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Doctorate in Creative Arts

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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 to 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 its familiar tropes and signs.

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