FATAL IMAGES: SEDUCTION AND DESIRE IN 19TH- AND 20TH-CENTURY MYTHS OF THE FEMME FATALE

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Fatal Images: Seduction and Desire in 19th- and 20th-Century Myths of the Femme Fatale

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The femme fatale becomes a central figure in the nineteenth century, but her appearance on the scene of art and literature draws on a long tradition of representation of the ‘destructive woman’ in works from classical mythology, Romantic poetry, European decadent novels, and various cinematic traditions. The figure has crucial implications for the representation of women in a variety of discourses—literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and the cinema. But what makes the femme fatale deadly and why she is so persistently an object of fascination in artistic production is one of the objectives of my analysis. My project explores the construction of this mythical discourse through an examination of the figure from Mérimée’s *Carmen* to the most notable Italian version of the femme fatale in the decadent novels of Gabriele D’Annunzio, and the figure’s subsequent reincarnation in early twentieth-century silent Italian cinema. A related issue in all of the works I deal with is the way in which the criticism of the texts or of the myth of the femme fatale itself is caught up in its own ‘theory of seduction’, or the same kind of functional paradox that characterizes the ambivalent power of the femme fatale itself. Whether it be in the commentaries on the Carmen story by critics such as Nietzsche and Adorno, or in the criticism of Italian decadence, and of D’Annunzio in particular, all of these critical discourses rely upon a fetishistic mode of interpretation that in turn, relies upon the critical and thematic seduction of one of the Western tradition’s most problematic—and obsessional—literary figures. The
result is a dialectical movement of tension, disavowal, denial, and repression that I argue characterizes the authors, the criticism, and the material itself. I also argue that the figure’s fatality is not merely thematic, but extends to include the ineluctability of her representation and the inevitably fixed set of meanings connected to her image, whether it be during the high point of her representation in the late nineteenth century, or in more recent, arguably ‘post-modern’ versions of her appearance.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother whose memory continues to inform my life and work. To Joseph Gould, my mother, born on 1924.4 and deceased in the wilderness of 1976.
And to my father without whom I would be lost.

I also wish to thank my advisor, Joseph Gould, for his guidance and encouragement. I wish to acknowledge the members of my committee: Jane M. Del Phant, Vincent G. Smith, and William J. Thomas for their patience and insight.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

These are the seductive voices of the night; the Sirens, too sang that way. It would be doing them an injustice to think that they wanted to seduce; they knew they had claws and sterile wombs, and they lamented this aloud. They could not help it if their laments sounded so beautiful.

-Franz Kafka

The femme fatale becomes a central figure in the nineteenth century, but her appearance on the scene of art and literature draws on a long tradition of representation of the ‘destructive woman’ in works from classical mythology, Romantic poetry, European decadent novels, and various cinematic traditions. The figure has crucial implications for the representation of women in a variety of discourses—literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and the cinema. But what makes the femme fatale deadly and why she is so persistently an object of fascination in artistic production is one of the objectives of this analysis.

This study begins with the construction of this mythical discourse through an examination of the figure from Mérimeé’s Carmen (1845) and Bizet’s opera (1874) based on the novella—the two models for all subsequent versions of the Carmen story. Subsequently, the focus then moves to the emergence of the figure in the Italian context in the ‘decadent’ novel of Gabriele D’Annunzio, Il Trionfo della morte (1894). The novel encompasses many of the elements of the femme fatale formula inspired by Mérimeé, while at the same time offering a revised vision of the
figure consistent with the concerns and themes of late nineteenth-century Italian decadence. Gabriele D'Annunzio is an important part of the project for what concerns the criticism of decadence, and of this author in particular, which I explore in relation to the figure of the femme fatale alongside a reading of the novel.

The analysis then moves to the femme fatale's later reincarnation in the figure of the diva of early twentieth-century silent Italian cinema. Here, the cinema offers a compelling medium from which to theorize a modern version of the femme fatale and the ways in which language gives way to the image with all of its implications for the representation (and abstraction) of this particular female figure. Lastly, a look at several of the readaptations of the Carmen story in recent years (both in literature and in film) makes up the final chapter of this project. There are a number of interesting transformations that occur in the context of what I call 'postmodern versions' of the femme fatale, including the ironization of the figure and the overt use of citation of its past models. The relevance of this material stems not from its belonging to a canonical collection of postmodern texts (if such a thing even exists); but instead based on the applicability of the works to the concerns I raise about the femme fatale and her reinvention in a more flexible representational construct. In this way, these arguably 'marginal' or 'peripheral' texts can also be seen as sharing a similarity with what have been referred to as the 'average texts' of nineteenth-century decadence.

A related issue in all of the works examined here is the way in which the criticism of the texts is caught up in its own 'theory of seduction' or the same kind of functional paradox that characterizes the ambivalent power of the femme fatale
itself. Whether it be in the commentaries on the Carmen story by critics such as Nietzsche and Adorno, or in the criticism of Italian decadence, and of D’Annunzio in particular, all of these critical discourses rely upon a fetishistic mode of interpretation that in turn, relies upon the critical and thematic seduction of one of the Western tradition’s most problematic—and obsessional—literary figures. The result is a dialectical movement of tension, disavowal, denial, and repression that I argue characterizes the authors, the criticism, and the material itself. In this way, figure’s fatality is not merely thematic, but extends to include the ineluctability of her representation and the inevitably fixed set of meanings connected to her image, whether it be during the high point of her representation in the late nineteenth century, or in more recent post-modern versions of her appearance.

Theories of seduction / Seductive theories

What does it mean to be ‘seduced’ by a text or a work of art? What relationship does desire or its mode of employment, seduction, have in reading literature or in looking at works of art, be they literary, cinematic, performative, or visual? The god Eros, as Plato reminds us, is not limited to its status as a god, but is related to desire itself—the universal human desire for knowledge. Thus, as Diotima (herself a female mythical figure and the mouthpiece of the most important truths of the Symposium) outlines for us: the only real love is the love of knowledge.

If we are to really understand the relationship between desire (which is not necessarily the erotic, but is decidedly about love) and the arts, or some notion of what it means to seduce and be seduced by certain texts, motifs, or themes in art and
literature, we may look to the repeated instances of a theme or a figure in the history of cultural production that continues to compel and, indeed, seduce us with its timeless myth. Perhaps no other myth is so entrenched in the history of art and literature, regardless of historical period or national origin, than the myth of the femme fatale. From Antiquity to the Modern period, innumerable versions of this mythical figure populate the cultural imagination of almost every time period and national tradition: from Homer’s sirens, to Phaedra, Cleopatra, and Salomé, to Guinevere, Francesca, and the famous femmes fatales of the nineteenth century, to the ‘diva’ and the ‘vamp’ of the twentieth century and the reinvention of these ‘fatal women’ in contemporary popular culture, it is clear that a thematic, cultural, and I would argue, even critical, seduction is taking place around the figure of the femme fatale whose importance in the history of the Western tradition may hold the secret to the art of seduction and the pleasure inherent in the search for knowledge itself.

Through an analysis of the figure of the femme fatale in several of her most significant moments in the history of her representation, as well as in some of the critical interventions to these works, a ‘theory of seduction’ emerges that is more than merely thematic, but is related to the desire to be seduced by literature and certain literary figures, which is to say, to the practice of seduction itself.

The theoretical problem of the femme fatale

The particular imaginative power of the theme of the ‘dangerous woman’ is a response that cannot adequately account for this figure’s excessive repetition in artistic production. There must be something more at stake, a greater anxiety that is
informed by and perhaps conditioned by her history of representation, which allows for its continued unquestioned presence in art and literature across the span of centuries. Perhaps no other figure has inspired more literary and cinematic interpretations than that exotic and elusive archetype of female sexuality, the femme fatale.

But what is it that makes her presence so compelling that her image is almost obsessively reproduced in artistic production regardless of historical, national or cultural context? As I will argue in chapter two with regard to Carmen and the history of representations of the femme fatale her character sets in motion, she is a universal figure along the lines of a female Don Juan or a Faust. As recognizable for her beauty and seductive power as for her inherent predisposition for destroying men, she may be the only female version of a mythological hero in the Western tradition. But with the femme fatale we are dealing with a trope or thematic icon which exists only to be reproduced and reinvented according to an author’s frame of reference and particular use of the myth. However, the representational power that exceeds cultural and national boundaries—the sheer durability of this particular mythical figure—begs to be interrogated on another level, one that might offer more questions about the production of meaning and interpretation in general than answers about the figure of the femme fatale itself.

The reason for this lies in the paradoxical situation produced when one asks the question: what does this image represent? The problem of relation (which then leads to interpretation), or to what this most recognizable and naturalized image refers, leads paradoxically to a representation without relation since there is no real
referent for the femme fatale but instead a concealment, a withholding of knowledge that is part of the figure's symbolic power. As the trope necessitates, the femme fatale figure is nothing if not enigmatic and unknowable, an almost always veiled figure (whether literally or figuratively) that begs to be revealed. In this way, the repeated representation of the femme fatale itself proves fatalistic since it relies on the very structure of an interpretive problem for its continued meaning and force. In other words, this phenomenon may have more to do with the theoretical problem the figure represents than with any real historical or literary significance of the myth.

It is a problem that is innate to literary criticism and that is the problem of trying to know what is not known, or the production of knowledge which ultimately ends in the production of metaphors. There is an inherent paradox involved in any critical process which undermines the very idea of criticism itself insofar as it is invariably caught in the hermeneutic circle from which it tries to escape. Therefore, an understanding or explanation is produced in order to account for a particular crisis in interpretation. Sometimes this takes the form of a mythologizing of what is not known in order to substantiate it as in the trope of the femme fatale. When a knowledge is withheld (such as the knowledge of sexual difference or the knowledge of the Absolute, for example), an interpretation and a corresponding anxiety arise due to this gap in relation. Through a constant repetition of a series of signifiers—verbal and visual tropes that are related to her particular representational power, the image of the femme fatale illustrates in a unique way this theoretical anxiety of the unknown.
The anxiety of the femme fatale

Art that represents an anxiety is often the art that we continually return to and re-read in an effort to solve the paradox it offers. For anxiety itself is the emotional equivalent of paradox or ambiguity in language. It is characterized by the irreconcilability of two elements, a combination of displeasure and excitement that, as Freud reminds us, is usually anxiety before something, like expectation or desire. Different from grief, pain, or sorrow, anxiety evokes a mixture of pleasure and pain that is often the result of a perceived situation of danger or stress. In Freud we find many examples of anxiety; in fact it seems to be a common theme throughout his work: “the problem of anxiety occupies a place [...] which may rightly be described as central,” he writes.\(^1\) Among the most important for him are: the anxiety due to the trauma of birth; separation anxiety; the anxiety of exclusion; the anxiety of death; and of course, the much quoted castration anxiety, or simply, the anxiety caused by female sexuality.

Similarly, in literary criticism the theme of anxiety is not without precedent. Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence*, for example, has contributed to the study of Romantic poetry and the idea of poetic influence in general. But whereas these examples speak to the ways in which anxiety can be an object of study, whether as the result of trauma suffered or perceived in psychoanalytic terms, or as the underlying motivational force which turns poets into “strong poets” in Bloom’s terms, anxiety can also be an inherent part of the text itself. In Freud’s case certain anxieties run throughout his writing, as he himself would readily admit given the

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most basic premise of his work—that unconscious motivational forces permeate our actions and understanding of the world. What these anxieties are exactly remains a constant source of theoretical speculation; how can we ever know for sure what unconscious forces lie beneath the surface of a text? Although it may not be possible to identify them exactly, it is possible to point to the places in the texts themselves where the anxieties become manifest—whatever they may be—and reveal that there is more at stake than just the immediate material of the text.

But it can also be the case that certain anxieties appear throughout a series of texts or a specific period of cultural production linking them in no other way than through the common anxiety they represent. This is true with regard to the myth of the femme fatale. This particular textual or representational anxiety has been a constant, even obsesssional, theme in artistic production for so long it seems a timeless trope without origins or a traceable history. It constitutes a myth that is always already there. In fact, this type of unchangeable character is a prerequisite for some of the most persistent and powerful myths of civilization, regardless of their signification. It is important to note, as Freud reminds us, that “where there is anxiety there must be something that one is afraid of,”\(^2\) and in the case of obsesssional actions, “the latter are only performed in order to avoid the anxiety.”\(^3\) It will be a part of the goal of this investigation into the myth of the femme fatale to uncover the anxieties being avoided and the fears that lie behind them in the representation of this well-known literary and popular figure.

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 498.
\(^3\) Ibid., p. 502.
The myth of the femme fatale

As Roland Barthes reminds us, “a myth is a type of speech defined by its intention much more than by its literal sense; and in spite of this, its intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized, made absent by this literal sense.”4 His example is the French Empire: “it’s just a fact,” he explains, “[...] for this speech is at the same time a frozen speech: at the moment of reaching me, it suspends itself, turns away, and assumes the look of a generality: it stiffens, it makes itself look neutral and innocent” (125). Myth works, according to Barthes, by turning signifiers into instruments of meaning that then obscure the literal meaning of a concept or image and establish “eternal reference” to something else. Barthes gives the example of an image of a Negro soldier saluting the French flag which then becomes synonymous with French imperialism in a subtle evocation of a mythical signifier that glosses over an intentional concept and establishes a motivated analogy (Negro soldier = French imperialism). This seems rather commonplace if we think of all of the mythical representations we encounter on a regular basis. Indeed, as Barthes reminds us, “the media undertake everyday to demonstrate that the store of mythical signifiers is inexhaustible” (127).

This process becomes more problematic, however, at the level of the reception of myths. This is where we encounter the “very principle of myth,” which is that it “transforms history into nature” (129). Mythical speech can be perfectly explicit, but it is “immediately frozen into something natural [...] as if the picture naturally conjured up the concept, as if the signifier gave a foundation to the

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signified: the myth exists from the precise moment when French imperially achieves
the natural state: myth is speech justified in excess” (129-130).

The figure of the femme fatale belongs to this category of foundational
myths, essentialized and frozen in the cultural imagination precisely due to the sheer
repetition (in fact, excess) of this mythical signifier. What the figure signifies is a
complex system of associations and meanings that have become so naturalized, so
commonplace, that its source in a world of images and fantasy is completely
forgotten. What happens is a curious reversal of terms in which her recognizable
image (be it as siren, harpy, sphinx, or vampire) however much the product of the
imagination, is turned back onto reality as if it were based in reality and truth, giving
substance to terms such as ‘femme fatale’ and ‘dangerous woman’ which have
entered the realm of language as if they possessed a real referent. In truth, the only
possible referent there can be for this figure is the one found in language: an image
signifies a type which signifies a referent which does not really exist. But perhaps
this is the point: myths are myths because they do not exist in reality. The process of
demystification merely produces the realization of the myth but can take us no
further. In order to analyze a particular myth one has to enter into its own mythical
speech and treat it as ‘real’ in order to reveal its inadequacies.

In the simplest of meanings, myth is taken as a representation in fictional
form of truths or values that are sanctioned by general belief: myth “tells the truth to
the extent that people believe that it tells the truth”; it can be called “the lie as truth.”

Myth’s link to the fictional and the imagination, its denial of the ‘real’, is generally

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unquestioned. It can also be said to originate in the unconscious: “its content or form is said to originate in passionate, poetic, or intuitional views of reality; in the unconscious, the dream.” Myth being linked to the nonrational, any discussion of it will be opposed to facts, to the intellect and to consciousness, and instead take place in the realm of the descriptive and the poetic. Myth “suggests the paradox and language of multiple reference in which it must be expressed: in fiction and myth a typical human or folk character or landscape lives in an irrational image, that can only be described but not explained or referred back any farther than exactly that specific appearance and experience.”

Hence the ‘eternal’ or ‘frozen’ quality of myths as Barthes understood them. Once an idea is articulated, either verbally or imagistically, and repeated enough to enter the realm of recognizability, it takes on the status of a mythical signifier that then only gathers more and more currency as it gets reproduced in artistic production. But it remains a fixed signifier which, as quoted above, does not refer back any farther than that particular appearance. It is not derived from anything except its own intent. It may refer to other past mythical appearances of itself (and it is sometimes necessary that it does), but it does not reveal any greater meanings or imply other modes of interpretation. Thus a femme fatale figure is inevitably a fixed icon—it offers only a specific set of associations which allow for a finite number of representative possibilities. Of course how she appears can vary, but what the femme fatale means is always the same. This, I would argue, is what constitutes her ‘fatality’: the ineluctability of her eternal reference, and not the vulgar idea of death

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6 Ibid., p. 71.
7 Ibid., p. 71 (quoting Myra Reynolds, The Treatment of Nature in English Poetry from Pope to Wordsworth [Chicago: 1896], p. 35).
usually associated with her image. That old notion of fatality is actually the result of the real (representational) fatality that belongs to each variation of her appearance. In other words, the myth is not her fatality; her fatality is the myth.

The femme fatale and the philosophical tradition, or 'the veil'

An understanding of the way myth works and its subsequent destabilization can shed light on what is at stake in the image of the femme fatale. But this is by no means the only way of understanding this literary and cinematic icon, or the way it is linked to more general ideas about the representation of women in art and literature. A thematic presence whose existence is purely plastic such as the femme fatale conjures up all kinds of related images of women in literature and philosophy which carry their own essentializing notions of the feminine. In fact, it is a well-known philosophical trope to associate women with the unknowable, the ineffable and, consequently, the metaphysical. For example, Kant’s connection of the sublime with woman in the veiled statue of Isis, Levinas’s idea of the ‘feminine’ as “absolutely other,” and Derrida following Nietzsche’s conception of woman as distance or the “non-truth of truth” remain problematic conceptions of the feminine in literature and philosophy. Moreover, a thematic presence whose existence is purely plastic such as the figure of the femme fatale offers a unique point of departure for an investigation into some of the most accepted yet problematic representations of women in art and literature.
Even in Plato the knowledge of the Absolute is possessed not by Socrates, but by the fictional female character of Diotima in the *Symposium*. She is the mouthpiece for the mysteries which constitute knowledge of the divine. The idea seems to be that woman, since she *naturally* inhabits the realm of mystery and unknowability, would have access to this realm alone. This enigmatic status is what makes her so attractive, but also inherently feared (hence the “direct feelings of pleasure and unpleasure”⁸ which accompany feelings of anxiety). In her link with metaphysical reality, the female functions in philosophical terms in the same way as the idea of the Absolute: humans are constantly drawn to it but cannot quite understand it or really have access to its ‘mysteries’. This is the way the withholding of information functions in order to shore up the mythical status of this figure and ensure its continued presence in artistic production.

The notion of woman as abstraction is by no means a recent phenomenon. As we know from Plato, the idea of the thing is the reality of the thing. We have knowledge of things in the world not because of empirical data, but only because we know their ideal forms, or the idea of them. Similarly, in Kant’s terms, the notion of the ‘transcendental object’—the non-empirical (which is all objective reality) is crucial to an understanding of his philosophical concepts. In fact, in a section of “The Analytic of the Sublime” from the *Critique of Judgment* in which Kant is dealing with “the powers of the mind which constitute genius,” his discussion moves from the idea of *Spirit* to the “ability to exhibit aesthetic ideas” which is the role of

the imagination. He goes on to illustrate his notion of the sublime (which is presented by the imagination) with the example of the ‘veil of Isis’. In a footnote to the main text he proposes the following:

Perhaps nothing more sublime has ever been said, or a thought ever been expressed so sublimely, than in that inscription above the temple of Isis (Mother Nature): “I am all that is, that was, and that will be, and no mortal has lifted my veil.” Segner has made use of this idea in an ingenious vignette prefixed to his Naturlehre [Natural Science], so as first to imbue the pupil, whom he was about to lead into this temple, with the sacred thrill that is meant to attune the mind to solemn attentiveness.

Thus, behind the veil of Isis is a furtive woman (who, according to Egyptian mythology is the personification of Mother Nature) hiding her knowledge of the Absolute from the male student looking on with longing for precisely this knowledge. But it is woman who possesses it and who thereby controls the fate of the student’s quest for knowledge of the divine. Literal and figurative ‘veiling’ and the deceptiveness of woman are some of the most well-known tropes of femininity linked to the notion that to be female necessarily means to be furtive and seductive.

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11 The poem by Schiller, “The Veiled Statue at Isis,” deserves mention here insofar as it repeats the theme of the veiled woman who withholds knowledge of the Absolute from the gazing youth. In the poem a priest and a young man are discussing whether it is possible to have knowledge of the whole, when they ‘chance’ upon the veiled statue at the temple of Isis and the youth asks the statue: “What form is that concealed beneath your veil?” / “Truth!” was the answer. “What!” the young man cried./ “When I am striving after truth alone, / Seekest thou to hide that very truth from me?” Here, the veiled woman is synonymous with deception and dissimulation (woman and art both use dissimulation), and when the pupil is admonished for his precocity, he is told that whoever dares lift the “sacred mystic covering” will, in fact, “see the truth”; in other words, will see woman.
But even more suggestive than Kant's vision of the statue of Isis (or, woman) as the best example of sublimity is his notion that the sight of the sublime in nature invokes fear and resistance (i.e., anxiety): "whatever we strive to resist is an evil, and it is an object of fear if we find that our ability [to resist it] is no match for it." The confrontation with the sublime is a confrontation with forces beyond one's control, a fear for one's own imminent destruction. Nature and woman (which are usually interchangeable) are both seen as agents of destruction and both ultimately need to be veiled in order to derive the "negative pleasure" which comes from the destructive power of the sublime (and woman). Moreover, this uniting of passion and beauty with destruction (as Nietzsche does in his discussion of tragedy and Kant, the sublime) is the very basis for the well-worn trope of the femme fatale.

Theories of the femme fatale

What remains constant throughout these examples, however, is the notion of a resemblance without existence, or in other words, an idea which is given the status of a reality, linked to reified notions of fear and wonderment which woman necessarily provokes. In other words, the femme fatale is treated as if the term had epistemological validity when it should come as no surprise that in fact, it has no objective existence. All forms of the phenomenon are products of the word's prior uses, combined with stock images resulting in a metaphor for wishes, desires, and fears that only pretends to offer access to reality. Moreover, if these ideas exist only in the space of representation (or in the abstract space of philosophical concepts) they must exist only in language. And woman, in the absence of any real substantive

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identity, but always enigmatic behind the veil she is so rarely without, occupies this intermediary space especially well.13

One way to get at this idea is through an example of the example. Thomas Carl Wall, in his book *Radical Passivity*, uses the example of the Hollywood character actor in order to illustrate his notion of passivity.14 As I will deal with in chapter four, a similar situation exists with regard to the presence of the diva in the Italian silent cinema. The character actor, like the diva, embodies the essence of the example unraveled of identity but never really identified, known to us through the parts she plays, through what she represents, but never because of who she is: “They always play “types” and they are nothing apart from the types they play.”15

Similarly, the idea of the femme fatale, that archetype of female subversion familiar to everyone but known to no one, might occupy this same intermediary space of the empty totality of the example. For in the space of the “type,” in this case, the ‘fatal woman’, the definitive is lost and the result is a non-identifiable community which threatens to dissolve identities and substitutes them with “depropriated, imaged, and stereotyped figures.” A better example may to be hard to find of that which is known only through appearances, or representations, than the

13 This is the subject of Giorgio Agamben’s work on the “threshold” or the intermediary space between identity and language. While not exactly with regard to the figure of the femme fatale, he does come very close to an identification with this figure in his notion of an essentialized thematic presence whose being is only in language. For in the space of the “type,” in this case, the dangerous woman, the definitive is lost and the result is a non-identifiable community which threatens to dissolve identities and substitutes them with “depropriated, imaged, and stereotyped figures.” For more on the idea of the threshold, and ‘threshold figures,’ see Giorgio Agamben, *The Idea of Prose* (L’Idea della prosa. Milano: Feltrinelli, 1985 ). For more on the ‘example’, see Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

14 “They are the actors (whose names we don’t even know) who become so familiar because their reality is entirely made up of their various roles such that their mannerisms, habits, looks, vocal tonalities, and gestures all become characteristic and as familiar as the actors themselves remain unfamiliar to us.” Thomas Carl Wall, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot, and Agamben*. (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1999), p.. 132.

essentialized thematic presence of the femme fatale. Her presence runs through literature, film, and popular culture like an old familiar song so that we forget that we know her only through her existence as image, as the representation of an idea. Each role is an echo of all the others with only vague and insignificant details separating the Carmens from the Lolas, or the Foscas from the Helens. She has no actual existence, but is instead an allegory of herself.

The figure is pure representation then, a purely rhetorical signifier and a function of linguistic figures and metaphoric substitutions whose image in visual terms does not, and cannot, coincide with her verbal existence in language. Thus her potentiality for action, or for existence, can never be realized which is another way of confining the figure to the realm of the abstract. To get around this problem, the image of the femme fatale is established as both signifier and signified, a paradoxical combination the dynamics of which are what set the term ‘femme fatale’ in motion and give it its cultural and aesthetic currency. In this way, the aesthetic crosses over into the real and the image of the destructive female takes on an imagined objective existence while the real takes on the timelessness of art. Again, a primary example of this is the existence of ‘real’ divas that make the seamless transformation from the screen to the extradiegetic world as their cinematic images become interchangeable with their existence in everyday life.

As my readings of the femme fatale in a variety of artistic and historic contexts in the chapters that follow will attempt to illustrate, there is a persistent ambivalence with regard to the theme of the femme fatale which accompanies the figure on the thematic level as well as with regard to the critical work on the subject.
This is particularly evident in the late nineteenth-century 'decadent' versions of her appearance (which is the subject of chapter three). Perhaps this ambivalence and attraction-repulsion anxiety express something fundamental about the image of the femme fatale itself that is inextricably linked to its theoretical treatment. In other words, there is a striking similarity between the effects the femme fatale is supposed to inspire—the ambiguous tension between awe and terror—and the theoretical and critical anxiety the figure represents. There is undoubtedly something uneasy and enigmatic about the nature of the 'dangerous woman' that Freud tried to put his finger on but ultimately referred to the poets or to a time when science could offer us "deeper and more coherent information." And what exactly is it? Perhaps every attempt to define it would end up in the same kind of aporia with which Freud's investigations inevitably resulted. It may be that there is no answer to the type of question he (or anyone else interested in the nature of sexual difference) is compelled to ask. But what this type of inquiry may reveal instead is that in the very concept of the figure of the femme fatale we expect a mimetic and epistemological claim that the figure itself does not make. Does that mean that her deadliness is not really deadly? Or her seduction is a seduction that has no object other than seduction itself?

It could be argued that the femme fatale is always necessarily eliminated due to the threat she constitutes (to male authority, to society, to sexual roles and mores). However, in anticipation of the issues I will treat subsequently in this study, it may help to recall Carmen's dramatic death at the end of Prosper Mérimée's novella in order to offer a different reading of the death of the femme fatale—one that is more about her power to seduce us as readers and critics through her constant portrayal as
a figure of silence, or, her threat as an agent of a different kind of seduction—rather than the vulgar notion of death usually associated with her image.

It should be recalled that the end of the Carmen story is followed by an added fourth chapter to the tale in which the narrator effectively “silences” the femme fatale for good—even after Carmen has been killed—ending the story with the proverb: “En close bouche, n’entre point mouche” (Into a closed mouth enter no flies). Here I would point to Kafka’s parable in which he contends that the sirens are, in fact, silent even though Ulysses thought that they were singing and that he alone did not hear them: “Now the sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence,” he writes. In other words, inherent in the figure’s construction is a resistance to the theoretical claims to ‘truth’ (and hence, to knowledge) it usually inspires. It is this transgression of the very structure which determines its existence that makes the figure a persistent topic of interest, both in artistic production as well as from a critical perspective. Thus, the siren is made silent, but, in light of some of the implications that will be drawn in the following readings of the figure in literature and film, it could be argued that perhaps she was never singing in the first place.

CHAPTER II

The Seduction of Carmen, Original Femme Fatale

Historical coherence and grand narratives are now riddled not only by holes, gaps, and omissions in our historical knowledge that once we might have tried to cover over or fill in, but they are also riddled by the questions and investments of past and present desire.¹⁷

No other figure has inspired more literary and cinematic adaptations than Carmen, the archetypal femme fatale whose origin can be traced to Prosper Mérimée’s novella of 1845. Since this first appearance there have been more than 50 cinematic versions of the Carmen story connected to either the novella, or its most famous offspring, Bizet’s 1874 opera, as well as countless musical, choreographic, and cinematic versions not confined to any one national tradition. References to the ‘myth of Carmen’ and commentaries on its significance have appeared in the work of major writers and thinkers such as Nietzsche and Adorno, and inspired films by Cecil B. DeMille (1915), Ernst Lubitsch (1918), Francesco Rosi, Jean-Luc Godard, Peter Brook, and Carlos Saura (all from 1983-84), to name only an illustrious few.

In fact, the Carmen story is one of the Western tradition’s most foundational myths (or seductions) on par with the Don Juan or Faustian legends and associated with such over-arching themes as freedom, alterity, exoticism, passion, sexuality, modernity, and cultural appropriation.

Both a historically situated and timeless cultural tale, the imaginative power of the exotic seductress is not enough to account for the myth’s excessive reproduction in almost every artistic medium from literature, to music, painting, theater and film, as well as a host of critical texts that interpret those reproductions. One objective of this chapter will be to explore the significance of the myth of Carmen and what makes the figure such a compelling symbolic force in literary and artistic production. I will illustrate how, through a set of aesthetic tropes and conventions first formulated by Mérimée in his creation of the character of Carmen, this female figure provides a foundation to the myth of the femme fatale which then makes possible the proliferation of similar female figures in artistic production since the late nineteenth century. My argument is that all of the ‘modern’ versions of the femme fatale, namely the ones which come after Mérimée, in some way have the figure of Carmen at their conception. As with any literary trope or thematological figure, there is an identifiable formula for the representation of the figure consisting of a set of conventions which give her her status as femme fatale. In essence, they are, but are not limited to, the following: an exotic aestheticism that is an integral part of the figure’s portrayal; a transgressive sexuality (which distinguishes her, as I will demonstrate in a subsequent chapter, from the late nineteenth-century, ‘decadent’ versions of her appearance); a remarkable physical beauty combined with a seductive, but inherently deceptive (and in many cases, indifferent) nature which causes those around her to transgress individual or societal norms; and lastly, the need to eliminate her in every case in order to reassert patriarchal authority and control.
The second objective of my analysis will be to look at some of the more notable critical interventions to the story (either Mérimée’s or its most famous offspring, Bizet’s opera) in order to investigate how the criticism of the Carmen material relies on the very same notion of seduction and desire that is so famously played out in the tale of Carmen itself. Through a discussion of Mérimée’s novella, together with a selection of critical references to the Carmen material, this analysis attempts to unravel the myth’s cultural and theoretical importance for both the representation of the modern femme fatale and for what concerns mythical constructions in art and literature and their equally significant critical interventions. In this way, something akin to a ‘theory of seduction’ will emerge that may help to explain the symbolic force of one of the Western tradition’s most significant cultural myths.

It bears noting that while originally based on an anecdote told to Prosper Mérimée by a friend, the Countess Eugenia Montijo, the figure of Carmen is not based in reality but is a fictional character conceived by the foreign imagination of a Frenchman whose travels in Spain in the 1830s were the basis for his representation. But Mérimée was also responding to the mostly French expectations of the Spanish grounded in the exotic aestheticism (“Orientalism”) of the late nineteenth century.

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18 The literary origins of the Carmen myth curiously turn out to be questionable themselves when one looks further into Mérimée’s own attempt to posit origins and create a literary history out of an oral tradition. Mérimée published an adapted translation of Pushkin’s epic poem The Gypsies in 1852 (originally published in 1827) which some critics have argued could be the origin of the story of Carmen, even if Mérimée himself always maintained that its origin was an anecdote recounted to him by the Spanish countess Eugenia de Montijo. This claim is pursued by some critics who argue that perhaps he was effecting some sort of hybridization of fiction and history that was so popular in the nineteenth century, combined with his obsession with historical claims to truth. This claim, along with Mérimée’s translation of the Pushkin poem and his earlier work on a version of the Don Juan story (Les Ames du Purgatoire), would need to be pursued in further detail but are outside the scope of this project. For this background I refer to a footnote by Evlyn Gould whose book, The Fate of Carmen (Johns Hopkins UP, 1996) has been useful for my own work on the subject. Hereafter I will refer to Gould’s book as Fate.
Nevertheless, Carmen is fully as much a construction of the French (or European) expectations of otherness as she is a symbol of desire and liberation, of rebelliousness and a transgressive sexuality, inextricably linked to notions of the exotic so readily available in the art and literature of the period. Indeed, her character is highly readable in terms of a semiotic exploitation of exotic codes (to which I will return) that make Carmen an archetype for all subsequent versions of the femme fatale found in European and American cultural production.

Ironically, reactions to the premiere of Bizet's *Carmen* of 1874 (the adaptation that made the story famous) were decidedly negative due to the unfamiliarity of the new musical style and the explicit portrayal of female sexuality in the opera. Now, however, the familiarity of the Carmen story—and consequently with the myth of the femme fatale—may be precisely what prevents us from approaching it with the seriousness it deserves. Of course, much of the figure's significance is directly related to the specific cultural and social preoccupations of the late nineteenth century, the femme fatale being one of the period's most obsessionl themes. But there is an aspect of the Carmen myth which transcends nationality and historical context and which has made of her an archetypal figure which continues to fascinate and trouble the imagination some 150 years after the publication of Mérimée's novella. The tale is overloaded—and perhaps overdetermined—with issues of race, class, and gender, as well as with the

19 For a close reading of the opera, its musical structure and effects, see Susan McClary, from the Cambridge Opera Handbook, *George Bizet: Carmen*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Particularly helpful from the standpoint of the diverse musical elements Bizet exploited are chapter 4, "The musical languages of Carmen", as well as her close reading of the opera in chapter 5, "Synopsis and analysis." See also her discussion of race, class and gender in the Carmen story. This work will hereafter be referred to as *Bizet*.

20 This has already been alluded to by Susan McClary and Peter Robinson, *Bizet*, Introduction.
particular nineteenth-century cultural ambivalences concerning women. However, related to these concerns are the discourses of seduction and desire which may prove to be even more compelling forces in their own right and which may account for the myth's continued attraction for artists, audiences and critics alike.

Written in the period in which history was first recognized as a profession, having been recently founded as a discipline at the Sorbonne in 1812, and in which historians were staking themselves out as scientists in opposition to literature, Carmen (1845) is a curious novella which seems to waver between a work of imaginative fiction and an academic treatise on the Gypsies. In Metahistory, Hayden White explores this new sense of historical consciousness in nineteenth-century Europe which caused the intense scrutiny of the boundaries between literature and history as purveyors of the existential 'truths' of modern times. Mérimée himself seems to have been confused about the nature of his own work, as is illustrated in the enigmatic late edition of a fourth and final chapter to the story which has done nothing but confuse critics ever since it was added in 1847. As noted above, Carmen ostensibly originated in an anecdote recounted to Mérimée in 1830, but over the ensuing fifteen years the tale grew with the addition of impressions of his travels in Spain, his own personal experiences of perceived 'ethnic' groups, and information gleaned from his wide reading in Spanish literature, in Roman history, and on the

21 Hayden White, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). White notes that the discipline of history was founded at the Sorbonne in 1812 and that it was followed by the growing popularity of historical societies such as the Ecole des Chartres founded in 1821 (136).

22 Evlyn Gould notes that "one might even argue that Carmen’s fourth chapter was added in 1847 as a moral evaluation to make the historical value of the tale more evident and to tame down the alluring appeal of the socially and politically radical, if fictitious, bohemians" (Fate, 192).
This generic uncertainty, together with the preoccupations of the period regarding boundaries whether disciplinary, cultural, geographical or otherwise, lends the novel an overall sense of undecidability and openness. And, while the author intends to write of uncontrollable passions and criminality, an ironic detachment reigns throughout his narrative that dramatizes Mérimée’s own self-conscious efforts at restraint while also contributing to the air of seduction and intrigue that surrounds the story and its most famous heroine.

Thus there is a general sense of ambiguousness and undecidability pertaining to the Carmen novella, with its crossing between the two genres of historical chronicle and novel, the moral irresoluteness of its author, and the implications of the many cultural and ideological assumptions, i.e., the problematic exoticism of a large number of fantasies involving race, class, and gender that circulated in nineteenth-century French culture. What lies behind the various interpretations of the story, however, is the issue of the construction of a mythical figure—in this case, one that has been symbolically determined over its long tradition of representation in art and literature—of the destructive femme fatale, purveyor of a transgressive sexuality and amoral liberties, and henceforth almost always linked to representations of the exotic. Not unrelated to this is a vague notion that always accompanies the figure of Carmen in her association with ‘nature’ and ‘the natural.’ It is a figure which seems to have always already existed in art and literature, one which, despite its being situated in a specific historical and social context, is given a timeless, mythical quality that ensures its place in the history of Western art.

23 Nicholas Jotcham, in the Introduction to Prosper Mérimée, Carmen and Other Stories, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). All references to the text are from this translation.
Perhaps because of its enormous popularity and the renewability of the myth, it is the Carmen of Bizet's opera which is usually the starting point for any discussion of this most famous mythical heroine, while her origin in Mérimée's novella is often overlooked. For example, Susan McClary's work on the opera endeavors to uncover the unrecognized aspects of a musical discourse that is culturally and sexually determined and determining. But she explores only examples of modern Carmens that borrow Bizet's score. Most of the discussion of the opera's literary origins is limited to an opening chapter by Peter Robinson which underscores the nineteenth-century sexual dynamics of narrative in Mérimée's text. While both of these are important contributions to the rather small body of published work that exists on the Carmen theme, they remain, as Evlyn Gould notes, within the two recent tendencies in Carmen studies: focus on the musical debt and focus on the "bad-girl myth" (Fate, 13).

However, in order to understand the figure's continued importance in artistic production, it is necessary to go back to the literary origins of the Carmen myth as well as to locate the story within a larger context of cultural production which effectively made the Carmen figure synonymous with the notion of the femme fatale itself, giving a foundation to the set of aesthetic tropes that have now become inseparable from all versions of the story and of the femme fatale genre as whole. It is this element of the transcendent value of certain texts and motifs which continue to repeat themselves (not unlike the Don Juan story) that reveals a seduction at work on various levels and which also serves to guarantee their sustainability as literary and popular figures in the Western tradition. Moreover, as I will illustrate here, that same
seduction and desire that guarantees Carmen’s place in the history of foundational
cultural myths is also operating on the level of the criticism of this often-cited
literary tale of seduction and betrayal. In other words, the same desire on the part of
the critics of Carmen to understand the figure and to give her a raison d’être can be
located within the story itself in that aspect of Carmen’s character that kindles both
fascination and suspicion and which constitutes the troubling element of the figure
both within the story and in its critical reception.

The novella

With its division into four chapters, Mérimée’s novella follows the rhetorical
rules for historical narrative identified by White24 as: research (chapter one,
including the background for the story in which the author sets up his tale as part of a
larger anthropological or ethnographic project); chronicle (chapter two, the
recounting of the part of the story in which the narrator establishes his moral
caracter and legitimizes himself as a reliable researcher); emplotment (chapter
three, in which Don José takes over the discursive function of storyteller, his story
possessing a beginning, middle, and an end and in which the actual story of the well-
known seduction occurs); and finally, evaluation, or moral judgement (an ideological
argument in White, which could apply to the added fourth chapter which transforms
the historical chronicle into a historical narrative). The use of the literary device of
the framed narrative and its implications for the text’s oscillation between historical
chronicle and novel is one of the most problematic aspects of the text and one which
pertains to the story, although in different forms, in all of its various adaptations (i.e.,

24 Metahistory, Ibid., p. 5-42.
the conflict between music and spoken dialogue in Bizet; or between choreographic and film narrative in Saura’s version; or even the constant splicing of sound and images in Godard’s *Prénom Carmen*, for example.\(^{25}\)

We are uncertain, from the start of the novella, whether the narrator is an amateur historian, a geographer, an archaeologist, an ethnographer, or merely a storyteller, since his goals are varied. First, he claims to set out to correct the work of geographers, but also of “official historians” through on-site fieldwork, as to the location of Caesar’s last battle. The reference to Caesar is not irrelevant to the story insofar as it establishes the narrator’s authority and situates him in a tradition of historical writing by citing a classical subject. In addition to this reference, the story begins with a provocative, scholarly epigraph that gives *Carmen* its decidedly misogynistic twist and, as Peter Robinson points out (*Bizet*, 4), may also be a sign of gender exclusion, since it is written in Greek and not translated—undoubtedly aimed at the educated white men, members of the professoriate, who would have been Mérimée's intended readers.

The citation is from Palladas, also a historian: “Every woman is bitter as bile, but each has two good moments, one in bed and the other in the grave.” This is the first seduction—one which lies outside the story and which is so deeply rooted in its own set of cultural preoccupations—but for which the author seems to be claiming the story of Carmen offers a kind of justification. In addition to setting the tone and revealing at least one of the author’s anxieties (about his views on women)

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\(^{25}\) For an insightful and interesting look at Godard’s film and the way in which it unconventionally uses image and sound in relation to tragedy, see Ronald Bogue, “Tragedy, Sight and Sound: The Birth of Godard’s *Prénom Carmen* from the Nietzschean Spirit of Music,” (presented at the 2001 ACLA conference, San Juan, P.R.).
underlying the tale that will follow, this epigraph also serves as the backbone of logic for the writing of historical chronicle which the author continually tries to reinforce, despite the destabilizing effects of the subject and of the narrative itself which he tries to represent as having the order of a chronicle. Thus the motivation for the chronicle is complicated from the outset by the self-conscious form of the frame narrative, or the story within the story. In fact, it could be argued that the same seduction to which the author/narrator is responding in the story of Carmen (that famous tale of the lover who succumbs to the seductions of a Gypsy only to endanger his career and then kill the source of his troubles) is repeated outside the frame of the story, setting up a curious formal parallel between the framing narrative and what is being framed. To complicate things even more, the seduction exerted upon the reader of the Carmen tale is very similar, if not identical, to the one being exploited by the author in the service of a representational construct that needs the myth of the femme fatale in order to be effective.

Aside from the formal complications, on the level of content, the geography project soon becomes an effort at cultural geography, and gradually, a study of the customs of Andalusia and ultimately, of the Gypsies of southern Spain. It seems obvious that the ethnographic project is the real motivation for his travels in Spain, despite the author/narrator's attempt at legitimizing his motives and attaining a level of objectivity and reliability that come with the pretense of academic historiography. In this way, the "persistent irresoluteness" of Mérimée's Carmen alluded to by Gould in her description of the novella (to which I will return) as an "ideal version of bohemian, or oppositional, narrative" (Fate, 60), becomes pertinent in light of the
ideological implications of the new practice of historical narrative—a practice that, according to White, became charged with the ambivalent political intensities of the French on the eve of 1848. During this period, he argues, the liberal ideals of the Revolution were clashing boldly with a new, reactionary conservatism and dividing the suddenly powerful bourgeois into bohemian and bourgeois sensibilities.

The first encounter with his “subject” occurs after the narrator has situated himself and his guide in the high plains of Córdoba. The encounter is with a ‘noble stranger’ whom the historian, upon hearing the stranger’s accent, refers to as a “traveler like myself, though one less interested in archaeology” (3). Due to his knowledge of Spanish culture, he quickly establishes a cultural fraternity with the stranger which allows him to conduct a detailed study of the physiognomy and linguistic habits of his specimen. His cultivated distance from this new object of study is underscored through his use of explanatory footnotes such as the one explaining how “the Andalusians lisp the s […] One can recognize an Andalusian merely by the way he pronounces the word señor” (3).

In fact, language becomes a significant marker of the story and often informs the narrator’s discourse of mastery and control at the same time as it represents one of the most threatening aspects of Carmen’s character since she is the only one capable of speaking everyone’s language: that of the narrator, the Gypsies, the Spanish and the Basque, the region of Don José. However, it is the French narrator who possesses the keys to unlock the secrets of the many languages invoked in the


story (there no fewer than seven: Basque, English, French, Greek, Romany, Latin, and Spanish). He plays the role of master translator throughout the story, providing at least 40 footnotes that translate expressions, explain details of local color, and sometimes elucidate metaphors whose meaning is obvious. Significantly, however, the Greek epigraph which opens the story is the only thing left untranslated, perhaps, as referred to above, revealing the author’s exclusionary tactics, but more generally, inserting him within the larger tradition of fear of female sexuality, a fear that is consistent within the history of Western literature, but of particular interest to the nineteenth-century European imagination.28

At first the narrator thinks he may have encountered a “real brigand” and is cautious in his behavior. Then, upon closer observation of the stranger, he determines him to be the celebrated criminal and infamous bandit, José-Maria. As a tourist with a penchant for glorifying the bohemian lifestyle of those on the fringe of society, the narrator is intrigued and naively charmed by the dangerous criminal. (It is not until the third chapter that the bandit is identified as Don José who will eventually meet and be seduced by Carmen and then kill her in a fit of jealousy).

With the encounter with the bandit, the narrator’s scholarly observation gives way to excited fascination, thus also revealing two modes of discourse related to Jerold Seigel’s sense of the relationship between the bourgeois and the bohemians. He insists that the two social identities are malleable, but that, as the bourgeoisie constitutes the bohemians as other, this also reveals the powerful attraction that the

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other exerts upon the bourgeois identity. In this way, the narrator's constantly shifting of public and private roles is enacted dramatically in a discursive scene that defines his own divided subjectivity:

Having considered my companion at length, I managed to see in him José-Maria's mug shot that I had seen posted on the doors of many cities in Andalusia. Yes, it is him alright: fair hair, blue eyes, large mouth, good teeth, small hands, a fine shirt, velvet jacket with silver buttons, white hide gaiters, a bay horse...No doubt about it! But (we) shall respect his incognito (6).

The narrator is excited to have encountered some real local color and has forgotten his earlier, more realistic appraisal of the stranger as "a traveler like me." Now he has become almost an accomplice (the French reads "mais respectons son incognito," an injunction to his implied reader to join him in his fraternal infraction) which, while continually demarcating the Gypsy bandit as other, also brings the narrator closer to his more exciting world. This double move destabilizes the narrator's own subjectivity and exposes him to 'dangerous bohemian activities,' insofar as Bohemia is synonymous during 1845-1847 with a countercultural revolutionary spirit which he finds both attractive and threatening.

Through the framed narrative, as well as through the narrator's oscillation between recounting a tale (historical chronicle), and the narrativizing of that tale (the author's own moral appraisals throughout the story), the problematic status of the speaking subject is constantly put into question. As we will see, this has implications both for the seduction taking place for Mérimée's narrator, as well as

29 Seigel, Ibid., p 9-10.
for the critical act of interpreting that seduction. Evlyn Gould’s interpretation offers one example:

Whereas the *Carmen* chronicle offered a series of more or less plausible events in which one thing literally led to another, the *Carmen* narrative becomes a tale of desire and of human degradation primarily concerned with the nefarious effects of bohemian life on the moral fabric of modern society [...] In following the rules of the new historical narrative and leading us to a predictable moral conclusion, however, *Carmen* also dramatizes the ways in which the integrity of a historical consciousness may be *unconsciously revolutionized* by the destructive forces it seeks to control (*Fate*, 67-68, my italics).

This seems clear given Jerold Seigel’s definition (echoed by Gould) of Bohemia as an ambiguous cultural phenomenon associated both with revolutionary spirit and with a reinforcement of bourgeois values (Seigel 7-11, as quoted by Gould, 68). But this definition of the revolutionary values of Bohemia (itself too much assumed in Gould’s analysis as a general ideal, rather than a geographical place) is reasonably consistent with almost any ‘countercultural’ phenomenon which can be seen as having some reactionary as well as revolutionary effects on the given society in which it occurs. This may in fact be a prerequisite of any, in Gould’s terms, “bohemian narrative,”30 but whether “unconscious revolutionary forces” can be seen to be operating in Mérimée’s text seems a bit harder to prove. Instead, what is

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30 In the introduction to her book on Carmen, Gould notes that she “coins the expression ‘bohemian narrative’ in order to suggest [...] that, as a dramatization of bourgeois social identity, we can locate in Bohemia a nineteenth-century source of current preoccupations with cultural identity growing out of the French Revolution and continuing through the twentieth century to produce both actual and virtual instances of bohemian behavior” (*Fate*, 4).
revealed in Gould's analysis of the Carmen material throughout her discussion, whether it be of the novella, the opera, or of the more recent Carmen films of the 1980s, is her own critical act as enacting a seduction of sorts around the Carmen story and its relationship to an ambiguous "bohemian" sensibility. Thus, the seduction here becomes the lure of the bohemian, every bit as enticing to the critic as it is, within the context of the story, to the French traveler/narrator.

But returning to Mérimée's text, the narrator's mixture of excitement and fascination—the discourse of desire—runs throughout the text in almost every encounter he has with the "exotic" which he locates in the context of the Gypsies and bandits populating the hinterlands of Spain. But, although he comes to find common ground with the male bandit in his fraternal sharing of food and a cigar ("in Spain, a cigar offered and accepted establishes relations of hospitality"[4]), it is Carmen who clearly embodies all of the author's fantasies of alterity: as "Oriental," as menacing worker, as lawless criminal, and as femme fatale. Her world proves much harder to penetrate and it is only through the indirect discourse of the story within the story that the narrator has access (and allows the reader access) to the Carmen tale.

The second encounter with the Gypsies is the one in which the narrator's voyeuristic desire is sublimated through the poetic description of a "particularly noteworthy spectacle" (11). The description, however, is preceded by the narrator's re-establishing of his authoritative and scholarly identity after the encounter with José in chapter one by maintaining that he has returned to his research at the Dominican library in Córdoba. This assertion is followed immediately by the
“spectacle” of thinly clad working women bathing at the banks of the Guadalquivir river:

A few minutes before the angelus a large number of women gather at the river’s edge below the street, which is on a fairly high embankment. No man would venture to mingle with that company.

As soon as the angelus has been rung, night is deemed to have fallen. At the last stroke of the bell all these women remove their clothes and leap into the water. A pandemonium of laughter and shouts ensues.

From the street above, the men gaze at the bathers, peering in a vain attempt to see what is going on. Yet those white and indistinct forms visible against the dark azure of the river set poetic minds at work, and with a little effort it is not difficult to imagine one is watching Diana and her nymphs bathing, without the risk of incurring the fate of Actaeon (11-12).

In this description the infernal noise-making of women bathing (“no man would venture to mingle with that company”) becomes a poetic vision of the goddess Diana and her nymphs. Both the erotic and the political force of these female workers (for they are Carmen’s co-workers from the tobacco factory as we will subsequently be informed) is tamed by a poetic reading of mythic proportions. But, although it serves to reinsure the objective distance of the historian’s discourse, it also works to hide the energetic, if disavowed, work of desire.

As an introduction to the real seduction that is about to take place, this encounter with the bathers is a prelude to the narrator’s encounter with Carmen. In a
way it is also a repetition of the encounter with the bandit, José, although now with decidedly sexual overtones. It is the strange, and once again, “savage” beauty of this Gypsy which charms and finally seduces the narrator: “She had a strange, wild beauty, a face that was disconcerting at first, but unforgettable” (14). And, just as José reminds him of Milton’s Satan, Carmen appears as a “sorceress,” a “servant of the devil” (15). He smokes with Carmen, as he did with José, and eats with her, thereby allowing himself to be ‘corrupted’ by her charms but, in his own mind also somehow accepted by the excitingly transgressive group to which she belongs.

But though the jasmine in her hair is “intoxicating” and her beauty alluring, the historian makes excuses and continually tries to stave off desire by punctuating his thoughts with footnotes as if to deny the seduction that he knows is taking place. However, the footnotes are loaded with generalizations and misrepresentations concerning Gypsies and Spaniards in general, reinforcing the narrator’s need to retain his scholarly distance while succumbing to the seductive charms of the exotic femme fatale: “At that time I was such an unbeliever that I did not recoil in horror at finding myself in the presence of a witch. Very well, I said to myself; last week I dined with a highwayman, so today why not eat ice cream with a servant of the devil? A traveler should try to see everything” (14).

But, as if to justify his being charmed by an ‘uncivilized’ Gypsy woman, the narrator attempts to locate her within his own determining discourse which circumscribes his notion of Spaniards as well as other ‘exotic Europeans’: “I very much doubt that Señorita Carmen was of pure Gypsy stock; at any rate, she was infinitely prettier than any other woman of her race I had ever encountered” (14);
and, as he will note in the added fourth chapter: “In Germany the Gypsy girls are often very pretty, but beauty is a truly rare attribute among the *gitanas* of Spain” (334). Thus, despite the enormous variety of physical attributes of the Gypsies given their ethnically diverse heritage, we are only given what will become the stereotypical representation of the sultry, dark, (incorrectly identified as) Spanish beauty so often drawn upon in any of the numerous representations of Carmen following Mérimée.

Equally relevant for what concerns the portrayal of the femme fatale first conceptualized by Mérimée, is the association of Carmen with a remarkable physical beauty, however “imperfect” that beauty may be. This becomes one of the fundamental aesthetic tropes of the femme fatale in all of its reincarnations regardless of national tradition, origin, or artistic medium. A femme fatale can be more or less of a destructive agent or victim of an inexorable fate, depending on the particularities of the context in which she appears, but one thing she cannot be is unattractive. Moreover, it should be emphasized that this particular notion of beauty which takes shape in the character of Carmen is inextricably tied to the context of nineteenth-century French exoticism (and, I would argue, to a Eurocentric notion of ethnicity in general) and then subsequently reinforced in all modern versions of the Carmen story or its many related myths. In this way, Mérimée’s description of Carmen’s physical attributes lays the foundation for all the subsequent ‘Carmens’ (and, by extension, all femmes fatales) to come:

Her skin, though perfectly smooth, was nearly the color of copper.

Her eyes were slanting, but remarkably wide; her lips rather full, but
finely chiseled, affording a glimpse of teeth whiter than blanched almonds. Her hair, perhaps rather coarse, and black with a blue sheen like a raven’s wing, was long and shining. I will sum her up by saying that for every fault she had a quality that was perhaps all the more striking from the contrast […] Her eyes in particular had an expression, at once voluptuous and fierce, that I have never seen on any human face. ‘Gypsy’s eye, wolf’s eye’ is a phrase Spaniards apply to people with keen powers of observation. If you don’t have time to visit the zoo […] watch your cat when it is stalking a sparrow (14-15).

First, there are no fewer than four different animals referenced in this description of Carmen, the implication being that her ‘animal magnetism’ and animalistic qualities are a large part of what makes her both intriguing and dangerous for the male imagination. Of course it is nothing new to associate powerful or threatening women with animals; Freud clearly saw the parallel and makes much of the association in his 1914 essay, “On Narcissism,” in which he compares the “narcissistic woman” (a type of woman whose “importance for the erotic life of mankind,” he claims, “is to be rated very high” [89]) to children, great birds of prey and cats, humorists, and criminals. In fact, Mérimée’s Carmen could be said to possess all of the qualities of Freud’s ‘narcissistic woman’—the raven, the sparrow and the cat, as seen in this quotation; in addition to Carmen’s description in the novel as “childlike” in her fickleness and love of sweets; her keen linguistic abilities; and lastly, her special skills in the area of smuggling, stealing, lying, and fighting. Perhaps Freud’s
particular insight into this special type of woman that interests men the most—"probably the purest and truest one," (88) he argues, was already there in literary form in the character of Carmen. Whether or not this reflects the unconscious forces of the imagination at work, as he will argue in much of his writings on literature, is a topic for a different discussion.

Secondly, and more relevant for my purposes, is the exotic aestheticism underlying Mérimée’s description of Carmen and its implications for the images of transgressive ethnic alterity fostered by works such as Carmen. This will be an important aspect of the story for many contemporary Spanish artists, including filmmaker Carlos Saura,31 in their attempts to deal with the centuries of European illusions about Spain and Spanishness, as well as the general European and Spanish national ambivalence about Gypsies and the history of their problematic cultural representation. As Carlos Serrano notes in his recent book on the myth of Carmen, "Este nombre […] ha acompañado a los españoles a lo largo de todo su historia contemporánea, convirtiéndose, con el tiempo y para un tiempo, en un signo de identidad de la española por antonimasia y, a través de ella, de España misma” ["The name Carmen has accompanied the Spanish throughout history, converting itself, over time, into a sign of Spanish identity, and through it, of Spain itself” (my translation)].32 But this history of the misrepresentation of Spain and its demarcation

31 Carlos Saura’s film adaptation, Carmen (1984), adapts both the Carmen story and the formal dynamics of its two models: Mérimée’s novella and Bizet’s opera.
32 Carlos Serrano, Nacimiento de Carmen: Simbolos, mitos y nación. (Madrid: Grupo Santillana, 1999), 54, in which Serrano researches the origins of the name Carmen which he notes goes back to the beginning of the 13th century but which was popularized by 19th-century religious devotions to ‘la Virgen de Carmen,’ which, interestingly, he traces to a sanctuary located in Israel dedicated to “la madre de Dios del Monte Carmelo” whose name comes from the Hebrew word ‘karmel’ or garden. In Castillian the name then became ‘Carme’ and then ‘Carmen’, which in Latin means ‘poetic verse or composition.’
as the ‘exotic Other’ of Europe fostered by works such as Mérimée’s *Carmen* and others of the period (the engravings of Gypsies by Davillier and Doré, or the travel writings of George Borrow, for example) has not been unproblematic from the point of view of the formation of Spanish national identity in the twentieth century and beyond. (This is especially true in light of France’s and Spain’s collaboration in the creation of a pan-European Community during the 1980s and 1990s, also the period in which a renewed interest in the Carmen story is evident from the proliferation of remakes, mostly cinematic, during this time).

Thus, the foreign depiction of Spain in nineteenth-century Europe, together with the fascination of the period with the mystique of the Orient and characterization of Gypsies as the domestic Other, played an important role in the romanticized European version of Gypsies and Spanishness which still exists today. Indeed, it is precisely this false Spanish national identity appropriated by European travelers and artists with which contemporary Spanish writers and filmmakers struggle in their diverse depictions of Spanish national identity. The false images of Spain which contemporary artists attempt to correct, reconcile or problematize in their work point to a kind of double colonization of the Spaniard both from within Spain and without. According to film critic Marvin D’Lugo (1991) in his work on the films of Carlos Saura:

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Spaniards, having come under the spell of the foreign, imposter impressions of Spain, find themselves seduced by this falsification of their own cultural past. The creative artist, bereft of any authentic tradition with which to identify, and situated within an artistic milieu he does not even discern as colonized by a specious foreign mentality toward Spain, only repeats the models of that fraudulent Spanishness in his own works and perceptions (203).

It is this notion of "fraudulent Spanishness" that, as stated earlier, forms the basis for much of the modern attempts to deal with the myth of Carmen as they repeatedly attempt to put these aspects of her famous French representation into question.

But one aspect of this discourse not dealt with extensively by critics of the Carmen story (of whom Gould and McClary are the two most significant dealing exclusively with the novella or the opera) is the extent to which this notion of exotic otherness is inextricably tied to the representation of a transgressive ethnic sexuality that is perceived as dangerous but ultimately highly seductive for both readers and critics. In other words, it is precisely because she is 'exotically ethnic' that Carmen is perceived as such a threat, but her association with alterity and exotic excess is also the aspect of her character that kindles such fascination and appeal and which continues to drive the seduction narrative. It is this unassimilatable—and hence

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34 Gould does mention in various places the dynamics of the narrative which point to the transgressive nature of the work that is tied to sexuality, however she limits most of her discussion to those aspects of the work which deal with issues of historiography and the ideological complexities of narrative. McClary has a chapter on the intersection of race, class, and gender in the opera, but most of the work centers on the music and a detailed analysis of its form and effects from a musicologist’s perspective, rendering issues of gender and sexuality secondary to her concerns, except for in the brief introduction to the book already noted above by Peter Robinson.

35 Of course this is nothing new. It bears mentioning that the fascination with ‘the Orient’ on the part of the West (Europe and America) which reached its high point in the late nineteenth century and
threatening—sexuality that is inextricably tied to ethnicity which is the cornerstone of the depiction of Mérimée’s Carmen, which then becomes the inspiration for Bizet’s opera—the vehicle by which the figure of Carmen could be said to have been popularized once and for all.

I will return to the discussion of the opera shortly, but first a brief digression will serve to illustrate the importance of the particular representational constructs that Mérimée put into play in the character of Carmen for the history of femme fatale figures both literary and cinematic. In the decades following the publication of Mérimée’s *Carmen*, a veritable barrage of films and narratives with an exotic femme fatale theme emerged, eventually leading to the first wave of the figure’s appearance in America in the Hollywood film production of the 1910s and 1920s, and then again in the post-war period of the 1940s. This first instance made famous the American film version of the Italian cinematic ‘diva’ (discussed here in chapter three), otherwise known as the ‘vamp.’ However, in the interest of clarifying the terms and their associated dates, the particular female figure of the ‘vamp’ in American cinema (from vampire, of course, and not irrelevant in the context of this discussion on ethnic origins as we will see) predates the actual ‘femme fatale’ of *Noir* film which is identified as a post-World War II phenomenon, roughly the period between 1941 and

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which many, including of course, Edward Said (*Orientalism*, 1978) have commented on extensively, has enjoyed a recent revival. This is evident if one looks at architectural, interior design, or fashion magazines (even a recent New York Times article (Jan. 29, 2004) on Moroccan design and style) in which everything Eastern is desirable: the cuisine, the music, the lifestyle, the philosophy, the design and clothing or ‘look’ of the East-meets-West character of, for example, Morocco which is becoming one of the most trendy tourist destinations in the world. This, despite the perceived tension and ‘threat’ that many believe is now attached to places with a large Arab population because of recent military interventions in the East by the West. This suggests to me that the fascination with the Orient is always accompanied—and in fact rendered all the more exciting and thus seductively transgressive—by the existence of a perceived danger or imminent threat (political, physical or cultural).
Meanwhile, the “golden era” of the vamp (1915-1919), was launched when Theda Bara appeared in *A Fool There Was* (dir. Frank Powell, 1914). Moreover, while the femme fatale of film *noir* is associated with the ‘New Woman’ in the post-World War II United States, that is “middle-aged, middle-class, employed, and married,” (as well as white and non-ethnic I would add) this is not the case with the vamp who more closely resembles the diversity of Carmen in her transgressive *ethnic* femininity.

In her article on the Polish-born actress Pola Negri, Diane Negra explores the reasons why the actress was “not successfully subsumed into operative Hollywood typologies of femininity” in the 1920s and argues that “Negri’s unincorporable status was largely a function of her resistant ethnicity” (Negri, 375). The fact that she was one of the actresses most associated with the figure of the vamp in early cinema makes her a particularly interesting figure for what concerns the status of ethnic female stars and their cultivation as markers for such cultural anxieties as changing sexual roles and gendered relations of power, imperial expansion, immigration, ethnic female labor, and American cultural unity in the early years of the twentieth century.

Like her predecessor, the figure of Carmen, the mythical vamp is associated with a destructive sexuality and a shadowy, mysterious past but is even more pernicious than that of her nineteenth-century counterpart in that she incorporates all

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36 These dates are given by Jans B. Wager in his book *Dangerous Dames: Women and Representation in the Weimar Street Film and Film Noir* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999) 73.
38 Wager, Ibid.
of the predatory aspects of the femme fatale but constitutes a threat not only to males who fall for her seduction, but to the larger cultural fabric of society as a whole. As Negra reminds us, “the vampire is almost always represented as in possession of a strange energy that seems to speak to both a sexual and a cultural threat” (382). She also notes that the cinematic vamp incarnated by actresses such as Theda Bara and Pola Negri, and others like them, either emanated from southern and eastern European countries or were given fictional biographies to suggest such origins (379). It should be recalled here that the question of national origin has always been pertinent to the femme fatale figure since Mérimée’s narrator, in guessing Carmen’s nationality, remarks: “ ‘I think you come from the land of Jesus (Andalusia)... Then you must be Moorish, or...’ I stopped, hardly daring to say ‘Jewish’” (Carmen, 13).

Thus, when Pola Negri emerged as a star in the making in the early 1920s, she represented “a problem of type” for Hollywood film critics as well as audiences of the time (383). Her German films, particularly those directed by Ernst Lubitsch (including the role of Carmen in Gypsy Blood (1918), a retelling of the Carmen story which made her famous for American audiences several years before her arrival in the United States in 1922), tended to emphasize her exotic image and won her international fame. However, in Hollywood this exotic image became the basis for the functional paradox that characterized both her exciting and transgressive allure, as well as led to the confusion on the part of audiences and critics as to how to classify her and, according to Negra, ultimately led to her lack of success in America:

Because she represented a problem of type, she was cast early on in vamp parts that were then undercut by the demands of “goodness
morality” in 1920s Hollywood. Nevertheless, throughout her Hollywood career, press accounts of Pola Negri consistently cast her as the vamp—unassimilatable in terms of both her sexuality and her ethnicity. Yet [...] Negri did not embody a single clear and distinctive ethnicity—rather she stood for a broader pan-ethnic threat. With her Italian surname, Polish ethnicity, and connection to the German film industry, Negri remained ethnically vague in the public imagination. [...] While other imported female film stars such as Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Ingrid Bergman would enjoy successful Hollywood careers by apparently balancing the stakes of exoticism and domesticity, with Negri this balancing act somehow never worked (376).

I refer to these American cinematic figures such as the ‘vamp’ in order to reiterate the importance of Carmen for their subsequent inventions and re-articulations of transgressive femininity. Of course, the connection between Carmen and the seductive forces of a primeval sexuality that is inherent in the representation of the ethnic female was not lost on any of the critics of either the novella or Bizet’s opera.

The opera

No other opera seems to have generated as much critical acclaim (after its initial lukewarm reception), than Bizet’s Carmen (1874). Perhaps the lure of the musical exoticism which the opera introduced to French and European audiences for
the first time is what attracted so many cultural critics, including Adorno and 
Nietzsche, for whom music played a secondary, yet not insignificant role in their 
respective philosophical works.

Indeed, the tension between desire for the exotic and fear of its seductive 
potency is a prominent marker of the cultural and literary tendencies of the 
nineteenth century, evident in the first two decades of the century in art and literature 
(in Flaubert, for example, and in the painting of Ingres) but which would then 
saturate the musical production, mainly opera, of the second half of the nineteenth 
century. Bizet’s opera (following the lead of Mérimée’s novella on which it was 
based), despite its connection with what was seen then as musical innovation and 
what we would now call “sampling” of different musical styles, both Western and 
non-Western, fits squarely within the Orientalist tendencies of the period noticeable 
in many of his contemporaries. As noted earlier, French artists in the first part of the 
nineteenth century began to manifest a profound fascination with things Middle 
Eastern. And, as Susan McClary points out, Victor Hugo defined the terrain and 
agenda of cultural “Orientalism” succinctly in the preface to his collection of poetry 

Les Orientales (1829):

The Orient, as image or as thought, has become, for the intelligence as 
well as for the imagination, a sort of general preoccupation which the 
author of this book has obeyed perhaps without his knowledge. 

Oriental colors came as of their own accord to imprint themselves on 
all his thoughts, all his dreams; and his dreams and his thoughts found 
themselves in turn, and almost without having wished it so, Hebraic,
Turkish, Greek, Persian, Arab, even Spanish, because Spain is still the Orient; Spain is half African, Africa is half Asiatic.\(^{39}\)

Two things are especially worthy of note here. First, Hugo describes his exploitation of the East in his poetry not as active volition, but rather as the East’s having *seduced* him into surrendering his Western rationality over to its agendas. Not unlike Don José (or Mérimée for that matter), he presents himself as having been lured against his will by the mystery and sensuality of the “Orient” and, presumably, this affected his poetic style and seeped into his aesthetic consciousness over which his otherwise rational logic of poetic tradition had no control.

Secondly, the statement above indicates the radical interchangeability of exotic types for the cultural Orientalist: Persian, Greek, Jewish, Spanish, African—all blend together in an undifferentiated realm of exotic otherness. This is the same kind of cultural lumping together of the barbarous and luxurious qualities which the Orientalist thought to be characteristic of the whole Middle East also found in the series of errors or mistaken identities in Bizet’s opera. The many fantasies of alterity represented in *Carmen* and in the character of Carmen as the opera’s bearer of exoticism and seductive femininity, are based on Bizet’s famous cultural ‘borrowings,’ all of which are revealed to be heavily mediated and not altogether correct—even in their existence as fantasies. The first one is the simple confusion—going back to Mérimée—to which I have already referred, of Carmen, a Gypsy, with Spanishness. Secondly, in terms of the music, much has been made of Carmen’s famous “Habanera” in Act I in which she sings the well-known lines, “l’amour est un oiseau rebelle, l’amour est un enfant de Bohème”—perhaps the most

\(^{39}\) As quoted by McClary, *Bizet*, 30.
celebrated melody of the opera. The “Habanera” is the first number in Carmen based on materials not originally by Bizet himself. Bizet modeled this on a Cuban-style song by a Spanish composer who was then popular in the cabarets.\(^{40}\) It lends a touch of “authentic” (rather than concocted) exoticism, even if its African-Latin origins scarcely seem appropriate for an opera set in Seville. As Susan McClary points out, “the actual signifying practices of ethnic musics matter little here, for what the European ear expected to hear in exotic music was its own image of difference: this music reinscribes not so much its ostensible musical model as European notions of what the Other is like” (Bizet, 54).

Thus Bizet’s lack of interest in imitating the “correct” ethnic musical style is another example of the errors put forth in the opera and then taken for granted by generations of audiences and critics alike. Additionally, this song-and-dance routine is one of the first instances in the opera in which we, the audience, as well as Don José, first get to know the character of Carmen. But the scene is ambiguously linked to her public persona—whether as performer or prostitute—in a way that affects the unfolding of the drama itself, but also, extradiegetically, of the seduction of the character of Carmen as well. The song’s persona freely celebrates sexual pleasure and promiscuity, but, as McClary is right to point out, is this the expression of Carmen herself (the character within the story), or is she just performing a number? This begs the question, do we ever have access to “Carmen herself,” or only to a stage persona? Does she strategically conceal herself behind her public image, and if so, is not this undecidability and, in fact, double layered representation one of the most seductively ambiguous aspects of her character (and of the story itself)?

\(^{40}\) McClary, ibid., 74.
Incidentally, it is at this point in the narrative of the story within the story—chapter three of the novella in which Don José is recounting the famous seduction—that he admits to effectively being seduced by Carmen: “It was that day, I think,” (the day he watches her dancing at the tavern, and the scene which corresponds to the Habanera in the opera) “that I fell in love with her in earnest,” (Carmen, 28). This suggests that much of her seductiveness comes from her position as performer, as she is most appealing to the male protagonist when she is singing and dancing. (Not unimportant here is the subtext of the long history of stereotypical representations of the Gypsies going back at least to the fifteenth century which is always linked to their existence as performers and entertainers).

This is translated effectively in the opera as Bizet strategically manipulates the score to fit with the exotic image of the Gypsy seductress and succeeds in creating a fittingly seductive piece of music which has the same effect on its listeners as Carmen has on her admirers. Again, from the musicologist’s perspective, McClary analyses the particular sounds and musical modulations that make up Carmen’s songs, most significantly the Habanera and later in Act I, her other important aria, the “Seguidilla.” McClary calls attention to those aspects of the songs that give her musical discourse (and consequently, her character) its “slippery, unpredictable, maddening, irresistible” (77) nature such as the “irregular triplets that strain against the beat, chromatic excess and erratic scales, the African-Latin rhythmic impulse that invites hip swings in response,” (76) and the “strange modal flavor reminiscent of flamenco music” (85). All of which combine to reveal Carmen as “an expert in seductive rhetoric...She knows how to hook and manipulate desire”
Clearly Bizet was responding to the same seductive qualities so evident in the character from the novella and evidently succeeded in translating all of the literary exotic codes employed by Mérimée into music and sound.

Consequently, these are the same aspects of Bizet’s opera that have for a long time seduced critics outside of France, especially in Germany. It was not only critics from the world of music who responded strongly to *Carmen*, although Brahms and Debussy along with Tchaikovsky, all had memorable things to say about the opera, but also critics who in some way responded philosophically (not to mention emotionally) to Bizet’s music. Nietzsche’s well-known account of *Carmen* appears in his 1888 essay, *The Case of Wagner*. While this essay is usually referred to for its attack on Wagner and Nietzsche’s use of Bizet as his musical antithesis, it is significant also for what it says about Nietzsche’s own proclivities as well as for what it reveals about the seduction taking place for him as a listener of the opera:

> Yesterday I heard—would you believe it?—Bizet’s masterpiece for the twentieth time. Again I stayed there with tender devotion; again I did not run away. This triumph over my impatience surprises me.

> How such a work makes one perfect! One becomes a ‘masterpiece’ oneself...

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41 According to McClary’s sources, Brahms is said to have ascribed *Carmen*’s greatness to its French qualities: “The French are the most cultured of the Latin countries,” he said, “and this is reflected in their masterpieces of literature, art and music.” And Tchaikovsky is reported as having written: “*Carmen* is a masterpiece in the full meaning of the word—that is, one of those rare pieces which are destined to reflect most strongly the musical aspirations of an entire epoch.” Both of these are quoted by McClary in *Bizet*, 116-117. She distinguishes between the early mostly negative reception the opera received in France which was very different from the high praise it received a year later when it debuted in Vienna. This, she suggests, was due to the particular concerns made relevant by the opera that were obvious only to the French such as the attack on the institution of the *Opera-comique* genre, the Orientalism linked with colonialism, and the bohemian lifestyle that still recalled the Commune in Paris. Thus, she argues, “the opera was finally only ‘understood’ when its premises, its materials, its sources were no longer entirely intelligible,” (116).
This music seems perfect to me. It approaches lightly, supplely, politely. It is pleasant, it does not sweat...

This music is evil, subtly fatalistic: at the same time it remains popular—its subtlety belongs to a race, not to an individual. It is rich. It is precise. It builds, organizes, finishes: thus it constitutes the opposite of the polyp in music, the “infinite melody.” Have more painful and tragic accents ever been heard on the stage? How are they achieved? Without grimaces. Without counterfeit. Without the lie of the great style...

Has it been noticed that music liberates the spirit? Gives wings to thought? That one becomes more of a philosopher the more one becomes a musician? ...

Bizet makes me fertile. Whatever is good makes me fertile...

This music is cheerful, but not in a French or German way. Its cheerfulness is African; fate hangs over it; its happiness is brief, sudden, without pardon. I envy Bizet for having had the courage for this sensibility which had hitherto had no language in the cultivated music of Europe—for this more southern, brown, burnt sensibility....And how soothingly the Moorish dance speaks to us? How even our insatiability for once gets to know satiety in this lascivious melancholy! [my italics].

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There are certain aspects of this commentary on Carmen which are relevant to my analysis. Some of them are beyond the scope of this project, such as Nietzsche’s well-known but problematic understanding of music and dance which informs much of his writings, particularly with regard to his study of tragedy and what he terms its “Dionysian spirit.” This is the same kind of nostalgia he evokes concerning music and its effects. It is a nostalgia based on a kind of idealization of music and dance—perhaps because they are the antithesis of verbal expression—which, as is exemplified throughout his work, is what gives existence an aesthetic dimension.

But, in his appraisal of the instinctual drives and the subjectivity of music which “makes a philosopher more of a philosopher,” there is something uneasily contradictory that belies the excessive praise or exaltation of music and resembles more an anxiety (to which he gives philosophical import) but which he is constantly trying to deny. In other words, in his dismissal of Wagner as someone who “represents a great corruption of music” (166) (ostensibly due to what he sees as the ethics of Wagner’s aesthetic project), in favor of Bizet’s “cheerful”, “African” sensibility in Carmen, there is a curious contradiction here with regard to the inebriating effects of music and the concomitant “aestheticization” of politics suggested by this essay. This phenomenon of the ideological and transformative effects of music, termed the “Wagner effect” by critics, forms the background of Nietzsche’s discussion of Wagner in his famously incoherent and histrionic denunciation of Wagner’s “infinite melody.” But is he really condemning Wagner’s music for its ‘ideological effects’ in favor of a music that is meaningless and pretty?

Or, in his hyperbolic praise of *Carmen*, is he not also under the influence of some kind of seductive and compelling desire for cultural otherness which puts him squarely within the long tradition of mesmerized readers and listeners of *Carmen* since its first publication or performance?

In contrast to Wagner’s ‘decadence’—“he has made music sick” (164)—which in itself is a contradiction since much of Nietzsche’s writings can be seen to fit within a decadent sensibility, wrought as they are with contradiction and fragmented incoherence—Nietzsche views Bizet’s *Carmen* as a wonderfully healthy work.44 But on what grounds is this ‘healthy’ music conceptualized? He very clearly bases his exaltation of Bizet on what he sees as its supposedly ‘ethnic’ melodies, its decidedly non-European (or at least non-northern European) sensibility (hence his confusion of Moorish with African), and above all, on its “lascivious melancholy” which he attributes to the music’s association with dance and, paradoxically, what could be called its ‘exotic decadence’ (even though for Nietzsche, decadence is a disease that must be resisted for the sake of health and vitality [CW, 170]). It seems clear that, despite his assertion that the “Wagnerian ideal” be forcefully resisted, Nietzsche has also fallen victim to the intoxicating effects of music, in this case, to music that is different, a difference based on misguided cultural assumptions and generalities of style—in short, the hypnotic effects of ‘sensual,’ Mediterranean (i.e., Gypsy) music. On some level this effect is not lost on him either (though perhaps its similarity to the very thing he condemns in

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44 On Nietzsche’s problematic relationship to decadence see Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, 7-32.
Wagner is) when he adds: “You begin to see how much this music improves me?—“Il faut méditerraniser la musique” (159).

The seduction which takes place on the level of the music for Nietzsche as well as for others who have commented on the opera, is also accompanied by the thematic seduction which interprets the opera based on a certain ‘fatalistic’ conception of love and desire. In this way, the hypnotic effect of the music is translated into the more generalized hypnotic effects of the representation of destructive sexuality inherent in the Carmen material. Nietzsche writes:

Finally, love—love translated back into nature. Not the love of a “higher virgin”! But love as fatum, as fatality, cynical, innocent, cruel—and precisely in this a piece of nature. That love which is war in its means, and at bottom the deadly hatred of the sexes!—I know of no case where the tragic joke that constitutes the essence of love is expressed so strictly, translated with equal terror into a formula, as in Don José’s last cry which concludes the work:

“Yes, I have killed her, I—my adored Carmen!” (157-159).

If this is the height of philosophical expression (“such a conception of love [the only one worthy of a philosopher] is rare: it raises a work of art above thousands” [159]), then the implication is that the relationship between the sexes is one of fatalistic doom, and the deadly “essence of love” is based on the outcome of a “formula” which necessarily eliminates the woman as the element in the mix that makes love turn into hatred. Moreover, “nature” (by which he means female sexuality—a trope inherited by all of the critics of the Carmen story—and also a particularly prevalent
theme in representations of women in the nineteenth century) is synonymous with woman. The notion of the “natural passions” celebrated famously in the figure of Carmen is usually an aspect of the character taken for granted but, in fact, as a look at the century’s most celebrated representations of women will reveal (the background for my analysis in chapter two), Nietzsche is right in step with a whole history of misogynist fantasies of gender and sexuality which insist on viewing women as synonymous with nature and the passions, and therefore, in need of regulation and/or elimination.

Indeed, a few paragraphs later Nietzsche will argue, using other examples from opera as his justification, that, ultimately, “the danger for artists, for geniuses—[...]—is woman” (161). At the risk of oversimplifying the issue, the philosopher’s tenuous and problematic relationship to women which is evident in many of his works and has been commented upon extensively by critics, is what allows him to equate nature with woman—a nature that is decadent, based in famously Baudelairean terms, on the revulsion of the female body: “when we love a woman, we easily conceive a hatred for nature on account of all the repulsive natural functions to which every woman is subject” [The Gay Science, 122]). Of course, a consequence of Nietzsche’s extreme views on women is that there has

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45 Nietzsche’s view of women has been the subject of much critical attention in the wake of the discussion of the subject by Derrida in “La Question du style” (translated by Barbara Harlow as Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles [Chicago: Chicago U.P., 1979]). In this essay, Derrida insists on the irreducible plurality and heterogeneity of Nietzsche’s pronouncements on women. Nietzsche was, he says, “a little lost” in this matter of women, unable to organize his thoughts coherently,” in Nietzsche aujourd’hui? Vol. I (Paris, 1973), 267. Charles Bernheimer calls attention to Derrida’s own omission with regard to women in Nietzsche’s writings in “The Politics of Aversion in Theory” in Men Writing the Feminine, ed. Thais Morgan (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1994). Also useful for the background on the ‘question of woman’ in Nietzsche’s work are essays by Sarah Kofman, Luce Irigaray, and Gayatri Spivak.

46 “Woman is natural, that is to say, abominable,” Baudelaire remarks in “Mon coeur mis à nu,” Oeuvres complètes, 1272.
developed a problematic within Nietzschean criticism in general and in feminist theory in particular, more complicated than this analysis will permit. And while the case has been made for a more liberating, creative feminist understanding of this dilemma in Nietzsche’s writings, it remains a problematic for which there may not exist any easy critical approach. This is why my analysis aims to look at the examples in Nietzsche’s texts (of which Carmen is one of the most compelling) as a way of providing an alternate course through the complex set of values associated with the Nietzschean woman. Suffice it to say that the gender politics informing representations of the typical figure of female sexuality in nineteenth-century art and literature—the femme fatale—found an exemplary model in the texts and interpretations of the provocative story of Carmen.

The music of Carmen also found its way into the theoretical writings of Theodor Adorno, who, in a 1955 essay, “Fantasia sopra Carmen,” gives his reading of Nietzsche reading Carmen as well as his own analysis of the opera. It is a brief but exemplary piece of writing for what concerns this notion of the critical seduction of Carmen which I am arguing is a large part of what makes the story such a remarkable locus for the intersection of the myth, the issues at stake in the myth, the criticism of the myth, and finally, the criticism of the criticism. For what other work of art can be said to lay claim to such a multi-layered chain of interpretive

47 This is the subject of Janet Ward (Lungstrom’s) essay, “Nietzsche Writing Woman/Woman Writing Nietzsche,” in Nietzsche and the Feminine, Ed. Peter J. Burgard (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994) 135-157. In it she argues that there is a “creative potential to the Nietzschean sexual agon,” and that a “feminist self-empowerment is indeed attainable within the woman that Nietzsche creates—less in his societal or metaphorical images of her than in his discourse on the metonymic, antagonistic desire between the sexes” (137).

commentaries, all of them linked by the very aspect of the story which they attempt to explain (the work's exceptional quality) but which continues to compel still more commentaries by virtue of its existence as myth? It should be clear now that the act of seduction - literary, critical, mythical, cultural - is what is driving the chain of criticism on the Carmen theme, all of which tend to focus on the same few issues at stake in the material but which inevitably end up in the same mythologizing discourse revolving around notions such as fate and fatality, death, love, desire, and the fascination with female figures of enigmatic and mythical proportions.

Adorno's analysis, for example, ostensibly being offered as a commentary on the music, instead winds up interrogating the same 'seductive' themes which figure prominently in Nietzsche's essay which he uses as a sort of legitimizing reference throughout his reading of the opera. In fact, he liberally quotes Nietzsche's essay throughout his text, and never actually quotes the opera libretto or the novella itself. Adorno reads the opera and its issues primarily through the lens of one of its most outspoken commentators, as if to shore up his own analysis and place himself in the prestigious company of admirers of Bizet's masterpiece, without being aware of his being caught up in the same structure of musical seduction he tries to interpret. At times it almost becomes impossible to distinguish between the artistic production Carmen, and Nietzsche's and Adorno's mythical versions of that work—as the issues central to its plot are given form and content on the level of universal ideas and exaggerated tropes that refuse to see the opera as anything less than the supreme expression of the 'laws of nature.'
It is not surprising that the first of these mythical notions to appear in Adorno’s commentary is the one which seems to be an inescapable element of any criticism of Carmen: the idealization of the Gypsy lifestyle and Carmen as its alluring representative. “Our attention is drawn to her as an outcast, as a woman who has not been completely domesticated ...For Carmen is a gypsy,” (54) he writes. And the music of Act II, according to Adorno, expresses its “envy for the colorful and unfettered lives of those who are outlawed from the bourgeois world of work, condemned to hunger and rags and suspected of possessing all the happiness which the bourgeois world denies itself in its irrational rationality [...] This is how Nietzsche understood Carmen,” (54). It is also the same mythologizing discourse about Gypsies inherited from Mérimée and his contemporaries. Then he moves to what is for him the nodal point of the whole opera: the moment in Act III in which Carmen is read her cards by a fortune teller revealing her impending death. Here Adorno argues that Carmen’s lyric expressiveness is linked to her ethnicity and her existence as powerful and enigmatic seductress, rather than to Bizet’s exploitation of that representative construct in his musical composition. It is as if Carmen were no longer a fictional character conceived for the opera stage, but a real woman who represents the timeless and mythical qualities of the romanticized version of the Gypsies expressed in her song: “Classical grandeur survives even today in the Romance nations in an almost physical way; it has migrated into the objective spirit of their peoples...It is this moderation that can be learnt from the gypsy song...‘Semplice e ben misurato’ is how she begins, as naturally as Nature herself, who is preserved in her Mediterranean civilization” (59).
It is not such a stretch then when Adorno reads Carmen as the signifier of the 'gypsy peoples,' then as representing "Nature herself," and eventually, to Woman as metonymic substitution for "the primeval and pre-intellectual force of sexuality itself" (61). This, he argues, is the function of fate in Carmen, "the Fate which rules and which nothing can halt" (61). Thus, what seduces Adorno are the same kind of cultural associations based on questionable metaphorical substitutions (always linked to the discourse of 'fate' and ineluctability) which seduced so many others before him, including Nietzsche. In this way, he describes a process which replicates a familiar strategy of nineteenth-century misogyny: a threatening image of an enigmatic and indifferent woman is evoked only to be condemned and then reinvented as, in Nietzsche's terms, an "affirmative power, dissimulating, artistic, dionysiac" (265). It is this particular logic of a chain of metaphorical substitutions which allows for the kind of theorizing based on the fetishistic recourse to 'the natural' when dealing with questions of subjectivity and sexuality. Thus it is never a question of Carmen as a particular symbolic object—or literal reference—tied to the particular constructions of women and sexuality which she has inherited, but rather she inevitably evokes the naturalizing discourse which, as Barthes understood the process of myth, turns signifiers into instruments of meaning that then obscure the literal meaning of an image and establish "eternal reference" to something else.

However, this theorizing of the femme fatale which turns her into a metaphor for 'eternal reference' to fate and the natural passions is not limited to the nineteenth century or to disciplines such as music. One can find the example of Carmen in critical discourses where it may seem surprising to find it, such as in a recent text by
Slavoj Zizek. I refer to it because in addition to adding his own commentary on the myth of the femme fatale in an essay that deals with what he calls “the deadlock of symbolization” in ideological and artistic phenomena, Zizek mentions Adorno’s analysis of Carmen in the same way that Adorno referred to Nietzsche. Thus he effectively completes the chain of criticism that begins with Nietzsche, then Adorno reading Nietzsche, and finally, Zizek reading Adorno. The thread that runs throughout these writings is the figure of Carmen and her relationship to the host of theoretical issues she represents, not the least important of which is the issue of her existence as a well-known signifier, or in Zizek’s terms, as a “terrifying, devouring, exploitative object” (108).

For Zizek, the figure’s importance turns on the “exceptional character of the subjectivization of the femme fatale,” which for him is located in an idea he finds also in Adorno and which is embodied in an exemplary way in the figure of Carmen who, he argues, represents the “original passivity of the subject” (108):

What gives her power of fascination to the femme fatale is exclusively her place in masculine fantasy. The theoretical lesson that one should get from this is that subjectivization coincides with the experience of one’s own powerlessness, of one’s own position as that of a victim of destiny. It is the moment detected by Adorno in his superb text on Carmen, concerning the melody on the “unmerciful card” of the third act... where Carmen, the bad-fatal object, is subjectivized, is felt as a victim of her own game (108).

49 Slavoj Zizek, “The Limits of the Semiotic Approach to Psychoanalysis,”
Both Zizek and Adorno argue that what makes the figure of the femme fatale unique is that her subjectivity coincides with the experience of her own powerlessness, of her own position as that of a “victim of destiny... one who, especially when she thinks she ‘masters the game’ is no less victim than her own victims” (108). In other words, the femme fatale is not merely a fatal object or an emptied subject, but rather a figure which fascinates because of what Zizek calls her “positivized emptiness” which he argues is the basis of the post-modern reversal of the Thing itself.50 Here, the femme fatale, and Carmen as her most representative example, is being utilized in an abstracting and essentializing discourse that sees her as an example of a “bad object” who, in her status as victim of her own game, offers a “theoretical lesson” of a unique affirmative passivity. The result is one more myth added to the chain of mythical discourses surrounding this ubiquitous figure: Carmen as emblematic of a ‘post-modern reversal’ that quite unexpectedly gives her the status of the ‘Thing itself.’

In short, in their readings of Carmen which rely on these over-determined myths of powerful femininity, there is a need to make the subject of the story—Carmen and her association with freedom and the natural passions—a symbolic image which offers access to the ‘real’ world of relations between the sexes, the fatalism of love, and the transcendent power of the aesthetic dimension. This may be what is really at stake for Adorno, in whose work can be found an idealization of art as the bearer of ‘truth’ and as offering access to the ‘negative’ knowledge of the actual world. “It is not for nothing,” he notes, “that freedom is the only idea to which explicit appeal is made in the work, and it is in the name of

freedom that the heroine dies. The absence of even the semblance of meaning, the uncomplaining acceptance of the fulfillment of the mythic spell, elevates the opera beyond that spell by which it seems hypnotized” (62). Thus for Adorno, the ‘myth of Carmen’ is the myth of freedom and this is where its ultimate truth lies, even if he wants to argue for an absence of meaning in the “unsentimental, undiluted depiction of natural passion” (62). But this, too, is a way of ascribing meaning to the work which relies upon the same seductive discourse (that of ‘mythic spells’ and hypnotic effects) that has historically interpreted this cultural myth as making some kind of epistemological claim that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

For Nietzsche, the ‘truth’ of the myth of Carmen is about the “deadly nature of the relationship between the sexes,” while for Adorno it is about freedom and the illusion of meaning in art, and for Zizek, it is about the paradoxically passive nature of subjectivity. The place of commonality for all of them, however, lies in their respective positions as each under their own “mythic spell”—one which relies on the self-referential nature of the myth of the femme fatale and on certain problematic and reductive theorizations about women. Hence the ‘metacritical seduction’ that this foundational cultural myth, represented so compellingly by the figure of Carmen, has enjoyed in the history of its artistic representation and interpretation. A seduction is clearly taking place of which the criticism is unaware—a seduction inherent within the thematic material—but also, as has been demonstrated in the examples above, on the part of the critics whose critical acts result in a reinvigoration of the myth of Carmen rather than its demystification. Like her fictional character, the figure of
Carmen continues to be a source of fascination and intrigue unmitigated by the countless attempts to try to contain or explain her.
CHAPTER III

Decadent Disavowal: The Criticism of Decadence and D’Annunzio’s Femme Fatale

Alcuna cosa è in lei, certo, eternale
e fuori della sorte e della morte
e da non poter essere domata
da uomo.

(G. D’Annunzio, La Nave)

There is something in her, certainly, eternal,
beyond fate and death,
unconquerable by man.

The mythic projection of the female protagonist Basiliola in La Nave is an idea that will become a topos of late nineteenth-century literature. The innumerable visions of the great mythic seductress whose power transcends everything including fate and death, constitutes one of the most enduring themes of the latter part of the century in European literature. Examples from the French fin-de-siècle are numerous and well-documented as a glance at the literary production of the period reveals. But Italian writers, too, have contributed in their own way to this now universal notion of destructive femininity. But while the essence of the figure’s symbolic meaning remains constant throughout its various phases of representation, the late-nineteenth century, decadent, versions of the femme fatale diverge notably

51 In France, Theophile Gautier’s Mademoiselle de Maupin (1835), Octave Mirbeau’s Le jardin des supplices (1899), Flaubert’s Salammbô (1862), D’Aurevilly’s Les Diaboliques (1874), Villiers de l’Isle Adam’s L’Eve Future (1890), all reprinted in The Decadent Reader: Fiction, Fantasy, and Perversion from Fin de Siècle France, ed. Asti Hustvedt (New York: Zone Books, 1998); and the paintings of Gustave Moreau are some examples of the Decadents who have perhaps contributed more than any other literary movement to the dissemination of the femme fatale motif in Europe. Many of the notable deployments of the femme fatale outside France can also be attributed to the specific influence of French writers and trends.
from the original basis of the myth which is to be found in the figure of Carmen. As will be illustrated mostly in the Italian context here, the decadent versions enact a sort of deconstruction of the Carmen figure, stripping her of her ‘natural passion’ and aggressive sexuality, in effect making her more a passive vehicle for the male imagination in keeping with the particular thematic and aesthetic concerns of the late nineteenth century.

Another concern of the period and, arguably, one that may turn out to be constitutive of the idea of decadence itself, are the notions of ambivalence and contradiction. One of the most ambivalent figures of modern Italian literature, Gabriele D’Annunzio, is also synonymous with Italian decadence and the first to bring the femme fatale to Italian readers. He has been referred to as a “parody of the decadent aesthete” and, alternatively, as a writer whose work is “one of the highest overall literary achievements of its time in Europe, the highest in twentieth-century Italian literature.” This ambivalence with regard to D’Annunzio is part of a dialectic of attraction and disavowal that is at the heart of the seduction of decadent texts, the criticism of those texts, and one of the decadent period’s most ‘obsessional’

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52 Italian Decadentismo occurs a bit later than the overall European movement of the same name. The period dates roughly from about 1890 – 1915 and some of the writers associated with it are Gabriele D’Annunzio, Antonio Fogazzaro, and Ugo Tarchetti. However, these last two are more closely associated with the preceding ‘movement’ in Italian culture, the “Scapigliatura” whose concerns and themes anticipate the Italian decadent movement, according to Sandra Avincola in her book, _Il Decadentismo: la coscienza della crisi_ (Milano: Omicron Nuova, 1997), 46-47. For a very useful discussion of the Scapigliatura movement, and the work of Ugo Tarchetti in particular, see David Del Principe, _Rebellion, Death and Aesthetics in Italy: The Demons of Scapigliatura_ (London: Associated University Presses, 1996) in which he suggests that Scapigliatura “be given a critical place within the fin de siècle movements of Decadence and Aestheticism” (110).

53 Mario Praz, _The Romantic Agony_, (Cleveland: Meridian, 1933) p. 251.


55 See Paolo Valesio, “The Lion and the Ass: The Case for D’Annunzio’s Novels,” _Yale Italian Studies_, 1.1 (1977): 65, in which he calls for a “re-hauling of the critical discourse on this great author, and on the whole of Italian Decadentismo.”
themes, the femme fatale. The notion of contradiction is central to this chapter, as is the idea of the seduction of certain texts, in particular the ones which generate the most negative criticism, as is the case with D’Annunzio’s decadent novels. Moreover, the ideas of contradiction and seduction are related to the logic of fetishism as a mode of signification insofar as they are concerned with an obsession with certain objects or themes, but also as a particular logic that allows for contradictory beliefs (affirmation and disavowal, for example) to coexist. As I will attempt to illustrate, the criticism of Italian decadence, and of D’Annunzio in particular, relies upon a fetishistic mode of criticism that in turn, relies upon the critical and thematic seduction of decadent themes and figures. The result is a dialectical movement of tension, disavowal, denial, and repression that characterizes the author, the criticism, and the material itself.

A figure such as D’Annunzio who inspires this kind of ambivalence, both marginalized and exalted by contemporary criticism at the same time, deserves a closer look if only to gain a better understanding of the two extreme reactions. In fact, the critical debate surrounding D’Annunzio’s opus is very similar to the polemical reactions often accompanying the decadent works in general. Perhaps no other figure in Italian literature inspires more critical debate and at times, even hostile division. That is, a certain simultaneous disdain for and attraction to the ‘peripheral’ or ‘average texts’ of the period often characterizes the critical debate. A closer look at D’Annunzio’s contemporaries may reveal a similar pattern of critical ambivalence.

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56 In connection with Paulo Valesio’s discussion of the critic’s task of looking at every literary text as part of a “contexture of average texts,” Barbara Spackman remarks that an average text is “one that marks no epistemological break as recognized by cultural criticism, one that has not been institutionalized as required reading in the history of a national literature or culture,” in Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D’Annunzio (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 3.
discourse on the art and literature of the late nineteenth century. In fact, there is a
double layer of criticism that needs to be examined in the attempt to uncover the
theoretical anxieties surrounding this author and the concomitant motifs of
decadence problematized by his work.

Most of the criticism of decadence usually starts from the late nineteenth
century in France and includes discussions of the foremost theorists associated with
decadence of the period (Baudelaire, Gautier, Flaubert, Moréas, and Bourget), and
their British counterparts (Wilde and Swinburne), in addition to a discussion of
Nietzsche (in the famous essay in which he discusses his own sustained relationship
to decadence, *The Case of Wagner*, 1888). The treatment given the concept of
decadence in Italy is also a concern since much of contemporary Italian criticism
uses the term “decadentismo” as a major historical category, sometimes as broad and
complex as the concept of modernity itself. As Mattei Calinescu in his book *Faces
of Modernity* notes, “Today decadentismo constitutes one of the major historical and
aesthetic categories of Italian literary scholarship, comparable in complexity and
scope with such concepts as romanticism, naturalism, or modernism.”

The most important critical pronouncements on decadentismo are those of Benedetto Croce at
the turn of the century. According to Calinescu, “It is probably safe to say that
Croce is to a great extent responsible for the important role the concept of
decadentism has played in twentieth-century Italian criticism and aesthetics. After

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57 Mattei Calinescu, “Il decadentismo” in *Faces of Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,
inspiring even an intensely negative reaction, has shaped a whole movement of ideas."\(^{58}\)

Croce's polemical pronouncements on the work of Gabriele D'Annunzio are well known in America due in part to the important contributions to the topic made by two of the most prominent scholars working on D'Annunzio in the United States: Paolo Valesio and Barbara Spackman.\(^{59}\) In his work on D'Annunzio, The Dark Flame (1992), Valesio insists upon the need for a sweeping revision of D'Annunzian criticism, both within the American tradition and with regard to the author in the Italian critical landscape:

The literary injustice committed with regard to Gabriele D'Annunzio is the most flagrant of the twentieth century in Italy and perhaps in all of Europe. So flagrant and so clamorous, it merits a systematic study of metacriticism, that is to say, a historical and methodological criticism of literary criticism [...] As recently as the mid-1970s there was limited recognition of Giorgio D'Annunzio in critical writing. A climate of indifference produced a body of scholarship (even in Italy) that often substituted clichés and superficial vignettes for critical meditation and appreciation.\(^{60}\)

Prior to this pronouncement, Barbara Spackman in her book, Decadent Genealogies (1989), traces the history of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century

\(^{58}\) Ibid., p. 213.
\(^{59}\) Here I am referring to Valesio's book Gabriele D'Annunzio: The Dark Flame (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), and Spackman's Decadent Genealogies referred to above. Also, the work of literary historian Mario Praz, La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica, originally published in 1933, and translated as The Romantic Agony by Angus Davidson, (New York: Meridian, 1956), offers a comprehensive, if somewhat dated treatment of the themes of decadence in European literature.
\(^{60}\) Valesio, The Dark Flame, Ibid.,
literary criticism that, she argues, “castigates decadent writers.” In this history, several critics of decadence figure prominently: Cesare Lombroso (who considered himself a criminological psychiatrist); his follower Max Nordau (both physician and critic); the aforementioned Benedetto Croce (the literary critic whose historical positivism inaugurates the chain of negative D’Annunzian criticism in Italy); and Antonio Gramsci, whose Marxist ideological dismissal of the rhetoric of decadence leads him to write that “D’Annunzio è stato l’ultimo accesso di malattia del popolo italiano [D’Annunzio was the Italian people’s last bout of illness].

Moreover, the problematic history of D’Annunzian criticism that continues today is not limited to the American critical tradition. To add a perspective from Italian criticism of decadentismo in the last decade, Enrico Ghidetti’s Malattia, coscienza e destino: per una mitografia del decadentismo (1993) considers the “malattia del dannunzianesimo” (the “sickness of D’Annunzianism”) beginning with the adjective ‘dannunziano’ itself which is presented, he argues, “fino dall’inizio, connotato negativamente […] e indica una degerazione patologica, una malattia d’origine letteraria” [“from the beginning, (with) a negative connotation, indicating a pathological degeneration, a sickness of literary origins” (my translation)]. He also notes that with regard to D’Annunzio, unlike other Italian authors such as Manzoni or Leopardi, it is not a question of merely a literary phenomenon, but the issue acquire a greater relevance:

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61 Ibid., 2.
63 Enrico Ghidetti, Malattia, coscienza e destino: per una mitografia del decadentismo (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1993), 66.
L’alternativa vicenda di dannunzianesimo e antidannunzianesimo acquista risalto non solo perché, a lungo, il decadentismo letterario in Italia è stato identificato con la personalità e l’opera di D’Annunzio, quanto perché il mito dannunziano, condizionando letteratura, costume, politica di una nazione intera e potentemente contribuendo alla “distruzione della ragione” nella tradizione culturale uscita dal Risorgimento, ha costituito un essenziale punto di riferimento nella vita pubblica italiana durante il periodo di massima crisi dello stato unitario (Ghidetti, 67).

The distrust of decadent writers as it appears in the work of the critics from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries is multifaceted and ranges from accusations of criminality and madness in Lombroso,64 to “the confluence of two well-defined conditions of disease (degeneration and hysteria)” in Nordau,65 to

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64 Cesare Lombroso, Genio e degenerazione (Palermo: Remo Sandron, 1897).
"vacuità di gergo [vacuousness of the jargon"] in Gramsci, and the antithesis of evolution and progress according to Croce. But a closer look at the texts of these critics reveals that the common element in the criticism of D’Annunzio (and, by extension, of decadence) stems from the deep distrust of the figurality of language, or of rhetoric. This is what Spackman argues constitutes the ‘sickness’ of decadent writers: "Rhetoric," she writes, “in this rhetoric of antirhetoric, is sick." Moreover, she argues, the ideological motivations behind each of the critics’ dismissal of the decadent artists, in their opposition, cancel each other out so that from either point of view the result remains the same:

For both Marxist literary criticism and the discourse on sickness, the decadents are political antagonists: for the former, they represent bourgeois decadence and thus are too far to the right; for the latter, they are too far to the left, criminal and even subhuman. The marriage of the two only thickens the screen, the blackened layer that obscures our view of decadent texts.

Thus the malady of which D’Annunzio’s writing is accused stems not from, as might be expected, the ‘fascination with fascism’ that always seems to accompany any discussion of the author’s works, but instead from the question of style.

Indeed, rhetorical richness is commonly associated with the decadent works; their relationship to a so-called ‘high modernist’ aesthetic, French symbolism, and a self-consciously refined style that elevates ornamentation over substance is what the

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66 Gramsci, Ibid., 71-72.
68 Spackman, Ibid., 9.
69 Ibid., 9.
70 See Paolo Valesio's discussion of the misreading of D’Annunzio, esp. chapter 1, in The Dark Flame in which he mentions “his war speeches and discussions of war which a postfascist, arguably superficial interpretation has chosen to confuse with fascist ideology” (118).
positivist, pseudo-scientific critics of the period found so undesirable. Clearly a
distaste for the themes of decadent works (attraction to the processes of disease and
decay, the cultivation of the artificial as opposed to the natural, and a penchant for
the melancholic that characterizes the work of Huysmans, Baudelaire, and Poe, for
example) is as evident in the period as the decadent themes themselves. It is as if
the negative judgement of decadence were an integral part of its structure, the
contradictory valuations expressing something fundamental about its nature. As
Charles Bernheimer writes in his recent book on the subject:

To judge decadence as bad would not assure one’s immunity from its
seductions since such judgement seemed to be a part of what defined
the phenomenon. To judge decadence as good would transform it
into something else, since the negative evaluation was needed for
decadence to retain its constitutional ambivalence.

The joining of opposites which is an integral part of the thematics of decadent
literary texts—the joining of the masculine and the feminine in certain images and
motifs such as flowers, or the discursive collaboration found in many decadent texts
between the sacred and the profane, or the constant reversals of the natural and the
artificial—is mirrored by the critical metalanguage that characterizes these texts as
either ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ Indeed it is hard to find another trend in literary history that
has been met with so much critical ambivalence and emotional judgement.

71 For more on the themes of decadence: Théophile Gautier outlined many of its tenets in his preface
to an edition of Charles Baudelaire’s Les Fleurs du mal (1868); and the decadents also published a
short-lived journal entitled Le Décadent.
72 Charles Bernheimer, Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and
Of course this unique literary phenomenon has something to do with the precise historical moment that is expressed in and through the works of the late nineteenth century in Europe. For example, the historical positivism and evolutionary theories reflected in figures like Nordau and Lombroso (*Degeneration*, 1892; and *Genio e follia*, 1863 and *La donna delinquente*) represented a world view based on the belief in ordered progress grounded in the potentialities of the natural sciences. The work of these two 'doctors' typifies the struggle at the end of the century to reclaim a past that relied on the laws of evolution and disciplined progress accompanied by a philosophy of self-restraint and a criticism of industrial society. Their work was in direct opposition to the emergence of modern modes in art and literature which embraced the “human deviations” and glorified precisely what Lombroso and his disciple, Nordau, castigated as criminal and degenerate. They were part of the reorientation of European thought at the end of the century in which vocal and self-conscious intellectuals freely challenged the confident liberalism and positivism of an older generation. Not the optimism for which Nordau stood, but the pessimism of the philosopher Schopenhauer seemed to triumph: “To many a writer, decadence was not a sickness but the affirmation of a fatalistic outlook on the world which welcomed the individualism of symbolist poetry or the ecstatic selfishness of Nietzsche.”

In fact, Schopenhauer was a key philosopher of the period whose version of world-weary pessimism proved highly seductive in the atmosphere of self-conscious decline of late nineteenth-century France. His philosophy of pessimism in *The

World as Will and Idea perpetuates the notion that the world is an evil place, the ‘will to live’ an illusion. Hence the suspicion of life’s promise and the ultimate goal being a state of nothingness. Influenced by Nietzsche’s ‘will to power,’ it also regards women as deceptive agents who perpetuate the will to live but who need to be overcome since, ultimately, the world should end. The influence of Schopenhauer is also one example of the way in which the decadents were concerned with lineage—not as a social topic, but as literary genealogy. Intertextuality is a crucial aspect of the decadent text and is used in particular ways that sometimes veer toward parody and pastiche, but nevertheless reveal the critical and self-referential nature of the decadent texts and their underlying concern with time and history. In other words, it is very much a literature of an age in transition, of art forms that correspond to periods of great turmoil and historic change.

One type of change in particular interested the decadent writers and, as I have noted earlier, has been the subject of discussion for the critics of decadence as well. Moreover, it constitutes one of the reasons the decadent works are usually relegated to curiosities emerging out of modernism but do not quite make it into the modern canon itself: the concern with language and the subversion of accepted aesthetic standards. One work occupies a special place in the decadent ‘anti-canonical’ marking a self-reflexive moment in the movement due to the metatextual nature of this so-called ‘difficult’ work.

74 On the representation of time and history in Huysman’s Against Nature, one of the period’s most symbolic texts for the whole of decadence, see Rodolphe Gasché’s article, “The Falls of History: Huysman’s A Rebours” in Yale French Studies, 183-204.
Published in 1884, J.K. Huysman’s *A Rebours (Against Nature)* is considered a key anthology of decadent texts and criticism while at the same time constituting one of its most representative fictional narratives. This ‘breviary of decadence’ is at once a bible of references, and a labyrinth of intertextuality in which the anti-hero and hypersensitive neurotic, Des Esseintes, becomes the quintessential voice of a decadent aestheticism in a disorienting and alienating account of his retreat from the modern world into the private indulgences of art and literature. Resisting the models of classic nineteenth-century fiction, it offers a compendium of images and motifs that are now synonymous with *fin de siècle* cultural decadence—the objects, jewels, flowers, perfumes, and texts that make up the aesthetic motifs of the movement—and also marks a break with the realism of Victor Hugo and the naturalism of Zola. “The achievement of *A Rebours* is to have imagined an alternative literary history in which the hitherto apparently esoteric Baudelaire and Mallarmé, rather than a literary colossus such as Hugo, might become the dominant voices.”

In this way, *A Rebours* and its anti-hero, the stylized figure of alienation who inhabits the world of overwrought description, detailed lists of cultural references, and a heightened sense of the aesthetic becomes a fitting exemplar for the decadent movement itself and its curious intersection of creative writing and the critical enterprise. Because the nature of decadent criticism and its relationship to the material with which it is engaged is a topic of concern here, and due to the many common themes between the two novels, I will undertake a brief diversion into *A*
Rebours, written exactly ten years before the publication of D'Annunzio's novel, 
Trionfo della Morte (1894).

The over-arching project of Huysmans's novel is that of subversion: subversion of naturalism by decadence; subversion of the organic in nature; subversion of narrative development; and, in keeping with the general tendency in decadent works of the period, the subversion of sexual difference and denial of the female body. Huysmans forcefully rejects the idea of Nature as the origin of the real and turns to artifice and imitation as the 'true' real (a common trope of the decadent texts). He writes, "Nature is incapable of creating, all on her own, such noxious, degenerate species (of plants); she provides the raw material [...] and the elements of the plant which man then grows, fashions, paints, and sculpts as he chooses" (AN, 77). Just as he subverts the organic, biological model of nature in the creation of artifacts or simulacra that simulate nature without having nature's organic interiority, Huysmans simultaneously subverts the organic model of narrative development. He uses techniques of rupture and discontinuity, both stylistically and in the elaborately contrived dream scenarios that constantly interrupt the text but which constitute some of its most important moments, as opposed to the Aristotelian plot or the family fictions of the traditional novel. In addition, each chapter is a self-contained unit, the order of which could be changed without affecting the story. As such, description in the novel overwhelms the imperative of storytelling. As Huysmans himself declares, "each chapter is a sublimate of a different art" (60) which acts as experimental vehicle to stimulate fantasies and thereby displace present reality.
Similarly, the discussion of woman in the text occupies a place of subversion and denial in the project of disavowal of sexual difference, another common trope of decadent texts. It is a theme attributable to one of the so-called ‘fathers of decadence,’ Charles Baudelaire, as exemplified in one of his many poems dealing with this theme, “Hymn to Beauty” from Les Fleurs du Mal (1845). In it he makes famous the nineteenth-century images of terrible, “monstrous” beauty found in woman’s decay. Charles Bernheimer writes in his article “Huysmans: Writing Against Female Nature” that the dream narratives in the novel in which we find most of the traumatic female figures are not simply representations of consciously contrived phantasmatic scenarios but are also “products of what one might call a textual unconscious, an unconscious revealed in and through the process of writing, whose compulsive obsessions may be found to influence even those elements of the narrative apparently most invulnerable to unconscious elaboration.” Perhaps this is not so much the unconscious of the text as much as it is the critic’s ‘unconscious’ displacement of that idea onto the text. Nevertheless, this is an idea that will become pertinent to the discussion of D’Annunzio’s work as well as to arguably one of the most ‘compulsive obsessions’ of the period: the figure of the femme fatale. Indeed, it is a unifying element in all of the decadent works I am concerned with insofar as

77 Baudelaire’s relationship to decadence is undoubtedly an important aspect of any discussion of late nineteenth-century art and literature, especially with regard to the significant influence he has had on the writers and artists who followed him and are considered ‘decadent’ for the purposes of this and other studies on the topic in European literature. For my purposes, Baudelaire and many of the themes of Les Fleurs du Mal as well as “Le peintre de la vie moderne” are in the background of my analysis of decadence, but it is beyond the scope of this project to deal with him in greater detail.

78 This idea is expounded upon in detail by Mario Praz in The Romantic Agony in the section on decadence in which he describes the particularly decadent aesthetic of “a real, genuine taste for such beauty as was threatened with disease or actually decaying,” (p. 40); and the “taste for the unclean and the horrible, ugly, macabre – always easily found in woman” (p. 44).


they reveal hidden (or not so hidden in many cases) anxieties which are directly related to the myth of the femme fatale and the fantasies and fears of the nineteenth-century male imagination. Bernheimer also notes that for Huysmans, denial is vital—and denial always bears specifically upon the traumatic perception of female castration. Thus it is no accident, he presumes, that in his preface Huysmans declares that his formal project to “abolish the traditional plot” requires the suppression “of love, of woman” (AN, 194). Significantly, female figures in the text are completely absent except for the ones who appear in the form of nightmarish visions which disgust and frighten the protagonist, Des Esseintes. As he struggles to abolish them from his environment, they reappear in dreams to awaken his fears and anxieties of sexual difference: like so many male characters of the nineteenth-century decadent novels, he is undeniably “haunted by the feminine.”

One of the most telling examples of this occurs in A Rebours with the protagonist’s nightmare of the figure of Syphilis (“Everything is syphilis,” Des Esseintes famously observes) personified as woman and accompanied, significantly, by castration imagery (exotic plants with black stalks suddenly springing up on every side of the seductive, naked figure). As Freud observes in his essay on the Medusa’s head, “a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration” (1963:212) while mitigating its horror by replacing the dreaded absence with a plurality of presences. The figure of Syphilis herself is vividly imaged as both castrating and castrated (as in “the bloody depths” he sees between the uplifted thighs of the “savage flower” of syphilis [p. 203]). As Bernheimer notes, “paradoxically, woman becomes phallic through the power she derives from her violent mutilation” (315).

81 Ibid, p. 322.
This and other similar readings of the nightmare of the figure of woman as disease, while exorbitant examples, may be helpful as one way of interpreting the figure of the ‘deadly woman’ so prominent in decadent literature through the lens of psychoanalysis. This reading hinges upon Huysmans’s own association of the virus of syphilis with woman, of disease and malady with specifically feminine attributes, and the anxiety of female sexuality which runs throughout the text. The notion of the femme fatale which is crucial to decadent fictions is fittingly present in the text on the level of imaginative scenarios and dream imagery, though not in human form. Similarly, another famously decadent representation of this artistic topos, is the figure of Salomé in Gustave Moreau’s painting. In it, the suggestive imagery of the evil seductress and the famous decapitation which symbolizes castration prefigures Des Esseintes’s nightmare scene in which Syphilis appears and terrifies him, confronting him with the horror of his unconscious in the exposure of the woman’s lack.

A closer look at the many examples of castration imagery and the iconography of the destructive woman in figures like Salomé (whose image and meaning becomes one of the most common tropes of the period, most notably in works by Moreau, Mallarmé, Flaubert and Wilde), not only gives us a kind of theatricalized citation of misogynist tropes, but also offers a complex meditation on the function of lack in the formation of subjectivity. Again Bernheimer’s analysis on the subject is useful:

Castration offers both an essentialist interpretation of woman’s lack, which justifies the misogyny so characteristic of decadent
sensibilities, and a constructivist interpretation of the male subject as a mobile play of identifications and reflections. Hence the crucial role of castration as the foremost trope of decadence: it is at once naturalizing and denaturalizing; it insists on the most retrograde misogynist ideology, yet it opens a radically new view of the operations of negativity in the psyche.  

However, the decadent association of the female sexual organs with the ‘flowers of evil’ (woman as diseased phallic flower) serve to highlight the project of fetishizing the female body in a more violent and dangerous way than even some of the other decadent fantasies such as the female android in Villiers’s *The Future Eve* (1890). The unconscious fear of female sexuality (and the concurrent ambiguousness of male sexual identity in the figure of Des Esseintes himself) which runs throughout Huysmans’s novel, serves as a reminder that the disavowal of nature and its accompanying denial of the female sexual body can never actually take place as long as female nature remains at the origin. Thus, the suppression of the unconscious fear which was literally killing Des Esseintes in his nightmare: “Thank God it was only a dream!” he exclaims. If *A Rebours* is widely understood to be the ‘bible’ of decadent literature, a work of general applicability which offers a meta-commentary on the movement itself—as in Des Esseintes’s wish for his work to be the “glossary for the decadent period of the French language” (163) – it can also be seen as a disorienting storehouse of contradictions, of consciously contrived scenarios representing questionable subversions, as we have seen in at least one example. This may

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82 Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, p. 117.
ultimately serve to highlight the ambiguous and polymorphous (but also circular) nature of the decadent movement itself.

As I have argued, in many ways the thematics of decadent texts offer a poignant window onto the particular critical discourses that characterize those same texts and, in both cases, reveal a psychological struggle with intensely contradictory meanings that define a typical love-hate relationship. These contradictions take place on many levels and at times it becomes difficult to separate the critical idea of “decadence” from the aesthetic-historical category of “decadentism.” However, in the attempt to uncover the dialectical complexity of their relationship, both perspectives intersect and reveal how certain myths of modernity and its supposed opposite, decadence, function within the scope of the literary and artistic imagination of the age. For example, it could be argued that decadence is a form of progress, however perverse that may seem, as well as the antithesis of this idea, that progress itself is decadent. As Mattei Calinescu notes: “The ideas of modernity and progress on the one hand, and the idea of decadence on the other, are mutually exclusive only at the crudest level of understanding;” and, as a consequence of the critique of the myth of progress, “which started with the romantic movement, but gained momentum in the antiscientific and antirationalist reaction that marks the late nineteenth century and prolongs itself well into the twentieth [...] a high degree of technological development appears perfectly compatible with an acute sense of decadence [...] an anguished sense of loss and alienation. Once again, progress is decadence and decadence is progress” (Faces of Modernity, p. 155-156).
contradiction and seduction which may in fact turn out to be related on more than just the thematic level. In other words, the particular symbolic power of the figure of the femme fatale is inextricably linked to the critical discourse surrounding the figure and the larger movement of decadence to which it is usually connected. This is a curious example of the way in which the critical debate surrounding a figure or a literary movement itself partakes of the same textual action which it tries to critique.

As mentioned earlier, this idea has been dealt with by Barbara Spackman with regard to the “sickness” of decadent texts, who in turn refers to Shoshana Felman and her work on interpretation as repetition. But here I would like to focus on the two notions of contradiction and seduction to reveal how the ‘problems’ or the set of themes and issues the figure of the femme fatale represents, which also include the problems inherent in its theoretical treatment, mirror the critical assessments of D’Annunzio and the reception of his opus as well as the larger movement of decadence within the context of Italian literary history. In the critics’ attempt to reclaim a place for D’Annunzio and Italian decadence, the figure of the femme fatale is both crucial to the discourse of decadence as illustrated in D’Annunzio’s poetic and prose works, and evicted from scene of that criticism at the same time. This erasure has the effect of repeating the movement of disavowal and denial around which many of the decadent texts operate. The failure of the criticism to take account of the implications of its own critique and make way for a serious discussion

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84 See Spackman, Decadent Genealogies, chapter 1, and her discussion of “transforming the criticism of decadent texts into a symptom of the very disease they claim to supercede” (p. 3). As an example of this she quotes the critic Salinari’s obsession with virility in D’Annunzio’s texts and his claim of the “powerful attraction D’Annunzio’s ‘siren songs’ exert upon the critic” (p. 27-28). As far as the reference to Felman and the way in which the critical interpretation “reproduces dramatically and participates in the text it tries to critique,” see S. Felman, “Turning the Screw of Interpretation,” in her book Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading Otherwise (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1982).
of the figure of the femme fatale reveals a theoretical complicity in the very structures of denial and repression of which the decadent material offers such compelling examples. Indeed this repression begins to resemble the “typical love-hate relationship,” as well as evoke “the dangerously deceptive character of decadent art and its power to seduce” that so preoccupied Nordau, Lombroso, Croce, and even Nietzsche.

In this section I want to turn to D’Annunzio’s text in order to interrogate the construction of his particular version of the femme fatale and its inherent themes and motifs in the consciously decadent movement in Italian literature of which this author is the prime example.

Published in 1894, Gabriele D’Annunzio’s *The Triumph of Death* is a reliquary of nineteenth-century aesthetics and themes. Indeed it echoes many of the motifs of Huysmans’s *Against Nature* in its subversion of narrative structure and excessive attention to the interiority of its protagonist and his tormented mental trajectories. It is also considered a primary example of D’Annunzio’s prose work and “symbolic of decadent discourse at its peak,” according to Paolo Valesio. He remarks: “The D’Annunzian novel is, in a sense, a lyrical narrative, almost completely devoid of plot, with monologues rather than dialogues in the flow of narrative.”

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Aurispa, clearly fits the mold of the decadent aesthete: contemplative and eternally anguished by his existence and life in general, yet powerless to effect any changes, resigned to his fatalistic visions of tormented desire and destructive fantasies. In fact, he is more attracted to death and decay than to life, more in love with his mistress when she is ill than when she is healthy, and embodies the pessimism of Schopenhauer, the “spleen” of Baudelaire, and the Romantic sensibility of pain as an integral part of desire. But it is not merely a preference for pain or decay, of inversion or cynicism for its own sake that characterizes the decadent works of art. For tied to this notion is the relentless misogyny of these texts, and, as Peter Nicholls notes, “closely bound up with an anguished repudiation of the body and erotic desire. Everywhere in the literature and visual art of the period there is the association of women with death, and of erotic desire with murderous instincts.”

The opening scene of the novel finds Giorgio and his mistress, Ippolita Sanzio, in the streets of Rome, gazing with horror and fascination at a dead body, the victim of a suicide. As he looks at the remains of the dead, the hair and blood of the victim on the pavement, he is unable to tear himself away and exclaims, “Beati i morti che non

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dubitano piú" ["Happy are the dead! They have no more doubts"
(Triumph, 3)]. This is the first of many scenes in which death is the
central focus, inspiring Giorgio’s thoughts of melancholic doom
which inevitably turn from the topic of death to the agony of love. He
is fascinated with the subject of the end of his relationship with
Ippolita and revels in his long, tormented projections of the end of
their affair and the joyous agony he experiences at the thought of its
demise. After one of the many digressions of this kind which
interrupt the text but constitute the majority of the ‘action’ (or non-
action) of the narrative, Giorgio responds through yet another interior
monologue in which he seems to understand the nature of his
‘malady’:
I vaghi rancori, che serpeggiavano in fondo al suo spirito contro la
donna, parvero dileguarsi. Egli riconosceva ingiusto ogni risentimento
contro di lei, riconoscendo un ordine superiore di necessità fatali. La
sua miseria non proveniva da alcuna creatura umana. Ma dell’essenza
stessa della vita. Ella non doveva dolersi dell’amata ma dell’amore.
L’amore, a cui per natura tutto il suo essere tendeva con invincibile
veemenza, l’amore era la più grande fra le tristezze terrene. Ed egli
era legato a quella suprema tristezza, forse fino alla morte (Trionfo,
18).

89 Gabriele D’Annunzio, Il Trionfo della Morte, (Milano: Mondadori, 1934), p. 15. All references to
the text will be from this edition. Translations are from The Triumph of Death, trans. Arthur
Homblow, (New York: George H. Richmond, 1898).
The vague rancor which had ravaged his soul appeared to be dissipated.

[He recognized the injustice of all resentment against this woman because he recognized a superior order of fatal necessities. No, no human creature caused his misery. It arose from the very essence of life. He had to complain, not of the woman he loved, but of Love itself. Love, towards which his whole being reached out with invincible impetuosity, was, he thought, the greatest of human sorrows. And, until death possibly, he was condemned to this supreme misfortune (6)].

The mixture of love and death, of sorrow and misfortune as the essence of both life and love (both inextricably tied to woman) which runs throughout the text, is a common aesthetic trope in D’Annunzio’s opus. It is what Mario Praz refers to as his ‘delectatio morbosa,’ or morbid sensuality (RA, p. 258). It is also the basis for Praz’s and others’ (Croce, Gramsci, Salinari, et al) defensive and troubled dismissal of D’Annunzio as the purveyor of an overwrought, “swollen” prose and a simple idealization of Eros. However, this does not take into account the particularities of D’Annunzio’s erotic discourse and its textual function which seems to be related to, if not

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90 “Stile gonfio,” as Spackman notes, is usually referred to as “bombastic style,” yet Croce himself, she notes, “gives us reason to hear the literal “swollen, turgid” beneath the transferred meaning.” Benedetto Croce, La Storia d’Italia dal 1871 al 1915, 5th ed. (1927; Bari: Laterza, 1934), 166. As quoted in Spackman, DG, p. 17.
directly responsible for, the complex relationship which his novels have had with critics. Indeed, Praz’s moral criticism with regard to D’Annunzio (in which he remarks more on D’Annunzio’s “libido” than on his texts, and exhorts the author to “be honest with himself” and “accept responsibility”91 [for his over-active libido we might ask?]) is a good example of the movement of revulsion toward the temporary victory of eros (and, by extension, toward the novels themselves) which Valesio sees as the basis for the ideological misreading of D’Annunzio’s work.92

The contradictory status of love and death in the novel, beyond the vulgar notion of sensuality and a simple textual eroticism, is related to the notion of the seduction of certain themes and motifs, in particular for what concerns the heroine around whom much of the tension, denial, revulsion and attraction revolves. According to Shoshana Felman, the treatment of problems of sexual passion in literature inherently defies simplicity since it always represents the conflict of two forces: “Sexuality includes its own negation ... it’s meaning is its contradiction.”93 This notion of sexuality as the divisiveness of meaning, or of meaning as conflict, is appropriate in the context of the D’Annunzian narrative insofar as it almost always

91 Praz, 258.
92 This so-called ‘ideological misreading’ is the central idea behind his call for an “adequate critical revision” of D’Annunzio’s novels and Italian decadentismo in general. In Paolo Valesio, “The Lion and the Ass,” Ibid, p. 71-72.
93 Felman, Literature and Psychoanalysis, Ibid., p. 110-111.
represents the movement of attraction and repulsion (the two forces in conflict) —of the protagonist toward life, toward love, and toward woman—but also of the reader/critic toward the text itself.

Again, Valesio’s description of this textual politics is applicable: “The symbolic action of erotic relationships in D’Annunzio’s novels follows,” he argues, “generally, a basic double movement: first a movement of triumphant assertion (conquest, enjoyment), soon followed by dissatisfaction, repentance, and a general flight away from the flesh and its pleasures.”94 D’Annunzio’s own phrase for this, *erotica-heroica*, is, according to Valesio, an adequate description for the basic dynamics of his text, provided that this phrase describes “a tormented dialectical antithesis rather than a harmonious combination.” That most critics are blind to these double movements and treat D’Annunzian narrative as an indiscriminate exaltation of Eros —“this,” he argues, “is a psychological problem of the critics, not a problem of the author’s text.”95

The treatment of the theme of death in this and other decadent works is, of course, directly related to the representation of women and the underlying anxieties that the female figures inevitably hide behind the ostensibly misogynistic tropes of the period, as mentioned earlier with regard to images of castration. D’Annunzio’s novel, in which it could be argued that death occupies the central role, more so than even the

94 Valesio, Ibid., p. 71.
95 Ibid, p. 72.
protagonist or the femme fatale herself, offers one of the best examples of the inevitability of doom contained in the representation of the female protagonist, a thematic element necessary for the representation of woman as ‘fatal.’ As the title suggests, death is prescribed from the start. Indeed, when he realizes he is in love with this kind of woman, Giorgio exclaims, “Ecco l’amore, che ha in sé il presentimento della sua fine!” (31) [“What love! That which carries within itself the presentiment of its end” (22)]. The inevitability of the tragic outcome is ineluctable, as is the fact that it will be brought about by a woman, in this case, the ineffable Hippolyte.

Many things contribute to this woman’s fatal qualities, not the least of which is her physical beauty and seductive power. A certain pattern emerges in the depiction of women in the decadent novels (both Italian and French) which relies on the illusory nature of their appearance as strangely beautiful. It is not a typical feminine beauty that is considered mysterious or dangerous. Instead, very specific physical qualities make up the tragic heroine of decadent novels. Hers is a ‘consumptive’ version of female beauty, accompanied by a very pale complexion that contrasts with her long, dark, curly hair and smoky, over-emphasized eyes. Indeed this is a common aesthetic trope of the nineteenth-century femme fatale which is later translated into the image of the diva of the early silent Italian cinema.96 As

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96 I deal extensively with the image of the cinematic diva and the aesthetic tropes surrounding her image in chapter four here. But many of the same qualities used to describe D’Annunzio’s female
Giorgio remarks, speaking of his lover, but in a description which could easily apply to many of the female figures of the period:

She is very beautiful, he mused. The expression of her face is nearly always profound, expressive, passionate. Therein rests the secret of her charm. Her beauty never tires me; it constantly suggests new dreams. What are the elements of this beauty? I cannot say.

Materially, she is not beautiful. Sometimes when I look at her I am painfully surprised by a disillusion. That is because I then see only her physical characteristics; her face is not transfigured, illumined by the power of spiritual expression. She possesses, however, three divine elements of beauty: the brow, the eyes, and the mouth. Yes, divine (10).

Figures can be applied to the diva of early cinema, most notably with regard to their physical attributes and, on the screen, a whole set of gestures, movements, and motifs that are implied in the textual representations but are given full force in their transformation from the verbal to the visual.
Similarly, with regard to the *dive* of silent film, these are the same characteristics which became synonymous with the iconic image of the screen stars: the eyes, the brow, and the mouth, exaggerated by make-up and emphatic gestures and contortions, are the main focal points of her filmic representation, almost transcending her body so that she literally becomes all face, made possible through the use of the close-up and other techniques of the camera innovated in the silent era. It is noteworthy that Giorgio does not see anything divine in her individual expression, but rather her divinity comes from what makes her most general. As in the *diva* films, her over-emphasized facial features are always the same throughout the films no matter whom the actress playing the central role. Moreover, the ‘elements of her beauty’ come not from anything connected to the spiritual or ideal, yet she is nevertheless ‘divine.’ This is the paradox of the femme fatale: the exaggeration of the tropes of femininity which is necessary for her representation as femme fatale or diva (brought about by the double movement of bringing the image closer on the one hand, and giving her a ‘larger-than-life’ status on the other) is also what makes her most universalized and unchanging, more an Idea than an individual.

In an example of the way in which the femme fatale genre is alluded to by D’Annunzio’s heroine, Ippolita is described by her lover as having “un pallore soprannaturale, che ti faceva sembrare una
creatura incorporea in mezzo a tutto quell’azzuro che cadeva dal cielo sul lastrico […] Non deve avere nelle vene neppure una goccia di sangue” (41) [“a supernatural pallor, which in the flood of azure falling from the sky to the pavement gave (her) the appearance of a creature without a body…She cannot have a single drop of blood in her veins” (33)]. The extreme pallor of these women, apart from contributing to their ‘other-worldly’ quality which is a fundamental attribute of the femme fatale from any period or genre, is also symbolic of the perceived vacuity of her nature. In other words, these women do not possess a soul and are cruel and unfeeling, thus their skin reflects this absence of color and vigor. This is not the sought-after porcelain quality of the aristocratic Victorian woman’s skin, but rather Ippolita’s pallor is given a uniqueness found only in the dead: “Era pallida ma di quella singolare pallidezza che Giorgio non aveva ritrovata in nessuna altra donna mai: d’una pallidezza quasi mortale, profonda, cupa, che poco pendeva nel livido quando s’empiva di ombra” (179) [“She was pale, very pale, but it was that singular pallor which Giorgio had never found in any other woman—an almost mortal pallor, a profound and dead pallor which, when in the shade, became almost livid” (181)]. In fact, death becomes an integral part of the desire for this woman in a way that belies the notion that fatality always comes from the female. In this case, it is repeatedly wished for by the male protagonist as a way to crystallize forever the
idealistic vision of Ippolita he wishes to preserve. His thoughts often wander into the supernatural realm of his dreams as when he muses, "Io penso che morta ella raggiungerà la suprema espressione della sua bellezza. Morta! E s'ella morisse? Ella diventerrebbe materia di pensiero, una pura idealità (179). ["I believe that when she is dead she will attain the supreme perfection of her beauty... Dead! And if she were to die? She would then become an object for thought, a pure ideality" (182)]. Clearly she already belongs for him to the realm of the 'living-dead', so only death itself can complete the fantasy and transform her into a purely imagined entity. This is an important aspect of the notion of the femme fatale as artistic creation (or, more precisely, as the vehicle through which artistic creation becomes possible for the male artist/protagonist), as existing only in the realm of imagination, or as a projection of male desire. Alive, she is much less real—and less interesting and compelling—than she is dead, or fantasized.

The rare quality of Ippolita's beauty is emphasized as the story unfolds and Giorgio becomes more and more enthralled with (and fearful of) the object of his desire: "Egli considerò a una a una, mentalmente, le nudità della sua amata. Ciascuna forma, vista a traverso la fiamma della brama, assumeva uno splendore specioso, chimerico, quasi sovrumano" (169) ["He contemplated, in his mind, his mistress's beauty; and every contour, seen through the flame, assumed in his eyes a radiant splendor, chimerical, almost superhuman" (171)]. Interestingly, the superhuman
here becomes entwined with the inhuman in the use of the word, “chimerical.” A chimera in mythological terms is a wildly imaginative creature, but could also be a monstrous and grotesque one. (It is variously described as part lion, part goat, part dragon, but definitely considered a “she-monster”\textsuperscript{97}). Thus, despite Ippolita’s fascination and splendor, what Praz connects to her attainment of a “mythological status,” (\textit{RA}, 253) she cannot escape its monstrous undertones. (Additionally, a common recourse to Greek mythology takes place in many of the decadent novels, in this case in the name ‘Ippolita’ (Hippolyte). The female version of the name of the main character in the Euripides play, Hippolytus is an example of a male rendered powerless and ineffectual by the overwhelming sexuality of Phaedra who is also referred to in the play as “monstrous”)\textsuperscript{98}. Here, however, the tragedy is given a gender reversal of sorts in D’Annunzio’s choice to give his female protagonist the name which implies passivity, while at the same time giving her the role of femme fatale which also implies the curious combination of agency and passivity often associated with the figure. Mary Ann Doane, in her book, \textit{Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, and Psychoanalysis}, appropriately explains the ambivalent power of the femme fatale for the texts of modernity:

Her power is of a peculiar sort insofar as it is usually not subject to her conscious will, hence appearing to blur the opposition between passivity and activity. She is an ambivalent figure because she is not the subject of power

\textsuperscript{97} Spackman, \textit{Decadent Genealogies}, Ibid., 78.

\textsuperscript{98} In fact, Phaedra could arguably be, along with the most famous biblical ‘destructive women’, Lilith and Judith, one of the first versions of a femme fatale in literature. As a side note, D’Annunzio wrote his own ‘high-modern’ version of the Phaedra tragedy, referred to by Valesio as “one of the extreme modern explorations of the sublime,” in “Declensions: D’Annunzio after the Sublime,” \textit{New Literary History}, Winter, 1985; 16 (2): 401-415. Moreover, in what seems to be a glaring omission and, in keeping with my argument here with regard to the erasure of the figure from the scene of D’Annunzian criticism, Valesio never even mentions the femme fatale genre in this article.
but its *carrier*. [...] The evacuation of intention from her operations is fully consistent with the epistemological recognition accorded to the newly born psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious. The femme fatale is an articulation of fears surrounding the loss of stability and centrality of the self, the "I," the ego.\(^99\)

It is precisely this ambivalence between passivity and agency that marks the character of Ippolita in such a way that it becomes impossible to decide whether she can be called guilty or innocent of the seduction/tragedy which unfolds. Again, this figure of the woman as inadvertent cause, as sexuality without consciousness, is reminiscent of the *diva* of the silent Italian cinema. As Mary Anne Doane describes her, "the *diva* is a woman of exceptional beauty who incites catastrophe—not by means of any conscious scheming but through her sheer presence."\(^{100}\) This is an important distinction which marks a difference between the Italian femme fatale or *diva* and her French or Scandinavian counterpart, the vamp. As the film historian Pierre Leprohon remarks:

Nino Frank shrewdly contrasts the *femme fatale* with the vamp invented in the Nordic countries, more deliberately devastating, the woman who lives off her victims’ misfortunes, a kind of vampire. The fate of the Italian *femme fatale* is often as dreadful as that of her lovers, and this makes her even more appealing. She takes the form of a force against which one is powerless, since she herself is dominated by something stronger than herself. This may well be the reason for


\(^{100}\) Ibid., p. 125.
the name given to her in awe, which also defines her: diva, or goddess. The man whom she touches and condemns becomes the victim of a kind of holocaust; he is sacrificed to a mysterious superior power. There is something almost religious in the audiences’ worship of the diva.\textsuperscript{101}

This is certainly the case with D’Annunzio’s femme fatale. Ippolita is given no real agency or even character development in the novel insofar as she exists only in the realm of Giorgio’s imagination and as a springboard for his fantasies and private, psychological musings. She is merely a provoker of events, the cause of Giorgio’s overwhelming sense of a fatal force beyond his control, an inevitability of doom displaced onto the figure of woman.

In a poignant illustration of this in the novel Giorgio’s presentiment of doom is combined with his feelings of powerlessness and impotence in a “secret allegory” he develops to explain his confused state. In it he envisions a sickly child being dragged along by a “una specie di gigante incappato che stringeva il torchio nel pugno enorme brutalmente […] C’è qualcosa forse in me, che mi fa assomigliare a quel fanciullo. La mia vera vita è in potere di qualcuno, misterioso, inconoscibile, che la stringe con un pugno di ferro” (88) [“a species of giant with a hood, whose enormous fist brutally grasped the taper […] Perhaps there is something in myself which makes me resemble that child. My real life is in the power of someone, a mysterious and unknowable being who holds it in a grasp of iron” (82-83). It is not difficult to surmise who this ‘someone’ is in the context of the novel. The

temptation to read this scene as a dream scenario masking the repressed desires of Giorgio for his ‘phallic mother’ for whom Ippolita stands as a substitute and all of the psychoanalytical assumptions that could be made, is strong, but ultimately, only a repetition of the problem. In other words, a “Freudian reading” would be just that: it is equally a text, known only through the difficulties and uncertainties of the act of reading and of interpretation. More useful for my purposes here would be to ask what kind of understanding of history, or what kind of anxieties in representation make possible (and so predictable in decadent novels) this displacement onto the woman of such a powerful fatalistic determination, of the certainty of death and destruction?

Mary Anne Doane refers to a “certain conceptualization of history, of temporal determination blocked and frozen in a perpetual war of the sexes,” and cites the various cinematic repetitions of the “inevitable, cyclical return of a scenario (the femme fatale) is doomed to repeat.” Neither of these ideas, however, related as they are to what she sees as the “destabilization of narrative” in the age of mechanical reproduction (and Benjamin is the obvious referent) really address the problem. Her assessments merely restate the ‘problem of the femme fatale’ as an inevitable consequence of this perceived ‘crisis in representation.’ Again,

102 I am using again Shoshana Felman’s text, “Turning the Screw of Interpretation” as the background for my apprehension in applying a psychoanalytical reading to decadent texts. This has of course been done and continues to be done in some very useful ways. However, I am more interested in the ways in which Freud, too, can be seen as belonging to the ‘decadent’ period himself with regard to his use of language, the decadent thematics and tropes occurring throughout his work, and the way he both inherits and elaborates decadent assumptions, rather than as an interpretive tool of decadent texts. In this way, he can be considered a contemporary of the decadents and just as caught up in the decadent fantasies which his theories purportedly attempt to explain. Charles Bernheimer’s unfinished chapter, “Freud’s Decadence” in his Decadent Subjects has been very useful on this topic.

103 Doane, Ibid., p. 127.
inevitability seems to be the femme fatale’s only possibility even from the point of view of her critical interpretation.

On the other hand, Charles Bernheimer may be more accurate when he surmises that “male insecurity and antifeminism are not sufficient to explain the full range of (the femme fatale’s) meanings. (Her) associations with death,” he argues, “can be far more complex than those displayed by the vulgar femme fatale theme.”¹⁰⁴ In this sense, the term ‘vulgar’ is being used in a way similar to Felman’s when she quotes Henry James’s assessment of his own novels (novels which have engendered a litany of psychoanalytical readings): “The difficulty itself,” he writes, “is the refuge from the vulgarity.” According to Felman, “the vulgar is the literal, insofar as it is unambiguous.”¹⁰⁵ Here, the literal when applied to the femme fatale theme would be the vulgar notion of death usually associated with her image. I refer to these examples because there is something familiarly unambiguous, and hence ‘vulgar,’ in the many attempts to assess the meaning of the particular aesthetic trope of the femme fatale that runs throughout the criticism of decadent works.

Even Paolo Valesio, who wants to critically revise the history of D’Annunzian criticism in order to take more seriously his textual politics from the standpoint of an ideological reassessment of his work, remarks in regard to a female heroine in one of D’Annunzio’s novels (Giovanni Episcopo, 1891):

The triumphant and acritical erotic assertion is not that of the hero—it belongs to the heroine (Ginevra), a femme fatale of coarse insensitivity. We see, then, the “logic” (i.e., the semiotic and

¹⁰⁴ Bernheimer, Decadent Subjects, p. 106.
¹⁰⁵ Felman, Ibid., 107.
ideological consistency) of the symbolic action (or fantastic politics) in the Dannunzian discourse. In fact this “exception” helps to unmask what the discourse hides: that the hero’s repentance and sublimation is also an attack on women (and this is said both without any snickering complicity and without any bleeding-heart adherence to the modern feminist rhetoric).  

Valesio here uses the example of the femme fatale in what is a complex semiotic reading complete with grids illustrating the different ‘ideologemes’ found in D’Annunzio’s novels, only to then call the example an “exception” and simply and uncritically an “attack on women.” This evasion of a serious reading of the figure’s importance under the guise of not wanting to deal with its “feminist” implications, only serves to highlight what he himself calls the “blindness” of Italian criticism with regard to D’Annunzio’s work. I would argue that this ‘blindness’ is particularly prevalent with regard to the figure of the femme fatale in D’Annunzian criticism and alludes to something about the figure’s significance beyond the fictional material in which it originates.

Perhaps the most important aspect of D’Annunzio’s representation of the fatal woman lies in the fact that she represents the crisis of sexuality and of previously clearly defined categories of sexual roles and identities taking place in the latter part of the nineteenth century. As Elaine Showalter suggests, the late nineteenth century waged war on women in cultural texts that either sanitized them

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106 Valesio, “The Lion and the Ass,” Ibid. p. 75.
107 In the same essay he writes, “In other words, the particular blindness (or, in another physiological metaphor, deafness) of Italian criticism in this respect is not due to chance or laziness—it is the coherent result of an ideological and political strategy,” in Valesio, “The Lion and the Ass,” Ibid., 81.
or rendered them as monstrous, in “scientific” attempts at theorizing femininity by Darwin or Freud, and in medical establishments that institutionalized or mutilated female patients to “free” them of their sexual impulses. This produced a new sense of instability regarding male identity and, some would argue, only heightened the already pronounced fears of female sexuality which engendered the idea of the beautiful woman who lures men into moral and physical destruction. Since the fatal woman is the figment of male fantasies about female sexuality, it is fitting that her descriptions in the novel all take place on the level of the male protagonist’s imagination. She is, after all, a construction of his fantasies and a conglomeration of his fears at the same time that she is enacting the drama that will result in very real and fatal consequences. As Giorgio intuits: “La sua forma è disegnata dal mio desiderio; le sue ombre sono prodotte dal mio pensiero. Ella, quaie mi appare in tutti gli istanti, non è se non l’effetto d’una mia continua creazione interiore. Ella non esiste so non in me medesimo. Le sue apparenze sono mutevoli come i sogni dell’infermo” (288) [“Her form is sketched by my desire. What different appearances she assumes in my eyes! Such as she appears to me each instant, she is only the effect of my continual inner creation. She exists only in me. Her appearances change like the dreams of an invalid” (298)].

And, of course, the inevitable tragedy which Giorgio predicts from the beginning of the affair plays out in the course of the passionate but short-lived tryst which ends in Giorgio’s destruction along with his lover. However, it is Giorgio who is irresistibly drawn to death (“death attracts me,” he remarks early in the novel)

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and takes Ippolita with him as he jumps off the edge of a cliff in a climactic and hyperbolic final act of possession of his love object. In this way, the initial scene of the novel, the stranger’s suicide which irresistibly fascinated the lovers, is re-enacted in a dramatic final tribute to death and to the powerlessness of the protagonist against his fatal destiny. It is clear that, although it was Giorgio who conceived of and enacted the double suicide, it is Ippolita and her ‘ineluctable fatality’ which drives him to destruction. This is perfectly consistent with the aesthetic contingencies of the femme fatale genre and the formal demands of its outcome.

However death is a more complex issue than it may seem in the context of each individual instance of its appearance in decadent works such as D’Annunzio’s. As Peter Nicholls observes in his discussion of decadence and the “Art of Death”:

This suicide tells us two important things about the decadents’ ‘cruel’ aesthetic: first, that the refinement of the Supreme Option requires an other to be ‘worked’ upon as well (Giorgio drags Ippolita down with him, ‘locked in that fierce embrace’ [315]), and secondly, that the sadistic drive of the decadent aesthetic always in the end recoils upon the self. 109

But in the D’Annunzian novel it is not merely a question of death as the inevitable consequence of the femme fatale story, or of a formal constraint of the genre that must be met at all costs. This is undoubtedly part of the formula; however, there is a more complex trajectory of actions and revelations which lead up to the final act of destruction, all of which contribute to the symbolic force of the novel and its concerns. It is also what could be behind the compulsive return to these

109 In Peter Nicholls, Ibid, 57.
novels in order to castigate, defend, decry, or celebrate them in the context of D’Annunzian criticism. A revulsion in the face of the Woman, or a flight away from eroticism in pursuit of some higher goal even if that is death, is analogous to the ‘revulsion’ of much of the criticism of decadent texts and what amounts to a sort of ‘critical unconscious’ that hides some of the same anxieties.

Thus the dominant moment of the text is the final flight from the flesh and revulsion at the moment at which it becomes clear that Giorgio’s most fervent desire, that of total possession of his lover, is not possible: “C’è sulla terra una sola ebrezza durevole: la sicurità nel possesso di un’altra creatura, la sicurità assoluta, incrollabile” (150) [“There is only one lasting intoxication on earth: certainty in the possession of another creature, absolute, unshakable certainty”(155)]. There are two principle reasons for the impossibility of this possession which are related, not to the present or the future, but to the irreversibility of the past. One is that Ippolita is not a virgin (she has been married already once); the other is that she is afflicted with “il demone isterico” (“the hysterical demon”) and “il male sacro,” (“the sacred disease,” epilepsy), both of which prefigure her inability to give birth. Both of these conditions appear as the continuing presence of the past in her body and represent, for Giorgio, her prior possession by others as well as his inability to possess her:

Una tale donna, egli pensava, è stata d’altri prima che mia! Ha giaciuto con un altro uomo; ha dormito con un altro uomo nel medesimo letto, sul medesimo guanciale. In tutte le donne è

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110 In Spackman’s analysis of the novel which is primarily concerned with the role of sickness and disease, she mentions the two themes of priority and fatherhood which dominate the novel (represented by the first two sections, “The Past” and “The Paternal Roof’) and which, she reminds us, are, according to Harold Bloom, the main preoccupations of the poet. (DG, 184).
singolarmente viva una specie di memoria fisica, la memoria delle sensazioni (184).

[A woman like this, he thought, has belonged to others before she was mine! She has lain with another man; she has slept with another man in the same bed, on the same pillow. In all women a sort of physical memory, the memory of sensations, is singularly alive (186)].

It is not surprising that a major component of the revulsion towards woman by the male protagonist revolves around notions of disease and sterility. The idea of disease and madness in women, indeed the ‘hysterization’ of women, was fundamental to nineteenth-century notions of the femme fatale. Nordau’s treatise, Charcot’s experiments on “hysterical” women, and Freud’s famous linking of the disease with female sexuality, all influenced fin de siècle representations of women in literature and the pathology attributed to women’s bodies at this time. In the Italian context the famously diseased women of the eponymous nineteenth-century novels spring to mind: Ugo Tarchetti’s Fosca, and Antonio Fogazzaro’s Malombra (1881). In them, the period’s diabolical feminine fascination and the related notion of genetic fatalism combine to produce the disquieting and transgressive woman, predestined to evil and to the inescapable mysterious fatality which oftentimes is genealogically based. In Fosca’s case, the origin of her malady is unknown, but certain; for Marina Malombra it is the inescapable heritage of her great-aunt, the “Matta del Palazzo” (Malombra, 85); and for Ippolita it is related not just to her sexuality, but to her middle-class roots:
Non erano belli i piedi nudi ch’ella a volta a volta scaldava su la ghiaia e rinfrescava nell’acqua; erano anzi difformati nelle dita, plebei, senz’alcuna finezza; avevano l’impronta manifesta della bassa stirpe. [...] Quante cose impure fermentano nel suo sangue! Tutti gli istinti ereditari della sua razza sono in lei, indistruttibili, pronti a svilupparsi e ad insorgere contro qualunque constringione” (295)

[“Her toes were even deformed, plebian, not at all delicate—they bore the impress of a lowly origin [...] How many impure things are fermenting in that blood! All the hereditary instincts of her race persist in her, indestructible, ready to develop and arise against any restraint” (306)].

Curiously, the act of possession (by the ‘spectral sinners’ of the past, or simply by the long tradition of historical demonic, i.e., ‘possessed’, women) is a common trope in the description of these female figures, an act of possession that mirrors Giorgio’s desire for total possession of Ippolita. The desire to possess is, after all, the cornerstone of Freud’s “castration complex.” But what, we might ask, does the male protagonist wish to preserve if not the ability to have the thing that is ‘lost’ as well as its negation? Moreover, even in the assertion of the genetic fatalism that haunts the women of these novels, and D’Annunzio’s in particular, there is a projection of sorts that is effected by the male protagonist literally onto the body of the woman in the form of disease which hides his own fears and anxieties surrounding the very thing which he condemns in her.

For example, in the section of the novel, “The Paternal Roof,” Giorgio laments his own family’s hereditary corruption and, in contrast to the double
movement of attraction and repulsion that his lover inspires, his relatives elicit only repulsion in him: from his philandering, ignominious father to his miserable and angry mother, to his sister Cristina and her sickly child, his brother Diego, and his Aunt Gioconda, who, with her typhoid breath and hermetic existence represents for Giorgio "the lowest degradations of human nature" (70). Even his uncle Demetrio, whom Giorgio fondly remembers as his "veritable father," (91) was the victim of a "virile melancholy" that eventually led him to take his own life. All of them seem to be contaminated by a hereditary fault which disgusts Giorgio, but which he feels powerless to escape.

In other words, if possession is both the cause and the desired effect of the femme fatale’s particular power, the result is an undecidability of the terms which constitute the ‘deadliness’ of the femme fatale figure. Or, more precisely, what we have is the co-existence of contradictory meanings that both affirm and deny her deadly role in the male protagonist’s imagination. She is clearly an object which inspires dread and fear, but she is ‘deadly’ merely by virtue of her existence as beautiful, seductive woman. This begs the question of whether the deadliness comes from the femme fatale herself, or from the projections onto her by the male artist, doctor, protagonist, or critic. It is this logic (which evokes Freud’s language of fetishism in the co-existence of affirmation and disavowal which it engenders) that makes contradiction not only possible, but necessary for the femme fatale figure to exist.

But what happens when the fetish itself becomes a theme in art and literature, thereby displacing the structure of its logic from the object of obsession onto the
literary text or theme itself? In other words, could the figure of the femme fatale provide the perfect example of the way in which the logic of fetishism and the oscillation of meaning or irresolution it allows, is both played out and undermined by the very terms of its own existence? In this way, the ‘textual unconscious’ of which we become readers and participants of nineteenth-century decadent novels, becomes eminently readable with regard to the ‘compulsive obsession’ that is the theme of the femme fatale.
CHAPTER IV

Silent Divas: The Femmes Fatales of the Italian Cinema muto

According to Roland Barthes in his study of myths, images are “frozen and eternalized” in order to enter the realm of what he calls mythical speech.111 Of all the reincarnations of the femme fatale, perhaps no other version better exemplifies the ‘frozen icon’ than that of the silent visual image of the cinematic diva. Both figures belong to that realm of aesthetic expression that presupposes an imaginative relationship to the material as if it always already existed. Hence the unquestioned repetition of this mythical theme in art and literature. But the paradox of repetition is such that each individual instance of the representation can only take place “a second time.” As with the simulacrum, there is no “original” of which succeeding repetitions are mere copies. What we have instead is a history of the repetition and no original object of study. Thus the attraction of the femme fatale myth is fully as much a function of our own familiarity with the myth as it is with the material itself. Not surprisingly then, this particular image of the ‘dangerous woman’ is a revealing symptom of part of a larger process of understanding which is related to notions of fate and fatality. In looking at some of the early Italian films which introduced the visual archetypes now known as the first divas, an understanding will emerge of just what constitutes this ‘representational fatality’ in the context of the silent cinema as well as how it is connected to larger issues of desire and the production of meaning in art.

The diva, ubiquitous now in film, fashion, and popular culture and associated most often with Hollywood film noir, is in fact a figure whose origins are located in the received repertory of images and themes from decadent novels and the Italian silent cinema. But while it is possible to trace the origins of the phenomenon of ‘divismo,’ or the star system, in Italian cinematic production, this is only one aspect of the importance of this figure for art and representation. The diva, like the femme fatale, constitutes another example of the way in which a term has entered the realm of language and now stands in for something which has no objective existence in reality. In both cases we are dealing with a set of received images and constructed notions of femininity that have become so much a part of the collective consciousness that whether they really have an essence in reality becomes irrelevant. The star system may function as a means of transforming the film personalities into ‘real’ versions of themselves but it is ultimately only in the image that the myth derives any meaning.

The term diva itself is most often linked with the larger-than-life female stars of the Italian post-war period such as Gina Lollobrigida, Anna Magnani, Monica Vitti, and Claudia Cardinale (not to mention Italy’s most famous diva, Sophia Loren). But if we were to construct a more accurate trajectory of the use of the term, its origins would have to be located in the early Italian silent films (produced from about 1913 to 1920) which have only in the last decade begun to receive critical attention.\(^{112}\)

\(^{112}\) In his article from 1998, Gian Piero Brunetta calls the “divismo” of the Italian cinema “a phenomenon that transcends any plan or project whose properties, characteristics and consequences are still far from being understood and studied whether within the specificity of Italian cinema or in
A diva now means something so general it no longer retains its relationship to the specific cultural and historical context from which it developed. It is now used primarily in the context of opera singers, an example of the way in which the term still somewhat remains within the Italian tradition but has been applied to the other arts in a more flexible way. The association of the diva with the operatic world seems to be a function of its usage internationally (due to a similar star system in opera with figures like Maria Callas and others) which ignores the fact that the term originated in the context of early Italian cinema. But one thing remains constant throughout the term’s history and that is its association with divinity. Female leads, whether on the theater, film, or opera stage, are given the status of nothing less than goddesses. The association of women with divinity, especially when it comes to a woman who is in some position of power, whether it be performative or otherwise, is a common trope which runs throughout the history of the representation of women in art and literature. As we will see, there is an internal contradiction in the perceived notions of divinity associated with the diva, one that suggests her other-worldliness but also includes the ‘bad girl’ image of the prima donna which so often accompanies the female star. Thus her mythic status is not questioned but, as we will see, it comes at a price: her deadliness or fatality.

But is a diva always necessarily a femme fatale? And are the popular icons we call ‘divas’ today even aware of the epistemological baggage the femme fatale carries along with her while at the same time being accepted by the world as a sign

the larger scope of the international culture of the early twentieth century,” in “Cantami o Diva,” Fotogenia, a, IV, n. 4-5, 1997-98, pp. 27-43.
of strength and power? Are the two versions of powerful women mutually exclusive or are they just different variations on the same theme? Either way, the result is the emergence of a term in language—and more than just a term, but a whole set of related images and ideas—for something with no epistemological validity, thereby attempting to control this representation while at the same time acknowledging its uncontrollability. In fact, the phenomenon of the diva or the femme fatale reveals the familiar dynamic which results from the desire to produce knowledge which ultimately ends up in the production of metaphors instead. For the figure of the femme fatale is indeed a compelling metaphor—a vehicle for desires, wishes, anxieties—that pretends to offer access to reality but in fact only offers access to the long history of the figure’s prior uses and meanings and not stable realities of the objective world.

But the phenomenon of the cinematic star who rises to a level of popularity that then surpasses her role as movie actress does have a traceable history different from that of her predecessor in the nineteenth century. The star system first arose in Italy even before a similar development occurred in Hollywood. It grew out of the first cinematic productions in Europe, stylistically most similar to theatrical

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113 On subject of the diva designation, if in its current usage we can call popular icons such as Madonna, Celine Dion and Jennifer Lopez divas, there is something lost in the transition from text to screen to popular culture—and from the particular to the universal—which needs to be retraced. Today’s diva is certainly not yesterday’s but this is not the point. Of course these popular figures’ iconic status cannot be argued with and the sheer level of their success attests to their diva status in the current cultural milieu. But success is not the only requirement by which an actress becomes a diva. In fact, despite all three of the above mentioned women’s extraordinary success, some of their recent career choices attest to their own awareness of the need to constantly revisit the past in order to recapture some lost essence (which may not even exist in the first place) and legitimate their status as divas in the more specific sense of the term. Here I am referring to the recent nostalgia for the ‘real’ divas which these female stars may be trying to emulate such as Madonna’s (misguided as the box office has shown) desire to remake Lina Wertmüller’s passionate drama Swept Away; Celine Dion’s new custom-built outdoor amphitheater modeled after the Coliseum in Las Vegas; and Jennifer Lopez as a modern Carmen in a recent MTV film.
melodrama, and the accumulation of traditions (figurative, literary, theatrical and musical) which led up to and coincided with the advent of film. But before it quickly became an international phenomenon, Italian ‘divismo’ served as the catalyst of transformation from the late nineteenth century theatre stage and literary text to the new cinematic medium. All of a sudden, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the emphasis moved from the verbal to the visual in a way that foregrounded the image and gave mythic status to the female stars and their repertory of symbolic gestures. As one Italian film critic notes:

Films began to be made on the actors themselves; the actor no longer played a character but the character became an excuse to show an actor who was now a legendary symbolic figure [...] and what happens is a transference of the audience’s desires and frustrations onto the actor, so the star symbolizes another world, another dimension to which the public aspires.114

As much of the work done on the femme fatale demonstrates, film is a specific site for the confluence of representational traditions associated with literature, art, theater, and music. While theories of cinematic specificity or theories of the spectator 115 have been important contributions to film criticism, my focus instead is on the emergence of the diva within the long tradition of representations of the femme fatale and its connection to the cinema as a particularly compelling

medium on which the mythical discourse depends. For it is at the moment of modernism that the figure of the femme fatale in its foundational nineteenth-century configuration—Merimée’s Carmen—makes the transition from the verbal to the visual, or from text to screen, marking a shift in the representation of the figure that is both dependent upon and indifferent to its literary origins. Of course Bizet’s Carmen is one of the most important departures from the verbal although still connected to the text both in terms of the libretto and the link with Merimeé’s novella.\textsuperscript{116}

So why is the femme fatale so insistently a figure of fascination in the texts of modernity? Some have called attention to the emergence of new technologies of production and reproduction (photography and cinema) born of the Industrial Revolution and the role of the female body as a common site for playing out this change. Others point to the emergence of psychoanalysis and the accompanying fears and anxieties prompted by shifts in the understanding of sexual difference in the late nineteenth century; while still others have called attention to the pseudo-scientific discourses of evolutionary theory which perpetuated fictions about disease and the “deadly nature of female sexuality.”\textsuperscript{117} What all of these hypotheses have in common, however, is the sense of a shift in relations or thought that prompted a different perception of reality that had profound repercussions on art and culture. In looking at the issues surrounding this shift in the perception of works of art, it may be that this mythical figure represents more than just a repeated thematic presence in

\textsuperscript{116} See my chapter 2 on the importance of Carmen to the history of the femme fatale.

art and literature, but becomes a necessary part of the structure that allows for this particular theorization of the modern to be possible.

The idea of the emergence of 'the modern' at the end of the nineteenth century, indeed of a new historical era that could be distinguished from the preceding one, becomes contingent upon a set of perceptions that perpetuate the idea of a break with history and a new understanding of the past. Walter Benjamin's 1939 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is one starting point for theorizing the modern work of art and provides the framework for his ideas to become naturalized to the point of assuming an authority of their own. But what if the idea of the modern versus the traditional, or the "auratic" in Benjamin's terms, as set against the "artwork in the age of mechanical reproducibility," were in fact metaphors themselves called upon to account for a change or crisis in history that can only be located within language itself (in this case, the language of Benjamin's essay)? In other words, what if there is no actual evidence of a crisis or shift in objective reality (just as there is no evidence of the objective existence of the figure of the femme fatale), but instead a crisis produced in the essay itself – the effects of which are read as real and not as merely the effects of language and ideas.

Clearly the language of Benjamin's essay conveys a sense of revolutionary change and crisis with regard to art of the twentieth century (film and photography). His definition of art with a political motive reveals his agenda of positing a theory of art that is "useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art" but "useless for the purposes of Fascism." 118 But the essay, as much as it may signal

a change in the history of aesthetics by introducing the political dimension into a theory of art, is an example of a set of meanings that have no significance except in the relations into which these meanings are put within the essay itself. In other words, it is the essay itself which gives the ideas their existence, not objective events which give rise to the essay. For example, this is made clear through certain metaphorical uses of language in the essay that serve to make connections from the linguistic to the empirical world where language fails to do so. For instance, the famous statements that “art sensed the approaching crisis,” (224) or that “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art,” (221) are examples of the performative nature of the essay that makes it possible to think about the aura as something personified or based in reality. But what is at stake in the essay is not so much the idea of the “new,” potentially subversive work of art as replacing the old traditional forms, but rather the possibility of defining art with a political motive at all. This is a significant stake and one which needs an authoritative stance. Thus the authority of the auratic work of art is replaced by the authority of a perception based in language (that of Benjamin’s essay) which defines an entire era.

It is this need to control the knowledge of a transition from the old to the new, or the definition of the modern itself, that marks not only the difference between a properly historical worldview (that of the 19th century), and one which is more openly a-historical and based in the temporal reality of the present. This way of understanding the modern may also explain the proliferation in the beginning of the twentieth century of more abstract and popular forms of representation in art and
culture that would bring a sense of immediacy to the work of art. Again this is Benjamin’s point when he defines the aura as “the unique phenomenon of a distance” (222) insofar as the decay of the aura signifies a decline in distance, namely historical distance or historicity. For Benjamin this is the necessary opposition around which his argument takes shape—the auratic, tradition, history, distance, and above all, authenticity, versus the modern, suppression of distance, and, of course, reproducibility.

Here the cinema becomes the most important site of representation in the twentieth century and offers access to the same ideas of knowledge and truth, or the production of meaning, but through a much more immediate and compelling medium—the image. It offers a new representational language which replaces the logic of reference and anticipates what Frederic Jameson has called “a realism of image or spectacle society (in which) the logic of reference is replaced with a new, semiotic logic of the signifier.” In this conception of art reproduction is necessarily non-historical and history has to be forgotten in order to have a modern concept of art. At the same time, the cinema offers a technology of representation that becomes the most fitting locus for the femme fatale, making the recreation of the auratic—in what is perhaps one of its last moments of glory—possible in this mythical, ambiguous, and problematic figure of modernity.

Jameson’s recent work on postmodern temporality and what he calls “incomplete modernization,” part of a revised historical understanding of modernism, have been helpful for my purposes in situating the change that takes place during the transition from nineteenth-century Industrial society to the modern technological world marked by a certain transparency of the image. In this shift he sees a “suppression of history, time, and temporality itself,” that makes possible certain kinds of representation that foreground the image rather than the object. See F. Jameson, “The End of Temporality,” in Critical Inquiry, Summer, 2003, vol. 29, num. 4, pp. 695-718.
One of the image’s most persistent incarnations is that of the diva of the early Italian silent cinema. As one critic recently argued, “the diva films are the only early cinema worth considering,”\(^{120}\) despite the fact that they tend to be often overlooked in film studies as a sort of premature cinema not taken seriously enough to warrant critical attention. Indeed the silent period of Italian cinema remains relatively obscure to modern critics. When one considers Italian film it is almost always in the context of the internationally recognized ‘golden age’—the post-war period of Italian Neorealism. But in fact, the pre-sound period in Italy (before 1927) which produced the first divas of the screen, reincarnated in the Scandinavian and American silent cinemas and, later, the femme fatale of 1940s film noir, is important in its own right. The Italian silent era occupies a special place in the history of cinema, one that still needs to be uncovered for its cultural and artistic importance, but also for its relationship to more theoretical concerns about art and representation.

Perhaps one reason the silent cinema is not taken as seriously as it should be is its more melodramatic, inward, and self-consciously aesthetic form, juxtaposed against the more ‘authentic’ production of the post-war period because of its dependence upon realism. The idea that the films, or the figure of the femme fatale itself, would not offer access to reality but pose instead a force subversive to coherent thought and truth is both a reflection of the decadent themes on which the figure depends, as well as the element that links it to a more general discussion of art and representation. Indeed, the femme fatale and the silent cinema are like metaphor and aesthetic creation themselves insofar as they depend upon the dynamics of

paradox and ambiguity for their disruptive and potentially subversive power. As Charles Bernheimer argues for the idea of decadence in art and literature, the same could be said of the femme fatale, one of its most persistent themes: “Its persistence is an illustration of the power of language and thought to keep the nonexistent in imaginary existence.”

Moreover, the fact that the ‘diva films’ predate the sound films and for that reason are often marginalized purely for technical reasons, only adds to their enigmatic status and fascination. Of course the actresses themselves are a large part of what makes these films stand out in the collective imagination as vehicles of pure emotion and melodramatic symbolism, embodying for the masses the passion, drama, and irrational forces that at the turn of the century preoccupy the modern consciousness. In fact, the absence of sound is not so much a lack as it is an integral and important aspect of the creation of the diva and her enduring representational force. The divas are fittingly and necessarily silent insofar as they do not need sound for the roles they play. Theirs is a purely physical, plastic, and transcendent reality that does not require language and is all the more effective because of its absence.

The diva’s gestures and repertory of symbolic language, her eyes, make-up, and the tropes of the theater stage tell her story better than a verbal performance could. The efficacy of her drama is dependent upon her theatrical performance and is made all the more compelling and poignant in its silent world of image and spectacle. She is pure image and spectacle herself, the embodiment of plasticity while at the same time a ‘real’ cinematic icon whose existence onscreen transcends her image and becomes a part of her existence off-screen.

Thus the line is blurred between representation and reality for the cinematic diva whose image and meaning is fixed on more than one level. While Benjamin’s argument is that “the film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the ‘personality’ outside the studio,” (231) the phenomenon of the diva is in fact an example of the reverse. In other words, the ‘cult of personality’ that is created by this representational icon reinforces the auratic element of the modern work of art and inextricably links it with its ritualistic, traditional origins (that of the theater stage), while at the same time producing an auratic presence for the masses that inevitably lives between art and life. In this case, the aesthetic crossing over into the real then allows the real to take on the timelessness of art which results in their impossible division. The fatality of the figure of the diva lies in this impossibility of existence outside the confines of her legacy of representation.

But this fatality is also what makes the diva an enduring figure in artistic production and perhaps it may be one of the few forms in which the auratic can repeat itself in the modern period. In this mythical figure the recreation of the auratic both in terms of the image on the screen and the personality outside the work of art becomes secure in this eminently reproducible figure of modernity. Three actresses most often invoked as the most important divas of the silent period and whose work can most clearly be defined as “auratic” are Francesca Bertini, Lyda Borelli, and Pina Menichelli.

By all accounts the first diva of the Italian cinema, Francesca Bertini (or “La Bertini” as she came to be called) received critical acclaim as the protagonist of Assunta Spina (1915), a role that established the myth of the diva as well as secured
the actress's own mythical status both in Italy and abroad. In this film directed by Bertini and Gustavo Serena (who also plays the male lead), she plays a young Neapolitan girl caught between two lovers and a father in a passionate drama typical of the diva genre. It is shot in the streets of Naples with natural light and the use of many non-actors, presaging the rise of Italian Neorealism. And, as is generally the case in these films, the woman is always constructed as the site of an excessive and dangerous desire which leads to the destruction of everyone around her, herself included. The formal device which structures the drama must also include exaggerated passion that quickly devolves into tragedy through jealousy, revenge, and in this case, even physical violence. A repeated set of aesthetic codes are employed in all of the diva films, their plots varying only minimally while the performance of the actress becomes the focal point of the film.

These overly stylized performances are clearly indebted to the theater and are marked by the use of hyperbolic gestures and movements, props, heavy make-up and costumes that over-determine the actress’s role as dangerous woman, in effect using her iconicity to transform her into spectacle and the personification of desire. The excess and over-determination of the femme fatale’s image is constituted by an exaggeration of the tropes of femininity which then become the formula for her many reincarnations in all of the various diva films of the period. For example, her eyes are always emphasized, with dark circles underneath; her hair is left wild and unruly; and her garments are typically flowing and ephemeral, again adding to the sense of other-worldliness her portrayal inspires. All of these tools of signification are combined to produce a seductive, provocative femininity aided by the techniques
of early film production such as the use of close-ups and filming in closed, interior spaces.

It is worth remembering that these tropes of the silent diva films did not arise wholly on their own but are the result of similar trends in artistic production which culminated in the cinema but whose traces are clearly found in the nineteenth century. The aesthetic codes, tastes, and ideas that emerge from these films are derived from the decadent sensibility which preceded them in art and literature. Of course Baudelaire comes to mind as one of the idols of the age, and in his work are found many of the same sensibilities that we see transformed onto the screen in the diva films: “primacy of sensation, taste for the bizarre and horrible, cultivation of the artificial, and abandonment of the self to melancholy (“spleen”) and sensuality.” 122 Consequently, one of the decadents’ most favored themes was the femme fatale. Flaubert’s *Salammbô*, or Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé*, for example, provided the decadent imagination with many of the themes from which it was to draw its inspiration. The image of woman as an idol, at once mysterious, inaccessible, and cruel became one of the most significant symbolic figures of the whole decadent era. And, as one historian of the period reminds us, the femme fatale “was indelibly associated with a rising fashion for a certain kind of exoticism in which we find (both) a concern for exact historical reconstitution, and a desire for escape into the nowhere land of dreams.” 123

As the diva films illustrate, the influence of decadent themes was not lost on the early cinema being produced in Italy. Bertini’s performance in *Assunta Spina* is

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one of the most revered in all of the Italian silent period. Much of it is characterized
by an ease and naturalness that belies the extreme stylization of her art. Her
performance in front of the camera resembles the characterization of such decadent
female figures as are found in Flaubert and Baudelaire, but also in the paintings of
Gustave Moreau and the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley. Indeed the theme of the
femme fatale is so often repeated throughout the art and literature of the nineteenth
century that the figures almost become parodies of themselves in their own
representations. In the cinematic figure, as in the figure's literary or artistic versions,
the emphasis is placed on woman's essentially futile nature as fundamentally
immoral, cruel, and perverse, as well as on the destructive nature of passion and the
dangerous aspects of love that lead man to his destruction.

Since she is at once vulgar and attractive, necessary and lethal, the femme
fatale figure embodies this dilemma expressed in the art and literature of the
decadent period, but is modernized in the early twentieth-century film versions of her
appearance. For example, the drama surrounding her character is no longer that of
the fantastic world of myth and religion or dreams, but has been brought ‘down to
earth’ and into the confines of working-class Naples or a small provincial town.
Instead of the wildly imaginative scenarios of the decadent dramas that took place in
exotic or ancient locales against sumptuous backdrops, here the attention is on the
ordinary or commonplace kind of love that turns fatal in the midst of normal,
everyday life. Assunta herself is introduced as the “la popolana appassionata e
fatalmente peccatrice” (the impassioned commoner, a doomed sinner) in the opening
scene of the film, a curiously paradoxical designation which fits with the ambiguity
of the femme fatale in all of her different variations. Moreover, because of what has been called its crude, documentary, photographic style, *Assunta Spina* is usually cited as an early example of silent realism.\(^{124}\) This, despite the fact that it is a realism that also depends on a high level of formal artificiality and over-representation that aligns it more with the theater than with the ‘new’ medium, despite its many innovations.

In Assunta’s performance we recognize the tropes of the theater stage: her exaggerated and dramatic gestures make her look larger than life, while her huge black eyes are often turned toward the camera and away from the other actors, as if acknowledging the camera’s crucial role in turning her into transcendent icon both on and off the screen. In this and in all of the silent diva films there is a magnification of the female star as the focal point of each scene at the same time as a reduction takes place in the scope of the set and space of the film. This type of contradictory movement is consistent with the figure in general in the sense that she provokes mixed emotions and appears to blur the opposition between activity and passivity with regard to her actions and their consequences.\(^{125}\) This can be related to what I am arguing is her auratic presence and to the production of images in the cinema in general. In Benjamin’s conception of the image, as will be discussed below, there is a double movement of bringing the image closer and distancing it from the audience at the same time. This is also consistent with the paradoxical


\(^{125}\) The idea of the “ambivalent power of the femme fatale” is dealt with by Mary Ann Doane in her book cited above, p. 2.
function of the aura in works of art insofar as it is only accessible in the moment in
which is seen as ‘withering’ or in a state of decay.

Moreover, in contrast to the historical epic films which glorified Roman
subjects and were known for their aesthetic exploration of cinematic space—the
long-shot was perfected by Giovanni Pastrone in *La Presa di Roma* (1910) and
*Cabiria* (1914)—the diva films which directly followed these large-scale productions
were self-consciously small in scale and introverted in scope. Along with this new
filming technique came an emphasis on the close-up which became crucial in the
organization of the cinematic narrative. Thus we have a ‘larger-than-life’ image in
the midst of a continuously reduced diegetic space and time which parallels the
action of the close-up as it both brings closer and separates the image from us at the
same time.

As Mary Ann Doane notes with regard to film noir, “with the formation of a
star system heavily dependent upon the maintenance of the aura, the close-up
became an important means of establishing the recognizability of each star. At
moments it almost seems as though all the fetishism of the cinema were condensed
onto the image of the face, the female face in particular.” 126 Barthes describes this
phenomenon in relation to the face of Greta Garbo (who, by the way, has been called
one of the ideal heirs of Francesca Bertini127):

Garbo still belongs to that moment in cinema when capturing the
human face still plunged audiences into the deepest ecstasy, when one

126 Doane, 46-47.
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literally lost oneself in a human image as one would in a philtre, when
the face represented a kind of absolute state of the flesh, which could
be neither reached nor renounced [...] Garbo’s face represents this
fragile moment when the cinema is about to draw an existential from
an essential beauty, when the archetype leans towards the fascination
of mortal faces, when the clarity of the flesh as essence yields its
place to a lyricism of Woman. 128

Garbo’s face (and the cinematic tradition to which she belongs) represents an
era—the ‘iconographic age’ as Barthes calls it—in which the face, rather than being
the mark of individuality, is universalized. “The face of Garbo is an Idea,” he writes.
This is especially true of the diva films in which each female star becomes less and
less individualized at the same time as she becomes known to the public through her
performances in the films. She becomes known, however, not for her singularity or
uniqueness, but for her portrayal of a type, or an idea. Thus the contradictory nature
of the production of images that are supposed to single out each star as the unique
presence of the film, and the universalizing tendency of the camera which makes the
face the common trope of femininity.

In any case, the close-up of the face is crucial to the creation of the auratic
through the production of a visual myth of Woman on which the diva films depend.
But, as Benjamin was well aware, the camera operates in a very ambiguous way with
regard to the effect it produces on the masses which for him is the key to
understanding the change in the way modern works of art take place. The
intervention of the camera as the mechanism which profoundly affects perception of

128 Roland Barthes, Mythologies, 56-57.
the work of art in the modern period is a crucial idea in Benjamin’s essay. For the camera makes possible the contradictory action of both bringing closer and distancing the image from the spectator so that what is changed is the means of perceiving the work and not the work of art itself. It is this same contradiction that imparts to the film actor her aura of individuality at the same time as her image ‘takes place’ in many places at once and which therefore cannot be said to have any ‘original’ occurrence. Benjamin characterizes this situation of the film actor as follows:

For the first time—and this is the effect of film—man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on the stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor. However, the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public. Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays.129

This is the unique situation of the aura as Benjamin understands it which, paradoxically, is constituted by virtue of its decay. In other words, it is not a question of a quality found within the work of art itself that disappears in the era of the reproducible image. Instead, the aura is something that is seen only in the process of its own withering or decaying. Thus it is from the start marked by an irreducible element of taking leave, of departure, or separation. But the aura, despite its decline or decay, never fully disappears since it returns in those forms of

representation that would seem most hostile to it, such as film. The essay may seem to announce the decisive disappearance of the aura, as the above quotation illustrates. Benjamin undoubtedly emphasizes its "vanishing" insofar as the camera serves to remove the actor from his performance and from his audience, thereby producing a distance that cannot be overcome in the age of technical reproduction. But, as Samuel Weber has pointed out (and this is related to the operation of the close-up and the resulting paradoxical image it produces), "the aura is able to return in the age of technical reproducibility because, as the appearance or apparition of an irreducible separation, it is never uniquely itself, but is always constituted in a process of self-detachment: detachment from the self as demarcation of a self." In other words, the decaying of the aura is a constitutive element of the aura itself; the withering is there in order to preserve the possibility of the aura and it is only in the moment of its decay that it is known at all.

It is this idea of an image constituted by two opposing tendencies which makes the notion of aura applicable to the image of the femme fatale. It is also one way to arrive at what is meant by the 'dialectical image' in Benjamin in order to understand how this may be related to the function of the image in the films being discussed here. It is the moment at which the two antithetical elements intersect.

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130 Samuel Weber, in his article "Mass Mediauras; or Art, Aura, and Media in the work of Walter Benjamin," argues that "there is a very real possibility that aura will be reproduced in and by the very media responsible for its 'decline',' and that "aura thrives in its decline," (p. 45) an idea which he admits gives Benjamin's essay a certain prophetic quality which may or may not be read in the essay but which allows Weber to develop his argument with regard to the mass media and television. 131 Weber, Ibid, 36.

132 The concept of the "dialectical image" is central for all of Benjamin's work especially that related to the *Arcades Project* which arguably is the work in which much of his thought is brought together in the most extensive but also fragmentary and difficult of his writings. Here I will only deal with a very limited aspect of this idea as it relates to the cinema and in particular to the type of image that is
that makes the dialectical image understandable. In this way Benjamin can give visual access, and hence understanding, to philosophical ideas that otherwise would remain inaccessible. And it is this moment as it occurs in the cinema which he calls the “shock effect” of the film *(WA, 238).* Shocking insofar as the image has the ability to awaken a collective subject from a dream state in which it has fallen, according to Benjamin. The awakening from the dream (a concept that deserves much more attention than is possible here) as it occurs in Benjamin’s work is nevertheless applicable with regard to the image of the femme fatale. For the figure does possess a ‘phantasmagoric’ presence resembling a dream state or fantasy world of primal history which is evoked by every version of this mythical figure. This is of course the delusional aspect of the image which is why the term ‘phantasmagoric’ as it is used in Benjamin is appropriate: the status of the commodity (or, as I am arguing, the femme fatale) is that of a “delusional expression of collective utopian fantasies and longings, whose very mode of expression itself, as delusional, ensures that those same longings remain mere utopian fantasies.” The result of which, as the case has been made for the commodity, is the “mythic compulsion toward endless repetition” which is the fate of the “failed” commodity in the age of capitalist consumption. This ceaseless play of repetition is also, I would argue, the fate of the image of the femme fatale.

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127 evoked in the diva films and what this may have in common with Benjamin’s formulations on film and perception of the modern work of art.

133 This idea is dealt with in terms of the commodity in a useful analysis of the dialectical image in Max Pensky, *Method and Time: Benjamin’s Dialectical Images,* (forthcoming from Cambridge UP).

134 Ibid, Pensky.
And it is for this reason that the myth of the femme fatale can be seen to rely on the cinematic mode of expression for its continued force and mass appeal. The production of images through the cinema is both what generates and compulsively repeats the mythical force of the image of the femme fatale. But it is only in presenting the figure as an object within a history, or ‘as it really is’ rather than as the myth, that the image derives its meaning. Hence the purpose of the dialectical image. It is only in the dialectical relationship between the two representational functions of the image—the mythical as well as the historical—that the image has, as it were, this transcendent function. Benjamin’s interest in the cinema was not only due to his fascination with the techniques of reproduction which it complicates and changes irrevocably, but also because he obviously understood that the implications of the “withering of the aura” of artworks as a result of their technical reproducibility far exceeded the aesthetic sphere to which they usually belong.

If Assunta Spina marks the beginning of the full-length dramas in which the actor becomes the center of the film, it also sets in motion the series of formulaic patterns that make up the ‘diva paradigm’ in which the female protagonists alternate between evil seductress and fatally doomed creature. Assunta, however, is portrayed as an enigmatic and sorrowful “sinner” who protects the lover who assaults her. She “provokes the final tragedy and then takes the blame for it in a generous yearning for redemption” reads the intertext. The tragedy occurs when her fiancé, Michele, thinks she is seeing another man which causes him to accuse her and then commit the most serious of affronts: the “sfregio” or, the cut. The word literally means a disfigurement involving a gash or scar, but it also has a popular connotation in which
a woman is marked or made ugly as a consequence of being unfaithful to her
husband or lover. In the narrative of the film the act seems incommensurate with the
events that lead up to it. However, when viewed within the context of the femme
fatale genre, the violence is a formal constraint that is given the appearance of being
meaningful in its own right regardless of whether it is justified by the film's content
or plot.

It is this tension between the form and the narrative that is constantly put into
play in the femme fatale films which, in a sense, are driven by the fatality of the form
itself. The form proves fatal in the sense that the plot or narrative inevitably become
secondary to the formal devices dictated by the genre itself. The aesthetic codes by
which the femme fatale is presented, or the tropes of her physical appearance, are
discussed above; while some of the classic elements of the genre are the dark interior
scenes, an authoritative father figure, an upright male protagonist who represents
patriarchal authority, and a devious, seductive, if often unaware, female who
threatens the life, welfare, or psychological well-being of the hero.135

After slashing her cheek with a knife Michele is arrested and Assunta pleads
with the court for leniency claiming to have seriously provoked him. When he is
sent to jail in another town, Assunta gives in to the attentions of the lawyer, Don
Federigo, who offers to help her get him transferred to Naples in exchange for her

135 In his book, The Fatal Woman: Sources of Male Anxiety in American Film Noir, 1941-1991,
(London: Associated University Presses, 1996), James F. Maxfield organizes his readings of various
films of the noir genre in terms of these very same formal elements, which in the case of American
film noir are translated into the detective dramas of the 1940s such as Huston's The Maltese Falcon
and Wilder's Double Indemnity, as well as Murder My Sweet, The Big Sleep, Out of the Past, and
White Heat. Though Maxfield does not acknowledge this, all of these films, indeed the American
noir genre in general, are clearly indebted to the early diva films, as a look at the films and their
structure as well as the famous femme fatales which emerged from them (Mary Astor, Barbara
Stanwyck, Lauren Bacall, Jane Greer, and Kim Novak for example) demonstrates.
own 'sacrifice'. In the end, he too “abandons her to her sad destiny” and in the final scene of the film the tragedy is played out to its inevitable conclusion. Michele is let out of jail early and comes home to find Assunta and the table set for two. As Don Federigo, her awaited guest, walks up to the house, Michele stabs him and he stagers inside and falls on the floor, dead. When the police arrive, Michele is gone and Assunta takes the knife and offers herself to the police as the murderer. The trope of the self-sacrificing female is not alien to the femme fatale genre. It is one of the few possible endings that the femme fatale can meet – either she is destroyed herself as the inevitable consequence of the destruction she has caused around her; or she offers herself up for destruction at the hands of a man, the law, or in the more sensational ending, by going mad.

In another film of the same period, L'età critica (1921) starring Pina Menichelli, the tropes of the femme fatale genre are even more exaggerated and the narrative functions by virtue of our expectations of the stereotyped format rather than by the action of the film. In other words, the familiarity of the genre is a constitutive element of the form itself insofar as the formula is so well-known that the specifics of the film’s plot become secondary to the constraints of the genre and the audience’s expectation of their fulfillment. For instance, when the young beauty, Erica, is sent to visit her aunt and uncle in the country for the summer and both her uncle and his son develop a fondness for her, we know how the drama will end. The boy, after seeing Erica with his father, cries to his mother and then grabs a rifle. A rifle shot is heard and Erica finds the boy’s body. The mother accuses her of killing her son and the tragedy is complete. What starts as an innocent infatuation with the
girl by both the father and the son then takes its inevitable course and everyone’s fate is sealed. The boy commits suicide and the family is torn apart, all because of the threatening and destructive presence of the young beauty, Erica. Menichelli’s performance, however, is perfect. She is one of the most expressive of the divas, statuesque and cold, a font of stereotypical movements and gestures who succeeds in transcending the role of the young seductress she plays. She is her image and her mythical reality, regardless of her level of awareness or complicity in the drama. Her type, indeed her myth, precedes her and eventually transcends even her physical presence both as actor and character in the drama.

Again one of the ways the diva is reduced to her image is through the particular use of the camera and its ability to animate at the same time as it mechanizes certain aspects of its subject. Here the camera focuses on Menichelli’s huge, black eyes as if they were the vehicle and source of power while her body remains just a secondary detail. Her physicality and beauty are less real than her imaginative and absolute, if mythical, power to destroy lives. In this sense, the femme fatale is only real insofar as she incarnates and embodies the long legend of her infamous role as femme fatale. Thus the ethereal and angel-like quality of these silent divas with their loosely flowing white gowns, pale faces and blank looks with eyes that fill the screen with their enormous gaze. At times, in fact, the figure seems to be nothing but a pair of destructive, demonic eyes. It is no surprise that the male protagonist opposite Pina Menichelli has a problem with his vision.

Castration anxiety, Medusa’s gaze, the threat of blindness, an uncontrollable passion that leads to death and destruction—there is an understandable desire to
laugh at the excesses of the received repertoire of decadent themes that make up the silent diva films. It is easy to dismiss these films from a critical point of view and make sophisticated fun of the lifelessness of the worn-out tropes of femininity they perpetuate. They recall a former aesthetic realm in which theatricality and excess were part of the allure of the genre but never without a certain amount of self-conscious irony or distance. When we watch them now there is a sense that they do not belong to a serious discussion of cinema or artistic creation, the same kind of dismissive judgement with which many of the works of the decadent period were treated. These were off-beat, extravagant works symptomatic of the late nineteenth-century psyche—appealing but dangerous, pleasurable but self-indulgent, exciting yet perverse and simply ‘degenerate’ as they were famously judged by cultural critics of the time. And yet there is undoubtedly something compelling and provocative about both the decadent works of art and their successive reinventions in the diva films of the silent Italian cinema. Do we love them or hate them? Perhaps it is precisely this contradictory status that allows for the fascination to endure.

There is a similar persistent ambivalence with regard to the theme of the femme fatale and its treatment in literary studies, despite the few recent attempts by some to take the material seriously. Perhaps this ambivalence and attraction-

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136 Max Nordau’s treatise, Entartung (the French translation, Degénérescence, appeared in 1894) on the ills of the fin de siècle artists and writers is the most prominent example. Also, from the standpoint of nineteenth-century ‘medical’ texts, another famous critic of decadence is Cesare Lombroso, Genio e degenerazione (Palermo: Remo Sandron, 1897).

137 Mary Anne Doane’s work cited above is one example, as is Charles Bernheimer’s (also cited above). Also, Jean Pierrot, in his 1997 book L’imaginaire décadent, translated by Derek Coulter as The Decadent Imagination, 1880-1900 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), challenges the minor role that is generally assigned to decadent works and provides a useful overview of decadent themes. And Barbara Spackman analyses the rhetoric of sickness in decadent fiction in Decadent Genealogies: The rhetoric of sickness from Baudelaire to d’Annunzio (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).
repulsion anxiety express something fundamental about the image of the femme fatale itself that is inextricably linked to its theoretical treatment. In other words, there is a striking similarity between the effects the femme fatale is supposed to inspire—the ambiguous tension between awe and terror—and the theoretical anxiety that the figure represents. There is undoubtedly something uneasy and enigmatic about the nature of the ‘dangerous woman’ that Freud tried to put his finger on but ultimately referred to the poets or to a time when science could offer us “deeper and more coherent information.” And what exactly is it? Perhaps every attempt to define it would end up in the same kind of aporia with which Freud’s investigations inevitably resulted. It may be that there is no answer to the type of question he (or anyone else interested in the nature of sexual difference) is compelled to ask. But what this type of inquiry may reveal instead is that in the very concept of the figure of the femme fatale we expect a mimetic and epistemological claim that the figure itself does not make. That is, inherent in the figure’s construction is a resistance to the theoretical claims to ‘truth’ it usually inspires. It is this transgression of the very structure which determines its existence that makes the figure a persistent topic of interest, both in artistic production as well as from a critical perspective.

Indeed, the femme fatale genre has fostered perhaps more imitation and revision than any other mythical figure. On the other hand, perhaps one reason the figure continues to survive in art and literature despite the ostensible fatality of the form itself is due to the intensity and coherence of the fantasy material it organizes. The insatiable desire of the sadistic woman is a myth that is constantly being re-

shaped and revisited in attempts to invest the fantasy with new life and vitality. Yet the paradigm on which the myth is based has always been the same: the ultimate mythic source lies in the “pure evil” of woman herself. If every myth must have an underlying preoccupation which is usually based on a fear or anxiety, this one is one of the most widely accepted despite its general acknowledgement as an exaggerated caricature. For an admission of its unreality does not constitute a denial of its forcefulness or effectiveness.

Thus the ambivalence which the femme fatale figure inspires, or that mixture of attraction and repulsion toward what she represents, functions in the same way as the theoretical desire to expose the genre as frivolous or essentialist and not deserving of critical attention. But perhaps it is by means of this apparent failure that the genre signifies anything at all. The dynamic and conflictual nature of the femme fatale material is invested with a constitutive desire to produce meaning which ultimately ends up merely illustrating the stereotypical preexistent “knowledge” about the figure which we expect to confirm through each representation. We already know the meaning of the figure and of her gestures, her style, her symbolism, to the extent that we expect the films merely to allow us to confirm our preexisting knowledge in advance. This apparent slippage between representation as an act of confirmation of preexisting knowledge on the one hand, and the expectation of the aesthetic offering us something new on the other, presents us with a methodological dilemma that is best exemplified in the emergence of a mass culture along the lines of the one Benjamin sees as distinctive to the modern era. It is this dual function of certain works of art—as protection from the potentially harmful or powerful effects
of the material on the one hand, and its wish-fulfilling function on the other—that, instead of resolving the conflict, keeps it in play with contradictory figures such as the femme fatale or the diva. In fact, the cinematic diva may offer us a curious ‘solution’ to these demands of aesthetic production that Benjamin locates in works of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In the mixture of attraction and horror, of distance and separation that her image provokes, or of the undecidability of her theoretical importance/marginalization, she offers us a telling interpretation of a never-ending fatality that no other figure could inspire. It is the realization that it is not the diva herself who is ‘doomed,’ but the structure which determines her representation that marks the fatality of the femme fatale. Hence, in a line that could just as easily be spoken by Francesca Bertini in Italy as it was by Gloria Swanson in Hollywood, the dying diva proclaims at the end of *Sunset Boulevard*: “I am still great. It is the cinema that has grown small.”
CHAPTER V

‘Postmodern’ Femmes Fatales and the Reinvention of the Myth

It is not surprising that one of the most ancient mythical motifs, the femme fatale, would continue to be a ubiquitous figure in modern artistic production. But while her undeniable aesthetic appeal and dramatic potential have not diminished since her high point in the late nineteenth century, she has undergone a transformation of her symbolic importance and the possible meanings connected to her image. A closer look at the ways in which this transformation has occurred reveals a new representational construct for this mythical figure in art and literature, one which is informed by the series of developments which have occurred in aesthetic discourse and in the tradition of Western thought in the ‘postmodern’ era.

Several elements of this change apply to what I call the ‘postmodern femme fatale,’ a figure whose image continues to be relevant in art and literature, but whose meanings and interpretive possibilities have undergone a definite change. These include a new self-conscious irony almost always present in recent incarnations of the femme fatale; an emphasis on citation, or a self-referentiality which recalls its own past and iconography and makes use of it in new and flexible ways; and a reappraisal of the critical and theoretical implications of the figure which opens the way for a new dimension of subversion and mockery of the motif, also from the perspective of female writers and artists. In this chapter I will look at several instances of the appearance of the postmodern femme fatale—including one of the many modern versions of the Carmen story—in order to chart the process of de-
mystification of the figure in its recent configurations and point to new ways of 
representing the old trope of threatening female sexuality. The texts I will examine 
include the short story, “Poisoning the Sea,” which retells Odysseus’s adventure with 
the goddess Circe from her perspective; and the contemporary Italian novel, La 
bruttina stagionata (1992) by Carmen Covito. The films I will consider are Carlos 
Saura’s 1983 version of Carmen, and Brian DePalma’s recent Hollywood 
contribution to the genre, Femme Fatale (2002).

Because the femme fatale’s representation is so dependent upon perceptual 
ambiguity and ideas about the limits of vision in relation to knowledge, the figure’s 
incarnation in the cinema is a particularly telling one. And, because she seems to 
confound power, subjectivity, and agency with the very lack of these attributes, her 
relevance to feminist discourses is critical. Thus, in dealing with the figure of the 
femme fatale in her more recent re-articulations, there must also be a concomitant 
analysis of discourses that previously may have been applied only anachronistically 
to the figure in its critical interpretation. A variety of discourses now inform the 
subject of the femme fatale—psychoanalysis, film studies, feminism, cultural 
studies—which cannot be divorced from its existence as a literary myth grounded in 
the specific historical conditions in which it developed. For my purposes all of these 
are relevant and useful theoretical paradigms that inform the readings discussed here, 
but an understanding and assessment of the figure as a cultural object and its 
continued force in artistic production is the crucial reference point linking all of these 
discourses regardless of investigative position.
Of course, the development of the cinema is a particularly significant marker in the history of representation of mythical female figures (as I discuss with regard to the diva in chapter four). As many critics—particularly feminist oriented ones—have understood, film is a significant site for the confluence of representational traditions associated with literature, art, theater, and music. The cinema gave the femme fatale a new visual image in every different reincarnation of her appearance. Additionally, psychoanalysis, despite its epistemological quandaries often frequently linked with a problematic inscription of sexual difference, offers a particularly rich site for the examination of cultural conventions and the limits and instability of knowledge of sexual difference. Therefore, a theory of the unconscious is crucial to the comprehension of the cinema as the realm of fantasy and desire and the activator of mechanisms of voyeurism and fetishism, all of which figure prominently in any discussion of the femme fatale.

In classic Hollywood cinema there are two types of films within which the contradictions involved in the patriarchal representation of woman become most acute—melodrama and film noir. The femme fatale remains one of the distinctive and alluring features in both types of film, and most discussions read the intriguing character of the femme fatale only relative to male fears about women. As

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140 Doane, 103.

illustrated in previous chapters, the femme fatale enjoyed a high point in the late
nineteenth century European context and then re-emerged in the first half of the
twentieth century with the diva films of the Italian silent cinema. Eventually, this led
to the development of the American cinematic femme fatale whose presence is
attached to a particular period in American cinema commonly known as film noir.
During the 1940s a group of American gangster/thriller films were produced which
were noticeably darker—both literally and in terms of their themes—than the earlier
Hollywood product. The French labeled them film noirs. These films popularized
the femme fatale for the American public and gave her a new, glamorous context in
which she figured prominently for at least two decades.

The detective films The Maltese Falcon (1941) and The Big Sleep (1946),
Double Indemnity, Murder, My Sweet (both 1944), and Out of the Past (1947) are
just a few of the noir films whose female protagonist fits the formula of the medieval
legend of Keats's poem La Belle Dame Sans Merci. In the legend—as it is
adapted in the Romantic version of the tale—a knight is deflected from his quest by a
beautiful woman who lures him to moral and physical destruction. Similarly in the
noir films, the detective protagonist (who represents the spiritual values of 'good') is
seduced by the 'evil' femme fatale, and although he later strives to break free of her
influence, is ultimately doomed by his initial fall.

Certainly, film noirs and other similar modern film genres such as Weimar
street film, owe much of their enduring ability to attract spectators to the appeal of
the femme fatale. The images of Marlene Dietrich in The Blue Angel (1930), or Rita
Hayworth in Gilda (1946) are perhaps the films most readily available to a general

\[142\] For the complete poem, see Appendix,
audience as representative of the modern femme fatale genre, both of them films in which the main protagonist is a fascinating—and dangerous—woman, also recognizable off-screen for the hugely successful careers of the two actresses. Both Dietrich and Hayworth could be said to have developed an off-screen presence that solidified their relationship to the femme fatale genre, effectively blurring the lines between their real lives and the character type they were consistently recruited to play.

This relation of the image to its power when translated into realistic contexts marks a contradiction in the figure of the femme fatale that is consistent with its conflictual nature both within the films and in their reception. It is one of many oppositions at work in this figure insofar as the cinema is concerned—an opposition between passivity and agency, for example, or, as was first theorized by Laura Mulvey, an opposition to proximity and distance in relation to the image. These are aspects, according to Mulvey, of the visual pleasure associated with the non-diegetic signifier as it bleeds over into the story and attaches itself to the figure of the actress or woman. This ‘sliding of signification’ is the means by which the imperceptible slippage occurs between the spectacle constituted by the cinema and the spectacle of woman in general. This relation is paradigmatic for the cinematic institution and its representation of women. As Mulvey points out in her highly influential article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”:

> Going far beyond highlighting a woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself.

> Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of
time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire.\footnote{143}

The transfixing or immobilizing aspects of spectacle work against the forward pull of the narrative in what is a continual tension between the object of the gaze and its meanings put forth by the narrative. It is out of this aspect of representation and the ideological effects of film that theories of spectatorship arose within film criticism in the last three decades.\footnote{144} Initially, these theories only emphasized male spectatorship in relation to the process of identification which occurs through cinema, and the film noir subject matter offered a unique opportunity to interrogate aspects of male identity and power (or lack thereof) in the common tropes associated with the detective genre. Indeed, most of the criticism of film noir—aside from the few articles already listed here—deal primarily with issues of male identity even with respect to the intriguing female protagonists which, arguably, provide the most striking element of the classic noir formula.\footnote{145}

I refer briefly to the history of the femme fatale in American cinema of the first half of the twentieth century in order to contrast the situation in the second half with regard to the changes that have characterized her representation in the last few decades. One aspect of this change concerns the ‘softening’ of the modern femme fatale.

\footnote{144} Christian Metz’s highly influential article, “The Imaginary Signifier,” is the most obvious reference.
\footnote{145} The example noted above, one of the most recent books on the subject of film noir is \textit{The Fatal Woman: Sources of Male Anxiety in American Film Noir, 1941-1991.} (London: Associated University Presses, 1996).
fatale with regard to her role in modern cultural contexts. Brian Stableford, editor of
*The Dedalus Book of Femmes Fatales*, notes that “the discipline of official morality
is no longer as strict or severe as it once was, and that softening is reflected in the
character of modern femmes fatales, who are far more often victims than villains.”

Although it emerged from rather different nineteenth-century roots, the eventual
development of the American situation mirrors the fate of the femme fatale in
twentieth century Europe. Stableford notes that once her heyday in *fin de siècle*
France was over, “she became a rather enfeebled creature, thoroughly de-mystified
even though she was never quite completely or convincingly explained by the
theories of Freud and his successors… She became a mere cliché, or—even
worse—a figure of fun” (27).

But it is precisely in this mode of cliché and parody that the femme fatale
experiences a sort of rebirth in the postmodern era. Indeed, the dissatisfaction with
the female stereotypes contained in the media and in all forms of representation of
women was a significant aspect of the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s, and
some of the feminist writers who were prepared to redress the cultural balance were
interested in revisiting the many implications of the femme fatale figures. Their
work has provided a dimension of satirical irony for the subversion of the motif,
which is clearly evident in such novels as Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*
(1977) or in the collection of short stories (Dedalus, 1992) referred to above.

Additionally, some of the most interesting modern stories of femmes fatales are to be

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found in the hybrid genre of ‘fantasy fiction’ most associated with postmodern artistic production:

Curiously enough it was in the borderlands where pulp weird fiction overlapped the nascent science fiction genre that the femme fatale obtained a new lease on life […] Fantastic fiction offers the opportunity … to remake—and perhaps correct—the myths and legends which embody our attitudes to sexuality. In fantastic literature, the vaguely supernatural quality with which the mundane femme fatale is uneasily imbued can be brought into sharp and explicit focus, and completely unfettered.147

The ‘supernatural quality’ of the femme fatale is an aspect of the figure which has always been present throughout the history of her representation in art and literature. It was given an unparalleled cultural importance in Homer’s version of the mythical female figures, the sirens or the harpies, or any number of seductive goddesses who populate The Odyssey and whose magical powers were akin to those of the gods themselves. Again, in the late nineteenth century many French writers gave voice to this aspect of the femme fatale which supported their attraction to the unnatural and the superficial in relation to female sexuality. Only in Carmen is there a concerted effort to make the female protagonist powerful on another level which seems to have nothing to do with the supernatural and is instead related to the ‘natural’ seductive powers of the exotic gypsy. However, on various occasions in the Mérimée novella, Carmen is referred to as a ‘witch’ or a ‘sorceress,’ therefore attributing some measure of her fascination to the forces of the occult.

147 Stableford, 19-26
In any case, the idea of the femme fatale exerting evil supernatural powers upon men is by no means a new aspect of her character. But what is new it seems, is the idea that the figure can be given literal supernatural force by the writers and artists who use the figure’s former meanings and aesthetic tropes to subvert the genre. The satirical re-interpretation of past models of the femme fatale by recent writers, filmmakers, and artists thus offers a new critical perspective—a kind of meta-commentary—to the long-established conventions of the very genre which they are referencing while simultaneously undermining.

It is in this spirit of irony and satire that the little known writer, Storm Constantine, rewrites the tale of Odysseus and Circe—this time from the perspective of the goddess herself. I include this work not for its literary or cultural importance—in fact, it may not be known at all outside a small circle of science fiction readers or those who may have come across it as I did in a collection of new and old femme fatale stories. But it seems to me a representative text, despite its peripheral status, of the trend in post-modern writing to make use of the trope of the dangerous woman and subvert the genre from within in its own canonical set of texts and references.

Of course, it is well known that the Circe of Homer’s tale was an enchantress celebrated for her knowledge of magic and venomous herbs. She used her skill, according to the legend, for evil purposes and was noted for her cruelty. The reason for her banishment by her father, Helios, to the island where she encounters Odysseus is that she murdered her husband in order to gain power of his kingdom. But in this revision of the classic tale, entitled “Poisoning the Sea,” Circe is witty, somewhat bitter, and all too human. She also feels justified for having murdered a
man whom she did not love and who mistreated her for years. She lives on the island with a female student of her witchcraft, “mad Helen,” and an Egyptian cat-woman named Baucis. She calls all men fools who underestimate the power and skills of women: “Oh, beloved father, did you really think to pull my claws by expelling me into this isolation?” she asks aloud. “I cannot believe that you underestimated my intelligence, but then, you are a man yourself and therefore lacking in wit of a sharper nature.”

When “the Persephone,” the appropriately named ship belonging to Odysseus—in this story renamed Aertes—lands on Circe’s island, the women watch from a distance thinking the men to be guardians sent by her father, “tiny figures [at whom she likes] to peer, wishing them various misfortunes, such as love and marriage” (156). It is when he is recognized as Aertes, “a poet of renown,” that the goddess’s interest is peaked and she makes a bet with Helen as to how long it would take her to ensnare him. When Aertes lands on her island and is introduced to Circe, he remarks, “You are a legend. Forgive my intrusion, but I was interested in finding you” (160). The text is full of little satirical asides like the emphasis on Aertes’ good looks and self-centeredness, as well as his oratorial bravado, and Circe’s self-reflexive humor (“Sometimes I convince even myself I am what I pretend to be” [161]). But the story revolves around the central conflict between the two characters which reflects the subversive aspect of the story as they question—with great self-reflexive irony—such issues as the trope of the deadly woman itself and the timeless mythical tales, such as Homer’s, told for centuries from the male perspective.

For example, we learn that Aertes has come to the island, not for some type of conquest or challenge, but out of curiosity for the "many infamous females" about which he is collecting stories and interviews for some kind of theoretical study of the "phenomenon of the dangerous woman." In this playfully ironic recasting of the famous mythical adventurer, he tells Circe that, instead of discovering "witches and monsters," he found an entirely different situation: "It seems to me that women such as yourself are merely icons of men's fear of femalekind. In a way, you are created by the men that fear you: idols of perverse desire; malignant, destructive, frigid, yet ultimately fascinating" (164). He tells her he wonders why she and other women like her "have been deified in this dark way," to which she angrily responds, "Perhaps because we are the witches and monsters we're supposed to be!" (164).

Circe is determined to defend her legend, however misguided or stereotypical, against Aertes's project of demystification, if only for the sake of continuing the farce so that she may control it herself: "The poet Aertes is a cruel and dangerous man! The destruction he wreaks is that of severing a lady's cord with her goddess, leaving her alone and soulless in the world... A woman without her goddess is a tractable creature, easily controlled. This is a woman's matter, and only women may take action against him" (169).

At the end of the story, it is Aertes, not Circe, who is punished for attempting to "strip a woman of her magic" (180). She devises a way to sabotage him while he is performing in front of a crowd telling one of his famously fascinating stories to a captive audience who is transfixed by his rhetorical skill. She makes him forget his train of thought and humiliates him so that he will remember her and effectively puts
a stop to his storytelling forever, thereby re-establishing her authority over her own legend: “Men are all fools,” she repeats at the conclusion, “I have proven them to be so. I have power, here on my island” (181).

It is this reversal of roles (and of the outcome of the story), as well as the calling into question of its own genre, that makes this work a perfect example of a postmodern revision of one of the most well-known of all femme fatale stories.

According to Gianni Vattimo in his book, *The End of Modernity* (*La fine della modernità* 1985), this ambiguity and ironization of established aesthetic codes marks the transformation of art—or, the ‘decline of art’—in the post-metaphysical (postmodern) age:

As a consequence (of the end of modernity) the work becomes constitutively ambiguous: the work no longer seeks a success which would permit it to position itself within a determinate set of values, but rather defines its success in terms of rendering problematic such a set of values, and in overcoming—at least momentarily—the limits of the latter. In this perspective, one of the criteria for the evaluation of the work of art seems to be, first and foremost, the ability of the work to call into question its own status. It may do this either directly, or indirectly, for instance as an ironization of literary genres, as rewriting, or as a poetics of citation.  

Thus it is not a ‘death of art’ in the sense of art no longer being possible, but of an age in which the work of art approaches its own tradition from the standpoint of an

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'overcoming' of its limits and opens itself up to new possibilities of meaning through irony and citation.

It is with this same sense of revising past models in order to disrupt or re-interpret them, that contemporary Italian author, Carmen Covito, writes her novel, *La bruttina stagionata* (1992). It is the story of a 40-year-old modern Italian woman who gradually learns to mediate the ghosts of the femme fatale inhabiting her psyche with her own sense of reality, transforming herself into her version of a ‘dangerous woman’ whenever and however it suits her. While she wants to be desirable to men, she lacks the fascination and seductive capacities of the femmes fatales whose image she has grown up with and she is well aware of this fact. She is, for all intents and purposes, the anti-femme fatale struggling to define herself in relation to these past models of femininity and desire.

The author’s overt use of citation is evident throughout the novel as it is full of references, both literary and cinematic, to other femme fatale figures and stories. It looks back at the past again from the point of view of irony—the only available mode of reference for a contemporary femme fatale novel set in an Italian city in the 1980s. In an article in which the author performs a sort of ‘auto-criticism’ (another interesting aspect of the postmodern relationship of texts to their criticism), Covito remarks on the need to revisit past models as an obligatory part of her project: "Volendo raccontare la storia di una donna contemporanea ho dovuto affrontare il problema della donna fatale come tema letterario" [wanting to tell the story of a contemporary woman I had to confront the problem of the femme fatale as a literary
Thus, she says, her protagonist could not have a naïve attitude (and neither could she) toward the femme fatale.

The protagonist’s name is Marilina Labruna, a subtle reference to one of the female icons of the cinema, Marilyn Monroe, but here Marilina is her inadequate, brunette (La bruna) counterpart. Not only for her status as female icon, the model of Marilyn Monroe is appropriate also from the point of view of the ambiguous victim/villain dichotomy which the novel puts into question as part of the history of the femme fatale genre. For Marilina’s (and Marilyn’s) fatality reverberates not around the men they seduce, but ultimately and fatally for Monroe, around their own lives instead. Marilina is not the blonde bombshell of the 1950s, but instead a rather plain housewife, an urban single woman in search of her own sexual identity who, in the course of the story, allows the ghosts of past female icons to inhabit her as she discovers her own sexual identity.

As Marilina progressively learns to mediate these ‘ghosts’ in order to transform herself into a femme fatale to be desired by men, she assumes some of the stereotypical attitudes of the femme fatale without involving herself emotionally in her relationships with men. During this process the character evokes the classic “inept” type characteristic of the nineteenth-century novel—a female version of Zeno—the insecure, unhappy, complex protagonist who possesses a critical awareness of her inability to adapt to the reality around her. But over the course of the novel she eventually learns how to be a social subject and goes from a woman incapable of entering ‘the game of seduction’ in a standard female role, to one who is

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able to seduce by refusing the traditional mechanisms of seduction except through the parodic performance of them. In one of the most aggressive uses of citation in the novel, Marilina performs a *mise en scène* in which she literally acts out some of the most recognizable femme fatale references available:

Capi di poter mettere in scena impunemente i suoi fantasmi di primadonna interiore. E, con un’ironia che per questa sola volta non sarebbe stata crudele, li danzò: inarcando le reni e sollevando la gonna e stringendo tra i denti il gambo di una rosa ideale tuffò le mani in una imaginaria cascata di capelli e poi le sventagliò giù, disegnandosi forme di seni a punta e ventre piatto, e dimenò un culetto di proporzioni edeniche a poi, visto che c’era, fece tutta la scena di lei che lentamente si sfila via dal braccio un lungo guanto di raso, perché qui non c’erano specchi a poterle impedire di buttare all’indietro la testa a sporgere le labbra e impugnare i due lembi della sciarpa e farla scorrere dal collo fino a sotto i fianchi e su di nuovo, sensualissimamente.  

[She realized she could act out with impunity the ghosts of the ‘primadonnas’ inside her. And, with an irony that for just this once would not be cruel, she danced them: swinging her pelvis and lifting her skirt and, clutching a rose by the stem between her teeth, she threw her arms up in an imaginary cascade of hair and then fanned them out, drawing herself pointed breasts and a flat stomach, and swung her perfectly proportioned hips, and then, since she was

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already there, acted out the whole scene of she who slowly removes the long white glove from one arm, because here there were no mirrors to impede her from throwing her head back and protruding her lips and grasping the shawl by the edges and making it slide from her neck to underneath her hips and up again, so sensually (my translation).

This scene is composed of fragments that comprise the whole iconography of the femme fatale. The central reference is clearly the celebrated scene of Gilda in which Rita Hayworth enacts a seductive striptease limited to the action of removing one glove. But there is also the vamp, and the classic dancer with the rose in her mouth emblematic of Carmen, the exaggerated feminine gestures characteristic of the divas of silent film, and the orientalized dance with the shawl (or veil) which refers directly to Salomé. In this scene the protagonist engages in a physical negotiation with her ghosts: she performs them self-consciously aware of her performance and this awareness is what opens the way for the ironic distance which allows for the possibility to create new ghosts—this time created by women themselves.

As Carmen Covito’s novel illustrates, through the use of citation of past femmes fatales in this type of highly self-conscious intertextuality—including even the self-conscious parody of the romance novel which is hidden beneath the text—the possibility of ironic distance makes it so that, paradoxically, it then becomes possible to “safeguard” the autonomy of women because they are no longer invested with the long history of representations created by men. In this way, it is

152 Covito, Ibid., 223.
she—Marilina herself—who dresses up (or undresses) whenever and wherever she wants.

And, in keeping with the spirit of ironic revisionism, the novel ends in a way that refuses the punitive closure so typical of the femme fatale genre. The final scene of the novel echoes Mérimée’s story as Marilina talks with her distraught boyfriend and imagines herself as Carmen acting out the final tragic drama of her death. (Prior to this she had just been watching Francesco Rosi’s theatrical version of Bizet’s *Carmen* on the television which prepares her for the re-enactment of the final scene of the opera or novella. It is a citation of a third degree—from Mérimée to Bizet to Rosi—and a curious (postmodern) transposition of text to theater to film). However, this ending reveals an ironic twist in which her boyfriend pretends to shoot her in a fit of jealousy after she refuses his declaration of love, but it turns out to be a fake pistol. The last lines of the novel contain Marilina’s refusal for the last time to incarnate the ghosts of femmes fatales past:

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E quante volte si è detta che avrebbe dato dieci anni o più per essere stupenda anche un attimo solo. [...] Ma se invece lei ardisse recitare fino in fondo questo copione mitico che le viene così semplicemente offerto, se si lasciasse fiorire sulla tempia o sul seno un garofano di sangue, ecco che all’improvviso sulle spalle il cappotto le si merletterebbe nella spuma impalpabile di una mantiglia, e la sua gonna si allungherebbe in una fiammeggiante cascata di volants: e
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sarebbe lei Carmen. Marilina alza la fronte, spinge uno sguardo tragico oltre la soglia del Walhalla delle donne fatali e dice: ‘No’.  

[And how many times did she tell herself she would have given ten years or more of her life to be beautiful just for one moment. (...) But if instead she dared to recite fully this mythical soundtrack that was offered so effortlessly to her, if she let flourish on her temple or her chest a carnation of blood, then all of a sudden on her shoulders her coat would transform into the impalpable sparkle of a lace mantilla, and her skirt would lengthen in a fiery cascade of ruffles: and she would be Carmen. Marilina lifts her head, shoots a tragic glance past the threshold of the Walhalla of the femmes fatales and says, ‘No.’ (my translation)].

Thus the protagonist refuses to live up to the history of femmes fatales that inhabit her psyche and their associated fixed and inevitable meanings. In this spirit of reversal of the long tradition of representing female sexuality from the limited position of powerful seductress, she manages to reinvent the image in light of all of its previous incarnations in a more flexible and subjective way. If the first time the myth is based on a tragedy, the second time around, as this novel poignantly illustrates, it may just as convincingly be based on farce.

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In keeping with the ubiquitous references to Carmen in the works analyzed thus far, it seems pertinent here to include one of the first post-modern versions of the Carmen story as an example of the way the story of Carmen has remained a

153 Ibid, 248-49.
compelling reminder of the continued fascination for artists and audiences alike for this particular myth of the femme fatale. Indeed a look at the filmography of cinematic readaptations of *Carmen* in the twentieth century reveals a remarkable number of them scattered throughout the century as if it were a thematic marker of a cultural phenomenon that, for reasons which this project attempts to define, has not been exhausted and continues to preoccupy writers and directors in a way that not many other thematic figures have done.

Perhaps one of the reasons for the story’s persistence is again the notion of transgressive ethnic sexuality (explored in more detail in chapter two with regard to the literary and musical models on which these readaptations are all based), which is key to understanding the cultural force of this legendary mythical figure. In fact, a glance at the illustrious—and decidedly ethnic—list of actresses recruited to play the role of Carmen in these films is an indication of the extent to which the myth’s most recognizable aspect—cultural exoticism—continues to be extremely relevant: Theda Bara and Geraldine Farrar (both in 1915 versions of *Carmen*); Pola Negri in Ernst Lubitsch’s *Carmen* (1918), Dolores del Rio in 1927, Rita Hayworth in *Carmencita* (1936), and Dorothy Dandridge in *Carmen Jones* (1954). And, the most recent example would be the version produced for MTV films with perhaps the most widely recognized and successful ethnic-American actress in the role of Carmen, Jennifer Lopez.

Saura’s *Carmen* (1983) could be seen as inaugurating the second or third wave of Carmen films released during the 1980s and early 90s, including Jean-Luc Godard’s *Prénom Carmen* (1983); Francesco Rosi’s and Peter Brook’s *Carmen* films
(both 1983); Franco Zeffirelli's filmed stage production (1984); and the performance art film by Laurie Anderson (1993). Saura's unique film version of Antonio Gades's ballet joins the other Carmen cinematic readaptations of the 1980s in its self-conscious relationship to the Carmen material and to the nature of film adaptation, as well as to the related cultural concern of the newly emerging European community.

In the modern cinematic readaptations of Carmen the transcultural quality of the original material which relies on the representation of the heroine as the 'exotic other' of society, is brought to the forefront. All of the 1980s cinematic versions of the story are in some way concerned with exploring the relationship between the Carmen material and the adaptation of cultural identities in the wake of heightened social tensions in Europe. In addition, all offer repeated examples of the continued reappropriation of Mérimée's self-aware writing strategies, as well as Bizet's doubled discourses and hybrid musical structures. Among these readaptations, then, Saura's Carmen distinguishes itself by virtue of the fact that it adapts and problematizes both the Carmen story and the formal dynamics of its two cultural models: Prosper Mérimée's novella of 1845 and Georges Bizet's comic-opera of 1875.

Just as Mérimée presents the double movement of the Carmen narrative within the confrontation between literature and history, Bizet exposes this hybridity within the context of the encounter of music and spoken dialogue proper to the comic-opera form, and Saura investigates the relationship between theatrical dance and film in his staging of the choreographic creation of a Spanish dance version of Carmen. In this multi-layered transposing of the well-known narrative, Saura's film
gives the story a highly self-conscious twist in his imaginatively structured visual recreation of the story within the story and, at the same time, effects a musical weaving of the operatic model of Carmen—Bizet’s original score—with the contemporary sounds of flamenco in the music of Spanish guitarist, Paco de Lucia.

The internationally renowned guitarist, famous for his innovative fusion of traditional flamenco with other musical forms such as jazz and world music, plays himself in the film as he accompanies the dancers throughout the staging of their fictionalized rehearsals. In addition, the lead role in the film (as well as in the staged performance in the role of Don José) is played by the choreographer/dancer Antonio Gades. The use of authentic artists—most notably from the world of flamenco—who would be familiar to a Spanish audience is related to one of Saura’s most persistent interests evident in his films throughout his career: the relationship of a hegemonic cultural and national Spanish identity to one of the country’s most visible but also marginalized forms of artistic expression: flamenco music and dance. Indeed, one of Saura’s principle objectives in the film is to assert the importance of flamenco music and dance and, in conjunction with this, to place the story of Carmen in an authentic Spanish context and setting, as well as to contemporize the Carmen story for a modern audience.

Carmen begins with a sequence which precedes the opening titles and in which a group of female dancers are put through a series of flamenco steps by Antonio, the director of the dance company. The camera then moves from the dancers themselves to Antonio, who is observing them, and they are reflected in a great mirror which occupies one of the walls of the rehearsal studio. Antonio’s eyes
direct the camera’s movements as they move from one girl to another as they individually perform the flamenco dance movements. At the end of the sequence Antonio expresses his sense of disappointment that none of the dancers seem suitable for the role of Carmen. The search will have to continue, he observes. The point is made that Antonio, searching for the ideal dancer to play the part of Carmen, has in his head an image, a stereotyped concept of what she is: an idea which is central to the film as a whole and which is reinforced here by the image of the dancers in the mirror.

The titles themselves are projected against a series of nineteenth-century engravings by Gustave Doré depicting scenes of Gypsy life, and accompanied by Bizet’s original score. In contrast to the prologue’s emphasis on Spanish authenticity, both the engravings and the music represent foreigners’ views and interpretations of Spain. This will be a key motive throughout the film: the foreign depiction of Spain by European travelers and artists and the role that both Mérimée’s and Bizet’s Carmen have played in this. It is obvious that Saura is concerned with reclaiming Carmen’s origins for the Spanish tradition to which she is supposed to belong at the same time that he wants to problematize those origins.

Spain’s largest minority group, the Gypsies, are associated with flamenco by the dominant social classes which both appropriate the tradition for foreign travelers as well as Spaniards themselves as one of Spain’s most enduring and ‘exotic’ art forms, while at the same time ignoring its practitioners’ marginalized place in society. This contradiction creates a double bind most noticeable in the country’s attempts at formation of a national identity in the 1980s—the decade that witnessed
the idealized vision of a pan-European community. This problematic but useful representation of Spain’s largest minority as the source of its ethnically diverse heritage only served to underscore the country’s long-standing struggle as the ‘Mediterranean other’ of Europe while allowing the Gypsies only a limited entry into the dominant culture’s representations of itself.

In exploring the ways in which the Carmen story has historically led to imported notions of Spanishness and the reinforcing of Spanish attitudes about Gypsy stereotypes, the role of flamenco is crucial, according to Saura, in the political process that turns artists into agents of cultural institutions. In The Films of Carlos Saura: The Practice of Seeing, film critic Marvin d’Lugo explains that, like many of his generation emerging from Spain’s National Film School in the 1960s, Carlos Saura has a history of attempting to disclose, even within the constraints of censorship, the ways in which Franco’s fascist regime has marked and defined the cultural codes of a Spanish national identity.154 Saura’s cinematic response to such a hegemonic imperative of cultural values involves questioning this relationship through intense juxtapositions throughout the film of European and ethnic performing arts traditions, of film narrative and dance performance, and of two distinct cultural traditions with a unique history of confrontation within Spain. Thus, there is an aspect to his work which, unlike in earlier versions of the Carmen story both in the nineteenth-century and early twentieth centuries, foregrounds “the ambiguous and dangerously malleable nature of cultural identity.”155 In addition,

155 As described by Evlyn Gould in her discussion of Saura’s film in The Fate of Carmen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 154.
Saura seems to be offering the notion that the performing arts could provide an ideal space from which to imagine how cultural identities may adapt to new and real cultural communities unfettered by larger national boundaries.

Moreover, in the flexible reinterpretation of past cultural models which characterizes the postmodern works discussed in this chapter thus far, Saura too makes use of the technique of ‘cultural borrowing’ in resurrecting some of the literary devices which emerged with Mérimée’s *Carmen* and displacing them onto the twentieth-century realms of New Spanish Cinema and modern flamenco dance.

For example, the framed narrative is once again an integral aspect of the Carmen story as Saura alludes to his past models while updating them for the specific concerns of a modern-day Spain just emerging from a transition from Franco’s fascist regime into Felipe González’s more tolerant, free market economy. As his characters act out the story of the lover who succumbs to the Gypsy only to endanger his career and then kill off the source of his troubles, the ideological aspects of musical styles (the ‘high’ art of the nineteenth-century French operatic tradition symbolized by Bizet as set against the ‘low’ popular art form of flamenco music and dance associated with the Gypsies), and the concerns of a changing cultural landscape are brought to the fore by Saura’s inclusion in his film of dancers, musicians, choreographers, and diverse musical traditions. At times throughout the film it becomes difficult to tell the artists from the actors and the performance from the movie in this dizzying array of styles and sounds which make up the film. It is this pastiche of representative constructs and their underlying social and political concerns that marks this rendition as a decidedly post-modern reinvention of the
myth of Carmen. It is not insignificant that Carmen remains Saura’s most recognized and most commercially successful film outside Spain (D’Lugo, 224).

Saura and Gades narrativize the traditional forms of flamenco music and dance so as to strip away European illusions about Spain, Spanishness, and the values of flamenco while at the same time appealing, commercially, to the greater European imagination.

The recent film by the controversial director, Brian De Palma, is a highly self-conscious action-caper film with an unbelievable premise which gestures at film noir and explicitly makes fun of itself and its cinematic history. Entitled simply Femme Fatale (2002), the movie stars Antonio Banderas and Rebecca Romijn-Stamos as the leads and opens with the femme fatale watching the classic noir film Double Indemnity while she prepares for a major heist of a diamond encrusted serpentine bodice worth millions and worn by a famous actress at the Cannes film festival. The scene she is watching is the last one of the film in which the two lovers (played by Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray) are quarrelling and a gun is pulled. But, after shooting and missing him the first time, the femme fatale allows the gun to be taken out of her hand and says:

I never loved you, Walter. Not you or anybody else. I’m rotten to the heart. I used you, just as you said. That’s all you ever meant to

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156 Brian De Palma and the controversy surrounding his films has been investigated by Kenneth MacKinnon in his book Misogyny in the Movies: The De Palma Question (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990). According to the author, his films including Carrie (1976), Dressed to Kill (1980), and Body Double (1985) were assailed by feminist critics as objectifying women and for their graphic portrayals of violence and sexuality.
me—until a moment ago, when I couldn't fire that second shot. I never thought that could happen to me.

This overt reference to the cinema, and film noir in particular, is clearly a major part of the film’s structure as is evident from the beginning, although many of the references are satirized and playfully employed as intertextual nods to the genre which it tries to emulate. The scene from *Double Indemnity* (directed by Billy Wilder, 1944), the film which along with *The Maltese Falcon*, established the basic plot motifs of film noir, is significant for two reasons. First, it establishes the link between the modern adaptation and its predecessor and situates it within a certain tradition of conventions and tropes, even if solely for the purpose of satirizing them; and secondly, because it sets up the femme fatale of De Palma’s film as a postmodern version of the cold-hearted, manipulative Phyllis Dietrichson—one of the most ruthless, but stereotypical femmes fatales of the film noir genre. This character represents a certain type of femme fatale whose function in the film is slightly different than her counterparts in that her ‘evil’ nature is so extreme and obvious that she ends up being almost a caricature of the femme fatale in a film which revolves almost entirely around the identity crises and psychological complexities of the male protagonist.

Indeed, *Double Indemnity* it is a film in which the latent homosexuality that often underlies the theme of the femme fatale is made evident in a manner that seems striking now given the time the film was produced. The original film is about a cruel woman who devises a plan to murder her husband to collect his life insurance and then ensnares the insurance agent, Walter Neff, in a series of shady events leading
ultimately to the total darkness and death of the fallen protagonist. But, although the ruthless Phyllis may seem to be the dominant character of the film, the central drama is more about the relationship between Neff and his co-worker, Barton Keyes, an older man and authority figure, than the relationship between Phyllis, the femme fatale, and Neff. In fact, it could be argued that the relationship between Walter and Phyllis is secondary to that between the two men, the Oedipal triangle (with Phyllis as the desired mother, Keyes as the father) forming an obvious element of the film’s subtext.

*Femme Fatale* (2002) also makes several references to homosexuality, though in a much more overt way than its 1940s predecessor. For example, in the first scene of the film, the heist at Cannes, the person the femme fatale has to seduce in order to steal the diamonds is a woman. She succeeds in getting her alone in the bathroom and getting the jewels off her body and that is where the action begins and she is on the run for the rest of the movie. Also, the part played by Banderas of the photographer who falls for her at the same time as he is trying to cash in on her eventual capture, is not altogether unmotivated. He is not the typical intriguing and macho male recalled by Humprey Bogart or Dick Powell, two popular male leads of the detective/noir genre. Instead, he borders on homosexuality and is decidedly not a challenge in any way for the female protagonist. (In fact, the choice of Banderas for the role is not altogether casual as he was well-known in Spain for his frequent portrayal of gay men early in his career in many of Pedro Almodóvar’s films. There is even an allusion to that in the film in a scene in which Banderas cites himself in a very funny parodic interpretation of a stereotypical gay man).
Similarly, the choice of Romijn-Stamos is an interesting one, given the fact that the femme fatale here is no longer played by a real actress with depth and vitality—someone like Barbara Stanwyck or Lauren Bacall—but is instead a non-actress, a vacuous and superficial, but beautiful supermodel. It is as if the film is flaunting her superficiality and inappropriateness for the role, her questionable acting abilities only adding to the tongue-in-cheek nature of the entire film. It is fully aware of itself as parody and farce, and as ironically distanced from the ‘real’ femmes fatales on which the film is based.

The last scene of the film represents perhaps the moment in which the gap that separates the postmodern version of the femme fatale narrative from its mythical past models becomes most clear. In every femme fatale story there are usually only two possibilities for conclusion: either the story/film ends in total destruction and the death of the femme fatale, or the male protagonist, or both—or, the type that ends in the restoration of order through the hero’s triumph over the forces of darkness. But here in De Palma’s version, in the penultimate scene of the movie after she has just killed Banderas, the femme fatale is caught and thrown over a bridge by the men, her fellow crooks, whom she tried to doublecross in the beginning. As she falls into the water, we see her from below the surface, naked, and the film switches into a slow motion, lyrical sequence of blue light and water. Then suddenly, she is startled awake and we see her sitting in an overflowing bathtub having just been awakened from a dream. This type of unexpected conclusion can only mean one thing: that the cruelty and exploits of the modern femme fatale are only possible now in a dream sequence—in the realm of the imagination in which all of the fantastical elements of
the genre and the myths of the femme fatale can be exaggerated beyond any realistic narrative structures. Here, the femme fatale \textit{wakes up} and has a conscience—she ‘does the right thing' with respect to the actions and decisions that would have led to the events of the dream. It is as if in the modern world, or at least in the world of postmodern Hollywood narratives, we can no longer tolerate the traditional notion of a ‘fatal woman' who kills and is ultimately killed. Unlike all of her past models, the femme fatale in this version conveniently escapes death—another element which seems to be consistent with the postmodern versions of the femme fatale we have seen thus far: she must have a ‘happy ending’—even if it is totally implausible within the context of the narrative.

As these recent reincarnations of the mythical femme fatale illustrate, despite the long tradition of ‘diabolical feminine fascination' which has made this particular literary and popular figure so compelling for so long, there seems to be an opening in its fixed and determinate history of representation for a version of the myth that is playfully ironic and slightly subversive of its past models and meanings. Perhaps this postmodern context, in its rendering problematic the fixed set of values and associations connected to the figure of the femme fatale, is the only context in which the possibility for creating a ‘new' myth can be fulfilled. Only in this way – in the flexible space of postmodern art and culture which includes all types of representational modes and artistic registers—can the theme of the femme fatale (and its related acts of seduction) endure.

In fact, there are constant reminders of the continued force of this persistent myth of seduction as a glance at the game of citation inherent in postmodern popular
culture will confirm. A recent New York Times article (January 2004) charts the "return of the femme fatale" in, for example, the renewed popularity of cabaret acts in Manhattan modeled on Marlene Dietrich's vamp or the songstresses of the 1930s and 40s; or the trend on Paris runways of the sultriness of 20's-style dresses and the "hollow-cheeked maiden" looks of models and celebrities. This may be the latest incarnation of the myth of the femme fatale insinuating itself into the popular consciousness of late, but, it is a myth that, despite its renewal and reinvention at different times over the course of cultural history, has never really disappeared.

Perhaps now at the beginning of the twenty-first century it will be the task of contemporary authors and filmmakers (especially female) to arrest the historical force of this persistent creation of the male fantasy, the specter of the femme fatale that has haunted literary production since the beginning of the nineteenth century, and give her a new history. After all, it would be naïve to suggest that this fascinating female figure could (or should) disappear completely, for that would mean to annihilate a part of our own unconscious desires as readers and participants in the 'seduction' of art and literature. Instead, it seems that this second phase of the history of the femme fatale demands that she re-emerge, this time not as an accepted and unquestioned literary creation, but as an ever-changing and demystified citation of her own image.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

It has been my aim in this project to interrogate the construction of mythical discourses, in this case, arguably one of the most ubiquitous in art and literature regardless of national tradition or time period: the myth of the femme fatale. In doing so, I have attempted to approach the subject of what constitutes the transcendent value of certain texts and motifs in cultural production which continue to repeat themselves, almost obsessively, as I argue is the case with the theme of the 'destructive woman.' These types of foundational cultural myths offer a way to enter into the discussion of issues that reveal more at stake than just the occurrence of a thematic figure or set of tropes that continue to repeat themselves throughout the course of history. If they are indeed cultural myths, they call out to be questioned and unraveled in an attempt to decipher the meanings and anxieties inherent in their existence as myths. From this perspective, the principle aims of this project were to explore the underlying preoccupations of this well-known cultural myth and give a shape to the history of representation of the 'femme fatale' as the figure appears in some of her exemplary moments in literature and film.

To this end, I have chosen to focus on certain genres to the exclusion of others. Obviously, there is a vast amount of cultural production transcending historical periods or national literatures for which the theme of the femme fatale is a central focus. I have had to eliminate some genres based on the applicability of the art form to my topic. Of course, a history of the representation of women in the
visual arts would conceivably offer much to analyze with regard to the theme of
destructive female figures, in particular in European painting of the nineteenth
century in which many of the same themes found in the literature of the period were
carried into the visual arts. I chose to focus on the literary and cinematic because a
curious connection exists between the word and the image that is linked to the desire
to represent women in terms of a fatalistic determination. The cinematic image, the
woman, and a view of history as inexorable fate thus interact in an intricate way to
produce the figure of the femme fatale and her descendants such as the cinematic
diva. The cinema, which gave the femme fatale a new visual image in characters
memorably played by the silent film stars of the early Italian cinema, also played a
major part in the transformation of these female stereotypes from the verbal to the
visual, and from the nineteenth century to the twentieth.

With regard to the literary image, the process of abstraction functions in
much the same way. For this, I chose the context of Italian decadence for its unique
portrayal of the movement from the rebellious, aggressive female figure as is found
in Carmen, to the more passive, fatally doomed creature of the D’Annunzian novel,
and, ultimately back to the more widely recognized femme fatale, or ‘vamp’ of the
American cinema. The element of voyeurism, whether verbal or cinematic, is
closely bound up with a certain detachment which is the foundation of a particular
aesthetic of the feminine found throughout the works of art examined in this study.
The recurrent theme in all of them seems to be the illusion cultivated by the writers
and artists of this genre of an absolute otherness dependent upon the objectification
of Woman and the ‘elimination’ of the feminine. It is here that the various
conventional fantasies of Woman as ‘dangerous’ and overpowering come into play. The cruelty of seduction depends on this aesthetic of superiority—of form over bodily content, or of the aesthetic over the ethical.

This logic that seduction takes place only insofar as there is an object on which to place the illusion of absolute otherness is detected in Soren Kierkegaard’s *Diary of a Seducer* (1843), where, he says, “The seducer by himself is nothing; the seduction originates entirely with the girl. This is why Johannes can claim to have learned everything from Cordelia. He is not being hypocritical. The calculated seduction mirrors the natural seduction, drawing from the latter as its source, all the better to eliminate it.”158 This grounding of the aesthetic in an objectification of the other is what constitutes the recurrent problem of the figure of the femme fatale. In this study I have tried to illustrate how the representation of the seductive female figure in art and literature depends upon this aesthetic in order to function and repeat itself.

Seduction, then, becomes the over-arching theme of the femme fatale in a variety of artistic and historic contexts, as my readings have illustrated. But the seduction which takes place on the level of the narrative is only one aspect of what I see as the larger process of seduction generated by the femme fatale genre. At times I have referred to it as a ‘critical seduction’ insofar as it seems to be applicable not only to the thematic level of the stories themselves, but also as part of the persistent attraction of these stories or myths by critics and readers alike. In other words, the powerful attraction that exerts itself upon the critics of *Carmen*, for example, such as

Nietzsche and Adorno, or more recently, Saura and Zizek, or of the texts of decadence and their critical responses, reveals a striking similarity in the act of seduction taking place on many levels. It is the same kind of functional paradox that I argue characterizes the ambivalent power of the femme fatale itself. Whether it be in the commentaries on the Carmen story, or in the criticism of Italian decadence, and of D’Annunzio in particular, all of these critical discourses rely upon a fetishistic mode of interpretation that in turn, relies upon the critical and thematic seduction of one of the Western tradition’s most problematic—and obsessional—literary figures.

The question then arises as to what extent all criticism is fetishistic and, consequently, how does the addition of another level of criticism (which is mine), escape from this dilemma? The answer to this question lies in observing how my own act of interpretation results in affirming the theory of seduction which I argue is at the basis of an understanding of the figure of the femme fatale and its continued presence in art and literature. In other words, the same attraction for the subject material I analyze exerted itself upon me as I participated in the same desire to understand the figure I was interpreting. This proves to me the notion of theoretical complicity in any kind of critical undertaking that attempts to disclose a ‘secret’ or epistemological claim that perhaps the subject of the investigation, in this case the figure of the femme fatale, never actually makes.

This is what is meant by the use of the quotation from Kafka’s parable, “The Silence of the Sirens” at the beginning of this work. If the sirens were never really singing, what does that mean for the long history of the figure of feminine seduction which has spawned the age-old accepted representation of women in art and
literature based on the idea of a dangerous, even deadly, seductive impulse? What does it mean then to argue that perhaps the figure’s whole history of representation has been effectively mis-read? If the sirens never really sang, then how can they perform the seduction for which they are so famous? Perhaps no seduction ever really takes place except in the realm of the imagination of the writers, artists, audiences, and critics who continue to pursue this figure in the hopes of giving her a relation to ‘truth’ and meaning which may never be possible.

While my intention was not to solve this problem inherent to literary criticism, one of my endeavors was to illustrate how certain texts, motifs, or themes in art and literature may offer at least a recognition of the relationship of desire or seduction to works of art and their interpretation. Perhaps these myths have more to say about the nature of our need for timeless myths such as those that continue to repeat themselves throughout history, not limited to the femme fatale, of course, but easily recognizable in her well-worn representation. Other cultural myths could be included in this list (the hero or the anti-hero for example) as repeated instances of culturally determined aesthetic tropes and figures that seem to have always existed. One of the principle aims of this study, however, was to focus on one myth in particular which puts into play important related issues such as sexuality, gender, reductive notions of the feminine, desire, and essentialist interpretations of female subjectivity. This kind of inquiry has implications for the representation of women in a variety of discourses: literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and the cinema.

From this premise of locating the myth of the femme fatale within a trajectory of significant cultural myths, I chose the case of Carmen as the centerpiece
for my investigation because of its unique ability to renew itself as a compelling narrative of feminine seduction and alterity. The related themes of freedom, exoticism, transgressive sexuality and transcultural borrowing combine in the story of Carmen to make it one of the most persistent foundational myths of the Western tradition. My investigation into this particular femme fatale figure originating with Prosper Mérimée’s novella of 1845 and spawning countless readaptations in a variety of art forms, time periods, and national traditions, reveals this figure as the model for all of the subsequent versions of the femme fatale reproduced in her image.

Carmen represents a romantic notion of seduction and rebelliousness who, when placed in the context of nineteenth-century French or Italian decadence is turned into something different. She becomes in the late nineteenth century decadent versions of the figure a more passive agent of destruction or simply, a muse-like figure who sustains the male imagination and offers a vehicle for inherent fears and anxieties about women and a conflicted male identity.

However, the modern femme fatale story as it emerges in the context of early cinema is a bit more ambiguous with regard to the representation of the dangerous woman. In this context figures emerge such as Francesca Bertini and the other divas of Italian silent cinema, whose exceptional beauty incites catastrophe—not by means of any conscious scheming but through her sheer presence. The terms of the femme fatale’s power seemed to revolve around the inexplicable but inevitable sexuality of the woman. This may have something to do with the ‘crisis of modernity’ experienced at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries in
which the idea of a technologized, industrial modernity gave way to a vision of women as representing the anxieties surrounding the machines and industrialized society. The diva, in the very predictability of the doom she incarnates, in the mechanicity of her effects, embodies a view of history and temporality consistent with the era of mechanical reproduction.

The postmodern femme fatale story is inevitably more analytical and more subtly ironic than its nineteenth-century ancestors; it is often apologetically urbane or flippantly witty (as in the case of the works analyzed in chapter five) — and yet it cannot entirely hide or set aside the anxiety which underlies it. There is also a tendency in these more recent works to borrow from the cultural models of the past in an attempt to point out their instability and inappropriateness for more progressive understandings of female sexuality or the relationship between the sexes. However, I do not want to argue that there is a more ‘positive’ or empowering version of the femme fatale figure to be found in the post-modern instances of her appearance. Certainly, there is an attempt to ironize the figure and perhaps to playfully put into question some of the past models on which this cultural myth depends. However, the figure remains neither positive nor negative with regard to the possible meanings of her representation. Instead, what she represents becomes more about the inability to locate something or to substantiate a concept in the form of an image or a figure, than it is about any social value placed on the figure’s meanings.

Furthermore, the contradictions or the tensions — as well as the similarities and related concerns — which mark the passage of the femme fatale from one period to another are not meant to promote an understanding or a reason for the femme
fatale's existence. My intention was not to give a historical account of the theme of 
the femme fatale (although some historical situating was necessary), so much as a 
conceptual and critical study which locates the figure within a particular type of 
discourse and tries to articulate some of this discourse's most problematic relations. 
This analysis offers a testimony to the decisive importance of the myth of destructive 
femininity to the cultural landscape of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. 
Furthermore, it is my guess that the preoccupations and relations that this figure 
embodies are not limited to any particular set of circumstances or social and 
historical conditions. On the contrary, the myth of the femme fatale is indeed 
timeless in the sense that her appearance on the scene of art and literature may never 
be outdated or no longer applicable. This is perhaps her most enduring act of 
seduction: as long as there is art, there will be room for an imaginative, fascinating, 
and ultimately, unknowable, female figure.
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