

“WHAT’S IN A NAME?” CONSTRUCTION OF
FEMALE IMAGES IN FILM *NOIR*
THE CASE OF FRITZ LANG’S *THE BLUE GARDENIA*



Isabel Fraile Murlanch
Universidad de Zaragoza

The *femme fatale* of film *noir*, subversive and independent as she appears to be, may be regarded as a male construct, a product of male anxieties and fears. This paper explores the ways in which the imposition of a name, or a nickname on a woman can be a relevant element in such processes of construction. The analysis then focuses on a particular film, Fritz Lang’s *The Blue Gardenia* (1953), and suggests that the main means used by patriarchy in order to keep the female protagonist under control, that is, the male gaze and the male use of names, are closely knitted together. The nickname by which she is known may be considered an excuse for men to make her into the object of both the narcissistic and the fetishistic gaze (Laura Mulvey’s terminology). The paper ends by suggesting that naming in *noir* is the vehicle through which men construct their own subjectivity on a safe patriarchal basis, while reducing women to silent objects.

Feminist criticism has consistently argued that the dominant literary images of women are not truthful, accurate reflections of real women: they are but projections of male fantasies (Moi 1987, 57). This is also true, of course, of the images of femaleness we are offered in cinema: the prototypes of women we find in a film may be regarded, at bottom, as a product of male desires and anxieties. Women in cinema are fictional in a double sense: not only are they cinematic illusions, but also creatures of the imagination or the unconscious drives of their male counterparts. Not even the most independent, strong, powerful woman of cinema, the *femme fatale* of film *noir*, and her comic sister, the protagonist of screwball comedy, escape the process of scrutiny and construction to which they are subjected by men. Thus, when Jeff Bailey says, in *Out of the Past* (1947), referring to Kathie: “There was something about her that got me. A kind of magic or whatever”, he is constructing her as the mysterious, beautiful, dreamlike woman we are so often presented with in the Western tradition. The same can be said of the following remark by Johnnie in *The Blue Dahlia* (1946): “Every guy’s seen you before... somewhere. The trick is to find you”, or of the attitude of the naive male protagonist of *The Lady Eve* (1941) in the following short dialogue: “Don’t you know it is dangerous to trust people you don’t know very well?” “But I know you very well”. “No, I mean people you haven’t known very long”. “I’ve known you a long time, in a way”. These remarks by male protagonists have a common denominator: they all betray a tendency on the part of men to identify the women they love with incarnations of “the eternal feminine”, that male invention. These men show preconceptions as to what it is to be a woman, and project this fantasy of theirs on the flesh and blood of the women they meet, therefore depriving them of their individuality and constructing them according to their own wishes and fantasies. If, as Telotte has pointed out (1989, 216), “*noir* suggests how much we are bound by patterns not of our own design”, this is especially true of *noir* women: they are bound, not just by the demands of society in general, as their male counterparts are, but, more specifically, by

the men that demand that they live up to their ideals of femininity or their own dreams of transgression.

Some *noir* women will indeed revolt against the processes of construction whose object they are: Kathie will complain, in *Out of the Past*: “I never told you I was anything but what I am”, revealing the strong disparity between “the real Kathie” and the one who lives merely in Jeff’s dreams. But, on some other occasions, what we find is an even more daring fantasy: not only women as constructed by men, but as constructing themselves for the gaze of men, trying to become the right character for a story men have written for them. Jones has pointed out (1985, 83) that “woman can enter into the symbolic life of the unconscious only to the extent that she internalizes male desire, that is, to the extent that she imagines herself as men imagine her”. This statement is also put in practice by women in screwball comedy (“I think I’m going to be exactly the way he thinks I am. The way he’d like me to be”. *The Lady Eve*) and in *noir* films: when Kitty, in Fritz Lang’s *Scarlet Street* (1945), agrees to entitle “Self-Portrait” the picture of herself painted by Chris, she is accepting to imagine herself as men do, she is identifying with an image of her own femaleness which is but a construction created by a man. An even more telling example is to be found in another film by the same director, *The Blue Gardenia* (1953): when Casey Mayo, the journalist, is trying to solve the murder of Harry Prebble, several women phone him and each of them tries to convince him that she *is* the murderess: they are trying to live up to a male fantasy of transgression, but they are denied this possibility. One of these women, presented as hysterical, is particularly remarkable: she tells Mayo that “I killed Harry Prebble because I loved him. I loved him with a passion that was stronger than the two of us”. She tries to present herself as the prototype of the dangerous, but irresistibly attractive, sexual woman. Lying on her sofa, smoking a cigarette, trying to appear sensual and passionate, she is however a very poor version of the *femme fatale*, and, like Cinderella’s wicked sisters, she is rejected because her feet are too big. Her attempt at imagining herself as men would is a complete failure: she is forbidden, therefore, the entrance into “the symbolic life of the unconscious”.

It can be noticed, now, that the construction of women by men seems to be a nagging concern in Lang’s films: it appears in very clear ways in *The Woman in the Window* (1944), and, as said, in *Scarlet Street* and *The Blue Gardenia*. It is on this last film that I would like to concentrate. As Deborah Thomas has noticed (1992, 60), *The Blue Gardenia* “fairly openly foregrounds the way in which female stereotypes are matters of construction rather than nature”. E. Ann Kaplan (1980, 89) has also paid attention to this aspect of the film, and has suggested that Norah is a fictional woman created by men, and that, “while the male discourse tries to define her as a *femme fatale*, we see rather that she is a victim of male strategies to ensnare her for something she did not do”.¹ The film makes it clear in many ways that men have clear preconceptions about what women are like. The very fact that Mayo tries to ensnare the murderess by means of so clumsy a device as writing her a letter is significant. Women are supposed to be particularly apt to be taken in by the magic of images, as Mary Ann Doanne has argued in *The Desire to Desire* (1987, 2). I would like to argue that they are also supposed to be particularly apt to be deceived by the magic of words: had Casey Mayo been dealing with a murderer instead of a murderess, he would never have thought of the trick of the sweet, falsely affectionate, treacherous letter. But women in *The Blue Gardenia* are constructed not only as particularly responsive to (and easily gulled by) the power of language: they are also constructed, in a variety of ways, by

¹ This discrepancy between the “real woman” and the ways in which she is constructed is also foregrounded by other *noir* films: on this basis, a parallelism can be established between, for example, Norah and the female protagonist of *Laura* (1944).

the male use of language. However, a discussion of all the ways in which women are constructed by means of language would fall outside the scope of this paper. I will therefore concentrate on the ways in which they are constructed by means of the names imposed on them, since, as A. Rich has noted (in Showalter 1985, 245), "the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative". I will first analyse briefly the ways in which naming is a relevant element in film *noir* in general terms, and then I will go on to explore its significance in Lang's film.

The extent to which naming can be relevant in *noir* has already been paid some attention to by P. Evans (1992, 169-70): "Chandler", he remarks, "seems obsessed by the revelation, or conversely the concealment, by characters of their own real names". This statement can be extended, I think, to *noir* in general, and has, as he goes on to argue, particular significance for gender construction. He produces examples from *Double Indemnity*, where "Neff's use of 'Baby' offers him a route to controlling through language this woman who poses so overwhelming, mature and sophisticated a threat", and from *The Blue Dhalia*, in which, he says, "the names motif is related to thematic questions about difficulties of communication through the fog of preconception and prejudice". These "questions about difficulties of communication" may be seen as bearing a direct relation to the question of sexual difference. We should remember that, when Johnny first presents himself to Joyce as Jimmy Moore, there is still no need for him to hide his real name: he is not on the run yet, nor is he trying to find out who murdered his wife. Neither is he, presumably, in a mood to enter the game of the fictitious name out of mere playfulness. What he is doing by concealing his real name is, it seems to me, to protect his masculine identity from the threat posed by the powerful sexual woman. We should remember that names may have a magic value attached to them and that, as we are informed in *The Golden Bough* (1989, 290), "the primitive man considers his name a vital part of himself, and therefore, takes good care of it". His name is, for him, "a definite part of his personality, just in the same way as his eyes or his teeth". It can be argued, then, that Johnny has unconsciously kept up this primitive belief in the magic value of his name and that he is protecting it from the dangerous probings of the *femme fatale*. He is preserving his name as a way of neutralizing the threat of castration: the strong, sexual, phallic woman, will have now, he believes, no power over him. At a point in the film, conversely, Joyce will also conceal her name from him in the following dialogue: "I don't know anything. I don't even know your name". "Johnny, you'll have to trust me. You'll have to trust me a lot". "Why? I haven't got the time to play games. Suppose you keep your secrets and I'll keep mine". Their attitudes towards each other's names are utterly different. As she has proved earlier on in the film, it does not make much difference to her whether he is Johnny or Jimmy: she is in love with him all the same. Johnny, on the contrary, is discomfited by her refusal to reveal her name, as his distrustful answer indicates. The question "what's in a name" does not make sense to a *noir* man: in his view, there is, undoubtedly, a great deal in any name. *Noir* men feel that each individual is defined by, and contained in, his or her name. Jeff in *Out of the Past* begins his confession to Ann with the following words: "The first thing I want to get off my chest is that my name isn't Bailey. It's Markham". His own name has for him the utmost importance, it "tells" him, and, in fact, his patterns of behaviour vary greatly according to the name he has chosen to bear at a given moment. Mike O'Hara in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948) attaches a similar degree of importance to his name: "It was clear now that I was chasing a married woman. But that wasn't the way I wanted to look at it. No! I, Michael O'Hara...", and he proceeds to proclaim a kind of declaration of his principles, as if implying that Michael O'Hara could never behave the wrong way. On several occasions in the film, he seems to cling to his name as if it were the guarantee for the preservation of his individuality and his personal safety.

This eagerness of men to protect their own names and to know those of other people can be related, I think, to the male way of viewing and interpreting the world that H. Cixous (in Moi 1987, 110-3) has called "the Realm of the Proper". According to her, men show an obsession with classification, systematization and hierarchization which is one more way to defend themselves from the threat of castration. I believe, with Toril Moi (1987, 160), that naming is to be seen as one of the clearest manifestations of this obsession with classification, and one of the most powerful means through which men try to impose coherence and order on the world around them, and very especially, I will be arguing, on the women around them: "To impose names", Moi says, "reveals a desire to regulate and organize reality according to well-defined categories". Men, then, feel the necessity to cling to categories, labels and names, and the absence of these creates unbearable confusion in the patriarchal system. This is clearly exemplified in *Mildred Pierce* (1945): at the beginning of the film, the representatives of the law are annoyed at the confusion surrounding her name: is she Mrs. Pierce?, is she Mrs. Beragon?: they cannot bear this ambiguity: she must define herself by choosing one of the names -which, it must be noted in passing, amounts to defining herself in relation to a man, and never in relation to herself solely. It can also be noticed that her attempts at independence crystallize in the several restaurants which proclaim, with their neon lights, that they belong to her and will only bear her name, Mildred. This is, of course, a tremendous threat for patriarchy, to whose rules she will be finally made to submit by attaching her identity to that of the "right" man, Pierce and not Beragon. In this sense, the film invalidates from the very title her hunger for independence: however hard she tries, she is, and will always be, Mildred Pierce. She calls herself, at the beginning of the film, Mildred Beragon, but patriarchy will not allow this unlawful, threatening attachment, which rings dangerously of corrupted matriarchy (Cook 1980, 71-5); in the same way, of course, patriarchy will belie her being simply "Mildred".

It seems, therefore, that the orthodox patriarchal male, as portrayed by film *noir*, feels threatened whenever he has to face a reality to which he cannot attach a tidy, clear label. Women, in turn, feel oppressed by this obsession which they understand as a limitation: they want to reach out for whatever is hidden behind such labels. This is, I would like to suggest, the reason why Debbie (*The Big Heat*, 1953) impatiently discards Bannion's description of his wife: she cannot bear what she calls "a police description"; she rejects the male anxiety to express experience by means of a few clear, tidy words. No matter how much all the Debbies of *noir* films complain about this attitude, men will always cling to the safety of classifying and naming, which endows them with a feeling of power, since, as Kramarae (in Moi 1987, 165) has argued, "those who have the power to name the world are in a position to influence reality". And it should be remembered that this power, according to the all-pervading biblical culture, was given by God to Adam, not Eve, and should therefore remain in the hands of man, not of woman.

To return to *The Blue Gardenia*, it may be useful to remember Woods' reflections on Lang's female characters: "Lang's feminine ideal ... points to a retrograde element in Lang's work" (in Jenkins 1981, 40). Langian women are never unproblematic; dealing with women proves a conflicting issue in most of his films, and this is the reason why, as Jenkins (1981, 40) has pointed out, "what tends to happen is that the very idea of the female is dealt with by various forms of displacement". One of the several mechanisms of displacement used by Lang is that in which the woman merely appears in the form of a memory: this would be the case in *The Blue Gardenia* if we were presented with the point of view of Norah's ex-boyfriend. Norah, however, refuses to be displaced as a memory, and struggles to provide us with her own point of view; she rebels against this secondary position allotted to most Langian women: this is one of the reasons why she must be

punished. But, although she is not displaced as a memory, she is displaced in a variety of ways of which, I would like to argue, naming is a crucial one. Men displace Norah, the "real person"; in the form of a name, "the Blue Gardenia", which is much easier to cope with.

When the forces of patriarchal order begin their investigation, the woman who murdered Harry Prebble is, for them, little more than a shadowy threat: she is perceived as something which cannot be grasped, which escapes scrutiny and analysis...., an obscure presence which cannot even be named. Finding a name for her is the first step of the process which will enable Mayo to find her out. Mayo is fascinated when he first hears her referred to as "the Blue Gardenia". He realises the full extent of the power implied in the process of naming: it is, as Gilbert and Gubar have noted (in Moi 1987, 57), the power traditionally associated with the (male) artist, with God: he may be said, in fact, to have created Norah, as I will be arguing. Naming her will also enable him to address her in the letter which will be the final key to finding her out. This is why his reaction on hearing the name "the Blue Gardenia" is one of ecstatic fascination: like Wally Fay in *Mildred Pierce* (like so many male characters in cinema, *noir* and otherwise), he is "fascinated by his own words", or, at any rate, by male words, by the male use of discourse.

The fact that Casey Mayo is a journalist is particularly relevant for my argument. As Jenkins has remarked (1981, 109), in Lang's films we are often presented with "dramatisations of the actual idea of discourse, the assertion of subject over object, meaning always, crudely, male over female". This is the reason why "the 'heroes' of several of Lang's later films are overt producers of discourse, whether journalist, writer, or news reporter". This is obviously the case in *The Blue Gardenia*: Mayo's social position as a journalist transforms him into the subject of discourse, and gives him the right to investigate Norah, the female object. Together with this figure of power, we usually encounter a similar one, that of the photographer, the man who, as Bellour has put it (1981, 28), "sees and seizes appearances behind the rectangular frame of his camera". Such a figure is also present in *The Blue Gardenia*: Sleepy, the photographer. I would like to suggest, however, that the two figures are blended in Mayo (in fact, Sleepy's active interventions in the film are very limited, and he is never seen in relation to Norah): he is the one who controls Norah by means of both the word and the look, and these two different types of power are expressed, as I shall try to show, in the very name "the Blue Gardenia".

In *A Poetics of Composition* (1973, 21), Upspensky has noted that "the adoption of one or another point of view in naming a person ... is directly conditioned by the attitude towards the person referred to". Significantly enough for my analysis, he adds that "this use of names to express attitudes is characteristic of journalistic writing". Mayo's attitude towards "the Blue Gardenia" is indeed an ambiguous one, as expressed in his remark: "I want to be the guy to nail her... , my girlfriend, the Blue Gardenia". This remark responds, in Jenkins' opinion, to the "dilemma of having to reconcile her as object of his desire with the fact that she comes to him as woman as potential threat, that is a murderess" (1981, 113). My view is somewhat different: these two facts, that she is the object of his desire, and that she appears to be a murderess, are not, I think, presented as a dilemma: they coexist in Mayo's mind, and he is not forced to choose, but, for most of the film, he can have it both ways. To him, she is desirable even as she is a murderess: all this is compressed in the name "the Blue Gardenia". When naming her, he is, as Mulvey (1989, 15) would phrase it, trying to "live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning".

In order to analyse the ways in which these conflicting meanings imposed on Norah, the silent woman, are already present in her very name, I will draw again on Mulvey's

theories. She argues (1989, 16-22) that woman, the object of the look as well as bearer of meaning, can offer man two types of scopophilic pleasure: that afforded by the fetishistic gaze and that produced by the sadistic gaze.

The fetishistic gaze allows man to control the threat of castration posed by the sexual woman by means of the overvaluation of the object, or, in Mulvey's words (1989, 21), "builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself" (1989, 21). All these elements of beauty and attractiveness needed by a man in order to fetishize an object are suggested in the very idea of a woman called "the Blue Gardenia". The name is indeed a lyrical, romantic one, which brings to our minds a beautiful, mysterious, improbably perfect woman: the very prototype of "the eternal feminine", the ideal invoked by poets and philosophers all through the history of Western culture. This ideal is the same Mayo worships, and its very unreality is underlined by Sleepy, who accuses him of "reading too many novels". We can very clearly see the gap between "the Blue Gardenia" Mayo dreams of, and Norah, the "real woman", as perceived by her flatmates. When they first meet, Mayo's gaze will be charged with this idealization which allows him to fetishize her in order to control the threat posed by the unnatural, phallic power she is supposed to possess. She is seen, then, as an ethereal being who can poetically vanish in the fog, and who is indeed "the wrong type" for Mayo's "little black book".¹

But there is much more in the name "the Blue Gardenia": it does not only suggest mystery and beauty, but also contains all the horror associated with the place where she supposedly committed her crime, the pub bearing the same name. Looked at from this angle, Norah's nickname gives Mayo a right to make her go through a process of sadistic investigation. A very clear exponent of this type of gaze is to be found in the scene in which she goes into Mayo's office: a long shot in which Norah appears under the bright sign of *The Chronicle*, in a clear symbolism that indicates that Mayo is positing her as the murderess, and therefore as a human page for the next edition of the newspaper. We are dealing with what Mourlet (1981, 16) has called "the Langian shot par excellence", "the one in which the executioner contemplates his victim, establishing him as an object, in a sort of implacable possession by remote control suggestive of the spider and the fly relationship". Norah is being thoroughly investigated so that the source of her phallic control can be found and taken away from her; in order to re-establish patriarchal order, she must be destroyed or rendered innocuous.

Once again, it should be pointed out that, if this last set of meanings was all Mayo meant by "the Blue Gardenia", some other less sophisticated name would have done well enough. But there are, as I have tried to show, two conflicting meanings which co exist in Mayo's mind. The film offers us several hints which point in this direction. Mayo's assistant, for example, asks him: "Mr. Mayo, how do you know she is beautiful?", to which he replies: "They always are". He is here implying that the woman he is looking for must be both beautiful and dangerous, must be an appropriate object for both the sadistic and the fetishistic gaze: no other name could contain both meanings as perfectly as "the Blue Gardenia" does. But the clearest example of these ambiguous desires on the part of Mayo is to be found in the following dialogue:

¹ We may also notice that he is not the only character we can blame with this excessive idealization of the opposite sex. Sally can also be charged with it: "I didn't like Prebble when he was alive", she says, "but now he's been murdered... That can give any man a certain aura of romanticism". Of course, her position is not quite the same as that of Mayo, since her desires, like those of any other woman in the film, are repressed, and she is therefore reduced to a waiting position. Yet it is worth noticing that in the confused -and confusing- *noir* world, both sexes misread one another.

Mayo- You know, I'm disappointed about your not being "the Blue Gardenia".

Norah- You are!

Mayo- Although it does comfort me, too. When I heard you on the phone, I made a mental picture of you. I was wrong.

Norah- What did you expect?

Mayo- Oh no, I won't tell you till I have got to know you better. But you've been a great surprise. One has only to see you with those tears drying on your cheek, and mustard on your nose.

From now on, and till the moment he finds out the truth, all that is left for him of "the Blue Gardenia" is the first element, the one which transforms her into an object for the fetishistic gaze: she still retains her beauty and her mystery (she will disappear in the fog in a few minutes), but she can no longer be constructed as a *femme fatale*. His first reaction is, far from being comforted as he claims later on, feeling disappointed. He loves her, yet he wishes she were the murderess, the "fascinating yet at the same time feared woman" (Krutnik, 1991, 63) who must be sadistically investigated. Norah is now a curious blend of "the eternal feminine" and a certain girl-next-door quality, as denounced by the mustard on her nose. Now she is not any longer the spider woman, but her opposite, the nurturing woman (Place 1980, 42-54), the redeemer who saves the male hero from the corrupted world he lives in. From this point of view, she is Mayo's redeemer rather than being redeemed by him: she will provide him with a situation of sexual normality (instead of his previous casual relations with women), within the bonds of a marriage sanctioned by patriarchal society. But the point at which sexual desire reaches its climax is, I think, the moment at which she is both the paradigm of feminine beauty and the incarnation of the female castrator- when she is "the Blue Gardenia" rather than simply Norah. The reluctance with which Mayo will now use that simple name, Norah, clearly reveals the extent to which he has been in love with a creature of his fantasy rather than with a real woman.

I have tried to analyse the ways in which Mayo, by naming Norah, by thinking of her as "the Blue Gardenia", constructs and creates her, transforms her into the mental picture he talks about. But there is still one more point I would like to make. Brecht said on one occasion (in Moi 1987, 160) that "when you name yourself, you always name another". The opposite is, I think, equally true: when Mayo names "the Blue Gardenia", he is naming himself, he is in search of his masculine identity no less than he is trying to provide Norah with an identity. As Krutnik (1991, 112) remarks, "the *noir* woman is problematic because of the conflicting and contradictory currents which she activates within the hero". She "serves as an articulation of ambivalent tendencies within masculine identity and desire". I have already discussed at some length the ways in which it is Mayo's own ambiguous desires that allow him to construct her as "the Blue Gardenia". This argument can still be carried a little further by suggesting that Mayo's search for his own identity has become an urgent question for him because he shows a tendency towards what Freud has called, in "A Special Type of Object Choice" (in Evans 1992, 170-1), the neurotic behaviour in love. The characteristics of such behaviour are as follows:

First, that the beloved must be attached to someone else ... so that there may be an injured third party. ... Second, that the woman in question should be in some way ... of 'bad repute' sexually, whose fidelity and reliability are open to some doubt. ... Third, fidelity to one love object is impossible. ... Fourth, that lovers of this type are characterised by a desire to 'rescue the woman they love'.

All of these characteristics may be regarded as applying to Mayo and to his relationship with Norah. It should be remembered, first of all, that, as he constructs her as "the Blue

Gardenia”, he entertains the (false) belief that she has been attached to Prebble..., a third party which has been more than injured. Secondly, it is clear enough from the opinions expressed by all the characters in the film that “the Blue Gardenia”’s “fidelity and reliability” are rather questionable, even if Norah’s are not. In the third place, Mayo’s “little black book” is eloquent: like every neurotic lover, he finds it difficult to attach himself to a single love object. Finally, the desire to “rescue” Norah is fully characteristic of Mayo during the latter part of the film. It can be argued, then, that Mayo can live out his obsessions by means of his own creation of “the Blue Gardenia”, and that he is finally cured of such obsessions when he is forced to identify his love object with Norah, and not with “the Blue Gardenia” any longer. It can be concluded, then, that Mayo’s act of creating and giving a name to “the Blue Gardenia” is also an act of naming himself, of trying to find out his “real” masculine identity. We can say, as Wilde does in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that “the sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself”. Therefore, Norah is regarded, not actually as a woman, as a human being in her own right, but rather (a fact repeatedly denounced by deconstruction in general, and by Derrida in particular) as “not-man”. She has been the passive battlefield on which two male fights have taken place: the fight for the definition of woman, and the fight for male self-definition. And Mayo has fought both battles, as I have tried to show, by means of what Upspensky (1973, 161-2) has called “stereotypic description”. It goes without saying that, in calling Norah “the Blue Gardenia”, Mayo (whether he means that she is a *femme fatale*, or the incarnation of the eternal feminine, or both) is using a stereotypic rather than a realistic description. Now, this attitude applies only, according to Upspensky, to minor characters: “They do not really exist in the narrative which forms the foreground. Accordingly, they are presented by means of devices belonging to the representation within a representation”. The name “the Blue Gardenia” accentuates, therefore, the fact that Norah is not allowed to exist as such, but rather as a male construct, and also stresses the fact that it is Mayo’s story, male interests, that the film is, after all, primarily concerned with. In this sense, we can agree with Krutnik (1991, 61) that *noir* addresses “the uncertainties and confusions of the postwar era in terms of the problems experienced by men”.

Are we to assume, then, that Norah is just an object constructed by both the gaze and the discourse of the male? After her initial attitude of rebellion, so brutally repressed, she certainly is. She accepts the position allotted to her by patriarchal society. As her behaviour clearly shows, she gets to believe she is actually “the Blue Gardenia”: when Homer asks her jokingly on the phone: “Is that... the Blue Gardenia?”, her attitude, scared and guilty at the same time, proves that she believes she *is* “the Blue Gardenia”; on another occasion, her enunciation of her complete name, “I, Norah Larkin of Bakerville...”, springs from a weak attempt to prove to herself that she still has got a name and an identity of her own to which she can cling. In order to belie the attempts of society to name her, she would have to grow to the size of such a strong heroine as Moll Flanders. “Moll”, G. Beer argues (1990, 75), “names everything but herself. The name “Moll Flanders” is, she insists, not her own. ... Moll has been named by society, but she insists at the outset that this is a fictional name and she keeps her own name secret”. Unlike Moll, Norah fully believes in the name society has attached to her and renounces her own. She accepts the male investigation which follows as a natural consequence of her “being” “the Blue Gardenia”, and she never returns the look except to look at another woman: Rose, the real murderess. Rose’s confession constitutes a climactic moment of the film, and it is particularly relevant in more than one sense. It is much more than the point at which the knot is untangled and truth found out. Another woman is allowed to give us, by means of a flashback, her point of view. Norah looks at her with horror in her eyes- yet this horror seems to me to be not

merely a product of her rejection of the murderer, but also, to a certain extent, of her identification with her. To begin with, their stories are very similar: stories of women abandoned by the men they love (and it can be noticed in passing that Norah's boyfriend abandons her for a woman whose name is also rich as a stereotypical description. The name "Angela" indicates that he has found the nurturing woman who saves him from the horrors of a male war). The dresses they wore the night Prebble was murdered were very similar, as well as their hairdo. Rose's voice when making her confession sounds at some points defiant, but her story reveals she is as scared and confused as Norah has been: "I had been wandering about all night. I had even forgotten to take my hat, my coat or my handbag. It began to rain. I was too confused to see anything..." Finally, at the crucial moment of her confession, we are shown the faces of both women in close-up, highlighting the physical similarities between them. I think, therefore, that Norah's gaze is one of identification: she is obliged to see the extent to which she is similar to the murderer. As Linda Williams (1984, 92) would put it, she is being made to identify with "the monster". Rose's story (it could also be noted here that not even their names are unlike: Casey Mayo has found the "flower" that, as he once puts it, he was looking for, although this one is not quite what he expected) is never explored by the text: she is simply offered as a scapegoat, although she seems to me to be one more victim of patriarchal society. Her story, however, serves to teach Norah the awful consequences of the retreat from patriarchy. After identifying with Rose, Norah will absolutely reject this part of her own personality, and she will be more completely submissive than ever. Her final posing as a "tough girl" for Mayo is mere attitudinising. She is affecting the behaviour of a *femme fatale*: "My final merit, I refuse you.../ I refuse putting from me the best I am./ Encompass worlds but never try to encompass me./ I crowd your noisiest talk by looking toward you". These lines from Whitman's *Song of Myself*, which seem to me a good summary of the *femme fatale* attitude, could perfectly apply to Phyllis in *Double Indemnity* (1944), or to Elsa in *The Lady from Shanghai*, but, put in Norah's mouth, they ring false. We are sure that she has already been reduced to a submissive position, and that her renunciation of her own identity will be soon made perfect by marriage, the ceremony in which, Nelly Furman says (1985, 76), "differences among individuals are seemingly dissolved under one name, the name of the father".

The story of "the Blue Gardenia" has, then, concluded "happily". But we should not forget that Mayo, who acts as "the voice of Truth" in the latter part of the film, has been, to a large extent, the author of "the Blue Gardenia"'s story, since, as has been shown, the woman who hides behind this name is his personal creation. It is he who transforms Norah into "the Blue Gardenia", and Norah, by accepting the role she is assigned, renounces her own identity. Instead of narrating her story, she is narrated by Mayo. She gives up the attempt at naming herself, and her position is relegated to that passivity which has traditionally been considered the "proper feminine attitude": "spoken more than speaking, enunciated more than enunciating..., no longer really an active subject of the enunciation" (Irigaray, in Moi 1983, 127). Her linguistic capacity has been taken over by Mayo, and, as seen, it is Mayo's problems rather than Norah's that find a channel for expression in the film. If, as Telotte has argued (1989, 222), *noir* suggests that "our best hope against the chaotic or the discontinuous (...) rests paradoxically in our ability to testify to it, to speak of its inevitable place in our individual and cultural lives", it should be concluded that, at least in the case of *The Blue Gardenia*, such hope exists for men but is denied women. If hope is to be found in the very speakability of one's problems, that hope will be forever out of the reach of Norah's hands. She has stopped being herself to turn into Mayo's creation, however much she follows Crystal's advice and plays "the tough girl" with the journalist. Displaced from herself, transformed into "the Blue Gardenia", she has renounced her own

point of view and her right to speak in her own voice. Having reached this point, we can only remember with Certeau that "to be spoken without knowing it is to be caught dead unaware; it is to proclaim death, believing all the time it is conquered; it is to bear witness to the opposite of what one affirms" (in Telotte 1989, 222).

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