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Katie Fitzpatrick

“Certainly, money and women are twinned for Marlowe,” (432) remarks literary critic David Smith of Raymond Chandler’s famous private eye, Phillip Marlowe. Indeed, although women are rarely the capitalists of Chandler’s novels, they are always the subjects most subsumed by capitalist ideology, by greed or decadence, by fantasies of social mobility. This association between women and capitalist ideology is perhaps even more strongly marked in Dashiell Hammett’s novel *Red Harvest*, where the “thoroughly mercenary” femme fatale, Dinah Brand, epitomizes the reified consciousness that pervades the text. Unlike Chandler’s and Hammett’s male protagonists, who insist on retaining a critical distance in relation to capitalism, these female characters are presented as utterly subsumed by it. They become not only the chief representatives of capitalism, but also its chief victims, manipulating and murdering, but only for the sake of the ideological fantasy which manipulates them. In the face of this characterization, one must ask: what discourse is at work that allows Chandler and Hammett to collapse capitalism into the feminine? How is it that women are figured as more easily “contaminated” by the ideologies and “social ills” male characters successfully resist? In this essay, I will use Andreas Huyssen’s discussion of mass culture as “feminine,” Mary Anne Doane’s concept of the “over-identifying” female gaze and Eliza Burke’s discussion of “contagion” to address this question. I will argue that it is the over-identification and lack of critical distance associated with the feminine subject and the feminine gaze which allows Hammett and Chandler to figure women as the symptoms of capital, as the contaminated representatives of ideological contagion.

In “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator,” Mary Anne Doane argues that the female spectator is associated with an over-identification with the image, an excessive proximity to the object of her gaze. In constructing this argument, Doane draws on Laura Mulvey’s work in essays such as “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” There, Mulvey describes the “essentially active,” scopophilic, male spectator who functions by “taking other people as objects [and] subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (485). “The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly,” Mulvey writes, “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed” (487). In her essay, Doane addresses the issue of the female spectator within Mulvey’s dichotomy. If the woman is perpetually figured as the object of the gaze, Doane asks, then how does she function as a gazing subject? If she is both the subject and the object of her own gaze, what happens to the critical

distance which typically exists between the voyeur and the object of desire?

For Doane, any such distance is collapsed and obliterated in the female gaze, producing an excessive proximity to the image. She draws on semiotics to explain the consequences of this collapse, writing, “The intimacy of signifier and signified in the iconic sign negates the distance which defines phonetic language. And it is the absence of this crucial distance or gap which also, simultaneously, specifies both the hieroglyphic and the female” (496). The ideographic hieroglyph collapses the distance between what is represented and the sign which represents it, and this lack of arbitrariness produces an over-identification between signifier and signified. Similarly, the female spectator, in gazing at herself as an image, or at an image she identifies with herself, blurs the distinction between herself and the object of her gaze. It is in this sense that she “over-identifies” with the object. Unlike the male spectator, whose very voyeurism is predicated on a certain distance from the object, the female spectator collapses the image into herself. It is for this reason that Doane argues that “The supportive binary at work” in constructing the male and female spectator, “is not only ... an opposition between passivity and activity, but perhaps more importantly, an opposition between proximity and distance in relation to the image” (498).

In “Feminine Visions: Anorexia and Contagion in Pop Discourse,” Eliza Burke criticizes the ways in which Doane’s conception of the “over-identification” of the female spectator has been adapted and mobilized within pop discourse. Specifically, she criticizes the notion of anorexia as a kind of visual “contagion,” a disease one “catches” from viewing other anorexic bodies. She argues that this notion of contagion is underpinned by the idea of the female spectator’s uncritical identification with the object of her gaze. “These ideas suggest that the process of comparison leads to self-erasure and the attempt to replace the body/self with that of the model which is constructed as desirable,” Burke argues (323). From this, she suggests, springs the idea of a female contagion, “the spread of a disorderly, collective mentality” (324), “a kind of sympathy between female bodies” (325). Thus, while Doane diagnoses a particular problem in the construction of the female gaze, pop discourse essentializes that problematic construction, associating women with a pathological gaze, a “lack of critical distance and excessive desire” (Burke 322).

This conception of contagion, of a “disorderly, collective mentality” produced by the female spectator’s over-identification, can be applied more broadly to conceptions of the “feminized” masses or of “feminine” mass culture, explicitly described in Gustave Le Bon’s 1896 work *The Crowd*, and criticized in Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Le Bon argues that “Crowds are everywhere distinguished by feminine characteristics” (21) and he identifies these characteristics as “impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, the absence of judgement and of the critical spirit” (17). For Le Bon, this “impulsiveness” and lack of critical perspective produces a “collective mind” (2). “In a crowd every sentiment and

act is contagious,” he argues, “and contagious to such a degree that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to the collective interest” (10, *italics mine*). We thus see in Le Bon an explicit association between contagion, the crowd and the feminine. It is the over-identification of individuals within the crowd that stands as their primary psychological characteristic, and this lack of critical distance between subjects can be directly connected to Doane’s conception of the over-identifying feminine spectator. Doane’s and Burke’s observations thus help us to better understand Le Bon’s much older conception of the feminine masses, as well as the specific association he draws between mass culture, contagion and a kind of permeable, sympathetic, feminine subject.

The over-identification associated with the female gaze can also be connected to Andreas Huyssen’s work on “Mass Culture as Woman.” Huyssen argues that “political, psychological and aesthetic discourse around the turn of the century consistently and obsessively genders mass culture and the masses as feminine” (47). Although Huyssen makes reference to Le Bon’s feminized masses, he is more particularly interested in the gendering of mass culture and popular literature. “Woman is positioned as reader of inferior literature – subjective, emotional and passive – while man emerges as writer of genuine, authentic literature,” he argues (46). This association between women and emotional, inferior literature can also, however, be read in terms of the female spectator. In “Film and the Masquerade,” Doane remarks, “The association of tears and ‘wet wasted afternoons’ ... with genres specified as feminine (the soap opera, the ‘woman’s picture’) points very precisely to this type of over-identification, this abolition of distance ...” (501). There is then, a similar discourse at work in gendering both mass culture and the “masses.” While the crowd is characterized by a contagious sympathy between feminine bodies, mass culture is characterized by an overly sympathetic relationship between feminine consumers and the text. Again, women are imagined as overly susceptible to others’ ideas and emotions, as unable to retain a critical distance between themselves and what they see.

In his analysis of “Mass Culture as Woman,” Huyssen also addresses the work of Frankfurt school theorist of mass culture, Theodor Adorno. He argues that because Adorno redirects the “blame” for mass culture from the masses themselves to bourgeois centres of control, he “erases a whole web of gender connotations” (48). Nonetheless, I would argue that while Adorno does not explicitly gender “mass culture,” his notion of an engulfing network of the whole, against which the modernist work struggles for autonomy, functions very much in terms of Le Bon’s own dichotomy, in which “an engulfing femininity ... projected onto the metropolitan masses” threatens the male subject with the loss of his “fortified and stable ego boundaries” (Huyssen 53). In Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s (in)famous essay “The Culture Industry,” mass culture takes on the “contagious” qualities of Le Bon’s feminized masses. “Culture today is infecting everything with sameness,” (94) they write, “all mass culture under monopoly is identical” (95). This “infection”

becomes increasingly unavoidable, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, as “the ever increasing pace of commodification and colonization of cultural space” pushes forward (Huyssen 57) and as it draws the public – “which allegedly and actually favours the...culture industry” (96) – into its fold. As the duped masses submit to their own “infection by sameness,” “life is ... made indistinguishable from the sound film” (99). In contrast to this “contagion,” Horkheimer and Adorno figure the modernist work, like the male subject, as autonomous and separate. As Huyssen writes of Adorno’s thought, “The autonomy of the modernist art work ... is always the result of a resistance, an abstention and a suppression – resistance to the seductive lure of mass culture” (55, *italics mine*). Thus, while Horkheimer and Adorno avoid explicit gendering, and while they shift the focus from mass culture to its bourgeois control centres, they retain notions of an engulfing mass culture and of “susceptible,” infected, masses. In contrast, they associate the modernist art work with autonomy and with a critical *distance* in relation to capitalist ideology.

As demonstrated, Doane’s conception of the female spectator and Burke’s discussion of “contagion” – a popular discourse that draws on the notion of the over-identification and over-proximity of the female gaze – help us to better understand older conceptions of the “feminine” masses or a “feminine” mass culture. Both Doane and Huyssen argue that mass culture was figured as feminine because of the sympathetic over-identification assumed to occur between consumer and character. Similarly, Huyssen argues that in works such as Le Bon’s, the masses are coded as feminine, and our investigation of Le Bon reveals this coding to be deeply embedded in notions of contagion and feminine over-identification. Finally, in Horkheimer and Adorno’s work – where ideology itself functions as a kind of contagion – the divide between the susceptible masses and the autonomous modernist art work is predicated on the same gendered dichotomy present in Le Bon, on the split between the feminine masses and the autonomous male subject. Intersecting Horkheimer and Adorno’s discourse with that of figures like Le Bon, we discover a space in which the feminine subject – with her over-identifying gaze – is imagined as more deeply susceptible to ideology. The “permeable” ego boundaries of the feminine subject are imagined as more easily worn down by both ideology and crowd mentality, while the masculine ego is figured as more capable of resisting “contagion.” This twinning of ideology and the feminine helps us to better understand Hammett’s and Chandler’s twinning of money and women, their figuring of feminine characters as “symptoms of capital.” In the next portion of this essay, I would like to discuss the ways in which their novels – *Red Harvest* and *Farewell, my Lovely*, specifically – draw upon and perpetuate this discourse of susceptibility in casting women as the representatives of ideological contagion. In doing so, I will also draw upon Slavoj Žižek’s conception of the femme fatale as a “symptom of man.”

Dashiell Hammett has been described as “probably, but not certainly, a card-carrying Communist” (Symons 127) and his 1929 hardboiled detective novel, *Red Harvest*, is centrally con-

cerned with the reification of all human relationships. The protagonist, the Continental Op, is invited to work on a case in a mid-American mining town called Personville. Early on, he receives a history of the town's labour struggles from defeated organizer Bill Quint. Capitalist boss Elihu Willsson "had owned Personville, heart, soul, skin and guts" (8). During a strike by the workers of the Personville mining corporation, Elihu had hired gunmen and strike breakers. These men had taken "the city for their spoils" (9), however, instating an anarchic, cut-throat gangsterism as well as a deeply reified consciousness, characterized by the exchange of human value for economic value and by radically alienated interpersonal relationships. After the resignation of Bill Quint, and the murder of the progressive-minded reporter Donald Willsson (which occurs early in the plot), this reified consciousness appears to subsume the town entirely. The Op's interactions with various characters throughout the novel suggest that a dehumanized and alienated psychology has penetrated every level of Personville's society.

The spread of this reified consciousness is associated, throughout the novel, with a kind of contagion. As noted above, Elihu is described as owning the bodies of the persons of Personville, their "heart, soul, skin and guts" (8). From the beginning of the novel however, the town Personville is referred to interchangeably as Poisonville, the inference being that these bodies, these persons, have been poisoned – poisoned by reification and capitalist ideology. Much like the feminine masses of *The Crowd*, the "poisoned" town is figured as an engulfing threat, against which the Op must assert his "fortified and stable ego boundaries" (Huysen 53). He argues that "anybody that brings ethics to Poisonville is going to get them all rusty" (117) and describes his effort to clean up the town as "me versus Poisonville" (89). As the novel progresses, however, he discovers that he has indeed been infected. His ethics become increasingly "rusty," and he notes, "I've arranged a killing or two in my time, when they were necessary. But this is the first time I've ever got the *fever*. It's this damned burg. You can't go straight here" (154, italics mine). Here, the Op describes his infection by a moral or ideological contagion in terms of a literal contagion, a "fever." Shortly afterwards, he notes, "Play with murder enough and it gets you one of two ways. It makes you *sick* or you get to like it" (155, italics mine). "Liking it" is also figured as a kind of sickness, however, and the Op says, "Poisonville is right. It's poisoned me" (157).

Of all the novel's characters, it is Dinah Brand – the only major female character – who most embodies Personville's moral and ideological contagion. Described as a "soiled dove ... a de luxe hustler, [and] a big-league digger" (22), she represents a strictly economic, strictly capitalist ethos. "She's money-mad, all right, but somehow you don't mind it," observes admirer Robert Albury. "She's so thoroughly mercenary, so frankly greedy that there's nothing disagreeable about it" (27). In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx describes the bourgeoisie as "pitilessly [tearing] asunder" all previous forms of human interaction, leaving behind "no other nexus between man and man

than naked self-interest, than callous cash-payment” (57). The “thoroughly mercenary” Dinah represents precisely this reduction of human interaction to a single nexus. It is not only her body, but her secrets and her loyalties which are for sale, and she is equally willing to sell out others. She betrays boyfriend Max “Whisper” Thaler in a gambling scheme, saying, “All I did was what any sensible person would have done – get in on the win” (81), and turns over associate Dan Rolff for a negotiated two-hundred dollars and ten cents (108). Notably, Dinah’s mercenary nature does not appear to spring from necessity. “It’s not so much the money,” she says, “It’s the principle of the thing. If a girl’s got something that’s worth something to somebody, she’s a boob if she doesn’t collect” (35). Dinah, subsumed by a reified consciousness, by Personville’s ideological contagion, views the entire world in terms of exchange value. Collecting on the economic worth of the human, sexual and spiritual commodities she trades is, for her, not simple manipulation but a sort of “natural” way of things.

In many ways, Dinah fits the model of the classic femme fatale. She is manipulative and seductive. She is dangerous, and is said to have “a habit of stirring up murderous notions in [her] boyfriends” (159). In *Looking Awry*, Žižek argues that while the femme fatale appears to be “pulling the strings” (64), she is in fact a “victim of her own lust for enjoyment” (65), “a plaything in the hands of forces she cannot dominate” (64). She cannot, Žižek argues, “be clearly located in the opposition between master and slave,” and this is very much true of the seemingly independent and powerful Dinah Brand. Although she is the novel’s chief representative of capitalism, she is also its victim. It is in this sense that she functions as a “symptom” of Personville’s ideological contagion. Dinah is introduced as “[the] Whisper’s woman,” and this casts her not only as Whisper’s possession, but also as the possession of the reified consciousness he has ushered in. She belongs to the “whispers” of ideology, and is victim to them as much as she perpetuates them.

Dinah’s ultimate powerlessness and victimhood is dramatized in the text in a number of ways. First, while it is evident that Dinah’s physical attractiveness is central to her power, she is depicted as perpetually unable to achieve the image she aspires to. Her makeup is always uneven and her dresses are torn and gaping. Her nylons are constantly running, with the sense that she is literally falling apart at the seams. “I paid five bucks for these socks yesterday,” she bemoans. “Now look at the damned things! Every day – runs, runs, runs!” (33). Albury underscores her inability to achieve the expected image of the femme fatale when he says to the Op, “I suppose you’ll see her. You’ll be disappointed at first” (27). Dinah is thus depicted as always one step behind the image which enables her power. She is caught in an endless loop, constantly buying, grooming and consuming – running, running, running – only in an attempt to become a more valuable commodity herself.

In addition to this, Dinah’s victimhood is dramatized by her underlying passivity. Although she appears to be manipulating various male characters, she is in fact so “thoroughly mercenary”

that she functions as neutrally as capital itself. She is traded and traded through. She can always be bought as long as the price is right. In the end, she is simply a passive term in male interaction. Furthermore, she must even suffer their derision for having taken on such a position. “So I’m too utterly filthy for you now, am I?” (82) she cries to Dan Rolff, responding to the lack of respect she is granted by the novel’s male characters. Dinah’s death also dramatizes this ultimate powerlessness. Reno Starkey arrives at her house hoping to trap Max Thaler, but begins to suspect Dinah has helped Max trap him. When Reno hears noises in the house, he becomes even more suspicious and kills Dinah. “A victim of her own lust for enjoyment” (Zizek 65), Dinah thus falls into her own trap. Attempting to play various male characters off one another, she eventually finds herself caught between them, and pays for it.

Red Harvest’s ideological contagion is thus depicted as most deeply infecting the novel’s only major female character. While the Op struggles to retain his autonomy in the face of this engulfing threat – ultimately leaving Personville and its poisons behind – Dinah falls victim to the capitalist ethos ushered in by Whisper and the other gangsters. She is entirely subsumed by the reified consciousness and capitalist ideology that poisons the town, and becomes its primary representative. She is also, however, its victim, and all of her manipulations in fact function in the name of the ideological fantasm which has been manipulating her. Zizek argues that the femme fatale’s ultimate powerlessness can be explained in terms of the Lacanian proposition that woman is a “symptom of man.” Nonetheless, in *Red Harvest* at least, we can imagine the femme fatale as a “symptom of capital” – a permeable, susceptible, feminine subject who is brought under the sway of an ideological contagion she cannot control. Unlike the men whose gaze allows them a critical distance in relation to ideology and so various levels of autonomy and self-consciousness, Dinah is depicted as so utterly close to the ideology as to virtually become it. She attempts to achieve identity between herself and a projected image of power, and it is this proximity which allows her to be subsumed by the ideological contagion the men are more capable of resisting.

This same figuring of feminine subjects as “symptoms of capital” appears in the works of Hammett’s literary heir, Raymond Chandler. Although not exactly a Marxist, Chandler is deeply distrustful of wealth and casts his private eye, Phillip Marlowe, as a poor outsider, unwilling to relinquish his autonomy in favour of money. “I’m a poor man, but I pay my own way,” he says in *Farewell, my Lovely*, “And it’s not quite as soft a way as you would like” (225). As in *Red Harvest*, however, corruption and capitalist greed are figured as a kind of contagion, or at least, as an engulfing totality. Vast power networks run through the government, the wealthy elite, the police force and the criminal underground in Chandler’s novels, necessitating that Marlowe keep his distance in order to retain his individualistic position. He remarks of Bay City, for example, “You can buy a town this size all complete, with the original box and tissue paper ... And that makes

me want out" (189). In contrast to Marlowe's attempt to retain a critical distance in relation to capitalist corruption, most of the women of Chandler's novels are depicted as entirely subsumed by it. In *The Big Sleep* and *The Long Goodbye*, wealthy heiresses Carmen Sternwood, Vivian Regan, Sylvia Lennox and Linda Loring represent the degeneration made possible by their fathers' power and capitalist exploits. General Sternwood says of his daughters "Neither of them has any more moral sense than a cat. Neither have I. No Sternwood ever had" (*The Big Sleep* 13). Meanwhile, the promiscuity and vacuousness of Sylvia Lennox are attributed to her being spoiled by wealth, and even Linda Loring is described as "spoiled a little ... by money" (*The Long Goodbye* 362). Similarly, in *The Little Sister*, Orfamay Quest is figured as symptomatic of the corruption of more "traditional" families by Hollywood greed, and in *Farewell, my Lovely* – the novel to be explored in depth here – Velma Valento is depicted as a representative and a victim of the "American Dream," the ideology of social mobility.

Marlowe begins *Farewell, my Lovely* searching for long-missing lounge singer, Velma Valento. Early on he also becomes entangled in a secondary plot involving a jewel heist and the wealthy Helen Grayle. By the end of the novel, Marlowe has discovered that Helen Grayle is in fact Velma Valento, and that she has committed murder in order to retain her new wealthy identity. Velma's transformation epitomizes the narrative of social mobility, and Marlowe remarks, "A girl who started in the gutter became the wife of a multimillionaire" (281). Nonetheless, as with Dinah Brand, Velma's apparent success and power masks an ultimate powerlessness. First, once she attains wealth she discovers that it is not what she expected it to be, that she has been fooled into believing it would offer her a better life. She says, "It's a pretty lousy world if you ask me" (278). When Marlowe responds, "Money must help," she says, "You think its going to when you haven't always had money. As a matter of fact it just makes new problems" (278).

Additionally, Velma is depicted as having lost control over her own scheme, of having to sacrifice everything for a social position she is no longer sure she desires. "I think she meant to kill anybody she had to kill," Marlowe notes, "She had a lot to fight for. But you can't keep that sort of thing up indefinitely" (286). Thus, while she may appear to be in control, even her murders are products of a desperate attempt to "keep up" with the ideology of social mobility which has subsumed her. After Marlowe exposes her, she goes into hiding, and so finally exposes her own powerlessness. "She never went home. She must have a little hideout where she could change her clothes and appearance," Marlowe says, "After all she lived in peril" (284). When she is found again, she kills herself before she can be arrested. Like Dinah, she is caught in her own trap, becoming a victim of the ideology she once represented. The final line of the novel underscores the tragedy of Velma's infection by ideological contagion. "You could see a long way," Marlowe says, describing a clear day, "but not as far as Velma had gone" (292). Velma goes far in terms of social

mobility, but in order to retain her position she must go further and further morally and personally. Ultimately, she loses control over own fate and, in death, goes as far away as possible.

It is significant to note that, like Dinah, Velma suffers because of an unsuccessful attempt to transform herself into a particular image. Burke argues that the notion of contagion associated with the female gaze suggests “that the process of comparison leads to self-erasure and the attempt to replace the body/self with that of the model which is constructed as desirable” (323) and Velma is very much engaged in a process of self-erasure, attempting to shed her poor identity and take on the appearance of her new self, Helen Grayle. She not only drastically changes her appearance and even her voice (271), but also replaces older photographs of herself with photographs of other girls, erasing her past self and making comparisons less likely. Despite all this however, she is unable to produce identity between herself and the fantastic image she desires. Like the Op with Dinah, Marlowe finds himself disappointed by her failure, saying, “Suddenly without any real change in her she ceased to be beautiful. She looked like a woman who would have been dangerous a hundred years ago, and twenty years ago daring, but who today was just Grade B Hollywood” (279). Just before she is finally caught, she is seen “studying the roots of her hair and eyebrows” (289), frantically searching for the traces of her past that are destined to emerge.

In *Farewell, my Lovely*, as in *Red Harvest*, autonomous male protagonists who fiercely resist ideological contagion are paired with major female characters who are utterly subsumed by that contagion, becoming both its chief representative and its victim. In both cases the women virtually become ideology, just as they struggle to become an idealized image. We can read this characterization as both a product and a perpetuation of a larger discourse that figures the feminine subject as more permeable, more susceptible to ideology and to the pressures of mass sentiment. Like the female spectator described by Doane and Burke, these women over-identify with a fantastic image and attempt to produce identity between themselves and that image. This over-proximity is paired with their over-proximity to the ideology which spurs and enables any such transformation, and is contrasted with the autonomy and critical distance associated with the male characters and with the male gaze. Vampiric, capitalism contaminates these feminine subjects, transforming them into the infected representatives of ideological contagion.

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