female narrators, allows the film to be read in terms of a female perspective. While each of the female contributors' flashbacks focus on a male character, they are intrinsically connected to a female viewpoint, and thus related to a representation of female subjectivity.

Janey Place deploys visual analysis to identify two broad categories for women *in film noir*: on one hand the spider woman femme fatale, and on the other the soft nurturing woman. Place's interpretation of these figures is that these women do not overcome the obstacles of their constrained situations, but that they do represent active and powerful roles. Place defines the femme fatale by her power gained from sexuality, a factor that is signified through visual icons such as her body, her clothes, jewelry, and cigarettes.<sup>10</sup> The power of the femme fatale is augmented by formal aspects including composition and lighting, she is the center of the frame and the focus of attention. Place conversely sees these powerful women as being confined

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<sup>10</sup> Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir" in *Women in film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 2008), 54.

narratively, subject to the restriction of the men who must control her sexuality or risk being destroyed by it. The opposite of the femme fatale is what Place calls the nurturing woman. This archetype is aligned with maternal features- compassion, understanding, unconditional love- but also aligned with passivity. While these two characterizations are accurate in describing a number of *noir* women whom Place identifies, the essay fails to consider the range of women who fall between these extremes. Place situates Phyllis (Barbara Stanwyck) in *Double Indemnity* in the same category as Laura (Gene Tierney) in *Laura*, two women in *noir* who possess very different traits and very different levels of agency with regards to their 'fatal woman' status. Identifying the women in *noir* that dispute Place's categorization is a focus of this paper. Place's essay is one of the earliest instances of the type of close visual analysis I will be using, incorporating frame captures as analytical support for the way women are presented visually.

Janey Place also pays attention to characterizations of men in *film noir*, and understands them as being inherently connected to representations of women. Both Place's femme fatale and nurturing woman are defined by their relationships to men and the way they articulate male fears. Men in *noir* are commonly presented in a way that undermines traditional concepts of masculinity: they are passive, confused, and impotent. As Place points out, these are all characteristics that make aggressive and smart women in *noir* even more threatening.<sup>11</sup> Despite my specific attention to the way Siodmak presents the subjective female, masculinity is consistently challenged in Siodmak's films, and it is useful at this point to acknowledge the ways this provides a counterpoint to representations of female characters. This topic in itself could fill its own thesis, but I will attempt to give a brief overview of the way masculinity is challenged in

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<sup>11</sup> Janey Place, 63.

the Siodmak films I am discussing. In these three films, it is evident that Siodmak's men adhere to a common and overarching theme in *film noir* of displaying the downfalls or instability of traditional masculinity. In the same ways that *noir* upsets patriarchal characterizations of women, it also dislodges existing gender roles for male characters as possessing traditional heroic traits. Krutnik theorizes that *noir* thrillers of the 1940s "betray a persistent problematizing of masculinity," which exists in various narratives and is constructed or resolved in multiple ways.<sup>12</sup>

Angela Martin points to the limiting effect that male-dominated theory has had on noir criticism, specifically in relation to the term *femme fatale*. Martin argues that this term is unfairly applied to women in *noir*, and male critics often miss the ways that female characters can inhabit other roles in a narrative. She points to *Gilda* and *Laura* as examples of films where richer interpretations of the female characters are possible, readings which consider the female spectator and the consequences of choices made by the characters within the narratives. Martin argues for a method of analysis which works to see female character as significant agents within the narratives. She writes, "Thus, the films which have central female characters (some of whom may be *femme fatales* but more are not) throw back implications for that model of *film noir* that emerged critically without taking into account the existence of both men and women as central characters."<sup>13</sup> My work seeks to expand on this issue raised by Martin, specifically rethinking the central female characters of Siodmak's work, but with the amendment of focused attention to visual construction. In her appendix of films with the central involvement of women (both as

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<sup>12</sup> Frank Krutnik. *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 86

<sup>13</sup> Martin, Angela, "'Gilda Didn't Do Any of Those Things You've Been Losing Sleep Over!': The Central Women of 40s Film Noirs" in *Women in film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 2008), 209.

divergent noir characters and with women as writers or producers), Martin lists several of Siodmak's films with the exception of *The Killers*. Martin's historical intervention is alerting us to the important women who contributed to noir behind the camera (producers, writers), whereas my own will situate the historical figures and movements that can be thought of as motivators of the central female characters in Siodmak's work.

Considering Siodmak's substantial contribution to *film noir*, it is surprising that there is not more literature focused on his films. A primary work related to my research is J.P. Telotte's piece, "Siodmak's Phantom Women and *Noir* Narrative," Telotte argues that women in Siodmak films are absent, either physically or in terms of a dual identity, a reflection of the gender realities of a World War II society. He argues that because men were absent from the household and women entered the workforce, traditional gender narratives of American life were disoriented, a factor which is exhibited by the absent and phantom characters in Siodmak's films.<sup>14</sup> While Telotte is accurate in describing the way these stories function to illuminate gender tensions and departures from mainstream representations, he fails to see the ways that women in these films are afforded agency in their own stories. In his analysis of *Phantom Lady*, Telotte posits that the film's central focus is the narrative of Scott Henderson (Alan Curtis), missing the fact that the majority of the film is aligned with the perspective of Carol Richman (Ella Raines). He goes on to say that Carol is a phantom as she vacates her identity at multiple points in the film, acting as other characters. This analysis fails to understand Carol as unique and complex, instead attempting to place her in pre-established categories. His analysis of *The Killers* acknowledges the crucial role of Kitty Collins in connecting the multiple fragmented

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<sup>14</sup> J.P. Telotte, "Siodmak's Phantom Women and Noir Narrative", *Film Criticism* 11, no. 3 (1987): 2.

flashbacks and being the central missing piece to Ole Anderson's story, reading this in a somewhat negative context. He writes, "We might simply attribute that absence to a repressive post-war society trying to restore the sexual status quo, thereby dictating a sublimation of drives and ambitions into a phantom aspect of the female character"<sup>15</sup> My analysis of Siodmak's films will depart from Telotte's in this sense, leaving behind the notion of the absent woman and instead emphasising the ways that Siodmak afforded these female characters a more comprehensively defined subjectivity.

### **Robert Siodmak**

Robert Siodmak began his career in Germany, working as an assistant screenwriter before becoming a director. During the early stages of his career he collaborated with many significant *noir* filmmakers such as Billy Wilder, Fritz Lang, and Edgar G. Ulmer, and worked at prominent German studios such as Nero-Film and UFA.<sup>16</sup> He left Germany for Paris during World War II, eventually emigrating to America in 1939. During this time Siodmak earned a contract at Universal Pictures and directed ten *noir* films, three of which will be key for my analysis: *Phantom Lady* (1944), *The Spiral Staircase* (1946), and *The Killers* (1946). In each of these three films, female subjectivity plays a major role. *Phantom Lady* centers on a female protagonist who takes on the typically masculine role of the detective, clearly mobilizing expressionist aesthetics in relation to American modernity. *The Spiral Staircase* positions its protagonist as a silent spectator, complicating readings of her as a femme fatale but maintaining her subjectivity. *The Killers* is notable for several flashback sequences told by female narrators, effectively compiling

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<sup>15</sup> Telotte, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Deborah Apli, *Robert Siodmak*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 1998), 17, 29.

multiple perspectives of a single female figure. Each of these films present female character which illustrate the complexity of women in *noir*, and the expressive ways that Siodmak manipulates film form to communicate them. Although Siodmak's work illuminates this concept in a unique and discernable way, using his films as a case study does not mean to suggest that female subjectivity in *noir* is a limited occurrence. Several other films were considered for this project, including *The Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1947), *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), and *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946). My interest in Siodmak's work stems from the way his film's privilege female representation that is not solely comprehended through a masculinized perspective, and the way this is communicated through film style. Siodmak is an exemplary figure for this analysis because his status as a German émigré transports Weimar sensibilities to a Hollywood context. Siodmak's expressionist visual style and reiterations of the figure of the Weimar New Woman enriches my discussion of female subjectivity, and offers a new angle from which to interpret *noir* women.

### **Contexts**

Siodmak's articulation of complex, subjective female characters can be understood within the context of precursors in German culture: the cultural ideal of the Weimar 'New Woman', the artistic movements of German Expressionism, the concept New Objectivity, and films of G.W. Pabst. Tied to a number of economic, social, and technologic factors, Weimar Germany saw the emergence of an increasingly independent and vocal female class, categorized as the New Woman. This figure was primarily identified by a substantial role in the workforce, the ability to engage in higher education, and increased political freedoms. In her piece "This is the New Woman" published in 1929, Elsa Herrmann identifies a central difference in woman in this

period in comparison to earlier generations, in the way she is “oriented exclusively toward the present.”<sup>17</sup> As per Herrmann, the New Woman departed from traditional female goals that were geared towards preparing for the future through motherhood. Atina Grossman summarizes this complex role in her writing on the Sex Reform movement, where she states “[the New Woman] was no longer either an angel in the home nor a working drudge, but a thoroughly rationalized female: the efficient juggler of the double burden.”<sup>18</sup> Importantly, these women represented a form of liberation that was still under some constraints. Like her counterparts in *film noir* decades later, the New Woman was subject to the pressures of her historical period. Some saw the New Woman as threatening to traditional family values, a factor which was subsequently tied to her sexuality and increased sexual freedom. The figure of the Weimar New Woman influenced émigré directors and made her way to Hollywood earlier than *noir*, in films such as F. W. Murnau’s *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927). In *Sunrise*, the Woman from the City (Margaret Livingston) embodies this growing fear of the independent and modernized New Woman, whose sexual freedom presents a direct affront to conventional family values. This aspect of threatening sexuality offers a foreshadowing of the women of *film noir*, specifically those categorized as the femme fatale, whose ownership and manipulation of sexuality is often viewed as a direct assault on conventional, maternal roles. The social figure of the New Woman in Weimar Germany offers an important blueprint for the type of female characters that appear in Siodmak’s films. Both the Weimar New Woman and the women of *noir* possess an increased freedom connected to social roles but are still subject to certain historical limitations. Both

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<sup>17</sup> Elsa Herrmann, “This is the New Woman” (Hellarau, Avalon Verlag, 1929)

<sup>18</sup> Atina Grossman, “Girlkultur or Thoroughly Rationalized Female: A New Woman in Weimar Germany?” in *Women in Culture and Politics: A Century of Change* ed. Judith Friedlander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 63.

figures inhabit a position that opens up a way of thinking about female figures as complex beings, containing oppositions, multiple contextual factors and historical contexts.

Stylistically, the high contrast light and darkness of German Expressionism is widely understood as a precursor to and major influence on American *film noir* cinema. Beginning as a movement in art and architecture in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, German Expressionism refers to a style which privileges exaggeration and representation of a subjective state. Peter Selz characterizes the shift away realistic representations in painting of this period as the most significant factor in the development of expressionist style, he writes “emphasis has shifted from the outer world of empirical experience to the inner world that a man can test only against himself.”<sup>19</sup> Expressionist art often deploys jagged lines, strong unrealistic colours, and clear brush strokes which draws attention to the medium while communicating the overwhelming emotional outpouring of the artist. Similar to *film noir*, expressionist art is more concerned with the communication of an experience or atmosphere than a coherent, realistic text. The portrayal of women in expressionist paintings is relevant in the works of artists such as Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler, both artists in this period who focused on portraiture of female subjects. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s Street Scene Series is especially pertinent to my project, as his focus on women intersects with themes and motifs of night, the city, danger, and anxiety- all elements which appear in *noir* cinema. Kirchner’s work in his Street Series features women prominently, frequently as prostitutes, navigating the potentially sinister streets of urban Berlin at night. Visually, Kirchner’s work is notable for it’s harsh contrasting lines and highly stylized perspective, both which function to communicate a feeling of unease. In his painting

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Selz, *German Expressionist Painting* (University of California Press, 1974), PDF e-book, 3.

“Street, Berlin” from 1913, each of these techniques are apparent. The traits of German Expressionism in this piece serve to reinforce the alienation of the modern city landscape, identifying the female subjects as both glamorous but distant from the male figures who do not engage with them directly. Each of the traits expressed in art of this period would later manifest in a similar fashion in German cinema of the 1920s.

With regards to cinema, German expressionist style typically involves the use of high contrast lighting, hyperbolic shadows, lack of realism, and distorted special effects or sets. These characteristics are comparable to traits of expressionist art: perspectives are forced through the use of contorted sets and landscapes, anti-realistic colours are realized through low-key film lighting, and exaggerated compositions, like the use of visible brush strokes, draws attention to the medium of cinema. Just as in expressionist art, an imperative feature of expressionism in cinema is its visual construction of subjectivity, placing the audience into a particular mindset and point of view. Referring to the expressionist movement in art, Hirsh observes, “The expressionist artist embraced *his* madness, converting inner demons into images of tumult and breakdown which radiated terminal bleakness”<sup>20</sup> (emphasis added). Significantly, all the fundamental texts in German expressionist cinema are focused on the male psyche. As Robert Siodmak was an émigré from Germany, he carried many of these expressionist sensibilities to his American work. Siodmak was in Berlin in 1925, a period when Weimar artists, filmmakers, and philosophers were contributing to a rich cultural scene. Siodmak’s background in German

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<sup>20</sup> Foster Hirsh, “The Cinematic Background: From Expressionism to Neo-Realism,” *Film Noir: The Dark Side of the Screen* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981), 54.

Expressionist aesthetics were influenced at this time by his interactions with Fritz Lang, and cinematographers Fritz Arno Wagner and Eugen Schüfftan.<sup>21</sup>

Arising as a reaction to the Expressionist movement was New Objectivity, or ‘Neue Sachlichkeit.’ Defined as a modern realist movement in 1920s Germany, it advocated detachment and dispassion. McCormick identifies the sensibility of New Objectivity as a period “in which the ‘isms’ - Expressionism, romantic anti-capitalism, revolutionary socialism, indeed any utopianism- seemed exhausted, and accommodation with capitalist modernization seemed the only pragmatic option.”<sup>22</sup> In cinema, this movement manifested in realist aesthetics, contemporary settings, and a focus on social issues. This movement is applicable to *film noir*, as it, combined with Expressionism, provides a historic parallel to the way that *noir* often synthesizes highly-stylized aesthetics with documentary realism. Robert Siodmak was a part of this movement through his collaboration with Edgar G. Ulmer and Billy Wilder on the film *Menschen am Sonntag (People on Sunday, 1929)*.

The silent films of G.W. Pabst serve as a significant predecessor to Siodmak, in the way that they frequently positioned female characters as the central characters in his films, placed an emphasis on representations of their psychological state, and blended elements of Expressionism and New Objectivity. As noted by Roberts, Pabst displayed women who were complex, “not necessarily liberated, but not meekly subservient to male fantasies.”<sup>23</sup> In this sense Pabst serves as an important predecessor to Siodmak. Pabst’s film *Pandora’s Box (1929)* offers an early prototype for the kind of female characters that would appear in Siodmak’s 1940s films. The

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<sup>21</sup> Alpi, 15.

<sup>22</sup> Richard W. McCormick,

<sup>23</sup> Ian Roberts, *German Expressionist Cinema: The World of Light and Shadow* (London and New York: Wallflower, 2008), 77.

character of Lulu (Louise Brooks) displays many traits of the New Woman offered by Atina Grossman,<sup>24</sup> including her short bob haircut, degree of sexual freedom, and rejection of a conventional maternal lifestyle. In addition, Herrmann's notion of the New Woman as a figure who is exclusively focused on the present is articulated through Lulu. In her commentary on the film, Mary Ann Doane supports this notion, indicating that Lulu "is a character for which the past has no weight."<sup>25</sup> My analysis of *Pandora's Box* observes that sexual difference is a principal component of the narrative, and



Figure 1: Lulu in *Pandora's Box*

which subsequently spills over into the film's aesthetic form. Female characters are shot and positioned differently than men, often displayed in tighter framings (close-ups) and with a soft diffused filter. The character of Lulu is most often presented with costumes or props that visually reiterates her social position and sexuality, such as the extravagant painting of herself which adorns her apartment, or the elaborate glittering dresses she wears during the theatrical production (Figure 1). German Expressionist style is seen in an anesthetized fashion in *Pandora's Box*, still present through harsh shadows and subtle geometric compositions. The film falls into the movement of New Objectivity through the way it handles social issues (modernity, commodity culture, and sexuality) in realist settings. Pabst also frequently deployed visual

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<sup>24</sup> Atina Grossman, "Girlkultur or Thoroughly Rationalized Female: A New Woman in Weimar Germany?" in *Women in Culture and Politics: A Century of Change* ed. Judith Friedlander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986)

<sup>25</sup> Mary Ann Doane, Criterion commentary track, *Pandora's Box* (1929)

motifs of reflection, including mirrors, and staircases that are similarly significant in Siodmak's work. *Pandora's Box* is an important predecessor to Siodmak's films, but it does not entirely display the traits that make Siodmak's films unique. For example, Pabst resists aligning the film with the subjective perspective of any single character (neither male or female).

It is useful to analyze Siodmak's films with the perspectives of these predecessors in mind because it ignites a feminized reverberation of German expressionism as well as a modernized, American representation of the New Woman. Considering the expressionist tendency in Siodmak's work in tandem with his portrayal of female complexity lights up a new reading of these films, which considers the internal conflict of a female character visually externalized through *mise en scène*. Siodmak mobilizes the aesthetic and thematic principles of expressionism, refitted to Hollywood cinema, in service of the female character. Here, expressionism functions as a mode of communicating female subjectivity, as opposed to the types of male-focused narratives that populated German cinema. In addition, the Weimar New Woman serves as a guiding model for the women of noir, visually conveyed by expressionism. My concern is not to conclusively argue that these influences directly impacted Siodmak on a personal artistic level, but rather to observe the ways they these influences appear in the texts themselves, and adopt the above contexts to rethink Siodmak's female characters.

### **Methodology**

I will investigate three key *noir* films with substantial female roles and narratives that highlight the agency and complexity of the female characters, considering both stylistic techniques of representation and reception within the perspective of film history. The three films I have chosen are *Phantom Lady*, *The Killers*, and *The Spiral Staircase*. My rationale for choosing these titles

from Siodmak's considerable *noir* filmography relates to several central criteria: perceptible visual iterations of German Expressionist aesthetics, strong examples of recurring motifs, substantial presentations of female characters which depart from one-dimensional readings, and an emphasis on film form to articulate these roles cinematically. The three films I have chosen are exemplary in each of these categories.

I will analyze the film's structure; how narrative conventions (flashbacks, voiceovers, typical archetypal character roles) are activated or dispelled. Film style will be central in order to sharpen an understanding of how women exist in *noir* cinema, which will involve observing formal elements such as lighting, framing, composition, sound. Reading these images also involves understanding past movements in cinema history, and how the films fit into or relate to other influences, such as German Expressionism. In order to position my own reading, this analysis will be supplemented with secondary materials (criticism and theory) to provide a comprehensive understanding of the way that these women are conceptualized in existing research. Several formal terms recur in my analysis, which I will briefly clarify in this section. The film frame refers to the distance to the subject of the shot (ex: close-up, medium close-up, medium shot, medium long shot, long shot). Camera movement refers to a dynamic repositioning of the film frame, within one shot with no cuts (ex: pan, tilt, tracking shot). Formal analysis of these films will highlight the way that women are articulated in a way that could not be solely communicated through writing or art, but exists as a function of the filmic medium. The formal and narrative presentation of these female characters relies on cinema-specific elements like movement, sound, duration, and editing.

Each chapter will feature a brief overview of the film, positioning it in a historical and production context, and outlining a summary of my analysis. Several categories appear in each

chapter: formal qualities, expressionist aesthetic, recurring motifs, and an analysis of the primary female character in each film (Carol in *Phantom Lady*, Helen in *The Spiral Staircase*, and Kitty in *The Killers*).

### Chapter One: *Phantom Lady*

Robert Siodmak's first American *film noir* was *Phantom Lady* in 1944. The film resulted from a partnership between Siodmak and Joan Harrison, one of the few female producers working in Hollywood during World War II. Harrison, a former screenwriter and assistant to Alfred Hitchcock, saw potential in a novel written by Cornell Woolrich and purchased the rights. Harrison's involvement is noted by Siodmak scholar Deborah Alpi as having a significant impact on the finished film, as her work with Hitchcock influenced the film's suspenseful scenes and her own experience as a successful woman in Hollywood shaped the characterization of Carol "Kansas" Richman (Ella Raines).<sup>26</sup> The film tells the story of a young secretary, Carol, who takes it upon herself to clear her boss Scott Henderson (Alan Curtis) of homicide charges. This task is troubled by the fact that Henderson's only alibi is a mysterious 'phantom' woman whom no one can remember seeing. Carol's investigation eventually leads to a discovery that all witnesses were paid to keep quiet by the true murderer- Scott's psychotic hand-obsessed former best friend who had an affair with his wife and killed her over jealousy, Jack Marlow (Franchot Tone).<sup>27</sup> Several formal aspects will be pertinent to my analysis of *Phantom Lady*, specifically

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<sup>26</sup> Alpi, 121-122.

<sup>27</sup> The association of hands and death/violence were a recurring motif in Siodmak's work. The French title for *Phantom Lady* was *The Hands That Kill*. Shots of hands would appear frequently in his later work, often accompanying scenes of death such as the first victim in *The Spiral Staircase* and Lund's murder in *The Killers*, or during scenes of violence such as Lund's hand injury. This motif can also be understood as a major connection to expressionism.

its visual ties to German Expressionism, camera movement, and framing. On a narrative level, I will also analyze Carol as a disturbance of conventional definitions of women in *noir*, as well as the increased presence of women as supporting characters in the film. *Phantom Lady* also contains the clearest instances of Siodmak's German influences, including its focus on modernity, as well as connections to the archetype of "The New Woman". Overall, this analysis will demonstrate the beginnings of several common themes in Siodmak's *noir* films: the complication of *noir* women, expressionist representations of inner states, and an intensified focus on women as subjective beings.

### German Expressionist Aesthetics

From a visual standpoint, *Phantom Lady* is Siodmak's most expressionist *noir* film. The tendency to represent internal states in a stylistic external way is mobilized and connected to the perspective of Carol. Siodmak situates her within a consistent visual pattern of exaggerated shadows, a visible



Figure 2: Expressionist Aesthetics in *Phantom Lady*

portrayal of the confusion and frustration of her investigation. As Carol is lost within the maze of her case, she is also trapped visually in harsh shadows created by staircases, window frames, and distorted lighting. The scenes where Carol visits Scott in prison are particularly evocative of this visual style (Figure 2). The formal elements which contribute to this aesthetic, including lighting,

composition, and setting, reflect several layers of narrative meaning. Carol is entangled within Scott's situation, she is physically inside a prison, and she is caught visually within the light and shadow of the film's mise en scene. Carol's confused inner state is reflected in a discernable, visual way provides a feminist reading of the film connected to German expressionism. In addition, the harsh contrast of light and darkness reinforces moral ambiguity, a common characteristic of *film noir*. This aesthetic feature is similar to German films which utilized "a contrast in light and darkness for the representation of the conflict between good and evil."<sup>28</sup> This is one example of how the film's visual style complements its thematic interests, a quality which is also evident in *Phantom Lady*'s representation of the *noir* city.

Echoing the work of such German Expressionist artists as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, the modernity of a city landscape plays a role in communicating anxiety and subsequently Carol's inner turmoil. During Carol's first investigation into a witness (the bartender), the urban environment is a central element in conveying the tense *noir* atmosphere. Carol's previously soft demeanor disappears as she returns night after night to the bar, sitting cold and motionless waiting for her witness to crack. One night she pursues him after closing, trailing him through dark and isolated streets. At a train station, the ridged lines created by train tracks and the platforms creates a sinister, pointed perspective. The process of navigating the tumultuous environment of the modern city is refracted visually through Siodmak's use of lighting and composition to suggest the subjective experience of Carol. In *Phantom Lady*, the urban environment, and Siodmak's visual presentation of it, provides the viewer with an externalization of Carol's inner state.

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<sup>28</sup> Guerin, 78

## Camera Movement and Framing

Camera movement and framing are significant formal techniques that inform the communication of female subjectivity in *Phantom Lady*. These two techniques are paired together in my analysis because they compliment each other in reinforcing Carol as a dominant agent within shots and scenes. Once Carol takes over as the primary character of the film (i.e. once Scott is arrested and Carol's independent investigation begins), the way she is framed situates her as the primary creator of action. The camera moves with her, and she is typically framed in medium to medium-long shots, which suggests her as the film's protagonist. Positioning Mulvey in this context is particularly useful for demonstrating how film technique reinforces Carol as an active agent. The connection Mulvey conceptualizes between the woman as an object to be looked at and cinematic modes of representation are disrupted in *Phantom Lady*, as Carol takes on a role of power (not an object for enjoyment of the male gaze) which is cemented in the way she controls the camera. When Carol enters a room, the camera follows her, and moves exactly with her movements. This phenomenon is most clearly elucidated in the sequence when Carol investigates the dressing room of performer Estela Monteiro (Aurora Miranda). The sequence begins with Carol opening the door, and proceeding to check the closet for evidence, as the camera anticipates her movement and follows her precisely. This technique not only positions Carol in an active role of power, but also draws attention to her subjective experience. As the camera moves with her in this sequence, our field of view is limited to her. Marlow enters the room and we are startled by his presence, just as Carol is, due to the camera's adherence to her perspective. There are brief instances in the film when the camera moves with male characters as well, functioning to associate her as being on the same level of power with her male counterparts. In terms of framing, Carol is frequently composed in the center of the frame, and

shot in medium to medium-long shots. The camera and framing do not provide us with sexualized close-ups of her body as Mulvey suggests, but considers her as a whole person, separate from fetishizing. There is one major scene where close-ups are deployed, which only functions to reinforce the film's rejection of depicting Carol as a passive object. In the scene where Carol attempts to seduce a witness (to be discussed further in the following section), Carol consciously acts to position herself to be observed by male gaze. We see a mobile close-up shot of her legs, which moves up to display her body as an object of desire from the male perspective of jazz drummer Cliff (Elisha Cook, Jr.). This scene stands apart from the way Carol is shot in the rest of the film, only serving to highlight its discordancy. Apart from this one conspicuous exception, camera movement and framing are used in the film to communicate Carol as having agency and dominance over the film's style and narrative.

### **Carol as Rupture of the Noir Woman**

The character of Carol provides a useful case study in Siodmak's *noir* filmography as she operates in a way that interrupts typical categorizations of *noir* women. Like many female characters in *film noir*, Carol contains contradictions. Janey Place theorizes the opposite of a femme fatale is the nurturing woman, a passive and understanding source of love and redemption for male characters.<sup>29</sup> It is true that Carol exemplifies some characteristics of the nurturing woman: for instance, she is compassionate and driven by her love for Scott Henderson.

However, Carol simultaneously demonstrates characteristics of the femme fatale, as she causes the deaths of two male characters (Cliff and Marlow), is fiercely driven to achieve her goals, and

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<sup>29</sup> Place, 60.

uses manipulation and sexuality to gain information from witnesses in the film. Carol also represents the clearest connection to the concept of the “New Woman”: she possesses a degree of financial and sexual freedom, and operates primarily in terms of the present. She is tied to ideals of femininity and modernity, existing in the film as an independent agent with a job (and her own secretary). It must be noted at this time that the film does not depart entirely from dominant patriarchal ideology, much like the archetype of the “New Woman” was similarly constrained by certain social values. As observed by Tony Williams, *Phantom Lady* is a subversion of gender norms that is still controlled by them to some degree; the film contains “a fissure, a gap in the ideology which permits the partial expression of the female voice.”<sup>30</sup> The film’s ending reinforces this restraint in terms of gender roles, as Carol agrees into the hegemonic ideal of marriage to Scott. The character of Carol in *Phantom Lady* provides a multidimensional representation of a contemporary woman, operating between the extremes of femme fatale and the nurturing woman, as well as containing aspects of both independence from and reliance on patriarchal ideals.

### **Recurring Visual Motifs: The Mirror**

An important visual feature in Siodmak’s *noir* films is that of the mirror, which serves as an important motif in each of the three films I am discussing. The mirror is not unique to Siodmak’s work, but rather becomes unique through the way he deploys it to different ends than it exists in other *noir* films. Janey Place characterises the pairing of women and mirrors in *noir* as a visual presentation of “self-absorbed narcissism” or alternately an indication of her duplicitous nature.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Tony Williams, “Phantom Lady, Cornell Woolrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic” in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 1999), 134.

<sup>31</sup> Place, 57-58.

Siodmak's use of the mirror refutes this reading, instead mirrors give way to moments of clarity, of self-realization, for female characters. Mirrors appear at crucial moments, providing a visual way for the female lead to understand herself, and actualize her situation, in non-verbal ways that the audience can also appreciate. In addition, the mirror has a special significance for understanding female subjectivity. Siodmak presents us with images of female characters viewing themselves, which is important because it is separate from the potentially sexualized gaze of other characters, and focuses specifically on how she relates to herself. A repositioning of the viewer occurs, as the spectator joins with the female character's perspective. In an important jazz club scene in *Phantom Lady* (to be discussed further in the following section), Carol interacts with



Figure 3: Carol engages with her reflection, *Phantom Lady*



Figure 4: Marlowe avoids his reflection, *Phantom Lady*

a mirror during a moment of heightened intensity, prompting her to address herself and the situation she has gotten into. She is not seen in the negative or malicious way that Place describes; in this case the mirror function to ignite a moment where Carol sees *herself*, not the seductive persona that she is inhabiting (Figure 3). As a point of contrast, there is a scene in the

film where a male character is seen in a mirror, which serves not to highlight his subjectivity, but to achieve the duplicitous reading set out by Place. During a scene where Jack Marlow talks with a detective, a dressing room mirror offers a visual double (Figure 4). At this point in the narrative, we are aware of his status as the killer, and his deceptive nature is refracted perceptibly through Siodmak's use of the mirror.

### **Scene Analysis: The Jazz Club**

One scene in the film is especially effective in demonstrating the way Carol exists between the extremes of the femme fatale and the nurturing woman, as well as highlighting expressionist style and the motif of the mirror. In the middle of the film, Carol masquerades as a seductress in order to gather information from jazz drummer Cliff. Special attention to this scene is required, as it exemplifies each of the stylistic traits discussed previously and provides a concise look into the ways that Carol is afforded agency and complexity. The sequence begins at the 40-minute mark, as Carol and Cliff descend a shadowy stairwell into the basement of a smoke-filled jazz club. Immediately, expressionist characteristics are evident: the geometric lines produced by light hitting the stairs, and the exaggerated perspective created by the flood of backlighting. Here the expressionist visuals convey her inner state of anxiety fueled by purpose, she is alone in an unfamiliar environment but driven by her quest for evidence. The sequence continues with claustrophobic close-ups of musicians, dizzying canted angles, and frantic editing.

Expressionism can also be applied to the scene's sonic form, as there is no dialogue, just loud fast-paced jazz music which supplements the experience and atmosphere of this overwhelming environment through sound. As the scene increases in its hysteria, Carol takes a moment to touch up her lipstick in a mirror. The mirror itself vibrates due to the loud jazz music, and the erratic

impulses of German Expressionist art are put into motion, given a kinetic, cinematic analogy. Carol observes herself in the mirror, and is snapped back into an understanding of the reality she inhabits (Figure 3). The scene continues as Carol returns to watch Cliff play the drums, initiating a fast-cut montage sequence of an increasingly intense interaction between the two. The shots become closer and closer, stressing Cliff's smiling but pained face as he completes a drum solo, intercut with Carol's enthusiastic encouragement. Many writers have noted the sexually-charged nature of this sequence, observing that the climactic conclusion of the drum solo functions as a metaphor and sex scene within the confines of the Hays Code. Critic Tom Flinn wrote of this sequence that "Siodmak gives full reign to his expressionistic propensities in a rhythmically cut riot of angles that "climaxes" in a drum solo that melds sex and music into a viable metaphor of tension and release."<sup>32</sup> The sexuality of this sequence again separates Carol from being read solely as Place's nurturing woman. Carol exists in a space between the extremes of the femme fatale and the nurturing woman: she possesses traits of both, establishing her as a complex and dynamic female character.

## Chapter Two: *The Spiral Staircase*

After *Phantom Lady*, Siodmak produced several other *noirs* within a short period of time including *Christmas Holiday* (1944) and *The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry* (1945). While Siodmak was on loan to RKO Pictures in 1946, he directed *The Spiral Staircase*. The film centers on a mute maid, Helen (Dorothy McGuire), who works in a New England household that

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<sup>32</sup> Tuska, J. *Dark Cinema: American Film Noir in Cultural Perspective* (Westport, Conn, Greenwood Press, 1984), 195.

is tormented by a serial killer who targets disabled women. The film blends elements of *noir*, melodrama, and horror, frequently casting suspicion on multiple characters throughout the narrative. The screenplay was based on Ethel Lina White's novel *Some Must Watch*, a title which already alludes to the voyeuristic proclivities of the film. In *The Spiral Staircase*, gaze becomes literal within the diegesis: the act of watching is incorporated into the narrative. This film offers an interesting case study for the purposes of examining female subjectivity in Siodmak's work, as it turns the focus from the female subject (as in protagonist or character) onto the female spectator. Writing on this film both during its initial release and in contemporary literature often characterize *The Spiral Staircase* by the way it deploys clichés of the horror genre (thunderstorms, creaking doors, eerie music), and paints the film as primarily as a genre film. The film is also often situated as a standard product of the studio system era, produced during a period when studios sought to capitalize on the trend of female gothic films such as *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940).<sup>33</sup> My analysis of the film will focus on the way it engages with the female spectator, both diegetically within the narrative of the film and in terms of reception. The concept of masculinity will be discussed, as it offers an interesting counterpoint to my focus on female subjectivity. Finally, two major motifs are present in the film: Siodmak's recurring motif of the mirror, as well as the feature of the staircase, an icon that has ties to Expressionism as well as other *noir* films.

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<sup>33</sup> Helen Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 47.

## **The Female Spectator**

*The Spiral Staircase*'s status as an entry in the genre of melodrama connects it expressly to a female audience, but the idea of a female spectator is also engaged by the film itself. The film begins with a scene that features an audience watching a silent film, D.W. Griffith's *The Sands of Dee* (1912). Like the courtroom in *Phantom Lady*, the audience is composed of a large number of female spectators. The camera emphasizes one in particular, the protagonist of *The Spiral Staircase*, Helen. Shots from the silent film are cut with shots of Helen's emotional reactions, drawing our attention to the way she uniquely engages with the film she is viewing. The silent film itself offers another level of metatextual commentary. Griffith's film is about a young woman, who after refusing one man's love for another, falls victim to the ocean tides and dies after being disowned by her father. This narrative, and its spotlight on death, romance, and a woman's decision, draws parallels to Helen's story in *The Spiral Staircase*. Based on the content of Griffith's short film and Helen's engaged reactions, a relationship between a female spectator (Helen) and a female subject can be understood, separate from notions of a masculinized gaze. As the audience watches the film, the camera is stationed on Helen, interconnecting our view and the film's diegesis.

## **Helen as a Silent Spectator**

The character of Helen offers an interesting example of a female lead, due to her psychological inability to speak, which means she exists for the majority of the film as passive, however, she possesses agency in other respects. This factor positions Helen as a spectator in her own life, as she is powerless to speak in dire situations and lacks the kind of agency that we saw with Carol in the *Phantom Lady*. However, this does not immediately denote her as a passive object of gaze,

as Siodmak's manipulates cinematic techniques to portray her subjectivity. Helen is an ideal example of a female character for my thesis, as she embodies both the complicatedness (containing both progressive and problematic qualities) and is presented in a way that highlights her subjectivity and position as a female spectator.

There are several instances in the film where Helen's 'disability' of not being able to speak is especially notable, and determines shots that situate her reactions as a female spectator as a major focus. During one sequence,

Dr. Parry (Kent Smith) learns of Helen's tragic past involving the death of her parents, and summarizes this story to her, effectively situating Helen as a passive spectator listening to her own narrative.

Helen's reactions in this sequence are framed with a close-up, filling the entire



Figure 5: Helen reacts to her own narrative, in *The Spiral Staircase*

screen, and fixing our view directly on with her emotional reactions (Figure 5). Her face becomes steadily more upset, her eyes well up with tears, and she collapses onto a nearby sofa. This shot mimics Helen's earlier reactions to the silent film, and she is equally as distanced from her past as she is from the events of the silent film she was viewing.

Mary Ann Doane observes a separation in melodrama films between ones which do not contain any specifically feminine-focused formal strategies (put simply, they are no different from films with male protagonists), and ones which mobilize cinematic structures to enhance

subjectivity (the voiceover, dreams, flashbacks, hallucinations).<sup>34</sup> While less overt than *Phantom Lady*, *The Spiral Staircase* still makes use of filmic structures to communicate Helen's subjectivity. Late in the film, Siodmak deploys a dream or fantasy sequence attributed to Helen. This dream is signified by a combination of visual techniques (a dissolve, a geometric pattern overlaid, a warping of the image) and a sonic cue that suggest a pausing of the narrative for a subjective interior thought. In this sequence, Helen imagines a future relationship and marriage with Dr. Parry after being kissed by him in the doorway. Even in Helen's idealized dream sequence, her inability to speak becomes a major hindrance, and turns her dream sequence into a nightmare when she cannot speak at her fictional wedding. The sequence ends with the same visual and sonic cues, and fades into a straight-on shot of Helen with a worried expression, echoing her earlier reaction to hearing her own story from Dr. Parry. Through Siodmak's use of the markers of a dream sequence, and this subsequent cut to a shot of Helen's reaction, she is again positioned as spectator in her own life. Helen's muteness is a result of a psychologic trauma in her childhood, and it is important to note the way she overcomes this in the film. There are several points in the narrative that Helen could use her voice to call for help, but she cannot even in times of dire need. It is only at the end of the film when she witnesses another traumatic event, the murder of the killer, Professor Warren (George Brent), that her ability to speak is triggered. Other characters do not force her recovery, but it occurs naturally in her own processing of events. The film's final words, and the first words spoken by Helen in the film, express this connection to identity and consciousness, as she speaks "It's I, Helen." Siodmak's use of cinematic techniques to relay the subjective experiences of Helen helps to categorize *The*

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<sup>34</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 34.

*Spiral Staircase* as a feminine-focused melodrama. The function of Helen's muteness adds to her complexity, and while she lacks the ability to speak for most of the film, she is nevertheless presented as a character who possesses agency and subjectivity.

## **Masculinity**

Although relevant in both *Phantom Lady* and *The Killers*, the topic of masculinity is directly addressed in the diegesis of *The Spiral Staircase*. The characters in *The Spiral Staircase* are aware of their own status than the male characters in Siodmak's other films, and sexual difference is a major preoccupation of the film's screenplay. In one scene between professor Warren and Steven Warren (Gordon Oliver), the brothers discuss their own failures to comply to their father's notions of masculine identity, saying "neither of us fitted his concept of what a real man should be, a gun-toting, hard-drinking, tough-living, god-fearing citizen."<sup>35</sup> Recalling an earlier-referenced piece on absent women, Telotte also addresses the way phantom men are represented in Siodmak's cinema. He observes that even though men are present in the narratives of films like *The Killers*, they reveal an elusive type of absence that undermines patriarchal order, acting as a reminder of how "tentative our formulations of self must be."<sup>36</sup> This notion of absence is particularly applicable to *Phantom Lady*, where Scott Henderson is absent for most of the film, and even during the final sequence where he proposes to Carol, he only exists as a Dictaphone recording. In *The Killers*, Ole 'the Swede' Anderson (Burt Lancaster) is developed in a more abstract way, through the flashbacks of other characters, still lacking the control and

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<sup>35</sup> *The Spiral Staircase* (Siodmak, 1946)

<sup>36</sup> Telotte, 10.

self-assuredness of stereotypical male representations. The problem of masculinity is resolved in various ways by Siodmak, and in each of the films I am discussing it is distinctly related to the female characters. Just as Siodmak presents interesting and unique portrayals of complex subjective women, and his formulations of masculinity present an equal counterpoint. Again, typical idealized versions of masculinity that characterize classical Hollywood cinema are ruptured, offering a complimentary position to presentation of the female characters.

### Recurring Motifs: The Mirror and The Staircase

One of the most significant motifs that surface in Siodmak's films is the mirror. In *Phantom Lady*, we observed it in the frenzied jazz club scene, where it was used to signify Carol in a moment of personal recognition, and it will reappear significantly in *The Killers*. In *The Spiral Staircase*, the mirror functions as a motif of deception, but not in the way that Place



Figure 6: False mirror shot from *The Spiral Staircase*

theorizes it in relation to the femme fatale. Instead, the mirror offers us a visual trick which complements the deceit of the film's murder mystery. Mirrors in the cavernous rooms of the manor and in hallways provide the illusion of a larger space. In addition, Siodmak utilizes the visual properties of the mirror's reflection in order to fool the audience, offering us images that are not what they appear. There is one specific shot which significantly demonstrates this point

(Figure 6), a shot which occurs multiple times in the film and in *The Killers*. The shot begins inconspicuously, showing Helen walking up a flight of stairs from a straightforward, high angle. As she approaches the landing of the staircase, the shot reveals itself to be a false perspective; it is actually a sideways shot created by a mirror. This is confirmed when Helen stops to fix her dress, seemingly looking directly into the camera. Siodmak was introduced to the technique that produces this type of distorted mirror shot early on in his career, when he worked with Eugen Schüfftan, a cameraman who designed unconventional shots for Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927).<sup>37</sup> This fact reinforces the expressionist quality of this shot, and connects Siodmak's work to his early German influences. The use of this shot reinforces the illusory quality that cinema can provide, and for the rest of the film prompts viewers to question the validity of what they are seeing. Like in other Siodmak films, the mirrors in *The Spiral Staircase* also serve to draw attention to the way women view themselves,

Connected to the mirror as a motif of reflection, the film uses a recurring extreme close-up shot of the killer's eye in which we see his victim reflected. This shot is interesting in terms of the way it frames the act of seeing. We are presented with an image simultaneously of a person watching and being watched, in a way that reveals the predatory nature of watching but does not align us with the direct perspective of the killer. We see the



Figure 7: Shot of the killer's eye with the victim reflected, in *The Spiral Staircase*

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<sup>37</sup> Alpi, 19.

victim in the same way that the killer does, but physically, the shot does not originate from his eyes. The reflected images of the women are warped, in order to replicate how they would be seen reflected in the curvature of a person's eye (Figure 7). In these shots, the focus of the gaze is indeed fetishized, but in a manner that directs attention to the harmfulness of this act. These shots represent a formal technique that deliberately refutes the connection of the audience with the killer. In order to clarify this point further, consider the effect these images would create if they were shot a different way. For instance, if Siodmak had provided us with a more conventional shot-reverse-shot of the killer and his victim, it would have effectively aligned us with the perspective and subjectivity of the killer. Instead these shots function to simultaneously visualize and criticize the male gaze.

The motif of the staircase is relevant not only to a textual analysis of the film itself, but also to the way the film relates to the domestic sphere in melodrama, other titles in the *noir* cycle, and the aesthetics of German Expressionism. Siodmak's focus on the staircase is overt, foregrounded by from the film's title and opening sequence (in which credits are placed overtop an image of a ghostly figure cautiously descending a curved set of stairs). At an aesthetic level, the visual form of a staircase lends itself well to the chiaroscuro lighting associated with *film noir*, but the staircase has deeper implications for the thematic and aesthetic concerns of the film. First, the domestic setting of the household is a primary and significant location in melodrama, and the staircase features prominently in discussions of the locations of gaze. Doane summarizes the staircase as a location which "possesses a certain semantic privilege in relation to the woman as the object of the gaze, which articulates the connection between the familiar and the

unfamiliar, or between neurosis and psychosis.”<sup>38</sup> The motif of the staircase makes an consistent appearances in *film noir*, particularly in the *noir* work of Billy Wilder. Like Siodmak, Wilder began as a filmmaker in Germany, and brought his expressionist sensibilities to his American work. In *Double Indemnity* (1944), Phillis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) is introduced standing seductively at the top of a staircase, wearing nothing but a towel. Later in the film, the camera follows her descent of the same staircase, in a close-up tracking shot of her legs. In this instance, Doane’s theorization as the staircase as a site of objectifying gaze is applicable. In Wilder’s later *noir* *Sunset Blvd* (1950), the staircase is featured prominently at the end of the film. Aging and delusional film star Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) descends into a mob of photographers and journalists whom she believes to be reporting on her new film role, but who are in reality reporting the murder that she committed. In this case, Clute and Edwards understand the staircase as a signifier of Norma’s “descent into madness.”<sup>39</sup> Visually, the geometric pattern produced by the image of a staircase and the impression of movement it creates leads back to German Expressionism. In her study of staircases in German cinema, Eisner positions the staircase as a static representation of movement, as an item that helps to “build or create film space”, and as an object to denote psychological inferiority and superiority.<sup>40</sup> The motif of the staircase in Siodmak’s film condenses each of these interpretations, serving to visually reiterate female subjectivity. The motif of the staircase in this film serves to reinforce female subjectivity through the way it visually associated the location of the home with female

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<sup>38</sup> Doane, 135.

<sup>39</sup> Shannon Clute and Richard L. Edwards. *The Maltese Touch of Evil: Film Noir and Potential Criticism* (UPNE, 2011) 245.

<sup>40</sup> Lotte H. Eisner. *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and Influence of Max Reinhardt* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 122.

power and the female mind, as demonstrated by the film's final scene in which the killer is defeated on a staircase by Helen and Mrs. Warren (Ethel Barrymore).

### Chapter Three: *The Killers*

Following *Phantom Lady* and *The Spiral Staircase*, Siodmak returned to Universal to produce his most well-known film and the one that would earn him his only Academy Award nomination for directing: *The Killers*. Like *Phantom Lady* and *The Spiral Staircase*, *The Killers* is an adaptation of a pre-existing work, in this case it is a short story by Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway's material only accounts for the first 12 minutes of the film, and the rest is composed of flashbacks which attempt to fill in the backstory of Hemingway's work. *The Killers* tells the story of an insurance investigation which attempts to piece together the life of Ole "the Swede" Anderson (Burt Lancaster), who is murdered by two hitmen. The investigative structure that the film utilizes highlights something significant, a central character who is at the heart of Ole's story, "a revelation that involves the truth not so much about masculinity but rather about femininity."<sup>41</sup> This character is Kitty Collins (Ava Gardner). Kitty is perhaps the closest of Siodmak's female characters to Place's definition of femme fatale. However, my analysis will refrain from placing her solely into that category through an analysis of the fragmentary way she is composed through flashbacks, and her close connection with the themes of death and fate. In *The Killers*, Siodmak's representation of female subjectivity moves away from the more visual incarnations of *Phantom Lady* and *The Spiral Staircase*, evolving into a phenomenon that is

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<sup>41</sup> Hollinger, 244.

conveyed through the film's narrative structure. Siodmak's expressionist influences are toned down into a more realist aesthetic, but nevertheless one which imparts the film's atmosphere of dread and thematic current of fate.

### **Flashback Narration and the Female Perspective**

The narrative structure of *The Killers* is often compared to *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), using a range of subjective memories to characterize and decode the film's central mystery. In the film, Siodmak's representation of female subjectivity becomes literal. It is no longer a stylistic externalization of the female protagonist's interior state, but now built into the film's very structure, a visualization of memory that is provided and re-enacted for us via the cinematic medium. Maureen Turim neatly summarizes this position on flashbacks in *noir* cinema, writing "the flashback introduces a reversed temporal order that creates the past as the site of the fiction, as a terrain, a privileged subjective realm of the imaginary."<sup>42</sup> Two such flashbacks are present in *The Killers*, both which require a fresh reading with a consideration of their female perspective. There is a third flashback from a female perspective, where Kitty Collin's own flashback involves herself. This will be discussed in the following section focused on Kitty.

The most significant flashback in the film from a female perspective is from Lily, Ole's former girlfriend who recounts the night he met Kitty Collins at a party. As mentioned earlier, many accounts of this scene focus on the bewitching effect that Kitty had on Ole, overlooking the implications the scene has when read with Lily's subjectivity in mind. Similar to the opening

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<sup>42</sup> Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory & History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 170.

scene of *Phantom Lady*, Lily's flashback begins with a shot of the back of her head wearing a hat. The characterization of Ole in this flashback is one of distance, he is unsympathetic and unaware of Lily's feelings from the scene's beginning. This emotional distance only becomes more apparent as



Figure 8: Lily observes Ole's fascination with Kitty Collins, in *The Killers*

the scene progresses. This scene is as much about Lily's perception of Kitty as it is about Ole's introduction to Kitty. Ole's behavior plays as almost comically overt, but this is the way it would have been experienced from the perspective of a woman who is being discarded by her boyfriend in favour of someone more alluring. The way Kitty overtakes Ole's attention is reinforced by the scene's composition and camera movement. Before our introduction to Kitty, Lily is in control of the camera. She visually dominates, the camera follows her movement, and she is placed at the center of the frame. Immediately after Kitty is introduced, the camera emphasizes her, pushing Lily off to the side of the frame and emphasizing the relationship between Ole and Kitty (Figure 8). At one point, Ole steps away from Lily and moves to stand behind Kitty as she sings, the camera follows and entirely removes Lily from the image. While Ole's fascination with Kitty is the main focus of the scene, we are reminded of our narrator's central role too. Lily begins a conversation with "Blinky" Franklin (Jeff Corey), where she learns about "Big Jim" Colfax (Albert Dekker), the criminal who would eventually take over Ole Anderson. This scene is crucial in understanding the not necessarily positive relationships between women that are frequent in Siodmak's work. In addition, the consciousness of a female perspective is reflected

by the nature of the flashback resulting from a female memory. In this case, Siodmak's preoccupation with presenting complex female perspectives in a way that affords them agency is realized through the film's narrative structure.

The role of female narrators affects the film sonically as well. In terms of actual voiceover narration, the film form incorporates the voiceovers as a lead into the flashback, fading off as the dialogue picks up within the flashback scene. Karen Hollinger's analysis of the *noir* voiceover is focused on the first-person investigative/confessional mode, but her overriding assumptions about the function of voiceovers in *noir* cinema are still appropriate. In *The Killers*, the investigational mode is established through multiple flashbacks, and as such the singular perspective of Classical Hollywood narration is already fractured at the narrative level. The flashback and the voiceover are inherently connected, and they produce the same effects. Hollinger argues that voiceovers in *noir* complicate representations of female characters, as the implications of the narrator's subjective viewpoint conflict with an 'objective' relation. Hollinger writes that this relation can be described as "a proliferation of point of view, a divorce of the narrator's, implied author's, and implied spectator's positions."<sup>43</sup>

The other female narrated flashback in the film comes from Mary Ellen 'Queenie' Daugherty (Queenie Smith), and it takes place early on in the film, prior to Lily's flashback which introduces Kitty. Queenie is the beneficiary of Lund's insurance money, due to her role in preventing his suicide years earlier. In Queenie's brief flashback, Lund is characterized as hysterical and impulsive, a hard turn from the calm and quiet demeanour he possessed in the previous flashback. Again, the subjectivity of the female narrator is apparent through the way

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<sup>43</sup> Hollinger, 247.

characters involved in the flashback are depicted, and her unique perspective and relation to those characters. Ole is physically imposing, much larger than Queenie and violently smashing objects in the room, breaking the glass of the window with a chair. But Queenie's flashback is important for another reason besides the way it provides a second example of female subjectivity. It also has a deep connection to another female character in the film, introducing the central mystery of Kitty Collins. Ole's attempt at suicide is precipitated by the abandonment of an unnamed woman. He screams "She's gone!" and Queenie replies, "Who's gone mister?" Turim notes this is one of the film's "hermeneutic questions", who is the elusive woman who has such an overwhelming grasp on the life of Ole Anderson?<sup>44</sup>

### **Kitty Collins as Multifaceted Motivator**

As the film progresses, we learn that the central woman who holds the answer to Ole's fate is Kitty Collins. Kitty encapsulates many characteristics that are central to discourse on the femme fatale. She fits Place's description of the spider woman, complete with the sexual iconography of her black evening gown, and the way she takes over control of the camera movement once she is introduced.<sup>45</sup> James F. Maxfield's definition of this archetype includes all women who pose a threat to "the life, welfare, or psychological well-being of a male protagonist," which Kitty does regardless of her betrayal or intentions.<sup>46</sup> While in many ways Kitty embodies the essence of the fatal, evil woman, these are importantly characteristics that are imposed on her by other characters in the film, fractured through their subjective notions of her actions. There are four

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<sup>44</sup> Turim, 180.

<sup>45</sup> Place, 54, 56.

<sup>46</sup> James F. Maxfield, *The Fatal Woman: Sources of Male Anxiety in American Film Noir, 1941-1991* (London: Associated University Press, 1996), 10.

flashbacks within which Kitty makes an appearance: Those of Lily, Lt. Sam Lubinsky's (Sam Levene), Charleston's (Vince Barnett) second flashback, and "Blinky" Franklin's first flashback.

She is also an absent feature of Queenie's flashback, discussed previously, and Charleston's first flashback, where he recounts Ole's talking about her while he is in prison. In each incarnation, Kitty has a different persona. Lily's characterizes her as a seductress, in



Figure 9: Kitty Collins in *The Killers*

Sam's she sweetly pleads her innocence to a stolen diamond spider broach. In Charleston's second flashback, he prefaces it by saying he can only remember what happened, not where it was or who was there. Regardless, Kitty makes an appearance. Even when her presence is not explicit, she implicitly controls the scene and connects each flashback. "Blinky" Franklin's delirious death bed recounting of the night before the big robbery characterizes Kitty as a hardened criminal. Her soft voice has disappeared in favour of a tough, biting tone. Big Jim Colfax threatens to hit Kitty in this flashback, prompting her line "You touch me and you won't live 'til morning", accompanied by a crazed glimmer of violence in her eyes (Figure 9). In each of these flashbacks, Kitty is the subject of a struggle caused by this narrative structure, a struggle against outside control of her image possessed by multiple conflicting narrators. Kitty's fractured perception is mirrored by Ole's, his persona characterized only by the flashbacks of people he knew in life, his multiple aliases furthering his duality. Ole Anderson, "The Swede", and Pete Lund are all one person. This is not a struggle within the diegesis of the film, but as Christine

Gledhill theorizes, “with effects structured in by the interaction of different generic and narrative conventions.”<sup>47</sup>

This fractured identity is complicated even further by Kitty’s own flashback of herself. Kitty agrees to meet with Reardon and they go to a restaurant, the Green Cat. As Kitty begins to tell her side of the story, it becomes clear that she is aware of her own image, and capable of manipulating the way others see her in order to get what she wants. In her flashback, Kitty actively portrays herself as a moral protagonist, alerting Ole of a double crossing that results from her romantic feelings towards him. Back in the present, Kitty excuses herself to powder her nose, setting up Reardon for betrayal, as two hitmen arrive. Within this understanding of Kitty’s own interpretation of herself, we understand that she possesses more knowledge than others give her credit for. This possessed knowledge can be attributed back to Doane’s theorization of deadly women, where the visual is at odds with the knowable. She is smart, and uses this to manipulate perceptions of her, such as at the end of the film when Kitty begs a dying Colfax to absolve her and lie about her innocence. In this moment, she cares less about her dying husband, but rather about the implications his death will have on her guilt.

Kitty bears an essential connection to the thematic currents of fate and death. Ole Anderson’s final words initiate the determinist and existential fascination with fate from the film’s beginning, as he acknowledges his death in saying “I did something wrong, once.” These concepts also extend to Kitty. As demonstrated, Kitty has a hand in almost every flashback in the film, occupying a central role in the various connected stories, and a dominant role in the life of Ole Anderson. She personifies fate for Ole, whose obsession for her reflects the Nietzschean

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<sup>47</sup> Christine Gledhill, “*Klute 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminism Criticism*” in *Women in film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London, British Film Institute, 2008), 30.

“love of fate”, *amor fati*. This phrase encapsulates Ole Anderson’s outlook on fate which characterizes the entire film, his calm acceptance of his death as the ultimate acceptance of his fate. A type of resignation is involved here, one which permeates the film on a structural level. Despite Reardon’s investigation, Ole is already dead, and the factors that lead to his death are crystalized in memory, unchangeable. The film’s final scene incorporates this pessimistic view, as even though Reardon solved the mystery of Ole Anderson’s death and discovered the stolen money, all his efforts only amount to the basic life insurance rate dropping by one-tenth of a cent.

### **Recurring Motifs: The Mirror**

Siodmak’s recurring motif of mirrors is especially prevalent in *The Killers*, not only with regards to Kitty but also to the men in the film. Fitting with Place’s interpretation, mirrors can be understood as a motif to imply a duplicitous nature for both Kitty and the male characters.

However, there is another reading possible, one which complements the fractured portrayal of Kitty through multiple narrators. In this interpretation, the mirror functions as a double, a ghostly other, a refraction of the actual Kitty Collins, just as she is refracted



Figure 10: False mirror shot in *The Killers*

through the memories of the film’s narrators. When Kitty finally enters the present tense of the film’s narrative during her meeting with inspector Reardon, we see a shot of them entering the

Green Cat restaurant. This shot is similar to the mirror shot in *The Spiral Staircase*, presenting a visual illusion that distorts our perception of the spatial relations between camera and subject. The shot is question immediately tricks the viewer, revealing itself to be an image of a mirror reflection, and a canted angle communicates that something is off (Figure 10). In this scene, Kitty also discussed her self in third person, a direct acknowledgement of her misrepresentation through other characters, when she says “I’m fighting for my life, not Kitty Collins’ life, but mine.” Similar to the function of the mirror in *Phantom Lady*, *The Killers* also contains a mirror shot that offers a moment of self-actualization, complimented Kitty’s awareness of her own role in the film’s narrative.

### **Weimar Aesthetics**

Siodmak’s German expressionist impulse is again relevant in *The Killers*. Although toned down from the overtness of these features in *Phantom Lady*, Siodmak weaves expressionist techniques together with a subtler realist aesthetic in *The Killers*, a potential visual parallel to New Objectivity. The tension between highly stylized and documentary-realist aesthetics is a common feature of *film noir* style. Alpi observes this same style and addresses it as the blending of “seemingly disparate elements of objective naturalism and subjective expressionism in the mise en scene.”<sup>48</sup> In this case, expressionist tendencies are detached from the perspective of any single character, complimenting the fractured mindset of multiple separate narrators. Instead, the expressivity of the film serves to communicate the emotional resonance of its overall theme of fate and death. Deep, low-key shadows via poetic realism begin the film, the seemingly quiet

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<sup>48</sup> Alpi, 324.

town of Brentwood appears as ominous and threatening. The film's first shot is from the back seat of a car, immediately we get a sense of being behind the action, following something that is already in motion, reiterated by the narrative structure of the intricate flashbacks. The drastic chiaroscuro lighting of this opening scene is the most conspicuous example in the film, but in characteristic of *noir* style, shadows and expressionist lighting are present throughout both the present (Reardon's investigation) and the past (the film's multiple flashbacks). As in *Phantom Lady*, sound elements help to cinematically realize an expressionist atmosphere. The sinister score composed by Miklós Rózsa can be categorized as an expressionist technique in the film, complimenting the tone of each flashback and communicating the dramatic, existential mode of the film. Robert Porfirio categorizes the expressive nature in the film as "the formative desire of the implied author, in this case Siodmak, to affect an audience through a variety of stratagems."<sup>49</sup> Porfirio goes on to describe the ways that sound and image combine to create a manipulation of diegetic space, spurring a pre-established emotion from the spectator. Where films with a realist aesthetic have an increased amount of ambiguity, the expressionist tendencies of Siodmak reduce this ambiguity, so that the intended mood of each scene is understood.

### Conclusion

Siodmak's films provide an exemplary representation of female subjectivity in a way that is intrinsically connected to film as a medium, as specific cinematic techniques are consistently deployed in order to construct a subjective female viewpoint. These techniques include the camera movement, framing, narrative structures of the flashback and the dream sequence, and

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<sup>49</sup> Robert G. Porfirio, "The Killers: Expressiveness of Sound and Image in Film Noir", in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1999), 245

recurring visual motifs, such as the mirror and the staircase. In addition, Siodmak's roots in German Expressionist aesthetics gives way to a feminized reading of this style, communicating the inner, subjective experience of a female character in a visual process.

Several figures, movements, and archetypes German Expressionism in art and cinema, the cultural appearance of the independent "New Woman" in Weimar Germany and filmmakers like G.W. Pabst serve as predecessors to Siodmak's conceptualization of female subjectivity. The timeline of Siodmak's influences does not simply begin and end with the 1920s-1940s, as was my focus for this project. The influence of German Expressionism, of light and darkness in German art, extends back to influences in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>50</sup> Looking in the opposite direction, cinematic representations of subjective female characters extend to contemporary media. The formal traits and complex female characters I have discussed that recur in Siodmak's work (including dream sequences/flashbacks, motifs of the mirror and staircase, traces of Expressionist/*noir* aesthetic) are still prevalent in modern cinema, exemplified by films such as *Mulholland Drive* (Lynch, 2001), *Coraline* (Selick, 2009), and *Black Swan* (Aronofsky, 2010). As with Siodmak's films, these examples are situated as simultaneously complicit with and separate from mainstream Hollywood. The conventions exhibited in Siodmak's work points to the overall impact that *film noir* has had on cinema, and further how these characteristics have evolved into modern film grammar. Siodmak's work fits into a network or genealogy of factors and influences, continuing today, and joining an evolving discourse on female representation in cinema.

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<sup>50</sup> Guerin, 78.

To conclude my analysis, it might be pertinent to question why Siodmak's representations of female subjectivity was so concentrated to *film noir*. In the 1950s, Siodmak went on to direct many films in both Hollywood and Europe, from costume dramas to westerns to war films. Although he uses similar techniques in several of his later films, Siodmak never quite returns to the strong emphasis placed on female characters, and their complexity, in his non-*noir* work. This leads to the conclusion that there is something genetically inherent in *film noir* which offers space for (or even requires) portrayals of complicated women. Portrayals of women who are smart but desperate, who do not necessarily fit a maternal stereotype, who can be both criminal and glamorous, who contain contradictions. These films and the female characters that inhabit them can be subject to consistent restoration, exposed to new relevance and interpretation, especially in the contemporary political environment. In its time, *film noir* reflected changing cultural conditions, existing as disillusioned and pessimistic but at the same time energetic and experimental- the same components that maintain relevance today. Through my discussion of Robert Siodmak's 1940s *noir* films, I hope to suggest that these texts, as well as those belonging to the categorization *film noir* more broadly, present subjective female characters that are more multifaceted than the term *femme fatale* suggests.

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