Femme noir: a subcategory of neo noir film
Certificate of Original Authorship

I, Louise Alston, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Doctorate of Creative Arts in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the exegesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution. This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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This thesis is dedicated to my daughter Kathleen, who joined in half way through.
Format

This thesis is composed of two parts:

Part one is my creative project. It is an adaptation of Frank Wedekind’s Lulu plays in the form of a contemporary neo noir screenplay.

Part two is my exegesis in which I answer my thesis question. I do this by acknowledging literature in the area of thought around my thesis question, exploring case studies and discussing my creative process.
Abstract

This study identifies a new subcategory of film noir, the femme noir. Traditional film noir films use gendered binaries, male gaze and scopophilic treatment of the female characters to limit and fragment women characters. This dynamic is most obvious in the binary between the ‘looking’ male protagonist and the ‘looked at’ femme fatale. This binary traps female characters in positions that have limited agency and scope within film narrative. Gendered binaries are a phallic pleasurable expectation and a way in which film noir recreates patriarchy.

The film noir film narrative is traditionally the enactment and expulsion of male sexual anxiety on screen. The femme fatale character typically personifies this male sexual anxiety. The film noir film story tends to follow the male protagonist and his journey to uncover a mystery surrounding the femme fatale. By the end of the film, the femme fatale is revealed, punished or rehabilitated according the will of the male protagonist. By the end of the film noir film, patriarchal status quo has returned. However, I propose that when the protagonist in a film noir film is a woman, the traditional gendered binary of film noir films is undermined.

In the subsection of film noir films I identify as femme noir, a ‘looking’ female protagonist meets the gaze of the femme fatale. She recognises not a binary opposite, but a dark sister, an abject version of herself. This study proposes that the dynamic between a woman protagonist and a femme fatale is that of a reflection. By the end of a femme noir narrative, the femme fatale is not uncovered and expelled, instead her essence is absorbed by the female protagonist.

I propose that the femme noir narrative is about the female protagonist’s journey to accept and absorb the essence of her abject reflection. The two woman characters together create a type of wholeness that resists the limitations and fragmentations of traditional film noir women. This study will
suggest that in femme noir films, feminist meaning can still be created within a traditionally sexist genre using it's familiar tropes and signs.
Table of Contents

Chapter 1 – Introduction 11
   The fragmented woman in film noir 12
   Film Noir and Neo Noir defined 13
   How can feminist creative practice contribute new meaning to film noir? 15
   Femme noir defined 16
   Examples of femme noir 17
   Creative project: 'Lulu' 18
   Exegesis structure 20

Chapter 2 – Film Noir and Neo Noir 24
   Film Noir 24
   Neo noir 28
   Femmes fatales 30
   Femmes fatales in this study 32
   Femme noir 33

Chapter 3 – Theoretical Approaches 39
   Liberal feminism 39
   Social context of the femme fatale 41
   Femmes fatales and powerful women 44
   Psychoanalytic approach 45
   Kristeva’s theory of the abject 49
   Queer theory 55
   The Uncanny 59
   The Uncanny in Femme Noir 62

Chapter 4 – Case Studies 64
   Single White Female 64
   In the Cut 76
   Black Swan 87
   Mulholland Drive 96

Chapter 5 – The Lulu Plays 108
   Historical context 110
   Jack the Ripper 110
   Events leading to WW1 in late-nineteenth-century Europe 111
   Women’s rights in Germany 111
   Contemporary context 113

Chapter 6 – Creative Process 115
Figures

Figure 1: Hedy Carlson (played by Jennifer Jason Leigh) and Allison Jones (played by Bridget Fonda) in Single White Female (1992) [screenshot from the film], p.17

Figure 2: Rita / Camilla Rhode (played by Laura Harring) and Betty / Diane Selwyn (played by Naomi Watts) at the club Silencio in Mulholland Drive (2001) [screenshot from the film], p.18

Figure 3: Frannie Avery (played by Meg Ryan) and Pauline (played by Jennifer Jason Leigh) in In the Cut (2003) [screenshot from the film], p.18

Figure 4: Lily (played by Mila Kunis) and Nina Sayers (played by Natalie Portman) on a transgressive night out in Black Swan (2010) [screenshot from the film], p.18

Figure 5: Nina Sayers / Swan Queen (played by Natalie Portman) sees an unfamiliar reflection in Black Swan (2010) [screenshot from the film], p.35

Figure 6: Allison Jones (played by Bridget Fonda) and Hedra Carlson (played by Jennifer Jason Leigh) see Allison's new earrings in the mirror in Single White Female (1992) [screenshot from the film], p.35

Figure 7: Betty / Diane Selwyn (played by Naomi Watts) and Rita / Camilla Rhodes (played by Laura Harring) both have blonde hair in the mirror in Mulholland Drive (2001) [screenshot from the film], p.35

Figure 8: Frannie Avery (played by Meg Ryan) answers questions while sitting in the back seat of a police car in In the Cut (2003) [screenshot from the film], p.35

Figure 9: Louise Brooks head shot depicting the bobbed-hair ‘flapper’ look, 1925 [mptvimages.com], p.43

Figure 10: ‘JULIAR…BOB BROWNS BITCH’ and ‘DITCH THE WITCH’ signs behind Bronwyn Bishop, Sophie Mirabella and Australian opposition leader Tony Abbott addressing a rally protesting against the Australian federal government’s carbon emissions trading scheme [Herald Sun March, 2011], p.44

Figure 11: Catherine Tramell (played by Sharon Stone) is questioned by police while wearing a short white dress in Basic Instinct (1992) [screenshot from film], p.48

Figure 12: DVD cover for The Hand that Rocks the Cradle depicts a happy marriage torn apart by a femme fatale (1992) [Buena Vista], p.51

Figure 13: Graph showing the Masahiros Mori’s ‘Uncanny Valley’ [Mori 2012 (1978)], p.62

Figure 14: Alex Forrest (played by Glenn Close) shot in the heart, in Fatal Attraction (1987) [screenshot from the film], p.68

Figure 15: Allison Jones (played by Bridget Fonda) knows Hedra Carlson (played by Jennifer Jason Leigh) has killed her ex-fiancé in Single White Female (1992) [screenshot from the film], p.73

Figure 16: Allison Jones (played by Bridget Fonda) and Hedra Carlson (played by Jennifer Jason Leigh) merged into one woman in the final shot of the film Single White Female (1992) [screenshot from the film], p.76

Figure 17 Frannie Ayers (played by Meg Ryan) and Pauline (played by Jennifer Jason Leigh) walk arm in arm in lower Manhattan in In the Cut (Campion 2003) [screenshot from the film], p.77
Figure 18: Charlotte York (played by Kristin Davis), Carrie Bradshaw (played by Sarah Jessica Parker), Miranda Hobbes (played by Cynthia Nixon) and Samantha Jones (played by Kim Cattrall) walk arm in arm in Manhattan in *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) [HBO publicity photo], p.81

Figure 19: Pauline (played by Jennifer Jason Leigh) speaks to Frannie Avery (played by Meg Ryan) reflected in the mirror in *In the Cut* (2003) [screenshot from the film], p.82

Figure 20: Pauline (played by Jennifer Jason Leigh) and Frannie Avery (played by Meg Ryan) dance next to the mirror and talk about their father’s romantic history in *In the Cut* (2003) [screenshot from the film]. P.82

Figure 21: Nina Sayers / Swan Queen (played by Natalie Portman) becomes animalistic during her performance in *Black Swan* (2010) [screenshot from the film], p.93

Figure 22: Nina Sayers (played by Natalie Portman) examines her shoulder for signs of an injury that might be imagined in *Black Swan* (2010) [screenshot from the film], p.93

Figure 23: Nina Sayers / White Swan (played by Natalie Portman) leans over her Black Swan corpse in *Black Swan* (2010) [screenshot from the film], p.94

Figure 24: Rita / Camilla Rhodes (played by Laura Elena Harring) notices a poster of Rita Hayworth in the role of Gilda reflected in her mirror in *Mulholland Drive* (2001) [screenshot from the film], p.99

Figure 25: Rita / Camilla Rhodes (played by Laura Elena Harring) and Betty / Diane Selwyn (played by Naomi Watts) discover a blue box in *Mulholland Drive* (2001) [screenshot from the film], p.102

Figure 26: Mary Jane Kelly murder scene. Source: City of London police archives, (photographer unknown), p 111

Figure 27: Donald Trump, third wife Melania and their son Barron in Trump Tower, New York [Getty Images], p.114