The femme fatale, or the “fatal woman,” has been primarily analyzed in her relation to men throughout the original film noir of the 1940s, an aspect that femmes fatales of the more contemporary neo-noir films are not exceptions to. Descendants of neo-noir films still reflect and embody aspects of the femmes fatales of the 1940s despite operating in different time eras – therefore, different social expectations and norms of gender. It has been argued that due to the historical backdrop of the 1940s in America (such as film censorship, the ending of the Great Depression, post-war anxiety of WWII, anxiety of women in the workforce), the femmes fatales reflected the American psyche at that time, as Barbara Hale suggests in her essay “Projecting Trauma: The Femme Fatale in Weimar and Hollywood Film Noir” when she says that writers and directors “projected their anxieties onto the character of the femme fatale” (225). It is in this way that contemporary neo-noir femmes fatales may be seen as subversions or even rebels of the definitions that confined their predecessors; they are arguably no longer bound by the same historical context and social norms, therefore allowing them more flexibility in their identities in neo-noir films. It is also this flexibility, however, that it becomes clear the roles of women in neo-noir are still limited, as well as more difficult to define. By analyzing the characters Agatha (Samantha Morton) and John Anderton (Tom Cruise) from the neo-noir thriller Minority Report in relation to interpretations of multiple theorists of femmes fatales from the 1940s film noir, this paper will explore the ways in which a modern femme fatale figure can both rebel and be victim to the confinements of the original femmes fatales.

The dichotomy between victim and rebel that seems too often be highlighted by theorists is situated interestingly in the realm of the imaginary conception of “PreCrime,” in the neo-noir film Minority Report. Both Anderton, the chief of PreCrime, as well as Agatha, a “precog” or “precognitive,” who is at the very heart of PreCrime, embody and balance the dichotomy of victim and rebel with their involvement in the department of “PreCrime.” In the film, Chief John Anderton works to prevent crimes -primarily murder - from happening as a part of the Department of PreCrime, which exists because of the ability of the three “precogs”: Agatha and her two brothers. Anderton, however, finds himself going against the Department of PreCrime in an attempt to prove his innocence when his name appears as a future murderer. Agatha becomes an especially valuable asset in the film when Anderton learns that she somehow is the most powerful out of the three in that her vision is stronger. In his attempt to prove he is being framed, he “steals” Agatha from the glass tank where she and her brothers reside day after day, and escapes with her.

Though seeing Agatha as a femme fatale may seem far-fetched, considering most traits of the iconic femmes fatales seem absent from her, the clear reversions of these qualities in Agatha make a statement about the femme fatale in a contemporary film and setting; therefore, it may be argued that she is both a departure from and a reflection of the original femmes fatales. It is in Agatha that we can see a more literal translation of the ideas of the femmes fatales of classic noir films. When we first meet Agatha and her brothers in the beginning, we learn that Wally, the caretaker of the precogs, uses dopamine and endorphins among other forms of sedation to control the precogs, who reside in a small pool filled with gel-like substance in a tank in the Department of PreCrime. Following this scene Anderton adds to this saying “It’s better if you don’t think of them as human...pre-cogs are pattern-recognition filters, that’s all.” Since much of the focus seems to be primarily on Agatha and not on her brothers, this may be interpreted as an example of portraying the woman character as an “Other,” or an entity that is depicted as abnormal in contrast to another through a binary that consequently undermines the power of the former. Within this we can see how Agatha’s role as an “Other” has taken on a more literal translation, in which she is now literally turned into a non-human, another creature whose innate power should be controlled, caged, and used. It is in the way that the precogs are used that the viewer is able to see another problematic situation in which the people ironically seem to not have any rights or choices of their own and are being used for the better of society so that others may live. There is a parallel in the way that the precogs live with the pre-murderers who are arrested and left to rot in a sort of cyberspace encasing, forever unaware of their surroundings.

When examining the femme fatale, one of her main features initially noted is her physical beauty and the often glamorous or high-end accessories she wears. Often times theorists will mention the physical beauty of the actresses that played femmes fatales, such as Joan Bennett, Rita Hayworth, and Ava Gardner, among others, as well as the beauty they gain from their attire and jewels, determining how they use their beauty to get what they want. In his essay “The Man’s Melodrama: The Woman in the Window & Scarlet Street,” Florence Jacobowitz writes of the fashion of the character Alice Reed “…her overstated attire (the sequined and feathered hat, the cigarette, the sheer chiffon dress which suggests her nudity), and … her over-determined slow-paced speech…” (155). Unlike Rita Hayworth’s “Gilda,” Joan Bennett’s “Alice Reed,” or Jane Greer’s “Kathie,” Agatha diverges from this conventional sense of beauty (thus from the conventional femme fatale) in the simplicity of her attire and physical appearance. Instead of glittering coats and beaded purses, Agatha wears a modern, sleek unisex suit (which her brothers both wear as well); and, instead of perfectly coiffed curls, her head is completely bare. In the shots in which the ideas of femininity may even represent a suppression of her asexuality) and psychological aspect (in her ability to see future crimes). Due to her lack of sexuality and...
perceived feminine conventions, Agatha subverts this main trait of the classic femme fatale, who relies mainly on manipulation and domination of her sexuality over the men around her. Hales writes, “The threat posed by the oversized woman symbolizes her weakened male counterpart” (227); perhaps it is this threat she as a woman poses that may explain not only the perceived suppression of her femininity, but also her lack of a voice and choice over what happens to her.

Hales also focuses primarily on defining the femme fatale not only in her manipulation of her beauty and sexuality, but also in her relation to her criminality. She states, “It is the femme fatale and her relationship to the criminal underworld that undermines the protagonist’s bourgeois values and highlights the danger and allure of the street” (229). Though Agatha is in a sense a portal through which Anderton has access to the “danger and allure of the street,” it is through her that he sees the evil crimes that people will commit; it seems that her relationship to this “criminal underworld” and her use as a precog is not a choice of hers and is out of her control. Many of the classic femmes fatales choose to involve themselves in the world of the criminal underworld, but in Agatha we see her connection to the underworld as either an innate “power,” which seems to cause her suffering, or a choice that is made for her by others for the benefit of the public. It becomes clear that Agatha, not treated as a human with rights of her own; strapped to her makeshift bed in a pool, she is not allowed to care for herself but is taken care of and infantilized by her caretaker, Wally. Nowhere in this portrayal of her do we see Agatha assert herself or any sort of control over her surroundings or the events that take place around her, not even when Anderton kidnaps her from the pool.

Another way in which Agatha is a departure from the classic femme fatale is that she is more of a victim than an instigator of crime. Hales writes, “the femme fatale as psychotic criminal is a monstrous sexual entity who lies, steals, and murders” (232). Though she can perceive crime that will happen and is at the core of the PreCrime system, she herself is not actually a part of the crimes, but simply acts as a protective agent and not a “psychotic criminal.” It is interesting to note that in her innocence and perceived suffering there is a subversion of the important aspect of the femme fatale being a part of the darker, criminal parts of society. When the representative of the attorney general of the president (Colin Farrell) asks Anderton if he can meet the precogs, Anderton refuses, saying “Cops aren’t allowed inside the temple.” By referring to the pool where they reside as the temple, he gives the precogs a sense of divinity and indirectly suggests a connection to the divine through them. In doing so, Anderton simultaneously further dehumanizes them and reinforces Agatha’s perceived otherworldliness and innocence from the awful scenarios that appear in her mind. In terms of cinematography and costumes, this innocence and cleanliness is further emphasized in the pale coloring of the precogs in their pool of light blue gel, softly lit up by a string of white lights that encircle them.

The idea of Agatha as a “fatale woman” is not completely invalid and without its points. Following her abduction from the pool by Anderton, it can be interpreted that although she aids Anderton on his quest to avoid the PreCrime department and finds out who framed him, she also becomes a major part of his downfall. In analyzing the film The Woman in the Window, Jacobowitz writes of the results of Professor Wanley’s involvement with Alice Reed:

She promises her illicit and forthright sexuality in typical femme fatale tradition, but delivers a nightmare of murder, blackmail and deceit. The hero is destroyed, losing his respectability, his social position, his money, his dream girl (154).

Hales supports this by saying that the femme fatale “lures men into danger, destruction, and even death by means of her overwhelmingly seductive charms” (227). Though Agatha is portrayed much more as a victim than these earlier femmes fatales, elements of these femmes fatales are manifested in her in the sense that she indirectly causes Anderton’s demise in his reputation as chief of PreCrime, his financial stability and his social status. It seems that instead of her sexuality luring Anderton into “danger, destruction,” it is her power as a clairvoyant that is her “seductive” element. Just as beauty seems to be the femme fatale’s curse, so it is that Agatha’s ability to see the future seems to curse her as well. In a way, Agatha does deliver “a nightmare of murder, blackmail and deceit.” Through her, the detectives are able to gain access to the worse crimes that occur in the future, and it is through her that Anderton’s name shows up as that of a future-murderer. It is also in this sense that Agatha is a major part of Anderton’s initial downfall in that his name appeared in PreCrime because of her, but perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she represents a reluctant danger to Anderton, as she never chose to be abducted by him in the first place and clearly does not have control over who she sees is a murderer.

Another important quality about the femme fatale that Jacobowitz writes of is his theory that she is “the embodiment of [the male’s] repressed desires” (154). Hales furthers this idea, writing “…film noir of the 1940s and 1950s conveys the crisis of male identity resulting from World War I by way of the femme fatale character” (224), and goes on to say that “men then transfer their damaged psyches onto the character of the femme fatale” (227). Because Agatha is constantly surrounded by other men such as her brothers and the male detectives of the PreCrime Department, it would be difficult to determine exactly whose repressed desires she would represent. Rather than representing a singular male’s repressed desires, Agatha seems to completely subvert this notion in that she instead seems to embody society’s deepest and repressed fears. In her horrifying visions and nightmares, the detectives are able to gain valuable knowledge and insight into the darkest, ugliest side of the people who make up society. It is suggested that Agatha’s power to see the future takes a toll on her in that she must relive the trauma, evil, and fear of the events and people she sees. The scene after Anderton’s arrest of the man who finds his wife cheating on him suddenly cuts back to a shot of Agatha eerily repeating what the wife was saying to her husband. Again we can see a more literal embodiment of society’s anxieties in the female character.

In examining the significance of Agatha’s forced responsibility to see future crimes before they occur for the benefit of society, Hales’ idea of woman embodying life and death take on new meaning. She writes “She embodies at once ‘Nature and Artifice’ and ‘Life and Death,’ depending on the contradictory expectations expressed toward her by man” (184), and goes on to use her femme fatale example to support this, saying “Terry controls life and death in her role as a murderess” (232). Because Agatha’s ability to see the future is the foundation of the PreCrime department, it is technically true that she embodies both “life and death,” she can indirectly save
people through detectives such as Anderton, and can also show through her visions those who should be put away for the rest of their lives. It is depicted that even the chief himself is no exception to Agatha's visions, when Anderton's name crops up as a future murderer.

Though it seems to contradict Agatha's victimization by the men that protect her, including Anderton, it seems that there is a similarity in her perceived partnership with him that occurs later in the film with Jacobowitz's interpretation of The Woman in the Window: Jacobowitz examines the strange partnership that seems to arise between Professor Wanley and the femme fatale Alice Reed in the classic film noir. He writes:

In fact, Alice is less a feared Other than a mirror image; she represents an inversion of the classic notion of the femme fatale. She is a projection of what Wanley wishes for himself (youth, spirit, adventure) (157).

This partnership is depicted in a much more obvious manner in Minority Report between Anderton and Agatha, and can even be interpreted as a mutual one. Anderton realizes that he needs Agatha in order to remain alive and to figure out who framed him, and Agatha realizes that she needs Anderton for her own safety as he takes her outside of the confines of the PreCrime labs and into the unknown outside world. This mutual partnership parallels the idea of the femme fatale and the hard-boiled detective as the “mirror image” of each other, as mentioned by Jacobowitz. In chapter one entitled “La Belle Dame Sans Merci and the Neurotic Knight: Characterization in The Maltese Falcon” in his book The Fatal Woman: Sources of Male Anxiety in American Film Noir, 1941-1991, James Maxfield writes of the detective and the femme fatale in The Maltese Falcon:

Spade is attracted to Brigid not only because she is a beautiful woman but also because she is a dark mirror image of himself. She also doesn’t want anyone to get the better of her (21).

The idea of the mirror-image seems to imply a partnership between the two; however, in the case of The Maltese Falcon, in which both detective and femme fatale are corrupt and dangerous, this darker partnership is inverted between Anderton and Agatha, whose partnership forms out of Anderton’s victimization in being framed and Agatha’s reliance on him to survive outside of the pool that was her home. In this way, Anderton’s victimization brings out Agatha’s, and they both must develop a mutual trust in order to survive. This mirroring, that is either a cause or effect of their partnership, is also depicted in a symbolic shot of Anderton and Agatha’s profiles in opposite direction, depicted in such a way that it is difficult to tell where one of them begins and the other ends (see Fig. 1).

Though Agatha differs from the original femmes fatales in many aspects, including her physical traits, her clairvoyant power, her relationship to the men surrounding her, and her relation to crime, there still seems to be remnants of them in the ways in which she subverts their original qualities. Her departure from the original qualities of the “fatal women” of the 1940s may not only suggest a new identity for the contemporary femme fatale, but a shift in the power dynamics between the femme fatale and the men that seemingly control her. Through her subversions of the original qualities and her role as a different representation of danger, we see a sense of rebellion towards the conventional attitudes towards women as femmes fatales in a contemporary neo-noir film. Although she is just as much confined to the patriarchal system that the classic femme fatale was, her innate power and her allying with Anderton affords Agatha a departure from the depictions of earlier femmes fatales, and in turn allows her to gain a sense of identity and power in a way that earlier femmes fatales could not.
Notes

1 The police department that Anderton works for which specializes in capturing, convicting and imprisoning criminals before the crime they are guilty of actually occurs.

2 When combined with her two brothers, Agatha and her unique siblings (under the control and care of the PreCrime department) are able to provide Anderton with visions of future crimes that will occur in the near future, specifically ones that either focus on or end in murder.

Works Cited


