

# Rethinking the New Femme Fatale in Carl Franklin's *Devil in a Blue Dress*: From a Woman Temptress to a Helpless Victim.

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## Abstract:

Drawing on Susan Faludi's critical concept of 'backlash' from her 1991 book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, this article explores how gender roles and the domestication of the femme fatale are portrayed in Carl Franklin's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995). Released in the mid-1990s — a time when women were experiencing the benefits of second-wave feminism, such as increased social mobility and visibility — I argue that Franklin uses the retro-noir genre to communicate his ideas about women's roles and position in American society. My analysis shows that Franklin's use of the femme fatale archetype is an effort to silence women and confine them to the private sphere. In other words, by referencing the femme fatale — a figure that traditionally challenges male authority — Franklin aims to undermine this challenge and reinforce the patriarchal order's dominance over women.

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**Key words:** Retro-Noir film; the femme fatale; gender; man; woman; backlash; social roles; the private and the public spaces.

## 1-Introduction

The “femme fatale” archetype is a pervasive cultural symbol in western culture. This alluring woman who represents desire, danger, and a challenge to traditional gender roles continues to influence popular culture and contemporary cinema. This article purports to analyze how gender roles and the portrayal of the femme fatale are depicted and domesticated in Carl Franklin’s retro-noir film *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995). Since the film was made in the mid- 1990s, a period when women were increasingly benefiting from the progress of second wave feminism, including increased visibility and social mobility, I contend that he used the retro-noir cycle to spread his beliefs about the position and role of women in American society. As my research will show, Franklin's allusion to the image of the femme fatale is actually an attempt to confine women to the private sphere and silence them. To put it another way, his allusion to the femme fatale as someone who opposes the male hierarchy is an effort to undermine that new social type and reaffirm the dominance of the patriarchal system over women

Carl Franklin’s movie has received a great deal of critical thinking. However, the majority of critics tend to emphasize racial issues more than the challenges related to the confinement of the femme fatale. For example, in *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (1998), James Naremore compares Franklin’s *Devil in a Blue Dress* with Raymond Chandler *Farewell*,

*My Lovely* (1940). Discussing the racial prejudices faced by the black community in the Los Angeles of the 1940s and 50s he writes

Although the film's protagonist, Easy Rawlins is both a private eye and something of a knight errant, his motives are far more realistic than Philip Marlow's, and his life is placed in much greater jeopardy. Marlow skin color and social polish enable him to move with relative ease through every level of the city, whereas Rawlins faces barriers each time he steps outside his immediate community (1998: 249).

Another critic who continues in the same vein is Aisha D. Bastiaans. In her article entitled "Detecting Difference in *Devil in a Blue Dress*: The Mulatta Figure, Noir, and the Cinematic Reification of Race" (2008), Bastiaans continues the exploration of the interracial relationships in post-World War II Los Angeles through the character of the mulatta figure. In her essay, she interrogates the peculiar confluence between investigatory modes of perception peculiar to the film medium, the film noir genre, and the mulatta figure and the ways in which these modes of investigatory perception conspire to reproduce race as an ideology of difference (2008: 224). For Bastiaans, Franklin's film is just a new way of expressing the historical anxieties over interracial relationships that plagued post-Civil War America.

## **2- Issue and Working Hypothesis:**

From this short review of the literature, we notice that the racial perspective takes the lead in the criticism devoted to Franklin's film. Releasing his film in the mid-nineteen nineties, a pivotal era marked by

women's increasing influence in American politics and society, as well as a significant resurgence of the femme fatale archetype within the neo-noir genre, I propose to approach this analysis from a feminist perspective, particularly through the lens of 'backlash.' In this article, I contend that Carl Franklin deliberately utilized the retro-noir film cycle as a medium to convey and promote his ideological views regarding women's roles and their position within American society. My examination will reveal how Franklin's invocation of the femme fatale archetype functions as a means to suppress women's agency and confine them to the private sphere. Essentially his portrayal of the femme fatale — traditionally seen as a figure challenging male authority — serves as an effort to undermine this challenge, aiming instead to reinforce and restore patriarchal dominance. Through this, appears to be attempting to dismantle the emerging social shifts that empower women, thereby reaffirming the control of patriarchal structures over female identity and agency.

To reach my aim, I will discuss Franklin's reactionary ideology against women through the lens of backlash. The term 'backlash' was coined by Susan Faludi in 1991 when she published her seminal book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*. In her book, Faludi defines backlash as all the counter-assaults — disseminated in popular culture, marketing, and media — that aimed to halt women's advancement and maintain the status quo (1991: 9-10). For Faludi, these subtle and pervasive attempts will not stop as far as women will continue their progressive ascension in the social, economic, and political domains. Every time women ask for equal rights, reach high and prestigious positions previously dominated by men, an anti-

feminist counterassault or backlash will struck again to try to push them back in order to preserve the conservative traditional values (Ibid: 61).

According to her, one of the most important canals or conductors of backlash and patriarchal ideology is popular culture, particularly film industry. Faludi's argument closely echoes the perspective articulated by Philip Green, who asserts that Hollywood primarily functions as a stabilizing force within society. Green emphasizes that the influence of Hollywood should be understood in terms of its role in maintaining social order and cohesion, rather than merely as a source of entertainment. By shaping cultural narratives and reinforcing societal norms, Hollywood acts as a powerful agent that upholds the existing social structure, ensuring stability and continuity in the collective consciousness (Green, 1998: 7). In this article, I argue that the social stability Franklin wants to reassert in his film is time when men were men and women were dames.

### **3- The Archetype of the Femme Fatale in Western Culture:**

Before I begin my analysis of Franklin's film, it is essential to first establish a clear understanding of the femme Fatale archetype. This involves exploring her origins and significance across various domains, including religious symbolism, mythological narratives, literary traditions and cinematic representations. By tracing her appearances and evolving portrayals throughout these different contexts, we can better appreciate the depth and complexity of this iconic figure, which will serve as a foundation for a more nuanced discussion of Franklin's work. The film Studies Dictionary defines the femme fatale in those terms: "femme fatale [French for fatal woman] A mysterious, alluring, enigmatic female character who poses a threat to the

male protagonist, using her sexual power to entrap and lure him to his downfall (2012: 158). Although the *femme fatale* term was only recently included in the dictionary, the roots of this woman temptress can be traced back to a very remote past. In fact, the archetype of the beautiful and mysterious woman has permeated western culture from its earliest literary sources; be they factual or mythical. The story of the *femme fatale* began with the biblical Eve and Salome, the legendary Pandora and Helen of Troy, the literary Lady Macbeth and Emma Bovary and still continues today with the cinematic icons Phyllis Dietrichson, Madonna and Catherine Trammell.

The story of the *femme fatale* began with the biblical Eve who is considered as the original seductress of man. In the classical interpretation of the Book of Genesis, Eve is the one who is seduced by the serpent, and then persuades Adam to partake of the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. According to this interpretation, Eve is seen as the one who initiated the act of disobedience or the original sin. Convinced by the serpent that she wouldn't die but would instead gain understanding and her eyes would be opened, she took the fruit, ate it, and then shared it with Adam, who also ate. Due to their disobedience, Eve and Adam were expelled from the Garden of Eden and sin then entered the world. According to this perspective, Eve was a cunning and alluring woman who brought about humanity's perpetual torment. Other biblical images of the *femme fatale* also include Salome the daughter of Herodias who requested the head of John the Baptist to dance for the Jewish leader Herod and Delilah the seductive woman who lured her lover Samson and brought his destruction. The major similarity between these women is their capacity to use their beauty and charm to influence men and leading them to their downfall.

Pandora is another image of the fatal woman in Greek mythology. In the myth, she is the first woman created by Hephaestus at Zeus's command, intended as a punishment for Prometheus. The gods bestowed on her many gifts, including beauty, charm and cunning. Then, Zeus sent her as a bride to Prometheus younger brother. Pandora was given a jar or box containing all the evils of the world. She was told by the gods not to open it, but her curiosity overcame her, so she opened the box and released the evil spirits. The latter brought suffering, disease, and hardship to humanity (Smith, 2005: 112). Like Pandora, Helen of Troy is also one of the alluring women in Greek mythology. Her fatal attraction and elopement with Paris the prince of Troy lead to war and an immense suffering and destruction of the city of Troy. In Homer's the Iliad, Helen is the quintessential fatal woman with "a terrible beauty" (Homer, 1998: 124). For him, her beauty was the central driving force behind chaos and the destruction of the old world.

As far as literature is concerned, the figure of the femme fatale was ubiquitous in sixteenth-century English drama, mainly in William Shakespeare's plays. Lady Macbeth is one of his iconic female characters who embody many of the characteristics of the fatal woman. She is seductive, manipulative, ambitious, and ultimately destructive. Driven by her desire for power and social status, she uses her sexuality and verbal charm to manipulate her husband into murdering King Duncan. Her thirst for power led to her demise as well as that of others.

The nineteenth century experienced a surge in the portrayal of the femme fatale across both literature and the arts. She became the centre of

fascination and obsession of artists, authors, playwrights, poets and composers. From the romantic Geraldine and la Belle Dame, through the sensationalist Lydia Guilt and Lady Audley, to the Fin de Siècle Dracula (to name but a few), the nineteenth-century literary scene was overwhelmed by fatal femininity. This fact can be explained by the socioeconomic changes that took place in the Victorian era. As more women were taking up employment outside the domestic realm and asking for more freedoms and liberties, they were seen as a threat to the bourgeois patriarchal system. As a cultural idea and a product of imagination, the confinement of the *femme fatale* served as a reaction against the progress of women. In essence, by punishing the rebellious and threatening woman at the end of the story, the detective restores the dominance of the patriarchal system.

In the twentieth century, the rise of Hollywood film industry brought greater attention to the archetype of the *femme fatale*, especially within the film noir style of the 1940s and 1950s. However, far from celebrating women empowerment, these films serve to reinforce the undesirability of such empowerment by depicting independence as dangerous and morally corrupt. The portrayal of the *femme fatale* in these classic American film noirs reflects societal fears about real women's claims to social and financial independence. As a woman who poses a threat to social discourses and power structures, her eventual downfall symbolizes the reaffirmation of male dominance and traditional patriarchal values.

After a brief hiatus in the 1960s and 1970s, the *femme fatale* returned with more vengeance in the 1980s and 1990s. The neo-noir *femme fatale* as she is called exercised her outrageous sexuality and violence in a body of

films such as *Body Heat* (1981), *Basic Instinct* (1992), *The Lust Seduction* (1994), and *Wild Things* (1998). Moreover, unlike the heroines of traditional noir films from the 1940s and 1950s whose inevitable downfall and tragic end were almost predetermined by the end of the story, the modern neo-noir femme fatale manages to outwit the forces of justice and emerge unscathed from the intricate web of the narrative, defying the conventional fate typically assigned to her classic counterparts. For example, *Body Heat* ends with the femme fatale Matty in a beach in the tropics savouring cocktails with a younger lover, and *Basic Instinct* ends with Catherine Tramell lounging in bed with her new lover Nick Curran. Thus, what started as a backlash against strong women in the 1940s and 50s evolves into a celebration of the empowered woman by the mid-1990s.

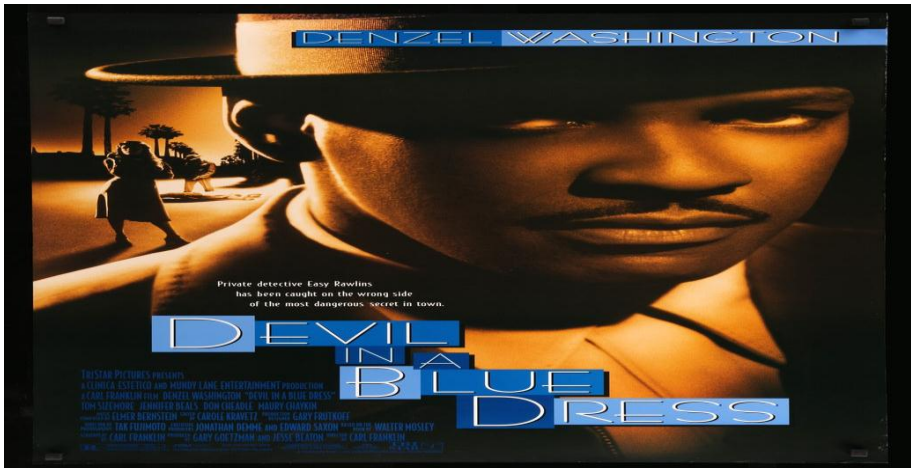
While eighties and nineties neo-noir (revisionist films) celebrate the strong independent woman to illustrate the gains of second wave feminism which granted women greater social and sexual liberties, the mid-nineties retro-noir films (made in the present but set in the classic noir period, the 1940s or 50s) express a reactionary vision of gender to undermine the advancement of the feminine cause. It is within this period of hot cultural and ideological debate on the role and place of women in American society that Franklin released his retro-noir film *Devil in a Blue Dress* to promote male power and female passivity and submissiveness.

#### **4- Daphne Monet as a Femme Fatale:**

Carl Franklin's *Devil in a Blue Dress* is an adaptation of Walter Mosley's best-selling 1990 private-eye novel with the same name. Released in 1995, the film stars (Denzel Washington) as Easy Rawlins, (Jennifer Beals) as Daphne Monet, and (Tom Sizemore) as Dewitt Albright. The story of the film revolves around Easy Rawlins a black veteran of the World War II who migrated from the South to California hoping to find a job, pay his mortgage, and attain the American Dream. When hired to find a missing white woman Daphne Monet, Easy enters the dark world of corrupt politicians, gangsters and racist cops.

The first reference to Daphne Monet (Jennifer Beals) as the femme fatale occurs even before her appearance on screen. In fact, the title of the film *Devil in a Blue Dress* links directly femininity with evil. Moreover, the way she is represented in the promotional poster for the feature film enhances this feminine dangerousness and criminality.

Figure.1



Promotional Poster (*Devil in a Blue Dress*, 1995)

In the poster, we can see a woman with long legs, long wavy hair and a cigarette who stands in front of two unknown men; one in the ground shoot by the other. This scene brings to mind the archetype of the dangerous femme fatale that is often seen in classic film noir movies like *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Out of the Past* (1947). In these films, the femme fatale is typically portrayed as a seductive and mysterious woman who uses her allure to manipulate men and achieve her own often sinister goals. Her presence is both alluring and threatening, creating a sense of tension and danger that keeps viewers on edge. Similarly, in this scene, the character embodies that same sense of intrigue and peril, reminding us of how these women were depicted as powerful yet potentially destructive figures within

the dark, morally ambiguous worlds of film noir. Their allure masks a deeper complexity, making them both fascinating and formidable characters.

The second time Daphne is referred to as the fatal woman in the movie is when Easy (Denzel Washington) the hard-boiled detective started his investigation about the missing white woman. As a woman who has “a predilection for the company of Negroes,” as he was told by the gangster Dewitt Albright (Tom Sizemore), Easy goes directly to an illegal black jazz club on Central Avenue in Los Angeles to try to find Daphne. Once there, Easy started asking about the woman by using other names such as “Dahlia” and “Delilah” just to hide his intentions. Referring to Daphne as “Delilah” serves as a deliberate allusion to the biblical figure from the Old Testament, often associated with the archetype of the “bad girl” or the treacherous woman. In the biblical narrative, Delilah is the cunning and seductive woman who betrays her lover Samson by revealing the secret of his strength, ultimately leading to his downfall. This comparison suggests that Daphne embodies the qualities of a perilous temptress — one whose allure and manipulative nature posses the power to bring about the destruction and ruin of her lover. Through this reference, we gain insight into her character as a figure of dangerous seduction, capable of undermining and collapsing the stability of those who fall under her spell.

After thirty-seven minutes of the film, comes the scene where Daphne makes her first appearance in flesh. Before her appearance, Easy receives a telephone call from Daphne who invites him to meet her at the Ambassador hotel. Then, her voice-over follows with the instructions that Easy must

follow to reach her. This sequence underscores Daphne's role as the quintessential femme fatale — an alluring yet commanding figure who orchestrates the encounter and exerts influence over the unfolding events.

When Easy enters her room a wide shot shows Daphne dressed in a blue dress and smoking a cigarette, creating a visual connection to the film's title.

Figure .2



Daphne as woman temptress who uses her sexuality to reach her aims (*Devil in a Blue Dress*, 1995)

After the greetings, she sits on a couch with her blue sheath nightgown to tease the private eye. Accompanied by a sultry jazz soundtrack, her robe slips slightly, revealing the beauty of her legs and hinting at the femme fatale's sexual allure. Moreover, when Easy asks her about the murder of Coretta, Daphne responds by engaging the discourse of seduction:

Daphne: Easy, if you're thinking that Frank had anything to do with Coretta's death then obviously you don't know very much about him. Frank doesn't go around beating people up; he prefers to use a knife as his weapon.

Easy: And what do you prefer to use, as your weapon?

Daphne: Well, why you don't search me and find out?

Easy: Mind if I have another drink?

Daphne: Help yourself (Franklin).

From this quotation, it becomes clear that Daphne is portrayed as a woman who skillfully uses her sexuality to achieve her personal aims of power and independence. Her actions suggest a deliberate and strategic use of her charm, indicating that she is aware of the influence her attractiveness can hold over men. This characterization highlights her as a figure who navigates her environment with confidence and intent, leveraging her femininity not just for superficial reasons but as a tool to assert her autonomy and control over her circumstances.

### **5- Daphne Monet as a Helpless Victim:**

However, far from advocating the ideals of women's emancipation and independence, Franklin's engagement with the neo-noir film cycle of the 1990s appears to serve a different, more controlling purpose: the domestication of women. In essence, his approach seeks to relegate women back into the private sphere or reinforce their traditional roles as dependent and submissive wives. Within this framework, the *femme fatale* — who embodies a potential threat to the patriarchal social order — must be subdued and kept in check. Franklin's portrayal of such characters reflects his desire to contain their power and influence, thereby reaffirming the societal norms that position women within a limited, controlled space.

The first scene which shows the containment of the fatal woman occurs in Easy's home where he finds Daphne waiting for him in a blue dress after a second murder. However, this time Daphne is not a *femme fatale* but a woman in distress.

Figure.3



Daphne as a woman in distress (*Devil in a Blue Dress*, 1995)

In fact, Daphne came to Easy's house to have some information about the photographs of Terrell and Easy takes this opportunity to ask her about her connections with the murders and the involvement of her supposed black lover Frank Green. Unable to keep the secret of her biracial background and her passing for white Daphne declares: "Frank is my brother. Our mother is Creole, we have different fathers; mine is white. And that's what Terrell has on me" (Ibid.). This depiction suggests that women are inherently delicate and vulnerable, unable to effectively defend themselves against the aggressive advances of men. As her secret is exposed, Daphne's character undergoes a transformation in the narrative; she transitions from the archetype of the femme fatale — an alluring and dangerous temptress — to that of a helpless victim, overwhelmed by the circumstances beyond her

control. This shift underscores a portrayal of women as fragile beings, whose strength is compromised once their vulnerabilities are revealed.

To undermine the power and independence of the *femme fatale* and highlight the inherent fragility and susceptibility of women in the face of danger or adversity, Franklin shows Daphne in a situation of peril and need of rescue. In fact, Daphne is kidnapped by Albright and his gangsters and is taken to a remote cabin. To emphasize feminine vulnerability and weakness, Daphne is shown scared and screaming in terror while being knocked and questioned by the gangster Albright about the place of the pictures she is using to counter blackmail Terrell,

Are you a liar? I know you're a liar. You lying about being a nigger? Tell me the truth. What part of you is nigger? Is your leg a nigger? Your arm a nigger? May be your face is a nigger. What part of you is nigger, huh? You know what I'm gonna do? I'm gonna burn it out of you! (Franklin, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, 1995)

This passage reveals that Daphne Monet should not be viewed as a classic *femme fatale*, but rather as a vulnerable and helpless victim in need of assistance. Unlike the archetype of the deadly woman who manipulates others through her sexuality to achieve her own goals, Daphne's sexuality is portrayed as her point of weakness, especially in the context of her assault. Furthermore, this depiction underscores a recurring theme that women are often portrayed as beings who require the protection and aid of men. The scene emphasizes this idea through the presence of Easy, the tough detective or knight-like figure, who comes to her rescue. Such a portrayal reflects a

traditional and somewhat a reactionary view of gender roles: masculinity is depicted as muscular aggressive, and triumphant, while femininity is shown as passive, vulnerable, and objectified.

In *Backlash*, Susan Faludi describes how, during periods of societal pushback, popular culture often portrays women as restrained and subdued. She explains that these images depict women as being silenced, infantilized, and unable to act freely. For her, this is a recurring theme where women are shown as confined to the home and characterized as the “the Quiet Woman” emphasizing their passivity and lack of agency (Faludi, 1991: 84). Faludi’s claim can be applied to Franklin’s film as a whole. In fact, most of the time Daphne is silenced.

The most significant scene that highlights this silence is the one at the film’s end.

Figure. 4



### Daphne as the quiet woman (*Devil in a Blue Dress*, 1995)

After being rejected by her ex-fiancé Tod Carter, Daphne is driven by Easy to her brother's apartment without uttering any word. Indeed, it is through Easy's voice-over narration that the viewer discovers the real Daphne and her motivations for choosing a white identity. Easy tells us that he left her at her brother's apartment, a four-unit building on Dinker Street. During the drive back, she shared her story with him in a way that resembled a sinner seeking forgiveness. Her name was Ruby Hanks, originally from lake Charles, Louisiana. He adds that for him, it seemed that what she truly desired was a sense of belonging, a place where she could feel accepted. Then a few days later, feeling guilty and somewhat eager to see her again, he decided to visit her to return his portion of the money. But when he arrived, he found that she and her brother had already moved away (Franklin). Diminishing Daphne's ability to express herself freely and openly in front of the camera effectively strips her of her discursive rights, thereby eroding her sense of female subjectivity. In other words, the way Easy exerts dominance over her voice serves as a metaphor for the broader patriarchal mechanisms that seek to suppress and control the rebellious, autonomous femme fatale. This act of silencing not only diminishes her individual agency but also reflects the societal tendency to undermine women who challenge traditional roles and assert their independence.

The last time we see Daphne in the film is when she enters her brother's apartment. Figure. 5



Daphne as the domesticated woman (*Devil in a Blue Dress*, 1995)

This scene represents the last act of domesticating the independent woman who dared to trouble gender boundaries. For the rest of the film, she is absent onscreen and we know that visibility and presence are primordial for female subjectivity in cinema. Kaja Silverman argues that the issue of male and female subjectivity in cinema and elsewhere are deeply linked to the voice with which they speak — figuratively and literally (Silverman, 1998). Silencing and Omitting the independent woman from the screen is the strategy used by Franklin to reinstate women in their proper role that of the submissive and dependent woman.

## 6- Conclusion:

In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Carl Frankklyn vividly explores the underlying male anxieties concerning women who seek independence and challenge traditional gender roles. Throughout the film, the director portrays a persistent effort to silence and confine the femme fatale, a character embodying the desire to break free from societal constraints. To Franklin, this figure of the New Woman symbolizes a threat to the core principles of a patriarchal order, which seeks to maintain control by relegating such women to the private sphere of domesticity and subservience. As a form of societal backlash, Franklin's retro-inspired film — often categorized within the noir genre — serves to reinforce a reactionary ideology, illustrating how patriarchal power structures ultimately prevail over the rebellious, autonomous femme fatale. This portrayal underscores the enduring tension between gender liberation and traditional authority, highlighting the persistent dominance of patriarchal values despite the appearance of progress.

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