

# THE INFLUENCE OF AMERICAN CINEMA ON THE PERFORMANCE OF THE *FEMME FATALE* IN SPANISH CRIME FILMS OF THE 1950S\*

NURIA CANCELA

## INTRODUCTION

The cinematic archetype of the *femme fatale*, with precursors in the vampires of the silent era, first emerged and rose to its highest form of expression in American *film noir*. The fatal woman is characterised by a combination of seduction and ambition. She is active, intelligent and destructive, with a power derived from her body and her sexuality (Place, 1978). She is a figure associated with crime, death, and deception. As Álvarez López (2006: 70) suggests, cinematic *femmes fatales* are women who use their seductive powers to convince—or trick—men into giving them what they want, which was usually something financial in nature. However, the fatal woman has generally been depicted from a misogynistic perspective that ultimately condemns her to an unhappy end in every film as a way of stressing the negative depiction of this type of femininity. Indeed, as Place (1978) points out, in Hollywood *film noir* this character

type is set up in opposition to the “nurturing woman”, who possesses all the female virtues of the era.

In Spanish cinema under Franco's dictatorship, due to a system of censorship that repressed the expression of any kind of behaviour contrary to Catholic morality, the presence of the *femme fatale* as a recurring archetype should have been practically impossible. In *Primer Plano*, the film magazine that served as the mouthpiece for the regime's vision of cinema, the idea of a Spanish version of this character type was almost never mentioned. The archetype was sometimes associated with foreign actresses, but a Spanish actress would be more likely to be described as a “vampiress”, a term with connotations dating back to before the Spanish Civil War, as if Spanish cinema had no contemporary version of the “fatal” seductress.<sup>1</sup> However, although the notion of a Spanish *femme fatale* is conspicuously absent from the film magazines of the era, the boom of

the Spanish crime film<sup>2</sup> genre in the early 1950s facilitated the repeated use of this female archetype. This genre began in Spain with two key films, *Crime Squad* (Brigada criminal, Ignacio F. Iquino, 1950) and *Post Office Box 1001* (Apartado de correos 1001, Julio Salvador, 1950), and it continued through to the mid-1960s. The Spanish version of the genre was clearly based on the Hollywood *film noir* model. The two film traditions thus share a number of common features: the presence of crime, violence and death; a style heavily influenced by realism, expressionism and psychoanalysis; and a narrative development that gradually builds the tension felt by the audience (Medina de la Viña, 2000).

Numerous scholars (Labany, Lázaro-Reboll & Rodríguez Ortega, 2013; Rodríguez Fuentes, 2011; Sánchez Barba, 2007; Medina de la Viña, 2000; Benet, 2012) have highlighted the various similarities between the Spanish crime film and different foreign versions of the genre, as well as some specific features of the Spanish productions associated with the censorship restrictions, such as the reduction of the moral ambiguity, the idealising of the police, and the absence of private investigators (Sánchez Barba, 2007). However, the influence of American *film noir* on one canonical archetype of this genre, the *femme fatale*, has received almost no scholarly attention. Although Sánchez Barba (2007) suggests that the stylistic, expressive and visual presentation of the Spanish “spider-woman” is based on its American equivalent, he does not really explore this question; similarly, Sánchez Martín (2012) highlights the American influence on the genre, but she focuses her attention on narrative rather than symbolic aspects of the archetype. Contradicting these authors, Medina de la Viña (2000) argues that Spanish cinema, with only a handful of exceptions, contains no genuinely treacherous women like the Hollywood *femmes fatales*.

The main aim of this article is to analyse the archetype of the Spanish *femme fatale* through

the performances of the actresses who dared to embody it. To this end, it takes a perspective based on star studies, which focuses on the acting styles of individual actors and actresses. This focus is a constant in the work of authors like Richard Dyer (1979), James Naremore (1988) and Philip Drake (2006), and it has even led contemporary scholars like Karen Hollinger (2006) to argue for the need to analyse actresses as authors of the performative *mise-en-scène*. However, the approach adopted here, drawing on the work of Richard De Cordova (1986) and Donna Peberdy (2013), is based on the branch of star studies that relates it to the system of film genres, an approach also adopted by Christine Gledhill (1991) and Andrew Britton (1991). Peberdy takes up this line of research with an exploration of American *film noir* that focuses on acting styles related to certain concerns of cultural studies. To this end, she argues that “it is necessary to move past a definition of performance as solely the actor’s movements and gestures to consider it instead as the interplay between actions, diegesis and social context” (Peberdy, 2013: 332). She therefore proposes the analysis of three types of performance that occur simultaneously in this film genre: screen performance, diegetic performance, and social performance. Based on this categorisation, this article examines the performances of the actresses who portrayed the *femme fatale* archetype in Spanish crime films of the 1950s through a detailed comparison aimed at determining the extent to which Hollywood cinema influenced the performative approaches of these Spanish actresses.

### SCREEN PERFORMANCE: BETWEEN RESTRAINT AND EXPRESSIONISM

Peberdy characterises performances in *film noir* first and foremost as restrained, drawing on studies by Foster Hirsch (1981) and De Cordova (1986). Hirsch suggests that *film noir* actors and actresses offer performances that are totally stylised, som-



Figure 1. *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *Leave Her to Heaven* (John M. Stahl, 1945), *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), *No disparas contra mí* [Don't Shoot Me] (José María Nunes, 1961), *¿Pena de muerte?* [Death Penalty?] (Josep Maria Font, 1961), *A sangre fría* [In Cold Blood] (Juan Bosch, 1959).

nambulistic and glacial. De Cordova argues that the restrained performances that characterise this genre are the polar opposite of the “performance as expression” that typifies melodrama. Peberdy analyses what she describes as the restrained performances of male actors like Alan Ladd, Humphrey Bogart and Robert Mitchum. Although she does not mention any example of restrained gestures by a female actor, it is notable that actresses portraying the *femme fatale* archetype, at significant moments such as when they are killing their victims, exhibit an identical kind of restraint: their inexpressiveness is so exaggerated that it might even seem unnatural, and contrary to the norm in classical cinema.

American *film noir* offers paradigmatic examples of this, like Ellen (Gene Tierney) in *Leave Her to Heaven* (John M. Stahl, 1945). In the scene where her brother-in-law drowns, Ellen seems unaffected, looking on with an expressionless look as the boy dies. As Núria Bou suggests, “it seems as if the patient Ellen had been waiting for this moment, and she might even be described as drowning the boy with her gaze” (Bou, 2006: 22). Another example is Jean Simmons’s performance as Diane Tremayne in *Angel Face* (Otto Preminger, 1952), who plays the piano impassively, without the slightest hint of concern on her face, while her stepmother suffers the death she has previously prepared for her. Similarly, when

the *femme fatale* brandishes a weapon, in most cases she stands up straight and serene with an imperturbable expression and points the gun steadily at her victim, like Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) in *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), Annie Laurie Starr (Peggy Cummins) in *Gun Crazy* (Joseph H. Lewis, 1950), or Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer) in *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947).

In such moments of extreme violence, we find the same restrained performances in the Spanish *femme fatale*: Lina (Mireille Darc) in *¿Pena de muerte?* [Death Penalty] (Josep Maria Font, 1961), Lucile (Lucile Saint-Simon) in *No disparas contra mí* [Don't Shoot Me] (Jose Maria Nunes, 1961) and Isabel (Gisia Paradís) in *A sangre fría* [In Cold Blood] (Juan Bosch, 1959) all hold their murder weapons with the utmost calm, apart from a blink on pulling the trigger in the case of Lucile: a tranquilbating of the eyelids as she watches her victim’s body fall, believing him to be dead and then approaching him to give him a necrophiliac kiss. Again, like Ellen (Tierney) in *Leave Her to Heaven*, the long duration of the shot of her calm face underscores the unnaturalness of this performance. In other cases, like Isabel (Gisia Paradís) in *A sangre fría*, the restraint is clear while she is holding her gun, although in a final struggle she is the one who ends up dead (Figure 1). An example similar to that of Kathie (Greer) in *Out of the Past* can be

found in Eva (Honor Blackman) in *Come Die My Love* (*Manchas de sangre en la luna*, Edward Dein and Luis Marquina, 1952), who shoots her former lover—and blackmailer—unperceived by her current love interest, who is also present at the scene of the crime, until he hears the sound of the gunshot. This is thanks to her absolute restraint when she kills him even though she herself is already dying. Isabel (Nani Fernández) wears a similarly unflappable expression when she shoots her lover from her hiding spot in *An Impossible Crime* (*¿Crimen imposible?*, César Fernández Ardavín, 1954). With the utmost calm and self-control she watches from behind the door, raises her pistol, points between the bars and shoots. The

long, hard stares of these women seem to condemn their men to their deaths.

However, as Peberdy points out, this restraint is sometimes alternated with explosive or expressionistic performances. Peberdy's theoretical framework draws on the work of Paul Schrader (1972) and Robert G. Porfirio (1976), who argue that *film noir* combines expressionism with realism. Most performances associated with the genre exhibit a contrast between *interiority* and *exterior emotionalism*. In her exterior emotionalism, the *femme fatale* displays her anxiety, often in scenes where she is alone. There are thus occasional examples of *femmes fatales* with mouths gaping open, faces buried in their hands and

Figure 2. Exterior emotionalism: Jane Greer in *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Blvd.* (Billy Wilder, 1950), Lana Turner in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1943), Honor Blackman in *Come Die My Love* (*Manchas de sangre en la luna*, Edward Dein and Luis Marquina, 1952), Malila Sandoval in *Llama un tal Esteban* [*A Esteban on the Phone*] (Pedro L. Ramírez, 1960), Emma Penella in *Red Fish* (*Los peces rojos*, José Antonio Nieves Conde, 1955), Laya Raki in *Closed Exit* (*Camino cortado*, Ignacio F. Iquino, 1955) Monserrat Salvador in *Fifth District* (*Distrito Quinto*, Julio Coll, 1958) and Nani Fernández in *An Impossible Crime* (*¿Crimen imposible?*, César Fernández Ardavín, 1954)







Figure 3. Exterior emotionalism and feelings of guilt: Joan Crawford in *Sudden Fear* (David Miller, 1952), Rosita Fornés in *Palmer ha muerto* [*Palmer Is Dead*] (Juan Fortuny, 1962) and María Félix in *Black Crown* (*La corona negra*, Luis Saslavsky, 1951)

wild-eyed stares that reflect the desperation they feel inside (Figure 2).

As a paradigmatic case of exterior emotionalism, Peberdy (2013: 324) cites Myra Hudson (Joan Crawford) in *Sudden Fear* (David Miller, 1952). With her explosive gestures, Crawford “covers the performance spectrum from subtle understatement to overt paranoia and madness.” In Spanish cinema, a similarly wide range can be found in María Félix’s performance in *Black Crown* (*La corona negra*, Luis Saslavsky, 1951). Despite exhibiting the canonical restraint of a *femme fatale*, throughout the film she exhibits

expressive gestures like raising her hands to her head after waking from a bad dream. But the epitome of exterior emotionalism is encapsulated in her final gesture in the film: her nightmare realised, she lets out an agonised scream with claw-like hands covering her face, leaving the spectator to assume that only one ending is possible for her: madness resulting from her guilt over killing her husband (Figure 3). This supports Peberdy’s theory that these gestures of excess and exaggeration are a means of calling attention to the feelings of guilt that plague the characters who exhibit them. Other Spanish examples of

this manifestation of conscience are Eva's (Honor Blackman) unhinged expression when she is struck by a bullet shot by the lover she "betrayed" in *Come Die My Love*, or Silvia's (Rosita Fornés) reaction in *Palmer ha muerto* [Palmer Is Dead] (Juan Fortuny, 1962) when she sees the man she thought she had killed (Figure 3).

### **DIEGETIC PERFORMANCE: AMBIGUITY AND DECEPTION**

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A diegetic performance is essentially a performance within a performance in the sense described by James Naremore (1988: 70), where "actors dramatize situations in which the expressive coherence of a character either breaks down or is revealed as a mere 'act.'" In this sense, the characters in the story are also "performing" a particular role. Peberdy defines a diegetic performance as one in which the *femme fatale* pretends to be a different person in a way that allows the spectator—and sometimes even the victim in the story—to recognise the theatrical nature of the character's behaviour. A paradigmatic example of this is Brigid O'Shaughnessy (Mary Astor) in *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), whose first appearance on screen is a diegetic performance in which she poses as a nurturing woman: she comes to the office of the two detectives to explain that she is genuinely worried about her sister and the man she has become involved with. She enters the office with tear-filled eyes and begins talking in a calm tone, but her speech and breathing gradually become faster due to her (feigned) anxiety over the subject matter. Brigid intersperses direct gazes into Humphrey Bogart's eyes to convince him of her concern with downcast looks when she recalls certain events or acknowledges her guilt for not being as kind to her sister as she should. The darting movements of her eyes is in keeping with her apparent distress. Her short silences while she looks away, breaking up the otherwise constant flow of words, appear to be moments when

the character is remembering aspects of the role she is playing in her diegetic performance. Sitting up straight, always in the same position, she never makes a single inappropriate gesticulation, like a genuine "good girl".<sup>3</sup>

The "good girl" act for investigators or the police can also be found in Spanish *film noir* in the character of Elena (María del Sol Arce) in *The Unsatisfied* (Juventud a la intemperie, Ignacio F. Iquino, 1961), who offers a diegetic performance while walking with a police officer taking her testimony to obtain information on the attempted murder of a friend of hers. When Elena and the officer begin to talk, the hint of a smile appears on her face as she says: "If you like, we can talk on our way to my house. I don't like to stay out late, you know?" In a soft tone similar to Brigid O'Shaughnessy's in *The Maltese Falcon*, she begins chatting. When the police officer tells her of her friend's fatal condition, she reacts with (feigned) surprise: "How could such a thing happen? My God... Poor Susana." She walks on with her hands in her pockets and a downcast expression, only lifting her gaze to look at the officer, as if searching his eyes for reassurance and an explanation for the crime. Her tone, like O'Shaughnessy's, becomes progressively agitated when she says to him: "Please, tell me where she is. I would like to help her." And when the officer replies that it would be pointless as she may already be dead, she sighs and hangs down her head even more. Like Brigid O'Shaughnessy quietly expressing her gratitude to the private eyes, Elena expresses regret that she is unable to be of more help in the investigation. When

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they reach her rooming house and bid farewell, Elena waits at the entrance until the officer has gone. Her sad but kindly expression changes to a deadpan look as she follows his departure out of the corner of her eye. The theatricality of her performance in the officer's presence is thus revealed. In fact, however, its nature as a diegetic performance had already been exposed earlier: while talking to the officer, she shot a sideways glance at a car that signals to her with its headlights, and now that the officer is gone, she rushes over to the vehicle and climbs inside.

Diegetic performances of this kind can be found in numerous other Spanish crime films. In *Cita imposible* [Impossible Rendezvous] (Antonio Santillán, 1958), Mercedes (Mercedes Monterrey) weeps desperately in front of a police officer when he tells her of her husband's death (to which she was an accomplice). In a state of absolute hysteria, she seizes a friend's arm and raises her other hand to her head. The clearly exposed theatrical nature of this display contrasts with her icy indifference and restraint in the following scene when she is conducting a systematic inventory of her theatre. Another example can be found in *Tres citas con el destino* [Three Dates with Destiny] (Fernando De Fuentes, León Klimovsky, Florián Rey, 1954), when Matilde (Olga Zubarry), after preparing to poison her husband, calls the emergency service like a perfect wife. "I don't know what to do. I'm desperate," she says, pretending not to under-

stand why her husband has fainted. She speaks in a fast-paced, nervous manner, frowning and jerking her head from side to side. When she hangs up the phone, her serious, restrained expression returns as she makes another call. "Roberto, it's done," she says into the phone, this time talking to her lover to inform him of her husband's death. She thus displays the expressive ambivalence of the *femme fatale* that Bou (2006) describes in the Hollywood version of the archetype, with facial expressions shifting between extremes of good and evil.

Similar diegetic performances, although without real deaths, but with hints of crime and feigned tears, can be found in *Los culpables* [The Guilty] (Josep Maria Forn, 1962) and *Red Fish* (Los peces rojos, Jose Antonio Nieves Conde, 1955). In *Los culpables*, Arlette (Susana Campos), with the help of her lover and her husband, arranges the "funeral" of the latter. Faking his death so that all three can be free, she acts out the stereotypical widow: (feigned) tears with a handkerchief in her hand. Dressed in black from head to toe, she keeps her head lowered while watching all the reactions at the funeral out of the corner of her eye. And when they reopen the grave to perform an autopsy, she lets out a desperate scream on seeing the supposed body of her husband, followed by disconsolate weeping on her lover's shoulder. In *Red Fish*, the character portrayed by Emma Pennella (Ivón) conspires with her lover to fake the

Figure 4. Faking and overacting: Mary Astor in *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), Nani Fernández in *An Impossible Crime* (*¿Crimen imposible?*, César Fernández Ardavín, 1954) and Lucile Saint-Simon in *No dispares contra mí* [Don't Shoot Me] (José María Nunes, 1961)



presence and death of his son in order to gain an inheritance. This “performance” takes place at a hotel where Ivón shows up in the middle of the night, cupping her hands around her mouth and calling out desperately for help because the boy has fallen into the sea. The following day, when the police arrive to search for clues, the process of deception is based on markedly theatrical gestures: they find her weeping, lying face-down on the bed at the hotel; her voice cracks every time she answers a question; and she holds a handkerchief that ostensibly serves to dry her falling tears. However, when the police officer closes the door, her crying stops suddenly, she takes a deep breath and shifts smoothly to an upbeat mood as she remarks: “Well, it’s all over now. I’d had quite enough of that stupid cop.”

On occasions, the *femme fatale* overacts in her efforts to convince her lover or husband that she is distressed, worried or out of control. Naremore (1988) suggests that certain gestures are perceived by the spectator as part of a diegetic performance because they are overacted. In *The Maltese Falcon*, for example, O’Shaughnessy (Mary Astor) breaks down in a melodramatic fit of weeping against the wall in front of her lover, with her head in her hands. This gesture is also used by Spanish *femmes fatales* like the ones portrayed by Nani Fernández in *An Impossible Crime* and Lucile Saint-Simon in *No desapare contra mí* (Figure 4). Such overacted gestures, serving as evidence of the diegetic performance, were imported directly from Hollywood.

There are even cases where the *femme fatale* exposes her own diegetic performance. An example from Hollywood cinema is *Scarlet Street* (Fritz Lang, 1945), in which Kitty March (Joan Bennett) reveals that the love she has professed for her lover has been nothing more than an act. Laughing loud and long, she admits to Chris Cross (Edward G. Robinson), the man she has deceived by pretending to be an innocent girl in love with him, that it was all a lie: “I’ve wanted to laugh in your face

ever since I first met you. You’re old and you’re ugly and I’m sick of you!” The end of the diegetic performance is marked by a change of register: from restrained expressions and gentle smiles to wild, exaggerated gesticulations. In Spanish cinema, Berta (Elena Varzi), in *The Eyes Leave a Trace* (*Los ojos dejan huellas*, José Luís Sáenz de Heredia, 1952) undergoes a similar transformation at the moment she reveals that she has only been acting. In this case, the diegetic performance has involved pretending to be in love with Jordán (Raf Vallone) in order to find proof that he killed her husband. In the final part of the film, when she wants to get him to confess, she offers a masterful performance, pretending to read aloud a letter that her husband supposedly wrote on the day he was murdered. Her convincing act, ranging in tone from complete restraint to extreme aggravation, traps the killer into confessing his crime. It is then that she will reveal to him that the “letter” was in fact a blank sheet of paper, and that it had all been merely an act to get him to confess. And here is where the absolute truth comes out: she admits to him that all this time he has disgusted her. “I would even have married you just to keep you nearby [...]. But thankfully, God didn’t want me to die of disgust.” With their respective confessions, both Kitty (Bennett) and Elena (Varzi) admit to their diegetic performances, and in so doing, abandon them. Now they can speak the truth. And also in both cases, the revelation of their performances and of the fact that they don’t love the men they have deceived leads to their deaths at the hands of those same men: one with an ice-pick, the other with a shotgun.

### **SOCIAL PERFORMANCE: FEMININITY AS A CONSTRUCTION**

With respect to the third category of performance proposed by Peberdy, the author argues that in performing their roles, actors and actresses in American *film noir* act out their respective genders





Figure 5. Exaggerated performativity: Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946) and Laya Raki in *Closed Exit* (Camino cortado, Ignacio F. Iquino, 1955)

as a performance in itself, based on the notion of performativity posited by Judith Butler (1990). Femininity or masculinity “is not a choice but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation and punishment” (Butler, 1993: 232). There is thus an “anatomical theatre” that our bodies perform every day; gender is “performed” to a point where that self-conscious performance can turn into parody, fully exposing the performativity of gender. The fact that these representations are commonplace in *film noir*, whose storylines invariably revolve around deceit and disguise, offers the *femme fatale* a particularly fertile territory to explore this exaggeration of gestures.

Rita Hayworth’s performance in *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946) offers a paradigmatic case of “over-representation” (Doane, 1991) when the title character appears for the first time on screen with a hyper-feminine demeanour, shaking her long mane of hair and showing off her body with an exaggeratedly seductive attitude. This physical

over-presence is very obviously performative. In Spanish crime films, a clear example of this strategy is the character of Cecilia, played by Laya Raki in *Closed Exit* (Camino cortado, Ignacio F. Iquino, 1956). Dancing on a stage in her first appearance in the film, she swings her arms around in constant, wide movements. Her hair also plays a part in the spectacle, as with her hands on her hips, she starts swirls it around wildly. At the end of her number, she holds her hair in her hands and with a brusque movement she covers her face completely with it (Figure 5). This kind of social performance through the movement of the actress’s hair can also be found in the character of María del Valle (Inés) in the film *Buenviaje, Pablo* [Bon Voyage, Pablo] (Ignacio F. Iquino, 1959), who even explains her abandonment of the man trying to woo her with a brusque movement that lifts her hair off her shoulders while she declares: “It’s because I’m a *femme fatale*.”

The use of clothing can also help reinforce this performativity. Just as *Gilda* asks her husband to



Figure 6. Rita Cadillac's imitation of Gilda as Hilda in *The Unsatisfied* (*Juventud a la intemperie*, Ignacio F. Iquino, 1961)

fasten and undo her clothes because she is no good with zips, the Spanish *femme fatale* Silvia (Rosita Fornés) in *Palmer ha muerto* asks a man to do up her dress. Similarly, while watching a play with her former lover in *Black Crown*, Mara (María Félix) lowers her shawl to reveal her shoulders. The body is thus made visible as a spectacle, emphasised by the tight dresses that accentuate the female figure, which becomes not so much an object of desire as a hyperbolic theatrical representation of a femininity pushed to the point of implausibility. This destabilises the sexed subject, viewed as exaggerated and even as a parody of itself.

Mary Ann Doane (1991) identifies another key moment of over-representation in the legendary final "striptease" in *Gilda*, where the title character dances around the stage with wild arm and leg movements and swaying hips. She appeals directly to the audience with a big smile on her face constantly while she sings. The number culminates with her removing her gloves and necklace. In Spanish cinema, a direct reference to this over-representation in *Gilda* is offered in *The Unsatisfied*: Rita Cadillac plays Hilda, a *femme fatale* who chooses to go out with a man much older

than her for financial reasons, who is shown swaying her hips down the hallway of her house. Her performance culminates with a dance in which she takes off her necklace, again in the form of a striptease. From her initial position leaning on the piano she continues her dance around the stage, touching her hair just as Hayworth does, trying to seduce her lover directly, singing into his ear and sitting on his lap. At this point it becomes clear that the resemblance between the two names is no accident: the influence of the American *femme fatale* on Hilda is crystal clear (Figure 6).

With their performative exaggerations, Laya Raki, María del Valle, María Félix and Rosita Fornés all demonstrate Butler's (1990) argument that

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gender is the dynamic site where the naturalisation of the feminine is displaced, deconstructed or parodied. Obviously, the Franco regime never allowed the foundations of the polarity between masculinity and femininity to be shaken. But the extreme exaggeration of the behaviour of the *femme fatale* implicitly undermined the binary ideology. It was all a performance, a mask, and therefore an attack on the idealised essentialism of the female gender. Peberdy's concept of social performance thus combines a series of strategies outlined previously in the other two categories and projects them onto the public sphere. For this scholar, "it is the combination and interaction of the three types that generic specificity emerges" (Peberdy, 2013: 332). And it is precisely in the combination of these three categories of performance that we find the clearest similarity between the performative model of the Spanish *femme fatale* and that of its American counterpart: a screen performance that shifts between the extremes of restraint and expressive gestures: a diegetic performance that oscillates between concealment and disguise; and a social performance that exposes the female gender as a construction based on over-representation.

## CONCLUSIONS

The actresses who portrayed the *femme fatale* in Spanish films were clearly inspired and influenced by the acting style of American actresses, on three levels. From a narrative and iconographic perspective there may be variables that distinguish Spanish crime films from Hollywood *film noir*, but the performances examined in this article are unmistakably mimetic of American models. Just as the Hollywood *film noir* genre promoted the performative excesses of their *femmes fatales*, Spanish cinema established a niche for the exploration of an active and aggressive femininity in opposition to the modesty expected of women in the Franco era. Despite the characterisa-

tion of the *femme fatale* archetype as negative by means of her ultimate fall or punishment and a moralising dialogue, female spectators could feel a certain subversive fascination for this figure in direct opposition to the "Angel of the House", the housewife and mother at the service of the nation and the patriarch. The *femme fatale* exhibited a femininity distinct from the model that organisations like Sección Femenina (the women's branch of the Francoist Falange) sought to construct and assert as the only possible valid option for women. In this sense, Spanish actresses' imitation of the acting styles of Hollywood stars helped to evade the suspicions of the censors, given that it was an archetype based on the Hollywood imaginary and not the Spanish reality.

The different expressions described here in the embodiment of the Spanish *femme fatale*—from the cool, dispassionate gestures to facial and body movements evocative of pretence and theatrical hyper-femininity—demonstrate that the crime genre allowed for the transgression of norms of femininity: a woman could be depicted on screen as active, independent, seductive and, if necessary, wily and deceitful, with the ability to question—or parody—her own gender. Whether they were Spanish or international actresses, they performed with actors associated with the Franco regime, generally portrayed Spanish characters, and existed in a local and therefore familiar context. In this sense, they introduced into the fiction films of the Franco era a kind of behaviour that the film press of the regime would only have wanted to see in foreign films. With their mimetic performances, these *Other* women of the Franco era constructed an *Other* reality, which invited their female spectators to identify with them as intelligent, crafty and spectacular *femmes fatales*. ■

## NOTES

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- 1 In her analysis of the (very limited) presence of vamps in the magazine *Primer Plano* during the Franco years, Evelyne Coutel (2016) finds certain "cracks" in the official discourse, in which a few actresses subtly vindicate their on-screen treachery in interviews. However, most articles attempt to demonstrate the view of these characters as abhorrent and "un-Spanish".
- 2 It is important to note that there are subtle differences between the thriller, the crime film, the police film and *film noir*, although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. The reason for the use of the term "crime film" here is the same one given by Ramon Espelt (1998: 10) in his study of crime fiction in Barcelona: "to adopt a broad, inclusive criterion that encompasses the largest number of films that have explored contemporary crime and the tension between the existence of conflicting forces on either side of the (often disputable) limits of law and order today" (Original version: "Seguir un criteri ampli, inclúsiu i que englobés el màxim nombre de films que tinguessin en la seva temàtica el fet delictiu contemporani i la tensió que es deriva de l'existència de forces enfrontades a un i altre cantó de la frontera (moltes vegades discutible) de la llei i l'ordre vigents" [author's translation]).
- 3 The "good girl" is equivalent to what Place (1978) calls the "nurturing woman": a good-natured domestic archetype and a model of angelical conduct, in opposition to all the devious qualities of the *femme fatale*.

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## THE INFLUENCE OF AMERICAN CINEMA ON THE PERFORMANCE OF THE FEMME FATALE IN SPANISH CRIME FILMS OF THE 1950S

### Abstract

The archetype of the *femme fatale*, despite being repudiated by society in the Franco era, was imported into Spanish crime films of the 1950s from American *film noir*. With a methodology drawing from star studies and the analysis of acting approaches in relation to film genres, this study aims to demonstrate the influence of Hollywood on the performances of Spanish *femme fatales*. Based on the categorisation of performances proposed by Donna Peberdy (2013), this influence is identified on three different levels: screen performance, diegetic performance and social performance.

### Key words

*Femme fatale*; Francoism; Spanish cinema; *Film noir*; Crime films; Star studies.

### Author

Nuria Cancela is a predoctoral researcher with the Department of Communication at Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF). She holds a degree in audiovisual media from Universidade de Santiago de Compostela and a master's in contemporary film and audiovisual studies from UPF. She is currently working on her doctoral thesis on the archetype of the *femme fatale* in Spanish cinema, with the support of a doctoral grant from the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (FPU 19/02441). Contact: nuria.cancela@upf.edu.

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## INFLUENCIA DEL CINE NORTEAMERICANO EN LA PERFORMANCE DE LA FEMME FATALE DEL CINE CRIMINAL ESPAÑOL DE LOS AÑOS CINCUENTA

### Resumen

El arquetipo de la *femme fatale*, pese a ser repudiado en la sociedad franquista, se importa en la cinematografía criminal española de los cincuenta desde el *film noir* norteamericano. Mediante la metodología de los *star studies* y el análisis de la actuación en relación con el sistema de géneros cinematográfico, este estudio pretende demostrar la influencia hollywoodiense en la *performance* de las *femme fatale* del cine español. Siguiendo la categorización de Donna Peberdy (2013), la influencia se observa de manera constante en los tres tipos de interpretación que propone la autora: la *screen performance* –interpretación en pantalla–, la *diegetic performance* –interpretación diegética– y la *social performance* –interpretación social–.

### Palabras clave

Mujer fatal; franquismo; cine español; cine negro; cine criminal; *star studies*.

### Autora

Nuria Cancela (Santiago de Compostela, 1997) es investigadora predoctoral en formación en el Departament de Comunicació de la Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Graduada en Comunicació Audiovisual (USC) y titulada en el Máster Universitario de Estudios de Cine y Audiovisual Contemporáneo (UPF). Actualmente realiza su tesis doctoral sobre el arquetipo de la *femme fatale* en la cinematografía española, amparada por el programa de Formación del Profesorado Universitario del Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades (FPU 19/02441). Contacto: nuria.cancela@upf.edu.

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