

Wicked Women and Beautiful lies: The Femme Fatale from Classic Noir to Contemporary Film

The femme fatale has evolved from a 1940s noir symbol of misogynistic fear—a dangerous, doomed seductress punishing men—into a modernized, empowered figure. Early examples represented anxieties about independent women, while modern interpretations embrace her agency, intellect, and moral ambiguity, often turning her into a "bad-ass" hero or complex anti-heroine rather than just a victim of her own downfall.

This seminar explores that evolution. Participants will examine how these characters—seductive, intelligent, morally ambiguous, and often dangerous—challenge traditional narratives of femininity and agency. How has the femme fatale changed over time? What is she, a threat, a survivor, a construct of male paranoia, or a figure of empowerment.

This is a list of suggested films. Participants are welcome to suggest their own with moderator's approval. Participants are to watch films on their own each week prior to class. Some films have limited availability. One suggestion from a previous seminar was for participants to have a "watch party" and view a film as a group. Each participant is responsible for a 20-30 minute presentation followed by a discussion.

1940s: Classic film noir

Double indemnity

Laura

Gilda

The Postman Always Rings Twice

1950s: Noir turns psychological

Sunset Boulevard

The Asphalt Jungle

Vertigo

1960s: Neo-noir

Breathless

The Killers

Bonnie and Clyde

1970s: Cynicism and crime

Play Misty for Me

Chinatown

Farewell, My Lovely

The Long Goodbye

1980s: Neo-noir revival

Body Heat

Blade Runner

Black Widow

Fatal Attraction

Heathers

1990s: Erotic thrillers & postmodern femme fatales

Basic Instinct

Bound

L.A. Confidential

The Last Seduction

Wild Things

Devil in a Blue Dress

2000-2010s: Psychological complexity, antiheroines, neo-noir

Mulholland Drive

Gone Girl

Ex Machina

Her

2020s-: Contemporary and power reversals

Promising Young Woman

The Batman

Decision to Leave