

Too Exotic to Enchant? How the Femme Fatale was sent on Retreat

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Abstract

In their latest movies of Japanese adaptations, Spike Lee, Adam Wingard, and Rupert Sanders all display the *femme fatale* in the discourse of patriarchy and female empowerment. She is portrayed as a complex figure, entangled in power, desire, femininity, self-determination and deception. She is the downfall of the hero. Once dominating countless oeuvres in Japanese productions, the femme fatale disappeared in Japanese films from 1930s through the 1990s and did not return in contemporary cinema. I propose that the end of the femme-fatale scenario ultimately began in Japanese popular culture in that she is now transformed into a western figure in a foreign land where she fears to tread. This paper demonstrates how the types of the *modern girl* and the *meiji school girl* are present in manga originals and how western producers transform them into femme fatales with potent sexuality and destructive power. The productions under discussion include *Death Note*, *Ghost in the Shell* and *Oldboy*.

Keywords: Femme Fatale, Adaptation, Female Empowerment, Japanese Cinema
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Whilst over the past years an increasing awareness of gender stereotypes has been plaguing Hollywood, following the #MeToo campaign with famous actresses exposing harassment and sexual abuse, the film industry is making slow progress towards gender equality in movies – slow because the numbers are still showing a staggering absence of women in important positions in directing, writing and cinematography. At the same time, there is a record high number of female protagonists in the 100 highest-grossing films of 2019 (compare Broom, 2020, o.S.). The position of women in cinema is thus clearly in undergoing change. Linked with questions surrounding empowerment and victimization that have been evoked again over the past few years is the question of women’s sexuality, which seems almost inseparable from this broader context.

No other figure than the femme fatale gives a more vivid portrayal of women, sexuality and power in popular culture. She is one of the most resilient character types in her repeated portrayal in Hollywood. Because of her powerful role, she also informed a feminist understanding of contemporary cinematic art and thereby obtained a key role in the discourse of patriarchy and female empowerment. Because of her firmly defined representation, she speaks simultaneously to conservative anxiety and to feminist aspirations for influence.

The question that motivates this paper arose in a cross-cultural American and Japanese context. How is the femme fatale modified in transnational adaptations? Whilst research has been done on the incorporation of the figure of the femme fatale from US movies into Japanese media by Yoko Ima-Izumi, I will instead direct the gaze to how producers like Spike Lee or Rupert Sanders portray the femme fatale in their adaptations of Japanese movies.

From Noir to Modern Cross-genre Depictions: Development of the Femme Fatale

Although I will be discussing movies from the last ten years, the femme fatale figure is primarily associated with the noir movies of western cinema of the 1940s and 1950s, where the term originated. Hanson and O’Rawe (2010, p.2) even go so far as to state that the link between the femme and noir can be read in many ways as a tautological one: if a film has a femme fatale, it is a film noir, and in order to qualify as a noir, the femme is indispensable.

Noir became a prominent reference point for the femme fatale, who nevertheless resists a clear definition. Julie Grossmann (2009, p.22) suggests that the femme fatale is constructed around several characters who then became and defined the role. Some of the iconic movies that she names are *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) with Mary Astor, *Double Indemnity* (1944) with Barbara Stanwyck and *Out of the Past* (1947) with Jane Greer. The femme fatale in these movies relates to femininity, sexuality, danger and deceit. Yet, the figure underlies a flexibility that continues to make her suitable in a commercial setting, ranging from a theme in pop music of stars such as Rihanna or Britney Spears, to lingerie brands and beauty products (Demarchelier, 2009).

In the context of cinema, the femme fatale also saw a strong revival in the erotic neo-noir era of the 1980s and early 1990s of Hollywood. Later, her appearance can be traced across different genres, such as thriller, action and horror (Farrimond, 2017). More contemporary pieces with genre mixes, but still with a considerable portion of noir heritage, would be Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct* (1992), Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) or Scorsese's *Shutter Island* (2010). Movies such as Edel's *Body of Evidence* or de Palma's *Femme Fatale* (2002) combine the empowerment of the figure with commodified sexuality. Despite their flexibility and multiple influences, the ambivalence between these two characteristics is prominent. The femme fatale might therefore be understood, as suggested by Stacy Gillis, "not as an archetype, but as a constellation of tropes and characteristics emerging from concerns about women and power" (2005, p.84). By moving beyond noir, she transcends genre limits and can instead stand between several film genres (Neale, 2000, p.163), with an increasing number of movies working with subgenres, offshoots or genre mixes.

My understanding in the given context is that the femme fatale is marked by the parameters of potent sexuality, destructive power and exoticism, while her powers usually rely on eroticism and she becomes the downfall of the hero. Last but not least, she is experienced through and manifests herself by her Otherness.

A Byproduct of Westernization?

As the term of the *fatale* woman originated in western cinema, her exoticism becomes even more evident on a world stage. With regards to Japan and Japanese media, the influence of the silent movies of the 1920s becomes relevant. To promote the modernization of the country's cinema, American silents were intensely studied and actresses were introduced into Japanese film, whereas up to this point female roles had been represented by male actors in Japan, the *onnagata*, in Japanese Kabuki plays. While actresses have a longer presence on the Western stage, they represent a hard-won claim in Japan which allowed for another significant change (Turim, 2007, p.133). A further outcome was the depiction of "modern girls" informing a westernized representation of women in Japanese cinema and society. Actresses such as Greta Garbo or Marlene Dietrich, who were well reviewed, can be seen as role models for this type of figure that incorporated eroticism and otherness (Suzuki, 1992, p.403ff). Turim (2007, p. 135) calls the modern girl "an icon for the embrace of the West," but also "a figure of a symptomatic anxiety of influence" (p.138). In the late 1940s and 50s another wave of Americanization swept through Japan and brought the femme fatale to screen. One of the most famous examples for this phenomenon is Princess Wakasa in *Ugetsu Monogatari* (1953), who had the power to captivate men with her sexuality.

Apart from exceptions such as Wakasa, however, neither the "modern girls" (*moga*) nor the "meiji schoolgirl" (another type of figure discussed below) reached the status of the femme fatale. The "anxiety of influence" that Turim addresses indicates why the femme fatale figure was not completely rejected, but also not completely embraced. The "modern girl" and the "meiji schoolgirl" did not reach the potent sexuality, the destructive power and the exoticism of the western femme fatale. More recent movies of the 1980s and 90s seem to support this thought: while post-feminism and neo-noir sparked a revival of the femme fatale throughout the West, the same development cannot be perceived in Japanese cinema. As Yoko Ima-Izumi (1998,

p.128) notes, the “Japanese” femmes fatales” largely do not reach the potential to trigger a man’s doom. He underlines this by reference to several Japanese remakes of *Yotsuya Ghost Story*, with the latest version in the 1990s, or *One Summer with Aliens* from 1988. He also picks out the theme of Japanese remakes of Hollywood productions such as *Wuthering Heights* by Yoshishige Yoshida in 1988 (Ima-Izumi, 1998, p.138). All these movies have in common that the male protagonist is saved from the effects of the femme fatale, who usually appears as a ghost. Portraying her as an otherworldly creature and not a real person reduces her power while heightening her otherness. In a sense, the fatal women can be seen as too foreign to establish herself as a permanent figure in Japanese cinema.

This is further underlined by the figure of the “meiji schoolgirl” related to the Meiji period (1868-1912), upon whom many westernized female characters, quite often the same as the figure “modern girl” or the “taishou new woman” of the Taishou period (1912-1926) were based. “Westernized” is used in this context from far more than a cultural perspective. The type of the Meiji schoolgirl prevents a simple binary view of a “Western” or “Japanese” figure, especially as not all changes in the depiction of Japanese women in cinema can be seen as a result of Western influences. Yet, this character type distinguishes itself by appearance (Western-influenced hairstyles and dresses), behaviour (speech habits) and ways of thinking (relationship to the opposite sex) that is perceived as evoked by the West and is considered to be assimilationist towards the West. Her otherness thus is a notion produced by Western otherness itself. A historical backdrop to the appearance of the Meiji schoolgirl is the modernization of women’s education through sending girls to private mission schools. This initiative served the cultural and national progress in the late 19th century, with the aim of establishing parity between Japanese women and their Western counterparts. Nobuko Anan (2016) states in his research on contemporary Japanese women’s visual arts: “Due to early association with Western influences, female students tended to be seen not only as the educated ‘westernized’ women who advocated women’s rights, but also as those who could move freely between the Western and Japanese cultural spheres.” Thus, the schoolgirl became a recurring figure in media and a culturally hybrid femme fatale. She also heralds the departure from the character type of the beautiful woman, the “bijin” – a courtesan-like literary character that was popular before the modern era.

Retrieving the ‘Hidden’ Femme Fatale from Japanese Originals

As mentioned, researchers such as Yoko Ima-Izumi laid the groundwork for analysis of the incorporation of the femme fatale motif in Japanese film, and how it follows the pattern that she is either a ghost or an “unreal” woman of some other sort. As the story develops, she is either defeated or becomes a benevolent protector of the male protagonist. Yet, in my research on Japanese media and their transformation into US productions, I encountered the figures, or adapted versions, of the Meiji schoolgirl and the new woman in several pieces. These adaptations of manga or anime into US movies are more than derivative of the original. The phenomenon of adaptation suggest that the story is the core denominator that is transported across media and genre changes (Hutcheon, 2006, p.10). Yet, technical constraints of different media will obviously shift the focus to different parts of that story (Gaudreault & Marion, 1998, p.45). In transnational adaptations, place and language frequently change, which leads to further changes in the story. For Hollywood, Hutcheon (2006, p.147)

observes that transculturation is strongly connected to what she calls the Americanization of a work. Interestingly, what can be encountered now is a reintroduction of the femme fatale in Hollywood movies that originated in Japanese media. Films such as *Ghost in the Shell* with star actress Scarlett Johansson¹ show that the American film industry has become aware of the Japanese cult of manga and anime. Recent film adaptations of *Battle Angel Alita* and *Death Note*, with potentially further US productions of *Akira* and *Naruto*, underline this trend.

While it is not surprising to find adjustments in the narration of the US movies, some particularly remarkable changes in the character design are noticeable, which I call the rebirth of the femme fatale in the US version from “hidden” or hybrid femmes fatales in the Japanese template.

***Oldboy* – Creating a New Femme Fatale Character**

Looking at recent productions from the 2010s onwards, this figure can be found with varying prominence in *Oldboy* (2013), *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) and *Death Note* (2017). The first *Oldboy* movie by Korean producer Park Chan-wook in 2003 is often referred to as a benchmark in cinema for post-noir. The dark style of cinematography was picked up by Spike Lee’s reinterpretation of the manga in 2013, which is often understood as a direct remake of Park’s film. Due to Lee using narrative elements of the Korean version, many differences between the manga original of the 1990s by writer Garon Tsuchiya and Lee’s movie are created. In the manga, hero Shinichi Goto is kidnapped and locked up for a decade for unknown reasons. Upon his release, the story follows his mission to uncover the motive behind his imprisonment. Lee’s *Oldboy* is already orientated along the revenge plot that Park introduced in his twist of the story. Protagonist Joe meets his daughter once he is released but does not recognize her. As planned by the antagonist, he falls in love with her and she becomes his downfall. Tsuchiya instead presents restaurant employee Eri, who saves Goto when he has no place to stay. A first impression of her is that she is kind, naïve and positive. Her design follows the child theme that is a typical characteristic of female figures in Manga. The power relation between the two is further established by Goto sitting on a chair in Eri’s apartment while she is kneeling on the floor. While Goto uses Eri’s first name to address her, she calls him “Mister.” At the end of this first night’s encounter, Eri will offer Goto to spend the night with him. When the latter initially refuses, Eri begs him to sleep with her (Chapter 3, p.69).

¹ Choosing Scarlett Johansson as the main actress will be discussed in regards of the role of the femme fatale. Her role in the movie though caused a casting controversy with the media criticizing the production for “whitewashing”.

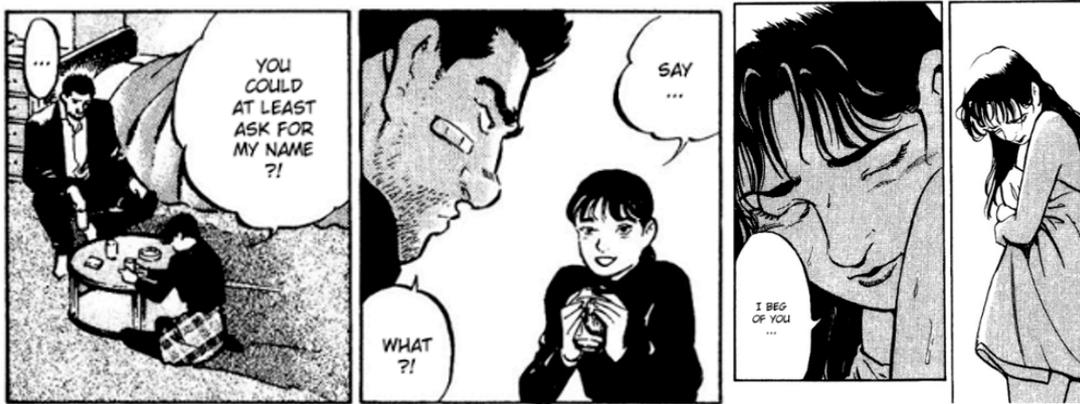


Fig. 1: First encounter between Eri and Goto (Chapter 3, p. 69)

With her request, Eri takes on an inferior role, which also gives the impression that she does not know how to deal with her own sexuality. This is resolved two pages later: Eri was a virgin (“I wanted to lose this sad virginity! [...] I am so happy that I have lost it to a nice guy like you!,” Chapter 3, p.74). Eri’s oblivion stretches further than sexuality into the realm of lacking empowerment. Goto does not involve her in his fight against the antagonist. When Eri becomes the villain’s target, he brings her into hiding, from which she is released upon the triumph of Goto at the end of the story. Dominance and submission, power and lack of power in the manga are clearly split between Goto and Eri.

Lee already gave the character of Eri a different touch by the incestuous relation that is created between Joe and his daughter Mia. Mia is a sexually far more potent and experienced character. This puts her into a position to seduce Joe and take on the role of an equal counterpart in the sexual relationship. In a motel with a read label, the camera puts her femininity in focus before Joe sleeps with her. Her character originally starts off in the role of the ‘healer’ and then changes into the role of the ‘love interest’ in a Hollywood manner. Due to her innocence, however, she never reaches the status of a fully developed femme fatale. Interestingly, next to her, the new figure Haeng-Bok is introduced in the US movie, who fits the profile of a *fatale* woman much better. Before the antagonist is even introduced, she is the one who captivates Joe. Before he loses his consciousness, she lures him by her dazingly sexual appearance. The sexual attraction is one-sided, however, as she uses her appearance only as a weapon. Once Joe joins her under her umbrella, he is doomed to two decades of imprisonment. As an assassin, she is a powerful female character whose charms cost Joe 20 years of his life.

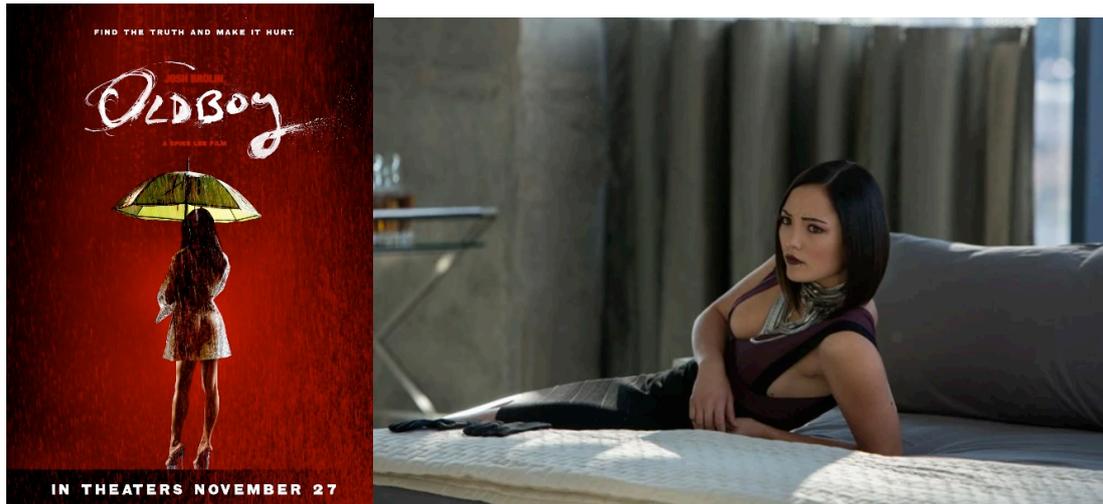


Fig. 2: Official poster and Haeng-Bok's appearance in the movie

Haeng-Bok thus gains a key role in the movie that does not have an equivalent in the Manga. This is underlined by her adorning official posters of the movie. The color scheme of red and black and the highly sexualized appearance that is also maintained in the movie clearly place her in the realm of the femme fatale. *Oldboy* thus serves as an example of not only altering the female main character, but also creating a new character to include elements of the femme fatale persona in the movie.

A Female Cyborg as a Blend of Femme Fatale and Classical Heroine

In *Ghost in the Shell*, Rupert Sanders introduces the femme fatale through his choice of actress for the main character Motoko. The original manga is heavy on text so as to analyze law enforcement and technology from a philosophical perspective. In the movie, this information is pushed into the background to give room to the visuals and the characters, which shifts the focus away from the narration and towards the main character and her design. Motoko, played by Scarlett Johansson, is a full cyborg. She fears that she may not even have a human consciousness. The search for the truth behind this question drives the plot. The trope of the female haunting “ghost,” as known from *Ugetsu Monogatari*, is used here in an adapted way. Her potentially former human past is incorporated by her “ghost” that lives in the cyborg body. With this, the integrity of body and mind is disrupted. For Sanders, this element serves to introduce the femme fatale through the actress Scarlett Johansson. The disembodiment of the actress's body can be traced through many of her previous roles. One of her oldest roles is in Brian De Palma's *The Black Dahlia* from 2006. In the role of Kay Lake, she is framed in a Marilyn Monroe-styled way that elevates her to the status of a sex symbol. The deceptive nature of the femme fatale is not only displayed in this movie, but also in Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013), in which Johansson portrays a seductive alien in human disguise. In *Her* (2013), the actress is a disembodied artificial intelligence and in *Lucy* (2014), she becomes a superhuman consciousness. In all these films, Johansson is thus playing the recurring role of the otherworldly femme fatale. It is a type of femme fatale that works in and through complicated depictions of the actress's body. Hence Johansson's former movies qualify her as a “perfect pick” for her role as Motoko. Not only does she become the classical hero of the story, but she also transports her trademark otherworldly femme fatale into the movie. For her role to work, the production relies on previous

knowledge of the audience about Scarlett Johansson's earlier roles. In *Ghost in the Shell*, her character is portrayed in nothing but a suit that makes her appear almost naked. Thus it is made clear that body and mind are neither a union nor inseparable. This othering is a trait of the archetypal femme fatale who has the potential to shift and be mutable. Johansson's costume, therefore, goes far beyond naked sex appeal. Her former roles allow the introduction of the femme fatale persona that is absent in the manga.

“Throw down your guns” – The Femme Fatale in the High School Scenario

Lastly, the *Death Note* movie features a dangerous femme fatale that is developed out of the figure of the schoolgirl. This type still radiates an unbroken attraction in manga that was introduced for the first time through the meiji schoolgirl and became a recurring theme in countless oeuvres. The plot of *Death Note* follows Light Yagami, who uses his brilliant mind to become a vigilante murderer when he takes ownership of a so-called Death Note that gives him the power to kill. At the end of the first volume of the manga, the female love interest Misa Amane is presented. With her blond hair and short clothes, she clearly features attributes of a successor type of the modern girl. Apart from this appearance, Misa is often displayed in school uniform, as she clearly still goes to high school.



Fig. 3: Collage of Misa's first depiction in Chapter 25

The backward blowing hair and active arms in the right panel suggest that she is moving purposefully through the crowd. Initially, by following her own plans, she causes problems for Light.



Initially, by following her own plans, she causes problems for Light. Inscriptions such as "Sexy Dynamite" in her room (see Chapter 29) underline that she is a dangerous figure in *Death Note*. Once she has met Light, though, **Fig. 4: Light and Misa**

she immediately falls for him (Chapter 30).

Slowly, Light uses her feelings to turn her into a tool for his purposes, while her love for Light becomes her own downfall. After his death, Misa can no longer handle the world and commits suicide a year later, her abandonment ultimately leading to self-

destruction. In the archetypal sense of the femme fatale, Misa starts off as a threat to Light who always gets himself into situations that impair or endanger him. At the same time, this is not a femme fatale in the classic sense as she is ‘tamed’ within the first chapter after her introduction and becomes Light’s minion.

In Adam Wingard’s movie, almost the opposite development can be observed. His female character Mia is also immediately portrayed as a femme fatale. She is even introduced before the audience has a chance to gaze at the protagonist for the first time when she is enthroned over her other cheerleading comrades. Appropriately, the camera takes a worm’s-eye view, which shows Mia looming against the background of a bright, yet cloudy sky. Her posture looks particularly tough due to the arms akimbo compared to the other two girls next to her. Right after her acrobatics, she takes the liberty to steal herself away to smoke a cigarette, which again is a very prominent marker for the femme fatale figure. This is underlined by the music of the song “Reckless” by the band “Australian Crawl” which asks the listeners “to throw away their gun.”



Fig. 5: Mia from a worm’s-eye view and with a cigarette (1:50 min)

Her act is closely watched by Light, who clearly admires and falls for her. Mia is not only very attractive, but she is also standing out compared to the other students in Light’s surrounding. In the course of the narration, Mia takes an antagonistic position. A first hint at this in the film is when Light says: “Do you think I’m crazy?” and Mia replies: “I don’t think you’re crazy enough. We could change the world” (25:50). Obviously, she is seeking power. By deceiving a love-struck Light, she almost succeeds in claiming the Death Note for herself and killing Light. Throughout most of the movie, she is secretly betraying him and works on his doom.

Mia relies on the Japanese new girl type as represented in Misa from the manga original, which is why she is placed in a high school setting. Starting off from this

character, Mia soon sets herself apart from the original template, however, by developing far more destructive traits. She uses her femininity against the protagonist, she emanates otherness compared to her surrounding, and she induces Light's downfall. Despite the story ending with her death, she puts Light into a position that critically exposes him to law enforcement and seals his defeat. Wingard thus manages to transform the hybrid femme fatale of the manga into a fully developed femme fatale modeled on a noir genre-mix.

In summary, while the presented contemporary mangas are a dead-end for the femme fatale, it is through the adaptations that she finds her way back into the story – either in the form of a new character, the actress herself, or the transformation of a harmless character into a femme fatale who emits potent sexuality, destructive power and an otherness that might be perceived as too foreign in the cinema of Japan.

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