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# ***I, ANNA* (2012) AND THE FEMME FATALE: NEO-NOIR AND REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE OLD AGE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Through textual analysis this paper explores neo-noir film *I, Anna* (Southcombe, 2012). This paper promotes the concept of the femme fatale in modern film noir as having much to offer women and ageing studies. Older women on screen have commonly been theorised within two opposing paradigms: ageing as decline, and ageing successfully. This paper argues that through a specific representation of the aged femme fatale body *I, Anna* offers a destabilisation of the common femme fatale stereotype. This contributes a more nuanced understanding of women and ageing on screen than the representations that are usually discussed in film and/or ageing studies. This paper also marks out this neo-noir British film as an interesting avenue from which to explore the representation of ageing women in film, as existing research has so far focussed on romantic comedy and bio-pic. This paper therefore seeks to add to the growing body of new work on female ageing and representations in the media.

## **KEYWORDS**

Women and Ageing; Neo-noir film; Femme fatale; Ageing Body; Stereotypes; Sexuality

## **Introduction**

This paper seeks to explore how far the neo-noir film *I, Anna* (2012) reconceptualises the femme fatale through the lens of age, and using the concept of cultural verisimilitude (Neale, 1981; Geraghty, 1991) examines how the film contributes to current debates on cultural ageing. It explores the representation of the body of the femme fatale in Barnaby Southcombe's adaptation of Elsa Lewin's best-selling novel (1983), and asks how far such representations work to destabilise or sustain common stereotypes of female ageing on screen, which are currently located within the paradigms of success (Rowe and Khan, 1987, 1997) or decline (Sandberg, 2013). As both paradigms of old age are informed by a variety of economic, biological, class-based and racial differences that become subsumed by the term 'old' (Cruikshank, 2003, pp. 2-8), this paper hopes to mark out this neo-noir British film as an avenue in which a more nuanced understanding of the representation of the older woman in film might be located.

As Phillip Lumby (2012) argues 'noir can be seen as a platform for exploring and challenging traditional perceptions of gender roles,' (p. 58). Or in other words, as

Molly Haskell (1974) suggests 'women have grounds for protest, and film is a rich field for the mining of female stereotypes,' (p. 30). The femme fatale of film noir is typically associated with youth and seductive feminine beauty (Kaplan, 1998; Hanson, 2007) but what happens to this iconic figure when interpreted through the lens of age and what does this re-working of the femme fatale tell us about contemporary discourses of ageing in relation to women?

This paper will start by offering a synopsis of *I, Anna*, establishing conventions of classic film noir as a basis from which to explore 'neo-noir' and the cinematic and narrative features of *I, Anna*. The concept of the femme fatale will then be analysed in relation to ageing. This paper will then explore the film in order to locate the ageing femme fatale as a site of epistemological trauma (Doane, 1991, p. 1); a representation of an older woman that works to unsettle common stereotypes of the ageing woman as protagonist on screen, and one which contributes to a (much needed) developing repertoire of available images of older women in the media.<sup>1</sup>

## Film Synopsis

Set against the typical film noir backdrop of a night-time urban space (London), *I, Anna* is the story of female protagonist (and femme fatale) Anna Welles (Charlotte Rampling), a divorcee who is reluctantly re-entering the dating world by attending her first 'singles mixer'. At the singles mixer, Anna is approached by George (Ralph Brown), a charismatic enough man who catches her eye at the bar. After sharing some drinks, Anna and George head back to his flat. The singles mixer becomes the catalyst for the dramatic elements of noir to come into play in the film – what is then recounted, through flashback, is a litany of deceit, murder and death.

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<sup>1</sup> I see this paper as sitting within a 'wave' of new scholarship on representations of ageing women in the media. For scholarship that embodies the 'crest' of the wave see Dolan, J. & Tincknell, E. eds. (2012) *Ageing Femininities: Troubling Representations*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing; Chivers, S. (2003) *From Old Woman to Older Women: Contemporary Culture and Women's Narratives*, Columbus: The Ohio State University Press; Jennings, Ros and Gardner, Abigail eds. (2012) *'Rock On': Women, Ageing and Popular Music*, Aldershot: Ashgate, November 2012. Similarly, this paper is a result of interactions with a series of inspiring papers delivered at WAM Summer Schools 2012 and 2013: Ulla Kriebner, 'Defeating the Nursing Home Spectre: Celebrations of Life in the Canadian Short Film *Rhonda's Party*,' Susan Liddy, 'Representations of mature, female sexuality in British and Irish film,' Claire Mortimer 'It Ain't Natural Her Not Having a Husband!': The Spinster in Post-War British Film Comedy'; and Maricel Oró Piqueras, 'The ageing woman in TV series *Brothers and Sisters*' represent a selection of emerging scholarship in this field.

The stereotypical noir detective (down-trodden, ineffectual, fellow divorcee and long-time insomniac) Bernie Reid (Gabriel Byrne) leads the investigation into George's murder. In true film noir style it is apparent from the outset that Anna was involved in George's death, though Bernie is the last to realise this.

Anna enters this noir world under the more confident pseudonym/persona of 'Allegra', though we know inherently that this protagonist is 'Anna,' due to the positioning of the film's opening titles before this scene. As the film progresses, we realise this act of identity deception results in buying Anna some much needed time during the murder investigation that she becomes embroiled in. This act of identity deception in itself also speaks to wider issues surrounding dating as an older woman. The film explores older female sexuality through the singles mixer encounter with George and then the relationship that develops with the Detective Bernie. She is, thus, represented as a sexual older woman, which works against the stereotype of the more usual asexual doting grandmother. It is therefore significant that on their first date Anna tells Bernie that she was "never any good with babies." This emphasises her position as 'other,' in relation to the traditional notions of older heterosexual women as (grand)mothers/caregivers/nurturers.

The film's closure reveals that Anna cannot remember the night George died because the memory of it has become entangled with an earlier trauma: leaving her baby granddaughter outside a telephone box, where she is hit and killed by a car. Anna does not die at the end of the film, as is often the ultimate punishment for the femme fatale figure in film noir, rather the film ends with Bernie pulling Anna back from the ledge of George's high-rise flat, as her traumatic memories of George's murder and her granddaughter's death return to her.

### **Classic Film Noir**

Historically, film noir is associated with a range of films produced in Hollywood in the 1940s and 50s. These films, generally directed by European émigrés, were influenced by the aesthetic markers of German Expressionist cinema which can be evidenced in films such as *Laura* (Preminger, 1944), *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944), *The Big Sleep* (Hawks, 1946) and *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950). It is this period in particular that is generally felt to have constituted the grand-era of film noir (Bould, 2005).

Classic film noir can be identified by both thematic and formal elements, such as chiaroscuro mise-en-scène, dramatic camera angles, temporal disturbance through flash-back, and is characterised by predominantly urban night time settings (Cowie, 1993; Nelmes, 2012; Cook, 1996; Cook, 2007; Kaplan, 1999). Film noir, particularly through the figure of the femme fatale, creates an important space for the representation of powerful female sexuality on screen. This is emphasised by Andrew Spicer's (2007) argument that 'typical noir male protagonists are weak, confused, unstable, and ineffectual, damaged men who suffer from a range of psychological neuroses and who are unable to resolve the problems they face' (p.47). As Kirk C. Hyde (2006) suggests, classic noir films are commonly structured around this troubled or ineffectual man and his male colleague or friend 'who provides support, hope and companionship' (p.12) in the wake of his encounters with the dangerous and powerful figure of the femme fatale.

Christine Gledhill (1998) suggests that the world of noir is one 'of action defined in male terms; the locales, the situations, iconography, violence are conventions connoting the male sphere' (p.28). Disrupting this masculine sphere, noir plots revolve around 'questions of female sexuality, and sexual relationships involving patterns of deception, destruction and unrecognised revelations rather than by deductions of criminal activity from a web of clues' (p.29). The femme fatale is a pivotal character in film noir, and has an iconic legacy that has translated into neo-noir in a number of ways which will be explored below.

### **The Femme fatale**

Mary Ann Doane (1991) identifies three 'types' of woman that can be broadly described as femme fatale, stereotypes of women made popular in a variety of formats culminating in the 'golden era' of film noir in the 40s and 50s. She suggests that there was first the 'vamp of the Scandinavian and American silent cinemas,' an early example might be the beautiful Theda Bara in the 1915 silent film *A Fool There Was* (Powell, 1915). Doane suggests another identifiable female character might be the diva of the Italian film, and of course, 'the femme fatale of film noir of the 1940s' (p.2) – though there are a number of fascinating choices, think of Rita Hayworth's Gilda in the film of the same name (Vidor, 1946), or Lauren Bacall's Vivian in *The Big Sleep*. Doane's 'types' of women have several things in common: a consciousness

of their sexuality, a tragic back-story or tragic/fated ending, greed, a destabilising power over the men in their lives, relationships that are ultimately destroyed or restored by love; and youth and beauty (Hanson, 2007).

Stylistically, noir femme fatales are characterised by curvaceous bodies, tight fitting clothing, smoky eye makeup, long flowing hairstyles, smoking (particularly with long cigarette holders) and in the post-classic colour film a penchant for red – think of the red dress and red lips of ‘The Customer’ in *Sin City* (Miller, 2005), or the red lipstick worn (and symbolically removed at the films closure) by Glenn Close as the Marquise Isabelle in *Dangerous Liaisons* (Frears, 1988). The significance of the colour red has been theorised as the ‘Red Dress Effect’ by Adam Pazda *et al* (2011). Pazda *et al* suggest that simply wearing the colour (it does not need to be tight fitting or exposing) incites a level of sexual awareness. When this reading of colour is used to examine film, we find it in noir as a device used to demarcate the femme fatales’ sexual liberalism (either positively or negatively depending on the cultural milieu in which the film was produced). The significance of dress, fashion and colour will therefore be explored below in relation to the older femme fatale found in *I, Anna*.

Helen Hanson (2007) suggests that the femme fatale might be defined as ‘sexually, and generically, transgressive: a female figure refusing to be defined by the socio-cultural norms of femininity, or contained by the male-addressed, generic operations of film noir narratives in which her fatality resulted in her ultimate destruction’ (p. XV). Thus the femme fatale seems to operate along the binary of the destroyer or ‘spider woman’ of film noir (Kaplan, 1998) – for example, Marilyn Monroe as Rose in *Niagara* (Hathaway, 1953), the wife who seduces and plans to murder her husband; or the victim/woman who is punished for her active sexuality, such as Joan Crawford’s Mildred Pierce in the film of the same name (Curtiz, 1945). This paper will extend these existing constructions of the femme fatale (as victim or spider woman) through the representation of the femme fatale in older age in *I, Anna*.

Kate Stables (1998) asserts that the neo-noirs that followed in the 1990s – such as *Disclosure* (Levinson, 1994), *The Last Seduction* (Dahl, 1994), and *Basic Instinct* (Verhoeven, 1992) – continued these themes of powerful female sexuality but more graphically and explicitly in line with the ‘proliferation of a sexual discourse which dominates postmodern media, both in images of sexuality and debate about its

import' (p.167). Doane (1991) suggests that 'the femme fatale is the figure of a certain discursive unease, a [site of] potential epistemological trauma' (p.i). Therefore the following exploration of the older femme fatale adds a crucial element to this discussion, especially when taken alongside E. Ann Kaplan's (1999) equation of female ageing and trauma.

As the epistemological and discursive unease of examining the representation of older women on screen is slowly being breached in academia, the lens of the older femme fatale provides a useful analytic tool for negotiating this struggle. As this paper will demonstrate, in reconfiguring the femme fatale as an older woman, *I, Anna* unsettles the commonly-understood stereotype of the young femme fatale, though the *function* of the character remains consistent. As Stables highlights, 'the postmodern film employs the fatale figure as a universal archetype [...] but most significantly as an anxiety pointer, a figure who processes and displays cultural concerns through popular film' (1998, p. 171). This paper will suggest that *I, Anna* reflects and critiques contemporary anxieties about the ageing female form through its appropriation of an older femme fatale and its representation of the female ageing body on screen.

Although *I, Anna* seems a long way removed from the black and white Hollywood pictures produced in the 1940s and 1950s, it retains many of the core features of classic film noir (except, critically, for the age of the female protagonist). In his study of film noir from the 1960s-1980s, Leighton Grist (1994) argues that the [neo-noir] 'genre provides a framework within which ideological and formal challenge can be both expressed and contained within familiar, commercially<sup>2</sup> acceptable boundaries' (p.270).

## Neo Noir

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Bould (2005) holds that a tension between 'low-key and high-concept, between film noir and block buster aesthetics' implicit in classic film noir became central to the development of the neo-noir genre (p. 95). Bould argues that for film noir (and especially neo-noir) there exists a 'knee-jerk preference for "realist" over "fantastic", "independent" over "studio", low-budget over big-budget, European over Hollywood filmmaking to be persuasive' which suggests the number of different 'modes through which film noir continues to evoke the absurd and impenetrable world of late capitalism' (p.114). This paper explores issues surrounding the representation of the ageing woman and, as such, Bould's argument interestingly reminds us of the critique of capitalism found in ageing studies, for instance, Dolan's (2010) suggestion that 'the regulation of the aging body is inextricably linked to the regulation of the state within capitalist logic' (p. 12).

Conceptually, neo-noir remains difficult to define. Noir films 'contain elements shared by still other films, causing the genre to flourish from multiple centres' and with the passage of time it 'took on fresh concerns [...] and exfoliated further, becoming fuzzier, harder to pin down' (Bould, 2005, p. 92).

In his reading of neo-noir films such as *Guncrazy* (Davis, 1992), *The Killing Time* (King, 1987) and *Jezebel's Kiss* (Keith, 1990), Alain Silver (1996) suggests there are a range of noir-inspired elements that have 'carried over' into more modern ventures. The use of flashback and voice over characteristic of classic noir continue to feature in many neo-noir films, economic devices which serve to 'create narrative layers' (p.335). Stylistically, the use of darkness and light through chiaroscuro and the benefit of isolated urban locations continue to feature in neo-noir films which, as Silver suggests 'permit a spare and stark visualisation' (p.336) reminiscent of classic film noir ventures such as *Border Incident* (Mann, 1949). Similarly, many low-medium budget neo-noir ventures retain the use of a small cast which 'allows production values to be maximised' (Silver, 1996, p.335). Crucially, neo-noir films retain the role of the femme fatale though, as this paper will demonstrate, the representation of this character has been modified to interact with modern cultural anxieties regarding age.

Jerold J. Abrams (2007) highlights 'the placing of social issues, like race, class, and gender, already latent in noir, at the forefront of dark cinema' (p.8) as a characteristic of noir that has carried over into neo-noir film. As Silver (1996) remarks, the noir genre has the ability to hold a mirror up to society in a way that other genres have been unable to do (p.338). As such, neo-noir films often present a critique of one aspect of society. Read from an ageing studies perspective, *I, Anna* seems to be holding up a mirror (literally – in the film – as well as figuratively) which invites us to re-examine our thoughts about older women.

### **Identifying Noir in *I, Anna***

Many of the elements of classic and more recent film noir feature in *I, Anna*. Stylistically, the film features markedly dark and moody scenery (see Image 1) with much of it filmed at night in urban London, a feature of classic film noir as noted



above. This modern colour film therefore works to echo the black and white, chiaroscuro visual style of film noir of the 1940s and 1950s.



(Image 1)

Plot devices such as the non-linear progression of its narrative and its use of flashback lend a distinctly noir feel to *I, Anna*. In this way, the film is reminiscent of classic film noir but also reminds the modern viewer of other contemporary ventures into neo-noir such as *Memento* (Nolan, 2000) and *Sin City* (Miller, 2005). The use of non-linear narrative in *I, Anna* is primarily achieved through flashback and memory sequences which has a critical impact on the representation of the older woman in this film, as discussed in more detail below.

In terms of the structure of relationships in the film, *I, Anna* echoes formulaic gendered relationships present in classic film noir as explored above. The relationship between Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) and Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson) in *Double Indemnity* is emulated in *I, Anna* as D.I. Kevin Franks (Eddie Marsan) fulfils the function of confidant and male companion to superior officer Bernie. Kevin Franks and Bernie's relationship is, in true noir style, disrupted by the arrival of the story's femme fatale, Anna.

Though many noir films centre on a male protagonist and femme fatale counterpart, *I, Anna* adheres to less-well established noir conventions by positioning the femme fatale as the main protagonist, as for example, in *Last Seduction* (Dahl, 1994). The disruption of the 'ways of looking' at the film that this creates, highlights the way that *I, Anna* can be seen to unsettle predominant representations of older women in (neo-noir) film – we *expect* Bernie to be the focus of the film with Anna as the peripheral counterpart. As Doane (1991) makes clear, 'what is particularly interesting about film noir for a feminist analysis [and, I argue, neo-noir] is the way in which the issue of knowledge and its possibility or impossibility is articulated with questions concerning femininity and visibility' (p.103). This paper explores the visibility of the ageing femme fatale body in *I, Anna*, and how we are invited to gaze at Anna's older body by exploring the femme fatale as it intersects with issues of display and age appropriacy.

### **Theorising Age**

It is wise to pause briefly in order to explore the concepts of 'age,' 'ageing,' and 'aged' as they are used in this paper, in order to both problematise these terms and to situate this work within wider academic discourses present within cultural gerontology and ageing studies. As Bill Bytheway suggests 'later life is now conceptualised in a confusing variety of ways' (2003, p.29). Older people are described in a number of ways: old, older, oldest, elderly, aged, and are often *classified* or categorised into three groups – young-old (65-74), old-old (74-84), and oldest-old (85+) (Garfein & Herzog, 1995).

The terminology used to describe these groups in themselves carry a culturally constructed set of assumptions, based around the ageing as success and ageing as decline paradigms. 'Young-old' invokes the positive image of 'youth' as opposed to the negative image of age as decline, in celebrating the continued ability and physicality of many members of this group. In a culture saturated with care home adverts, exposés and relentless political commentary on elderly care, 'oldest-old' or 'deep old age' (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1989) represents frailty, vulnerability and the medical, the antithesis to the activity of the 'young-old'. As Susan Pickard (2003) suggests oldest-old 'becomes tautologically synonymous with decline' (p. 2).

In terms of ontology, this paper similarly sits well with other 'second wave' ageing study scholars such as Josephine Dolan when she argues that 'old age can be seen as a discursive construction that is mapped onto particular bodies in a similar fashion to gender, sexuality, class, or race' (2010, p.2). This position enables the critique of the existing paradigms of ageing as decline/success, as it assumes that if age is a cultural construction then the categories of 'success' and 'decline' are culturally constructed around it. The depiction of the aged female body on screen presents a space from which to deconstruct these assumptions; a necessary task if we are to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the representation of older women on screen. It is from this feminist social constructivist position that *I, Anna* is read.

Similarly, this ontological underpinning works well with the feminist theoretical position from which this paper approaches the study of film. Feminist psychoanalysis provided the initial framework with which to interrogate the construction of the femme fatale in film noir (as in Doane, 1991, for example), though scholarship has now turned toward more narrative investigations of the cinematic content. As Julie Grossman (2009) suggests, such an approach to women on screen captures a more nuanced understanding of 'female stories and the social contexts presented in these films that are so central in generating their meaning and that often determine the fatalistic or traumatic tone of the films' (p. 2). By adopting a social constructivist position this paper aims to expand on existing readings of the older woman in film commonly obtained through feminist psychoanalysis, for example, the pioneering work of Kuhn (1994), Mulvey (1975) and Haskell (1974). Laura Mulvey's seminal work politicised discourses about the representation of women on screen, a clarion call to feminist film scholars to use the critique of film as a 'political weapon' with which to destabilise 'the paradox of phallocentrism' present within patriarchal models of film production (1975, p. 28). As with gender before it, the representation of the aged, especially the older woman, is becoming an increasingly politicised topic.<sup>3</sup> This paper therefore comes at a time when a more sensitive and graduated reading of the older woman on film (and in life) is demanded.

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<sup>3</sup> The Women, Ageing and Media group (WAM) alongside the European Network of Aging Studies (ENAS) are doing much to politicise issues raised in research about women and ageing. In October 2013 the 'Charter on Ageism and Sexism in the Media,' developed by the New Dynamics of Ageing Group in collaboration with WAM, Women in Journalism and the National Union of Journalists was launched in London. WAM in particular are encouraging research based activism based on their findings. Read the WAM Manifesto here: <http://insight.glos.ac.uk/researchmainpage/ResearchCentres/WAM/Pages/WAMManifesto.aspx>

## **How old is Anna?**

It is not until nearly the end of *I, Anna* that we are invited to work out how old the female protagonist actually is, when her tax record is brought up on a computer screen. As this shot pans across the computer screen the audience is invited to read Anna's date of birth, but it is over too quickly to work out her age. The invitation is there to rewind and pause on this frame, in order to make out her date of birth. Anna was born 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1956, making her a chronological age of 57.

Anna, therefore, falls into none of Garfein & Herzog's (1995) categories nor is she a resident of Featherstone & Hepworth's (1989) 'deep old age'. Though Anna conforms to current World Health Organisation definitions of older in the global sense as being over 50, this paper finds common ground with Bytheway, who uses the terms 'later life' and 'older people' (2003, p. 29). In order to create a more nuanced understanding of the representation of the older woman on screen that departs from the ageing as decline or success paradigms, and given that Anna does not sit well within any pre-defined boundary, this paper moves away from categorising older people by chronological age. Instead, it explores the culturally constructed nature of age and the representation of the older woman as femme fatale.

## **The Aged Femme Fatale Body**

Doane (1990) speaks of the 'cinematic inscription of sexual differentiation in modes of looking' (p.31) and posits that this sexual difference is weighted male over female. In cinema, Doane never quite makes the point that the femme fatale in modern film destabilises this inscription, by shifting the focus of these 'modes of looking' toward a gaze that is situated in powerful femininity. *I, Anna*, then, presents the viewer with an example of this process at work as over 80-percent of the film is presented from a female intra-diegetic viewpoint with Anna's story being revealed piece by piece, through flash-back in classic film noir style.



(Image 2)

Critically, this intra-diegetic viewpoint is also *aged* (Image 2). In the scene from which images two and three are taken, the camera works like a mirror, into which Anna is seen applying a slick of bright red lipstick (the significance of which will be explored in more detail below). Mirror scenes are common in film noir (recall Rita Hayworth's constant examination of her appearance in the mirror in *Gilda*) and elsewhere when exploring issues of femininity, sexuality and identity on screen (see for example, Smelik, 1992). Janey Place (1998) suggests that the many mirror shots employed in film noir are used to 'indicate women's duplicitous nature' (p.58). Indeed in this scene, Anna is stood in George's bathroom and is a few moments away from beating him to death. Anna's raised eyebrow (Image 3) is disconcerting. Place (1998) suggests 'compositions in which reflections are stronger than the actual women, or in which mirror images are seen in odd, uncomfortable angles, help to create the mood of threat and fear' (p.58). The mirror scene therefore helps solidify Anna's identity as femme fatale.

Whilst the mirror scene solidifies Anna's femme fatale identity, the mirror/camera device also works as an invitation for the spectator to examine Anna's aged face. Her eyes are heavily hooded and lined and her hair is greying at the roots. Are we supposed to wonder if she dyes it? What are the connotations of this in light of work

on the ageing female body and 'youthing' procedures and the cosmetic surgery industry (Davis, 1995, 1997, 2003; Clarke & Griffin, 2007; Fraser, 2001)? By spending time analysing Anna's face in these shots, it seems that our reading of Anna's face is informed by a degree of cultural verisimilitude: it is an aged face – she has lines, bags and grey hair – and yet represented as physically (and dangerously) beautiful, a characteristic of the femme fatale, an identity which works against the paradigms of ageing as success or decline.

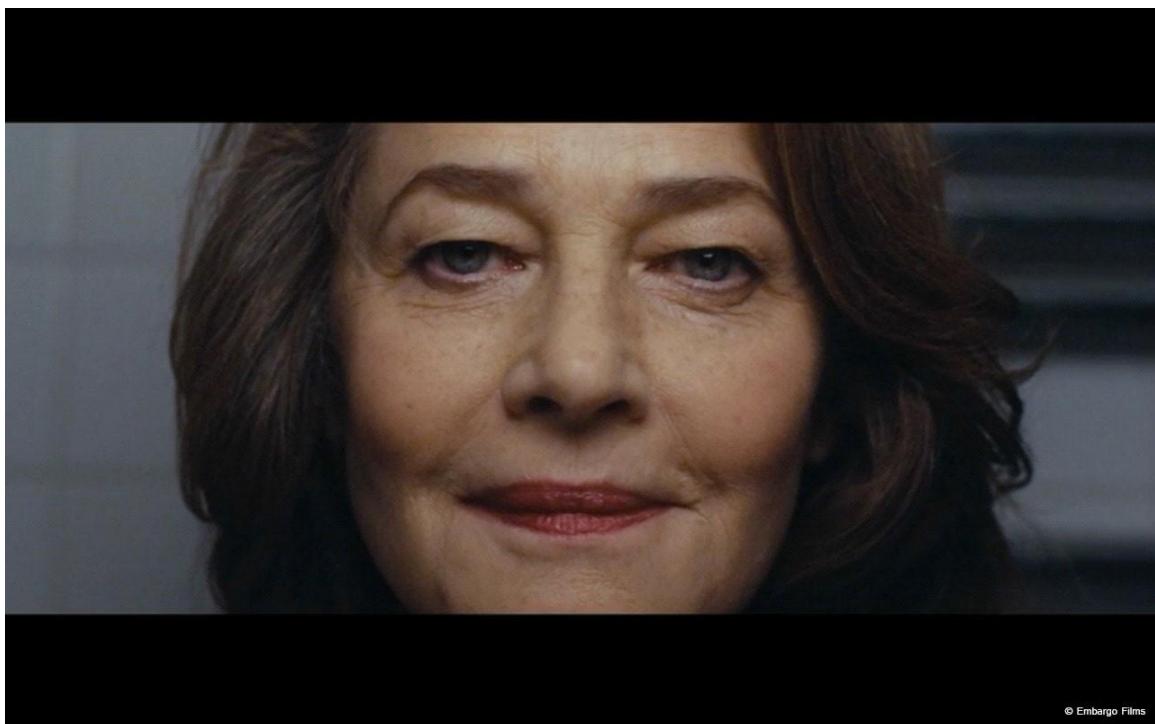
Anna's body is fragmented in this scene (Mulvey, 1975) as her face is presented through a series of snapshots – first the lips and lower portion of her face, next her eyes and nose, and then close up of her face in full. The disarticulation of body parts employed through fragmentation, as Mulvey (1975) holds, 'integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism' (p.809) the voyeurism of the spectator. Fragmentation is also a noir device and thus, revealing Anna's face in separate, disarticulated parts, has a further function in this film, establishing its qualities as neo-noir. While other film noirs focus on signs of the femme fatale's youth (the close ups of plump, red lips and flawless alabaster skin), in *I, Anna* the viewer is invited to focus on the physical signs of Anna's ageing. When her eyes are presented however and the spectator/voyeur makes eye contact with her, her defiant stare seems to challenge the audience's critique of her aged physicality. For example, in the final shot which depicts her full face, Anna raises an eyebrow for a split second and smirks into the mirror or at the audience (see Image 3).

The aged inter-diegetic viewpoint most visible in the 'mirror' scenes seems to work forcefully against viewing the ageing female on screen in terms of the paradigms of ageing as decline versus success, and invites us to explore the function of the youthful gaze in the context of film noir. Kathleen Woodward (2006) suggests:

Given the ageism that saturates [American and English] visual culture [...] we cast ourselves as younger in relation to the old person we see on the screen or in a photograph (as spectators we inhabit the position of an uncritical "younger than") unless [...] we have educated ourselves to see past conventional and reductive ageist responses. (p.164)

The concentration on the physical aspects of her ageing and the invitation to the audience to critique her physicality through the mirror seem, initially, to echo

traditional negative representations of the older woman on screen (ageing as decline). Diametrically opposed to this reading, however, we see Anna presented in these scenes as femme fatale: an aged woman who has ultimately commanded (or demanded through her femme fatale identity) a powerful aged female gaze, and who demonstrates an *awareness* of the audience's gaze upon her (ageing as success). Thus, through the cultural verisimilitude of Anna's aged femme fatale body in the mirror scenes (and through challenging viewers' preconceived understandings of it) the film suggests a depiction of the ageing female body that sits neither in decline nor success.



(Image 3)

### **Sexualising the Aged Femme fatale Body**

The first sustained passage of dialogue from the opening scene of the film is worth quoting at length. Applying lipstick in the mirror (which becomes a frequent symbolic behaviour) in the public bathroom of the singles event, Anna watches two young women giggle and run out of a cubicle. Sighing, she smooths down her tight, red dress and looks over at a woman (credited as 'Joan' – Honor Blackman) who is also applying red lipstick:

Joan - "Chin up girl!"

Anna - "You're right. What do they have that we don't?"

Joan - "Nothing age can't better."

Anna - "Want to share?"

Joan - "Suction."

Anna - "What?"

Joan - "You heard me."

Anna - "I don't do that."

Joan - "I bet the little blonde he left you for does."

Anna - "Actually, the split was mutual. We didn't realise what we had."

Joan - "No honey, *you* didn't realise what you had. And now it's a bit late, isn't it? Things ain't what they used to be. We can meet the men we want now. We can choose. So get your skinny legs back out there and flaunt them!"

This sequence has a series of particular functions which have a critical impact on the way we read age in *I, Anna*, and the way Anna's femme fatale credentials can be verified. Through a series of cinematic devices the audience is invited to compare Anna's appearance with Joan's (Image 4). Joan is fore-grounded and in focus and is lit in such a way that the audience is invited to focus on the signs of biological old age (her wrinkles and white hair). Anna is presented variously as out-of-focus or in a more mid-range shot and in this way she is not subject to the pathologising gaze (Dolan, 2010, and see below) in the same way that Joan is. Joan's red lipstick and nail varnish are the same shade as Anna's dress which comprises the invitation for the audience to make comparisons between the two women. The 'red dress effect' (Pazda et al, 2011) is therefore realised in this scene: Anna's femme fatale identity is indicated through the deliberate wearing of red to the singles mixer, a colour denoting sexuality, sensuousness, and, in film noir, danger. Moreover, though Joan is front of screen, her red lipstick and nails match Anna's dress, which serves to foreground Anna as the dominant figure in this scene, and reinforces the perception of her as femme fatale.





(Image 4)

Alongside these cinematographic and stylistic choices the dialogue in this scene similarly problematises our implicit acceptance of Joan as simply 'old'. By offering Anna advice on both dating and the importance of sex ("suction"), Joan both reiterates a heteronormative discourse that insists on coupledness whilst subverting the usual culturally informed, age-related stereotype of comforting 'granny' or motherly 'nurturer.' This stereotype is further subverted by Joan's appearance: her makeup, her jewellery, and the shade of red of her lipstick and nails suggest Joan might easily be the femme fatale of another story. The sexualised nature of Blackman's most famous previous role as Pussy Galore in *Goldfinger* (Hamilton, 1964) is not lost on the viewer 'thinking with age,' when she is represented here in later life, and reminds us of Joanne Garde-Hansen's (2012) suggestion that Blackman is a 'vampish' and 'seductive' (p.163) star who continues to effectively manage her 'elderliness' through the media (p.170).

A third way in which this scene critically impacts on the way we read age in the film is that we are *told* that Anna is old, by her own admission "What do they have that we don't?". In doing this, Anna aligns herself with Joan and establishes difference with the younger women. Joan's dialogue also draws immediate attention to Anna's (ageing) body by instructing her to get her "skinny legs back out there." Anna's aged body is presented as admirable, desirable, as if her 'skinny legs,' *legs that belie her*

age and legs that situate her appearance as femme fatale, will ultimately help her to find a partner. As Dolan suggests, contemporary discourses that surround the aged female body are concerned with ‘an absence of wrinkles or extra flesh: an absence that constitutes firm skin and hard bodies as gendered signifiers of “youthful ageing,”’ (2010, p.2). Anna’s legs as gendered signifiers of youthful ageing, then, become the visual focus of many later scenes, the locus of Bernie’s desire for her, and one of the major visual indicators of her femme fatale identity: long, firm, legs culminating in stockinged feet enclosed in black, high heeled shoes, exposed beneath a tan-coloured mac (Image 5) (Place, 1998, p. 54).



(Image 5)

Anna’s appearance does not, however, seem pastiche – she looks comfortable, confident and powerful in her body – a point which is strengthened when one realises that Charlotte Rampling was in fact ten-years older than the character she played in this film. Already established as a sexy and sensual actress through a large number of roles from the 1960s onwards, Rampling’s sex appeal has continued into older age. This is in part evidenced by several nude photo shoots with Juergen Teller, the 2008 shoot perhaps yielding the most provocative photographs. As Jane Shilling of the Telegraph suggests, Rampling ‘looks no more ordinary as an elderly woman that she did as a young woman’ (2013). It is precisely the extraordinary beauty of the femme fatale, the exquisiteness of her form and disposition, which

constitutes her dangerous allure. In this way Rampling, as an actress with a host of films with provocative themes (see *The Night Porter* [Cavani, 1974] for example) under her belt, and a consciousness of her femininity in old age, lends her sex appeal and sophistication to the character of Anna, an edge and sexiness in older age which furthers the credibility of Anna's aged femme fatale identity.

In one scene, Anna is seen taking a bath in a deep tub (Image 6) – her shoulders, neck, arms (one wrist enclosed in a cast) and upper chest are exposed to the gaze of the audience. This scene reminds us of the scene in the classic noir film *Laura* in which Waldo Lydecker lies in his bathtub and recalls his relationship with the doomed femme fatale of the film's name. In *I, Anna*, this iconic scene is reconfigured: a naked, older woman fills the tub. Anna's ageing body is presented positively (if modestly) which contrasts with Elizabeth W. Markson (2003) when she suggests that 'viewing an older woman's body nude or nearly nude and not morphed by cosmetic surgery offends the female's social positioning as an object to be gazed at with admiration' (p.99). The audience is not offended by Anna's exposed skin due to the composition of the scene (perhaps due to our reminder of noir conventions established by the likes of *Laura*) and as Anna's modesty remains intact. Moreover, Anna's aged body is presented as sexually desirable, or to use Markson's terms 'admirably.' *I, Anna*, then, offers a positive reimagining of the nude older female body and modifies the gaze which has until now assessed the physical signs of the ageing naked body on the basis of the paradigms of decline or success.



(Image 6)

Anna's body is sexualised in a more explicit way, in a later scene that encompasses the height of the action. Acting on the advice wrought from her encounter with Joan (through the device of flashback in true noir style) Anna goes back to George's apartment and begins to give him oral sex. When George becomes aggressive, Anna bites his penis. George attacks her, attempts to rape her, and fighting for her life, Anna bludgeons him to death. Read from a psychoanalytic feminist viewpoint, as with Mulvey (1975), this scene could be read as a typical cinematic representation of woman as locus of male fear of castration, with Anna herself embodying the act of castration in its physicality. More than this, however, it is in this scene that Anna can clearly be identified as a femme fatale. As Silver and Ursini (2004) suggest 'of the many women who are principle characters in film noir, many are victims' (p.131). Though a victim of sexual assault in this scene Anna refuses to be a victim in submitting to male sexual aggression. When Anna kills George in self-defence, however, we are reminded of the femme fatale victims of film noir: Wilma Tuttle, in *The Accused* (1949), and Nora Larkin, in *The Blue Gardenia* (Lang, 1953), who both 'mortally wound a sexual predator' (Silver & Ursini 2004, p.131). This echoes the femme fatale of the classic noir as explored above.

There are two further interpretations of this scene that impinge critically on what it is that this film 'says' about older women as femme fatale. First, the fact that Anna

becomes a murderer can be read as her ultimate punishment for refusing to 'act her age' (in performing a sex act culturally associated with younger people). Such an interpretation is similarly bound up with the notion of ageing as decline, where old age becomes a slippery slope into deviance and decrepitude. This, however, is a reading that buttresses the cultural stereotype of the older woman and her correct 'place,' and one which reinforces the patriarchal hierarchy of film that Mulvey so lamented in the late 1970s.

Secondly, we could read this scene as presenting a more positive image of the older woman as a sexual being with the physical prowess to defend herself drawn from her femme fatale identity. Anna went back to George's flat in order to have sex with him. She drove them both there in her own car, and entered under her own volition. Anna's active pursuit of a sexual relationship works against predominant representations of the older woman as an asexual being, closeted in the bounds of care giving and domesticity. Though she sought sexual adventure, rather than sexual satisfaction, Anna's encounter with George has devastating consequences. *I, Anna* therefore seems to overturn conventional representations of older female sexuality through active sexuality and the vehicle of the femme fatale. The film does, however, still present a contradictory image of sexual encounters in later life: on the one hand, it offers a representation of the sexually active ageing woman; and on the other, the sexually active older woman is punished for transgressing expected sexual behaviours.

### **The Femme Fatale and the Clinical Gaze**

Anna's aged body is also represented in another way that might on first glance appear to fit with more established representations of older female bodies on screen – the 'medicalised body' (Faircloth, 2003). This type of representation of the older woman on screen seems to invite an interrogation using the concept of the 'clinical gaze' first articulated by Michel Foucault (1973). Dolan (2010) suggests research into old age has been dominated by the medical and social sciences, and 'is typically underpinned by a set of embedded assumptions that equates aging with decline and vulnerability, assumptions founded on the clinical gaze' (pp.2-3). As this paper has asserted, *I, Anna* destabilises readings of older age based around these paradigms, and the medicalisation of Anna's ageing body is a key example of this destabilisation

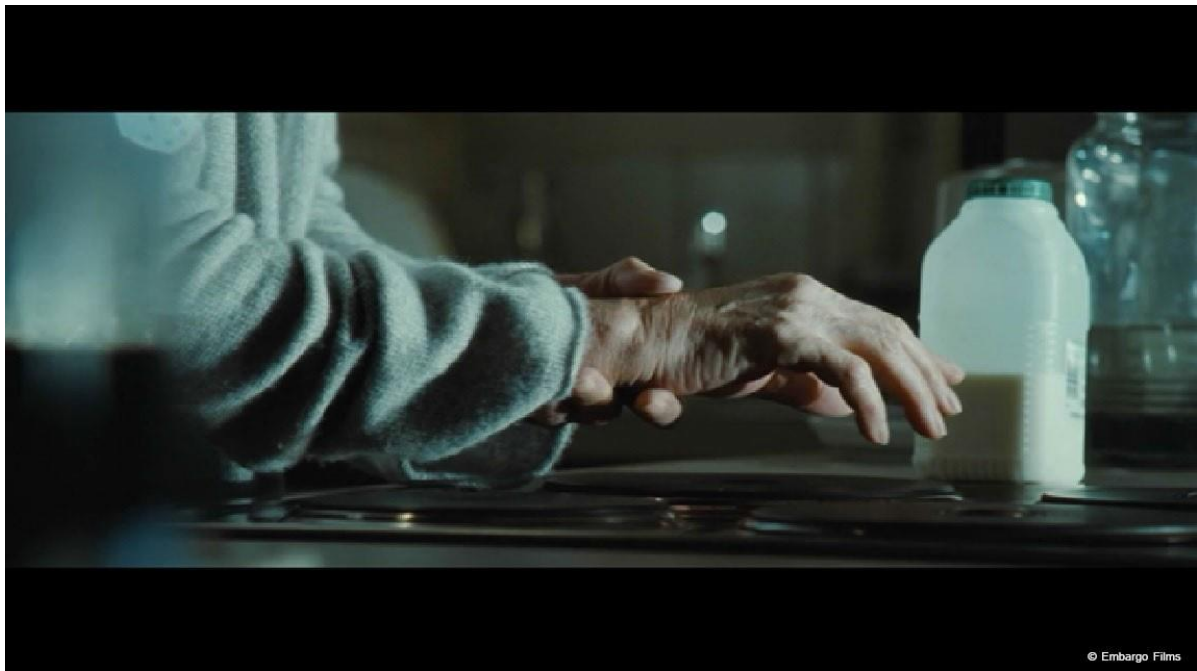
in process.

A close up of Anna's hands (see Image 7), replete with veins visible through the skin, provides evidence in support of Dolan's argument that 'effectively, the hands are constituted as signs of a "real old age" that cannot be effaced by the interventions of the "youthing" industry' (2010, p. 13).<sup>4</sup> As this paper has demonstrated, through her femme fatale identity, and through the depiction of the sexualised older female body, and one that has endured little (or no) extreme 'youthing' procedures, Anna's is an older body that sits neither in decline nor success. *I, Anna* therefore seems to work against this discourse of pathologised ageing formulated against the backdrop of pharmaceutical and cosmetic intervention which works across the ageing as success or decline paradigms.

Anna's hands may show the signs of her age, but so does her (ageing) body and her (aged) face which have all worked to situate her in powerful femininity. She physically captures Bernie's sexual attention (he is first mesmerised by her legs – a device well used in classic film noir) and her physical form plays on his mind throughout the film (he constantly notices women who look like Anna). As such, Anna is represented in this film as a sexually desirable older woman whose ageing body sits neither in success nor decline: it simply 'is'.

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the hands as signifiers of female old age, see also Diane Railton and Paul Watson (2011) "'She's So Vein': Madonna and the Drag of Ageing,' in J. Dolan & E. Tinknell (eds.) *Ageing Femininities: Representation, Identities, Feminism*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, pp.195-206.



(Image 7)

In a scene half way through the film, Anna lifts up a milk carton and is gripped by pain in her wrist (image 7) and decides to go to the hospital to have it examined. In this scene, the type of discourse that medicalises old age is simultaneously invoked and critically questioned by the film itself. The set comprises a hospital bay, bathed in blue and grey, plastic and steel, tubes and medical machines, and interestingly embodies potentially the brightest (or least noir-like) shot of the entire film (Image 8). In this wide-shot, in which Anna's face and body are largely obscured by the blue hospital curtain, the disembodied (and slightly patronising) voice of the doctor can be heard saying, "Are you sure you didn't lift anything heavy? Don't worry, fractures are common in people your age."

The doctor's comment works in two ways: first, it reminds us of feminist discourses which suggest film noir addresses or critiques patriarchy, as the audience feels perturbed by the ease in which the male doctor condescendingly dismisses Anna's injury and questions her memory. As Grossmann (2009) suggests, this type of argument arose during a time when the femme fatale was seen as a projection of post-war male anxiety about changing or ambiguous gender roles (p.2). Second, we might read the doctor's diagnosis as an expression of male anxieties about ageing women: by dismissing Anna's injury as a symptom of her age (and her 'victim' femme fatale identity allows this), we are left to wonder if he would have treated a



male patient of the same age in a similar way?



(Image 8)

The audience feels instinctively that this injury cannot be reduced to the effects of old age, though when Anna tells her daughter, “It’s just a fracture,” her daughter readily accepts this as part and parcel of her mother’s advancing years. The audience is left feeling uneasy about this diagnosis, however, a feeling attributable to the amount of work the film had already done by this point to situate Anna’s physical age in neither success nor decline. Rather, we are strongly inclined to feel that she was hurt during the struggle with George, though at this stage in the film we are still not sure what really happened: a disarticulation of events presented through flashback reminiscent of classic film noir. *I, Anna* therefore seems to critique normalised understandings of injury in old age, as Anna’s identity as femme fatale (and thus our complicit knowledge of her part in George’s murder) further critiques the clinical gaze, and the suggestion that all ‘too easily ill’ health in ageing people is collapsed into the ageing process itself’ (Kaplan, 1999, p.172).

Though we are eventually able to piece together the non-linear narrative presented to us through flashbacks, on first reading (and when viewed through the clinical gaze) it seems that Anna is suffering some kind of delusion and is vulnerable, fragile and confused. As Jane M. Ussher (2010) writes:



It is a bitter irony: menstruation is positioned as woman's curse yet the end of the menstruation years do not bring a reprieve from women being positioned as mad, moody or vulnerable because of the womb. (p.120)

Conditioned as we are by this dominant logic, we might read Anna's memory-loss, vulnerability and fragility as symptomatic of her post-menopausal age; however, by positioning Anna as older femme fatale this film works against such a reading: Anna is not suffering because of her *age*, rather, it is a result of her *identity*: the dangerous, tragic and mysterious woman characteristic of film noir. Moreover, if we treat Anna's memory-loss not as a biological precondition of her age, but as a symptom of her traumatic femme fatale identity, *I, Anna* might be usefully read as another sub-genre of neo-noir – amnesia noir (Abrams, 2007, p.17), as in *Memento*, for example.

Similarly, Anna's position within the film – at times confused and vulnerable (though, as this paper has asserted, this is not attributable to her age) – links to the narrative mode of unreliable narration reminiscent of classic film noir such as *Detour* (Ulmer, 1945). As Volker Frenz (2005) suggests, though the concept of the unreliable narrator is traditionally attributed to voiceover narrators, films without this device can also contain elements of unreliable narration. This comprises moments when the audience makes 'incorrect inferences about the story world' based on their connection to the leading character. Frenz asserts that films of this sort generally 'feature some major twist or surprise effect which is so common in unreliable narration' (p.137). The devices of splintered narrative and unreliable narration are, therefore, representative of film (noir) techniques which work to create tension and darkness, rather than indicators of this older female character's dementia or madness.

## Conclusion

This paper has suggested that *I, Anna* offers a reconceptualisation of the femme fatale as an older woman, representing the ageing female body as sexy and desirable through this femme fatale identity. With its implicit engagement with themes and issues arising from women and ageing studies, *I, Anna*, presents a more positive image of the ageing woman than can usually be found in the media. As debates in the field return 'consistently to the theme of the lack of positive images

and role models for women who are ageing' (Jennings, 2012), it appears that *I, Anna* may represent an important step along the path toward an increasing diversity of available images of ageing women.

The cultural verisimilitude of Anna's aged body: feminine, visible, beautiful, and sexual, has resulted in a reading of the older woman on screen which works to unsettle prevailing cultural discourses about ideal female beauty as Kaplan understood them fifteen-years ago. Conceived around the binary of ageing as success or decline, Kaplan wrote:

As a woman's appearance begins to lose its youthfulness, there may be a crisis of identity: I am either good, beautiful, whole, and to be loved; or bad, ugly, fragmented and unlovable, according to the degree to which my appearance fits into prevailing cultural discourses about 'ideal' female beauty. (1999, p.174)

As Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton (2010) suggest in *Film and Ethics*, 'the concept of "positive representation" derives from debates in early feminist film criticism of the 1960s in the sociologically informed so-called "images of women" tradition, and later in identity-politics-driven gay and lesbian studies' (p.37). As this paper has demonstrated, debates over the positive representation of women on screen are ongoing, especially in terms of the repertoire of images of older women available in the media. Locating positive images (or at the very least, ensuring a multiplicity of images of older women) in the media, in film and on television in particular, is pivotal in the negotiation of such a crisis.

As 'victim' femme fatale, Anna is ultimately saved by Bernie at the end of *I, Anna* (in a homage to classic femmes fatale of film noir, for instance, in *The Big Sleep* and *Gilda*). By coming to a similar end as her younger femme fatale counterparts, found in both classic and neo-noir, Anna illustrates that the category of femme fatale need not be bounded in terms of chronological age: a credible femme fatale can be young or aged. Though the femme fatale remains a contested image of femininity, in figuring age into the concept of the femme fatale *I, Anna* constitutes a shift in the repertoire of cinematic images of older women, one which subverts the utility of reading age in terms of success or decline.

Thus, the film invites us to reconsider how we view the older female body on screen and, perhaps, in life. The textual analysis of *I, Anna* has shown that 'beautiful' and 'loveable' can relate to aged women just as much as young women, and that 'fragmented' need not mean 'demented': after all, though still vulnerable, as a red-cloaked, stockinged, intelligent and poised femme fatale, Anna is represented as desirable, sexual and, critically, *visible* and therefore runs counter to current narratives of ageing as decline and ageing as trauma.

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