

Caitlin Hamilton
English 4996
Dr. Glick

Unraveling the *Femme Fatale*:
Auteur Theory and Christopher Nolan's Work

Auteur Theory, a term coined in the 1940s to recognize a filmmaker's or director's unique thematic style has remained prevalent and has helped distinguish Auteur artists such as Christopher Nolan from his contemporary colleagues. Initially coined to differentiate thematic styles from one another, Auteur Theory has now become a medium to accredit varying thematic styles as works of art. In the article, *No Start, No End*, by David Andrews, Auteur Theory is attributed to classifying cinematic techniques as artwork. "Within the cinema, the Auteur Theory has been given credit for helping to consecrate film as one of the sanctified arts... Two corollaries of this new production centrality, were, first, the assumption that a personal vision could be traced across the curve of an auteur's oeuvre and, secondly, the belief that the best directors generally make the best films. (40). While Auteur Theory may not be as pertinent in today's climate, in the case of Christopher Nolan, it is important to recognize his identity as an Auteur artist in order to understand how his uniform techniques work to portray his goal of exposing underlying meanings and character motives, particularly through his use of *the femme fatale*.

In order to fully grasp Nolan's precise vision, one must first recognize the impact *Film Noir* has had on Nolan's work. Nolan was born in London, England but grew up in Evanston, Illinois during his formative years. Nolan grew up approximately ten years after the end of classic film noir production. While the production of classic film noirs may have ceased by the 1970s, European filmmakers had brought their film noir methods to Hollywood. In the article, *Film Noir: The Elusive Genre*, by Richard Brody, Brody explains the influence film noir had on America due to the afflictions of World War II. Brody writes, "German filmmakers fleeing the Nazi regime, such as Lang, Preminger, Ulmer, Robert Siodmak, Max Ophuls, and Billy Wilder

brought their shadowy, fragmented aesthetic to Hollywood.” (1). In an effort to escape the deteriorating state of Europe in the mid-1900s, European directors and filmmakers came to America and drastically changed Hollywood with their knowledge and expertise. Directors who desired to portray an anxious America utilized a fragmented aesthetic to represent the high tensions and nervousness felt by Americans during the height of the Cold War. Modern film noirs, categorized as neo-noirs, contained the same negative energy as the film noirs during the height of World War II. Similar to classic film noirs during the 1940s, the neo-noirs proceeding the aftermath of World War II, displayed marriage as unbearable and comprised of infidelity, and society as a whole was represented as unethical and untrustworthy.

Films with contemporary film noir elements, such as Hollywood-crime dramas, that displayed an unethical America, came into production during the height of The Cold War. Neo-noirs, such as the 1973 film, *The Long Goodbye* and the 1974 film, *Chinatown* gained widespread recognition throughout Nolan’s youth. Both neo-noirs begin with a mystery that the protagonist is expected to solve. The two films focus on the concept of death and murder as well as the decision to make one of the antagonists an alluring female. In the case of *Chinatown*, the wife of a chief engineer seeks to uncover her husband’s infidelity, capturing the mistrust and suspicion that plagued America in the 1970s. In Paul Duncan’s book, *Film Noir: Films of Trust and Betrayal*, Duncan explains the true characterization of the film noir genre. Duncan writes, “Film noirs are stories about doomed love set in a criminal or degrading world. From the beginning, we know that things are going to end badly, so the stories take on tragic dimension...Generally, a Film Noir is pessimistic in tone and reflective in mood, often presented with a voice-over, and a series of flashbacks. The visual image is usually made up of layers of

black and grey. The characters are obsessed, or are compelled to act in the way they do. (17).

Due to the fact that Nolan was subjected to the tensions that plagued America during the height of The Cold War, and after a close analysis of Nolan's work, it is arguable that the majority of Nolan's thematic content is heavily influenced by the dark themes and motifs of film noir. In specific, after scrutinizing Nolan's first film, *The Following*, it is evident that film noir had an early influence on Nolan's career as a director.

Narrated as a flashback, *The Following* starts off on a pessimistic note as the main character, is a struggling writer desperate to find inspiration on the streets of London. From the very beginning, the narrative takes on a tragic dimension as the protagonist is struggling with the internal conflict of writer's block. Typical of most film noirs, the protagonist is a distressed introvert, who is not exceptional, but rather ordinary and internally conflicted. The narrative grows increasingly dark as the protagonist takes on a new identity as a burglar after meeting a serial burglar, Cobb. In order to match the visual style of the film with its dismal content, Nolan utilizes 16mm black and white film and dark iconography such as long, ill-lit streets, in order to establish an eerie and sinister ambiance that is typical of classic film noirs. Similar to the neo-noirs of Nolan's youth, *The Following* is a crime drama that includes a provocative lead who manipulates and deceives the protagonist, ultimately leading to the protagonist's demise. The protagonist ends up taking the fall for a murder he did not commit, encapsulating the element of mistrust in film noirs. Following a defeatist narrative, typical of classic film noirs, *The Following* reveals that the psychology and mentality of the main character are driven by fear. In the essay *Dark Roots*, by Jason Ney, Ney explains that the aspect of fear is what initially attracted Nolan to the genre of film noir. "When speaking about the uniqueness of noir, Nolan has said that he has

found himself very attracted to working within a genre that lets you take our everyday neurosis—our everyday sort of fears and hopes for ourselves— and translate them into this very heightened realm.. *Following* explores the idea of fear through the character of the Young Man, who fears loneliness so much that, rather than be alone, he gets tangled up with a thief, some mobsters, and a dangerous woman, ultimately taking the fall for a murder that Cobb committed.” (63). The theme of fear included in *The Following* captures the haunting and bewildering nature of the film noir genre by creating an uneasy ambiance and foreshadows the centralized focus on the aspect of a dangerous woman in future Nolan creations.

While *The Following* has been Nolan’s most accurate representation of the film noir genre due to its uncolored composition and dark iconography, Nolan continues to include centralized content and cinematic techniques that are consistent with the film noir genre in his films. In specific, Nolan consistently employs the use of the *femme fatale*, a female lead that negatively impacts the protagonist’s mentality and behavior. In particular, in Nolan’s 2006 film, *The Prestige*, Nolan takes a unique spin on the portrayal of the femme fatale as Scarlett Johansson's character, Olivia, does not broadcast her femme fatality but rather employs behind the scene manipulation to deceive the male protagonists in the film. Nolan illustrates the neo-noir take on the femme fatale by utilizing elements of mise-en-scene and editing techniques that help accentuate Nolan’s distinctive thematic content.

The term *femme fatale* has changed significantly with women advancement in society. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, women attained more rights, such as more control over their bodies. Changes such as amendments to the constitution in the 1973 case, *Roe V Wade*, that allowed women to have the liberty to decide whether or not to have an abortion,

demonstrated a shift in society, a society where women were gaining more control. However, before the second wave of feminism from the 1960s to the 1980s, women had even fewer rights and less autonomy in society. Before the second wave of feminism, particularly from the 1920s to the late 1950s, classic film noir films often portrayed the femme fatale as entirely devious and invariably subjected to punishment. In the essay, *Sex Ratio, Socio-Sexuality, and the Emergence of the Femme Fatale in Classic French and American Film Noir*, by Deborah Walker-Morrison, Morrison describes how the femme fatale is portrayed in classic film noirs. “The femme fatale of classic American film noir (as portrayed by the likes of Barbara Stanwyck, Lana Turner, Rita Hayworth, and Ava Gardner) lures her hapless male lover into committing murder or other violent crimes on her behalf and then promptly sets about disposing of him.” (Morrison 25). Similarly, in *The Following*, the female lead consciously tricks the protagonist into murdering a man by means of her good looks and flirtatious demeanor. Acting in accordance with classic film noirs, the female lead in *The Following* is murdered, which stands as a representation for the idea that women should endure punishment when rebelling against the standards of society. Furthermore, the female lead in the film is not even named, thereby representing a lack of regard for the complexity and dynamic of her character.

However, as Nolan became a more experienced director, Nolan’s representation of the femme fatale in his films had changed significantly. Nolan’s neo-noir approach on the femme fatale, worked to illustrate the femme fatale’s desires and autonomy. In Kirsten Smith’s essay, *Seduction and Sex: The Changing Allure of the Femme Fatale in Fact and Fiction*, Smith explains the shifting representation of the femme fatale. “The 1980s and 1990s also saw the return of the femme, this time a femme fatale who was focused on her own ambition and power

which did not include a man controlling her...What does emerge from the 1980s onwards is an attempt to play with the well-established trope of the femme fatale in order to create more moral complexity and also to allow a more rounded female character to emerge..” (Smith 46). In the majority of neo-noirs of the 21st century, the femme fatale’s desires and self-sufficiency are established. Additionally, while the femme fatale may have deceptive methods, she is less often portrayed as wholly evil and is less often subjected to punishment.

In the case of the 2006 film, *The Prestige*, Nolan utilizes Scarlett Johansson’s character, Olivia, as the central femme fatale in the film. While Olivia is portrayed as Angier’s beautiful assistant designed to allure the audience with her good looks, she also displays an outstanding level of autonomy, highlighting her independent nature as a femme fatale. *The Prestige* exposes male vulnerability in the presence of an alluring female character, as two rival magicians constantly try and outsmart one another, and in doing so, fall victim to Olivia’s deceitful motives. While Olivia’s intentions are not always malicious, she uses her charm and sexuality to dangerously deceive the men in the film, thereby qualifying her as a femme fatale.

Arguably the most recognizable trait that qualifies Olivia as a femme fatale is her undeniable bewitching outward appearance. In order to portray Olivia as an alluring femme fatale, careful and precise costume design is implemented. When referencing the image of the femme fatale, Smith describes the femme fatale’s outward appearance, that distinguishes her as sexually enticing. Smith writes, “Although fashions and politics changed over the Cold War period, when the femme begins to appear more in fiction, we do see a distinct look for the femme emerging during this period which allows an audience to identify her quickly for what she is. This look usually involves a revealing, close-fitting dress, high heels, dark and luxurious fabrics,

and accessories, including a cigarette, possibly in a long holder, and heavy make-up (smouldering eyes, accentuated lips). The intention of the femme fatale look is to emphasise at every stage a feminine physique and overt sexuality.” (38). When Olivia first makes her appearance, she is wearing a compressed dress that accentuates her bust and highlights her curvature. Olivia’s makeup is glamorous and her pink lipstick accents her rosy cheeks. Furthermore, Olivia is seen wearing heels, highlighting the muscles in her calves, and thus making her legs appear longer. As Olivia makes her first formal entrance on stage, Michael Caine’s character, John, narrates a voiceover. John declares, “A pretty assistant is the most effective form of misdirection.” (The Prestige). Hence, from Olivia’s debut, her features are dramatized and her looks are called to attention, forcing the audience to recognize the undeniable presence of her sexual desirability.

While the other female characters in the film, Julia and Sarah, are arguably attractive, their outward appearance is simple and unembellished. To elaborate, Piper Perabo’s character, Julia, is seen with butterfly barrettes in her hair, giving off the impression that she is innocent and peaceful, as butterflies stand as a cultural symbol for childhood and harmony. Furthermore, unlike Olivia, Julia does not appear to be wearing any makeup. While Julia is seen wearing seemingly short dresses while on stage, a tactic used to portray her as an appealing assistant, her dresses mask any curvature, which along with her lack of makeup, distances Julia’s character from heightened objectification. In the case of Rebecca Hall’s character, Sarah, her outward appearance is completely unadorned. Not only is Sarah seen without any visible makeup throughout her scenes in the film, but she is also the only female character consistently covered from head to toe in heavy material. For instance, Sarah is constantly seen wearing long-sleeved

dresses with a high neckline that conceals any cleavage or physical characteristics of the female body. Even when Sarah is seen in her nightgown, in the company of only her husband, she wears a shawl over her shoulders, hiding a vast amount of skin. Furthermore, Nolan's use of color works to showcase the characterization of the three female characters in the film.

The personalities and character intentions of Julia, Sarah, and Olivia can be interpreted through the colors of their various ensembles. In the peer-reviewed article, *Color and Psychological Functioning: A Review of Theoretical and Empirical Work*, by Andrew J. Elliot, Elliot describes the effect color has on audience perception Elliot writes, "Lightness is metaphorically linked to good ("seeing the light") rather than bad ("in the dark"). These metaphoric associations are presumed to have implications for important outcomes such as morality judgments (e.g., white things are viewed as pure) and stereotyping (e.g., dark faces are viewed more negatively)." (Elliot). Similarly, in the film, Julia and Sarah's character are portrayed as pure and virtuous as Julia is consistently seen in white attire and Sarah is seen in attire that reflects the Earth and the natural. In explanation, at the beginning of the film, Julia is seen wearing a white nightgown and is later seen wearing a white and light blue dress on stage. The color white is a cultural representation of innocence, sincerity, and softness. Furthermore, the softness of the colors white and blue represents peace, highlighting Julia's peaceful nature. Therefore, Nolan works to portray Julia's character as unthreatening and non-threatening. In a similar fashion, Sarah's character constantly wears plain and unadorned colors that highlight her humility and candor. For instance, Sarah consistently is seen wearing the color brown. The color brown is culturally known to represent a sense of grounding and wholesomeness as brown is the color of trees, bark, dirt, and nature. Sarah's personality corresponds with the symbolism of the

color brown as Sarah dedicates her life to mothering her child, attempting to ground Borden and set his priorities in order, etc. Similar to Julia's character, Nolan dresses Sarah in a fashion that paints her in an unfrighting light.

However, when it comes to Olivia's character, Nolan utilizes a variety of different colors to illustrate her wavering intentions. When Olivia is first seen on stage, she is seen wearing a pink dress. The color pink is often associated with affection and approachability. Likewise, at the beginning of the film, Olivia's main priority was making a good impression with Angier, for if she were to have come off as standoffish, it is likely that she never would have gotten the job as his assistant. However, as the film progresses, Olivia's outfits gradually become darker, representing her advancement at the art of deception. To elaborate, when Olivia first introduces herself to Borden, she is seen wearing a very dark blue. Darker colors typically portray an element of sophistication, hence by wearing a darker ensemble Olivia's experience and refinement is highlighted as she embarks on becoming not only an assistant to one but to two esteemed magicians. During Olivia's last performance on stage, she is seen wearing an all black corset. It is no coincidence that Olivia's costume during her final performance on stage with Borden varies significantly from her first performance on stage, as the color black is stronger and more visually obtrusive than light pink. The color of Olivia's ensemble in her final performance reflects her sense of authority, as black is often associated with power and dominance. Olivia develops a level of control by achieving a level of trust with both magicians. Not only does black represent power but the color black also symbolizes death and the unknown. Olivia is seen in the color black a mere ten minutes before Angier realizes Olivia had betrayed him by giving him the wrong diary. In fact, when Angier visualizes Olivia as he reads Borden's imitation diary, Olivia

is also seen wearing the color black. While Angier did not physically die, at that moment, the hope of him successfully replicating Borden's "Disappearing Man Trick" seemed utterly despondent. Furthermore, in this scene, Angier realizes that he cannot trust Olivia and is unaware of her capabilities. Hence, the color black mirrors Olivia's unpredictability, as Olivia's true intentions are unknown throughout the majority of the film. Ergo, Julia and Sarah are presented as plain and conventional to emphasize Olivia's correspondence to the image of the traditional femme fatale. The dichotomy between Olivia's outward appearance and the only other two primary female characters in the film, Julia and Sarah, intensifies Olivia's sexuality and the control she has over her male counterparts.

In order to further emphasize Olivia's desirability, compared to the other female characters in the film, Nolan utilizes specific lighting techniques to further establish her role as a femme fatale. The first female character who makes her debut is Julia. While spotlights are common and necessary for live performances of any kind, the contrast of the spotlights used, and how often they are used, accentuate Olivia's prominence in the film. While Julia is first seen on stage and is the center of the trick being performed, the spotlight cast on her is less bright and has less exposure than the spotlight on Olivia when she makes her debut on stage. Even when Angier is seen bowing and taking credit for his performance, the spotlight remains focused on Olivia. By increasing the exposure of Olivia's spotlight, compared to the spotlight cast on Julia's character, Nolan creates a stark difference between the two assistants. By consistently casting a brighter and more intense spotlight on Olivia's character, often times brighter than the lights used to embellish the magicians in the film, Nolan is manipulating the audience's perception by forcing them to recognize Olivia as esteemed and obtrusive. Furthermore, when Sarah makes her debut

in the film she is seen in a dimly lit room, surrounded by brown and mustard yellow walls that accentuate the dullness of the room. When Sarah makes further appearances in the film she is seen in dark rooms, seldom outdoors in the presence of bright or natural light. Therefore, Sarah blends in with the background, whereas Olivia is consistently seen under a bright light in a dark theatre, thereby emphasizing her visual presence.

In addition to Olivia's unquestionable good looks, Olivia also utilizes her voice to enthrall the men in the film. Olivia is first recognized as a deceptive character when she is instructed by Angier to work for Borden and find out the secret behind his trick, "The Disappearing Man." When Olivia first approaches Borden, she stares at him intently, inflects her voice, and unmistakably uses her sexuality to persuade Borden to hire her. In Francesca Shaw and Victoria Crocker article, *Creaky Voice as a Stylistic Feature of Young American Female Speech: An Intraspeaker Variation Study of Scarlett Johansson*, Shaw and Crocker describe the small, yet prominent details that establish the alluring elements of the femme fatale. "We returned to the scene in *The Prestige* from which we took our speech sample and looked at its contextual setting in terms of interlocutor and character type. In this scene, Johansson's character is trying to be persuasive, acting seductively towards her male interlocutor in order to try and get what she wants. In fact, when looking at all the scenes across all six movies, we found creaky voice to be more prevalent in scenes of intimacy or seduction." (Shaw and Crocker 26). In the scene where Olivia is trying to convince Borden to hire her, her voice maintains a high-pitched creak throughout their conversation. The sound of Olivia's grating voice in this scene, compared to Borden's deep, lowered voice highlights Olivia's femininity, as women are typically known to have higher pitched speaking voices than men by at least an octave. Biologically speaking, a

low-toned growl usually represents a larger, authoritative, and protective animal, which corresponds with the perception that women are attracted to protection and security, and can explain why deeper voices in men are culturally preferred. On the other hand, higher pitched sounds, such as those made by crickets or mice, represent a sense of submissiveness and fragility. Therefore, it is arguable that Olivia's high pitched creak entralls the men in the film and effects Borden's decision to hire Olivia, because as magicians, the men in the film are attracted to manipulating their surroundings, and mistakenly see Olivia as unchallenging to control.

After exploring Olivia's physical appearance and voice inflections as a femme fatale, it is important to analyze her decision to take on a double identity. Olivia is first introduced as Angier's assistant, after the death of his previous assistant, Julia. However, Olivia then begins to work as Borden's assistant, showcasing her double identity as assistants to both magicians. While Olivia ends up showing her loyalty to who she believes was Borden's character, but was actually his twin brother, Fallon, Olivia's presence ends up being catastrophic to Borden's character as she is the reason why Borden's beloved wife, Sarah, takes her own life. While Olivia did not wish any ill on Julia, she still maintained a romantic relationship with whom she believed to be Borden although he was married. Smith writes, "One of the key things that sets her apart from other enemies, and what allows her to be an alluring danger to the hero, is the fact that she often does not appear at first to be dangerous. Instead, the femme uses her femininity to entice the hero into betrayal by exploiting him in the vulnerable and intimate area of sex." (38)." In the scene where Borden/Fallon is seen kissing Olivia in bed, Borden is seen twirling his wedding ring around his finger. The image of Olivia in bed with Borden represents the idea that

her sex appeal is what led to his strained marriage, as it was when Olivia was kissing him and exerting a level of sex-appeal that Borden felt it was appropriate to take off his wedding ring. Hence, Olivia is seen using her femininity to entice Borden in the vulnerable area of sex, which eventually leads Borden to destruction as his wife becomes suspicious of the affair and ultimately decides to end her life. While Olivia may have had genuine feelings for whom she believed to be Borden, she still used her seductive voice and overall sexuality, to entice Borden to become romantically involved with her even though she was aware of his marital status. Hence, Olivia's manipulative techniques, along with Borden's decision to hire her, ultimately lead to the death of Borden's wife, further establishing a unique spin on the subject of the femme fatale.

While Olivia's character presents devastating complications to Borden's character, she primarily acts as Angier's femme fatale throughout the film. While Olivia's true loyalty isn't officially revealed until the end of the film, Olivia's deceptive practices as Angier's femme fatale arguably start early on. At the beginning of the film, before Olivia is instructed to work for Borden, she coincidentally chooses Borden from a crowd to assist Angier in performing a trick. In this scene, the crowd is immense and a large number of hands are seen in the air eagerly volunteering to assist in Angier's act. However, out of all of the hands in the air, Olivia coincidentally chooses Borden to assist in the trick, which ends up being catastrophic to Angier's performance. While Borden was in a disguise, and supposedly had not met Olivia at this point in the film, it is arguable that Olivia had heard about Borden through word of mouth and had acquainted herself with him before being verbally instructed by Angier. Accordingly, that would also explain why Borden hired Olivia so quickly after minimal coercion.

Furthermore, moments before Olivia chooses Borden to appear on stage, Olivia is seen staring at Angier as he explains the premise of his next trick. Instead of centering the camera, Nolan includes a low-angle shot of Olivia which alters the disposition of the scene. In this scene, Olivia maintains a fixed glare at Angier while smiling mischievously. The decision to utilize a low-angle shot in this scene paints Olivia in a dominant and authoritative light as low-angle shots make the subject appear powerful by manipulating their height, making the subject appear larger and more secure. Hence, it is arguable that Nolan chose to utilize a low-angle shot in this scene to visually represent the control she had over Angier's trick. Therefore, proving the fact that the femme fatale does not appear to be dangerous at first, giving her the upper hand at deceiving the male protagonist.

In addition to the low-angle shots included, the reflective surfaces utilized can also work to prove Olivia's loyalty to Borden early on in the film. In the scene where Olivia approaches Angier in her nightgown, Angier is seen staring at himself in the mirror. Olivia soon reveals that she had been sleeping at the theatre overnight without Angier's knowledge. When Olivia inquires as to what Angier is doing, he replies, "A part of a magicians job is to watch his competition" (The Prestige). Immediately after the word "competition" is elicited, a close-up shot is used to show Olivia looking at herself in the mirror. Mirrors often stand as a symbol for duplicity, as a reflection of something that already exists is shown. Hence, it is arguable that the act of Olivia looking into the mirror, as a close-up shot is used, and the word "competition" is elicited, stands as a representation for her double identity. While Olivia stands next to Angier as his assistant, she looks into the mirror recognizing her identity as his true competition.

Furthermore, the fact that Olivia had been sleeping overnight at the theatre without Angier's knowledge can be seen as a tactic she employs to watch her own competition, Angier. The only other time a close-up shot is used in this scene is right after Angier says the words, "I'm alone." The camera then focuses back on Olivia, who is momentarily seen with a smirk while looking in the mirror. Instead of looking at each other face to face, as most do in normal conversations, Olivia and Angier converse by looking at the other through a mirror, thereby drawing attention to the mirror and its representation of duplicity, accentuating Olivia's double identity.

While Olivia's loyalty can be interpreted through various scenes in the film, her loyalty is undoubtedly established when Angier reads through Borden's imitation diary. Angier reads the lines, "Today Olivia proves her love for me—to you, Angier. Yes, Angier, she gave you this notebook at my request. And Tesla is merely the key to my diary, not to my trick. Did you really think I'd part with my secret so easily, after so much? Good-bye, Angier. May you find solace for your thwarted ambition back in your American home." (The Prestige). It is at this moment when Angier realizes he has been deceived and betrayed by his beguiling assistant, Olivia. In this scene, Nolan utilizes a multitude of cutaways to showcase Olivia's wavering loyalty. The camera cuts to different flashbacks of Olivia, as Angier reads through Borden's imitation diary. The cutaways focus on Olivia's character, as she is seen in the center of the scene, rather than Borden, which proves Angier felt more deceived by Olivia, rather than his trained and cunning opponent. Furthermore, the first cutaway Nolan utilizes shows Olivia underneath a spotlight, presenting her as the concentration of the trick being performed. In a similar fashion, Nolan

chooses to show Olivia underneath a spotlight to visually represent the idea that Olivia is the root of Angier's failure as a magician.

Additionally, the words "Today my mistress proves her truthfulness" are recited as the face of Olivia is shown in order to highlight the lack of sincerity and candor the femme fatale demonstrates. It is evident that Olivia's character has caused Angier great anguish as his eyebrows narrow, his mouth hangs wide open, tears start to come from his eyes, and he aggressively squeezes the diary in his hands, all of which are actions performed after he visualizes Olivia's face. If Angier had never entrusted in Olivia, he would not have wasted his time following a dead end. Moreover, entrusting in Olivia allowed for Borden to have a one-up on Angier at all times as Olivia was willing to give up Angier's secrets but not Borden's.

On the subject of voiceovers, Nolan utilizes voice-overs to include an aspect from classic film noirs, as well as highlight Olivia's role as a femme fatale. In J.P. Telotte's book, *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film noir*, Telotte describes the effect voiceovers have on an audience. Telotte writes, "The narration consists of a voice, but it indicates an individual's presence and consciousness, which together motivate all that we see, move our vantage about freely about in time and space. That voice, though, stands over all else, signaling its proprietary nature... When a narrator tells us something in film, it is doubly important; it implies that the accompanying images are the result, and the indicator, of directed attention." (Telotte 41). Hence, the voice-overs included in *The Prestige* work to guide the audience in a specific direction, the direction of viewing Olivia's character as the femme fatale in the film. While there are a variety of voice-overs included in the film, a majority of the voiceovers are used to describe Olivia. There are no voice-overs heard when Julia or Sarah are seen in the film, which thereby

distances Olivia early on from the other two female characters in the film. In fact, the voice-overs draw attention to Olivia's sexuality and the subject of deception, which thereby creates a parallel between the two. The first voice-over utilized to describe Olivia is as followed, "A pretty assistant is the most effective form of misdirection" (The Prestige). After the word "misdirection" is heard, a close-up shot on Olivia's character is utilized, thereby drawing a correlation between the term misdirection and Olivia's character. Additionally, the connotation of the word misdirection not only relates to Olivia's ability to deceive an audience, but the term also foreshadows her ability to deceive her partner as well. By using the words "pretty" and "misdirection" in the same sentence Nolan foreshadows Olivia's nature as a femme fatale, and how she will use her sexuality to manipulate more than just the audience.

Furthermore, the only other voice-over that is heard when the camera focuses in on Olivia's character is when Olivia successfully manipulates Angier. Angier reads from Borden's diary that states, "Today my mistress proves her truthfulness" (The Prestige). Olivia's truthfulness to Borden thereby affirms Olivia's betrayal to Angier, as the two magicians are in constant competition with one another. The connotation of the word mistress highlights her extramarital sexual relationship with Borden/Fallon. Hence, by including the word mistress and truthfulness in the same sentence, Nolan continues to connect Olivia's sexuality with her level of candor and sincerity. The two-voice overs used to describe Olivia in the film represent the essence of the femme fatale as the femme fatale is culturally known to misguide men through the use of their sexuality. Therefore, not only does Nolan showcase Olivia's nature as a femme fatale through costume, voice, or character action but also through a careful soundtrack.

Furthermore, it is no coincidence that the trick Olivia primarily helps Angier with involves a trap door. One of Nolan's signature traits as an Auteur artist is his use of symbolism. In the case of the trap door trick, Nolan uses symbolism to allude to Olivia's identity as a femme fatale. To elaborate, when Angier falls through a trapdoor in the stage, a replica of Angier appears in a different place in the auditorium. Hence, Angier's most popular trick consists of the use of a double identity. The fact that Olivia helps Angier with "The Disappearing Man" trick, more so than any other trick, symbolizes her close relationship with the subject of double identities as well. Trapdoors culturally represent secrecy and multiple passageways. The act of Olivia falling through the trapdoor in the stage foreshadows the secrecy she is about to embark on, working as an assistant to both magicians, as well as her change in direction away from Angier's good graces. Additionally, the trapdoor Olivia falls through is the same trapdoor that is fatal to both Angier's replica as well as Fallon's character, for he is framed for Angier's murder. Hence, it is arguable that the act of Olivia falling through the same trapdoor foreshadows the devastation her character will bring to the male characters in the film.

Another aspect of Olivia that qualifies her as a femme fatale is her ability to pursue her own desires rather than those of her male counterparts. In the essay, *Personality Disorder and the Femme Fatale*, by Scott Snyder, Snyder describes how the femme fatale showcases autonomy which allows her to break away from the constraints of patriarchy. Snyder writes, "She controls her own sexuality, setting her apart from the patriarchal system. This rupture of the suppression of women by the society was summarized recently: "...women break out of the molds cast for them in the rigid spiritual and social structures of the ruling patriarchy. (Snyder 4). In the film, Fallon, whom Olivia believes to be Borden, begs Olivia to continue a relationship

with him after Sarah's death. Fallon goes as far as to say that he never loved Sarah, and only loves Olivia. While *The Prestige*, follows the lives of two young magicians in the late 19th century, and women in the 19th century were expected to adhere to the desires of men, Olivia showcases her own autonomy by choosing to walk away from Fallon, despite his wishes. In the book by G.J Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life*, Barker-Benfield describes the challenges women faced in the 19th century. "Now women "were called upon to provide the love, tranquillity, and socially invisible labor needed by men pushing themselves to the limit." (Barker-Benfield 26). In the film, Fallon maintains his composure as he gives his case as to why Olivia should still maintain a relationship with him. In fact, Fallon's disposition is relatively calm, as though he almost expects Olivia to adhere to his desires. However, instead of keeping the peace or worrying about providing love to Fallon/Borden, Olivia refuses to infringe on her wants and beliefs. Hence, Olivia controls her own sexuality and demonstrates her strength as a femme fatale by separating herself from the patriarchal structure that expects women to act as submissives to their male counterparts.

While Olivia conforms to the traditional femme fatale in the sense that she is sexually alluring and maintains a double identity, she represents the neo-noir take on the femme fatale in the sense that she is left unpunished for her meddling with both magicians. In Ingrid Hofmann's essay, *Deadly Seductions: Femme Fatales in 90's Film Noir*, Hofmann explains the fate of the femme fatale in most classic film noirs. "But Film Noir's use of the phallic woman, who is later castrated, can also be read as a vehicle for reassuring men that even powerful women can be controlled in the end. Very few of the femme fatales of the 40's and 50's film noir went unpunished or unrecuperated." (Hofmann 3). Often times the classic femme fatale would find

herself arrested or killed, as did the femme fatale in Nolan's *The Following*. However, by taking on a neo-noir film, and straying away from popular classic film noir elements in *The Prestige*, such as the use of black and white film and the presence of a prominent detective, the film allows for a deviated portrayal of the femme fatale.

Instead of Olivia getting punished in the film, Olivia was the only female character who lived. In fact, Julia died by the hands of a male, and Sarah died from the heartache caused by a male. While Sarah and Julia didn't interfere in the personal lives of the protagonists, they were the ones who met their demise. Hence, it is reasonable to infer that throughout the decades and advancement of film, the femme fatale has gained more agency which has made her more threatening to the male protagonists in the film. To elaborate, when Angier had accused Olivia of becoming too close to Borden, it was only then that Olivia handed Angier Borden's imitation diary as a means of revenge. While Olivia had clearly intended on deceiving Angier with the fake diary at some point in time, for she would not have carried it around with her otherwise, she made the ultimate decision to betray Angier after he had yelled at her and criticized her efforts. Hence, while Angier may have believed Olivia was acting in submission to his enraged voice, Olivia was actually acting in revenge, and it was her, who subjected Angier to punishment. Therefore, Olivia demonstrates heightened jurisdiction, as not only does she willingly deceive Angier, she also maintains a level of dignity as she does not let disrespect go unnoticed.

While Olivia arguably misleads Angier more so than Borden ever had, Angier had no problem framing Fallon, who he thought was Borden, for murder, when he believed Borden had double-crossed him. However, after Angier realized Olivia had double-crossed him, he didn't care to pursue her. Furthermore, without Olivia's assistance, it is probable that Borden would not

have been able to fool Angier into believing Tesla was the key to Borden's Disappearing Man trick. Olivia was an integral part in deceiving Angier and her deceptive practices can be seen as more betraying than Borden's were because Borden was upfront about his allegiance. Therefore, while Olivia double-crossed Angier more so than any other character did in the film, it is arguable that Olivia's sexuality and ability to successfully deceive Angier deterred him from seeking revenge as he was fearful for her sense of unpredictability.

While Angier and Borden are presented as the two primary magicians in the film, it is Olivia who presents herself as the superior magician. Angier and Borden both encounter severe setbacks in their careers as magicians in the film. For instance, Angier lost his wife and spent the majority of the film following a false lead. Borden also lost his wife due to his secrecy as a magician, and also lost his brother, Fallon, as his brother was framed for Angier's "death." However, while Olivia may have been looked at as a magician's assistant, after analyzing Olivia's alluring presence, double identity, and ability to deceive, it is arguable that Nolan set up Olivia's character to act as the prevailing magician, for she was the only character who was successfully able to deceive characters on and off the stage. Neither Angier nor Borden would have been able to carry out their tricks, such as deceiving Angier, or the Disappearing Man Trick, without Olivia's assistance. Therefore, the male characters in the film showcase their heightened dependence on Olivia. Due to the fact that *The Prestige* is a film that deals exclusively with the theme of magic, and those familiar with the art of magic know how important it is to always have the upper hand, Olivia proves herself to be the prevailing magician as she is the only performer in the film whose methods of deception consistently remain undiscovered.

In the years following *The Prestige*, Nolan has continued his focus on the femme fatale, and how the femme engages in behind the scene manipulation, rather than overt deception. In one of Nolan's more recent films, *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), the protagonist, Bruce Wayne, falls victim to the sexual allurements of Miranda Tate's character in the film. While Miranda and Olivia's character varies significantly, as Olivia's intentions are not always entirely devious, they are similar in the sense that they don't reveal their betrayal and deceptive techniques until the end of both films. Miranda's effect on Bruce Wayne was similar to the effect Olivia had on Angier, as Bruce Wayne had just previously lost a love interest in *The Dark Knight Rises*, and was hence already vulnerable. Furthermore, Miranda also maintained a double identity, as she was Bruce Wayne's love interest as well as the most effective antagonist in trying to destroy Gotham city. In addition to Miranda's double identity, Miranda's character is consistently seen wearing darker colors. In fact, when Miranda reveals her true identity she is seen wearing a very dark brown. Although, in most angles, her outfit appears all black, thereby highlighting her control and mastery. Furthermore, as seen in *The Prestige*, an image of Olivia wearing all black is shown when Olivia's true loyalty is revealed. Hence, in both films, Nolan utilizes a careful and specific color scheme to emphasize the inconspicuous nature of the femme fatales in his films.

In the book by Jacqueline Furby and Stuart Joy, *The Cinema of Christopher Nolan: Imagining the Impossible*, Furby and Joy cite Mary Ann Doane who describes how Christopher Nolan, as an Auteur artist, uniquely portrays his version of the femme fatale. Furby and Joy writes, "Mary Ann Doane defines the *femme fatale* as a figure of a certain discursive unease, a potential epistemological trauma [whose] most striking characteristic, perhaps, is the fact that she never really is what she seems to be; [she] transform[s] the threat of the woman into a secret,

something which must be aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered' (1991:1) (Furby and Joy 65). Miranda and Olivia both reveal their identity in an obtrusive manner, alarming not only to the male protagonists in the films but to the audience as well. For instance, Miranda reveals her true identity and loyalty to "The League of Shadows" when she stabs Bruce Wayne at the end of the film. While Olivia did not physically inflict harm on either of the male protagonists in the film, her identity was not revealed in a pleasant or calm manner, but through Borden's imitation diary, a medium of ultimate betrayal.

Consistent with the majority of his films as an Auteur artist, Nolan utilizes specific editing techniques to highlight Miranda's nature as a femme fatale. For instance, cutaways are used in order to emphasize Miranda's deceit. To elaborate, when Miranda is seen stabbing Bruce Wayne she tells him the story of her past. Cutaways are used that transition back and forth between Miranda at the present moment and Miranda when she escaped from the pit as a little girl. However, when the camera switches back to Miranda as an adult, distinctive dialogue is heard that accentuates her trickery. For instance, the word "vengeance" and "murder" are heard as a close-up shot is used to focus in on Miranda's face. By utilizing a close-up shot on Miranda's face when words with negative connotations are used, an inevitable parallel is drawn between Miranda and a sense of danger and fatality. In a similar fashion, as previously stated, Nolan utilizes close-up shots on Olivia when he wants to associate certain terms with her character.

However, the most striking phrase that exhibits Miranda's perilous nature is the phrase she recites, "A knife that waits years without forgetting, that splits quietly between the bones, that's the knife that cuts deepest" (The Dark Knight Rises). This quote represents the control

Miranda has over Bruce Wayne's character at this moment, and how her prior relationship with him allowed her to hurt him in the deepest way possible. If a cutaway was not used to focus the attention back on Miranda's character it is arguable that the impact of the quote would have been less powerful. To elaborate, it was the cutaway back to Miranda's adult face, as she stabbed Bruce Wayne, that highlighted her stoic expression and lack of remorse, making her an utterly sinister femme fatale. Furby and Joy writes, "Any power that Bruce may have had in his role as the male hero vanishes, and he realizes he is at mercy of a woman he has never known" (66). Hence, this quote corresponds with Morrison's prior argument, that the femme fatale promptly sets about disposing of her lover after her work is accomplished. Similarly, Olivia had never returned to Angier after she had given him Borden's imitation diary, and had left Borden/Fallon immediately after his wife died by suicide.

Ergo, both *The Prestige* and *The Dark Knight Rises* are both comprised of extremely masculine characters who are ripped of their masculinity by the female leads in both films. Angier and Borden are constantly trying to outdo one another by the means of fighting over women and becoming the most successful male magician in London. However, Olivia robs both magicians of their heightened masculinity, as by the end of the film, both magicians feel a sense of despair as they had both suffered severe loss and neither one of them had become the superior magician, a fate that could have been arguably avoided without Olivia's interference. Bruce Wayne, better known as Batman, is recognized for his superior strength, beguiling girlfriends, and high intellect. However, Miranda takes away a sense of Batman's masculinity as he is seen wounded, and less physically equipped to defend himself. Furthermore, Miranda's successful and unexpected manipulation challenges Batman's intellect as he was in utter shock when

Miranda revealed her true identity. Therefore, both femme fatales strip their male counterparts of masculinity by using their sexuality and femininity to misguide the male protagonists on a path of destruction.

While Nolan utilizes similar tactics to portray both femme fatales, they differ significantly in the sense that one lives and one meets her demise. Unlike Olivia, Miranda was killed, coinciding with the more traditional representation of the femme fatale and her inevitable punishment. However, Miranda still deviates from the representation of the traditional femme fatale as she practices behind the scenes manipulation, which allowed for the men in the film to view her as a complex character, a character of more substance than the traditional femme fatale, who was often left unnamed, such as the “blonde girl” in Nolan’s film, *The Following*. While it is evident that Nolan changes the fate of the femme fatales in his films to avoid becoming predictable, his goal of presenting underlying meanings and character motives through the use of an alluring female remains unchanged.

Although Auteur Theory may be considered outdated in today’s society, it is important to view the work of Christopher Nolan through this specific lens to get a clear sense of his creative identity. By using Auteur Theory as a lens to analyze Nolan’s work, the audience is able to pick up on recurring themes and similarities in visual style that allow for an increased level of understanding. To elaborate, recognizing Nolan as an Auteur artist will help the audience recognize recurring thematic content such as the focus on the femme fatale. By using Auteur Theory, the audience will have knowledge that Nolan’s female leads are often rebellious and autonomous, capable of severe damage to the protagonist. Furthermore, the audience will know to pick up on the femme’s specific costume design and how Nolan utilizes color to drop hints at

the femme's true motives and desires. Additionally, the audience will be able to recognize how dynamic camerawork, such as low-angle and close-up shots, work to accentuate the femme's level of confidence and control through the bulk of Nolan's work. Editing techniques, such as cutaways, will signal the audience towards a shift in the film, as Nolan often utilizes cutaways to reveal the true identity of the femmes in his films.

Inspired by classic film noirs, Christopher Nolan maintains a focus on the dark thematic content of traditional film noirs, however, strays from classic film noir conventions in order to better represent the changes in society. In particular, Nolan deviates from the traditional representation of the femme fatale in efforts to gain a sense of novelty, as well as highlight the increased level of power gained by women throughout the mid-late 20th century. Nolan creates strong-willed and nonconformist female leads to mirror the level of jurisdiction women were portraying in society when Nolan was growing up. Women displayed outstanding autonomy in the mid-late 20th century through their endless protests and eventual victories, such as the legalization of abortion in America. Most notably, Nolan deviates from subjecting his femme fatales to punishment, a fate near certain for the femme fatales in classic film noirs. In specific, Nolan's portrayal of Olivia Wenscombe in the 2006 film, *The Prestige*, best portrays Nolan's neo-noir representation of the femme fatale. The female lead, Olivia, is a unique portrayal of the femme fatale, as she undoubtedly leads the male protagonists on a path of destruction but does so without overt manipulation and does not bear any consequence. Instead of overt manipulation, Nolan's utilizes elements of mise-en-scene and specific editing techniques to showcase hidden meanings and interpretations through the use of the femme fatales in his films, which thereby stresses his creative identity as an Auteur artist.

Work Cited

Andrews, David. *No Start, No End*. Film International, 1 Nov. 2012.

Barker-Benfield, Graham John. *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Aspects of the Exploitation of Women by Men*. 1968.

Brody, Richard. “‘Film Noir’: The Elusive Genre.” *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 20 June 2017, www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/film-noir-elusive-genre-2.

Duncan, Paul. *Film Noir: Films of Trust and Betrayal*. Pocket Essentials, 2006.

Elliot, Andrew J. “Color and Psychological Functioning: a Review of Theoretical and Empirical Work.” *Frontiers in Psychology*, Frontiers Media S.A., 2 Apr. 2015, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4383146/.

Furby, Jacqueline. *The Cinema of Christopher Nolan: Imagining the Impossible*. Wallflower Press, 2015.

Hofmann, Ingrid. *Deadly Seductions: Femme Fatales in 90's Film Noir*. July 1998.

Ney, Jason. *Dark Roots*. Film Noir Foundation, 2013.

Nolan, Christopher, director. *The Prestige*. Warner Home Entertainment, 2006.

Nolan, Christopher, et al. *The Dark Knight Rises*. Warner Bros., 2012.

Shaw, Francesca, and Victoria Crocker. "Reaky Voice as a Stylistic Feature of Young American Female Speech: An Intraspeaker Variation Study of Scarlett Johansson." *Lifespans and Styles*, 2015.

Smith, Kirsten. *The Changing Allure of the Femme Fatale in Fact and Fiction*. At the Interface/Probing the Boundaries , 1 Sept. 2017.

Snyder, Scott. *PERSONALITY DISORDER AND THE FILM NOIR FEMME FATALE**. Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture, 2001.

Telotte, J. P. *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir*. Univ. of Illinois Pr., 1989.

Walker-Morrison, Deborah. "Sex Ratio, Socio-Sexuality, and the Emergence of the Femme Fatale in Classic French and American Film Noir." *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Center for the Study of Film and History, 20 Aug. 2015, muse.jhu.edu/article/589136.

