

VIOLENT HOLLYWOOD

**Male Fantasies, Female Disembodiment
& The Black Dahlia**



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This thesis contains spoilers for *The Black Dahlia*, *True Confessions*, *American Horror Story* and *Sin City*.

It also contains graphic forensic photographs that some may find disturbing. Discretion is advised.

'I never knew her in life. She exists for me through others, in evidence of the ways her death drove them.'

- Dwight 'Bucky' Bleichert, *The Black Dahlia* (1984)

'This bloodstained physical dismembering is a curious thing: it's both the catastrophe itself and the subsequent method of trying to understand.'

- Melissa McCartney, *Death, Sharks, Surfers* (2019)

Introduction

In the summer of 2012, my stepmom hung herself. She had separated with my mom for almost a year then, but naturally, her premature death came as a big shock to me. I was eighteen at the time and had just graduated high school. I vividly remember watching *Sin City* with my mom, just a few months after the funeral. Halfway through the film, Bruce Willis' character is strung up by his neck, and just barely stays alive by tiptoeing on a stool (Figure 1). When the scene came up, my mom burst into tears and didn't stop crying for hours. Perhaps it's no coincidence that I can still clearly remember this particular scene... its brutal violence amplified by the noir-inspired contrast and stark shadows.



Figure 1: Detective John Hartigan (Bruce Willis) tiptoes for his life in *Sin City* (2005) © Miramax Films

During my teens, I used films and videogames to escape from the harsh reality in which I existed; one characterised by an alcoholic and verbally abusive stepmother. While projecting her frustrations about her personal struggle with identity and gender norms on me, I fled to my room and – ironically - watched films in which outdated gender norms were celebrated. I particularly enjoyed the simple but compelling narratives in classical thrillers, in which a detective had to solve a crime.

I didn't go to her funeral in 2012. Afterwards, my sister described the visible marks she'd seen on her neck, which the mortician had, apparently rather unsuccessfully, tried to cover up. Although I hadn't seen my stepmom's body with my own eyes, I could picture it easily. The image that formed inside my head was akin to those countless corpses I had seen laying in coffins and mortuary tables in thriller and horror films. Therefore, the 'reality' of death and violence had already mingled with the Hollywood images in my mind. Fictionalised crime helped me escape my personal horrors and perhaps even assisted in surviving it. But they also distorted and warped my views of the world.

Popular crime writers like Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett gave rise to the so called 'hard-boiled' crime genre in the 1920s, in which rough private eyes shot their way through Los Angeles' underbelly in order to get closer to the truth; he doesn't always play by the rules but gets results. Hollywood quickly caught on and morphed these dark stories into

the genre of film noir. This gritty type of film was in high regard and its influence is still evident. *Sin City* is a fairly recent example of how Hollywood still struggles to let go of its noir past. There is an obvious male fantasy at work in the detective genre, one that's progressed from the literary world to the silver screen and is still predominant in contemporary media culture. One reason I am writing this thesis is to address how I frame the world in the entitled narratives produced by the lens of film noir.

A few years ago, my therapist asked me to describe the inner figure that had protected me during my youth. I told her it was a *he*, and that this man was very masculine and wore an old fashioned raincoat. I stated that he was reminiscent of Philip Marlowe, the moody, no nonsense detective often played by Humphrey Bogart. Much later I found out that Woody Allen wrote a film about an insecure man who seeks help from Philip Marlowe, much like myself at a younger age (Figure 2). This indicates that, although Philip Marlowe's popularity has long since faded, the masculine fantasy that he represents still lingers.



Figure 2: Allan takes relationship advice from Philip Marlowe/Humphrey Bogart in *Play It Again, Sam* (1972) © Paramount Pictures

In this thesis, I want to explore how the masculine fantasies shaped by the hard-boiled crime genre has come off the page and live on in film. Furthermore, I want to show how a notorious Hollywood murder from 1947 reflects the disembodiment of women by men in cinema. This thesis is about men cutting up women. Literately and figuratively.

As case studies, I'll dissect two pictures – *True Confessions* (1981) and *The Black Dahlia* (2006) that both are based on the real murder case of Elizabeth 'The Black Dahlia' Short - one of Hollywood's most notorious unsolved crimes - in which a woman was found cut in half. The films I'll analyse both created a male-driven fictional story around the crime. Through exploring the history of the hard-boiled crime genre and how this genre relates to the Black Dahlia murder, I hope to demonstrate how women are disembodied on the silver screen and how this affects me as a male artist, occupying a privileged position and insofar as my own position is informed by male fantasies of female victimhood.

I

Hard-boiled: forensic disembodiment and objectification in crime literature & cinema

As a teen, I read and watched detectives for entertainment. Today, I look more critically and recognize many of the tropes, characters and narratives that were established in American crime literature from the 20th century. In this chapter, I'll describe how this particular genre bled into film, and how its male-driven narratives and forensic processes manifested a tradition of disembodiment and objectification.

Hard-boiled crime fiction

Writers like Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain gave rise to 'a specific type of crime literature, known as the 'hard-boiled' crime genre, which often takes place in the Los Angeles of the first half of the 20th century.' (Moore, 2006) In most of these novels, which reached their peak of popularity between 1920 – 1950 a male private eye is hired to solve a problem or a crime. 'The hard-boiled private detective is among the most recognizable characters in popular fiction since the 1920s—a tough product of a violent world, in which police forces are inadequate and people with money can choose private help when facing threatening circumstances.' (Moore, 2006) The crime stories are action-packed, contain explicit language and have easily recognizable and recurring archetypes; such as

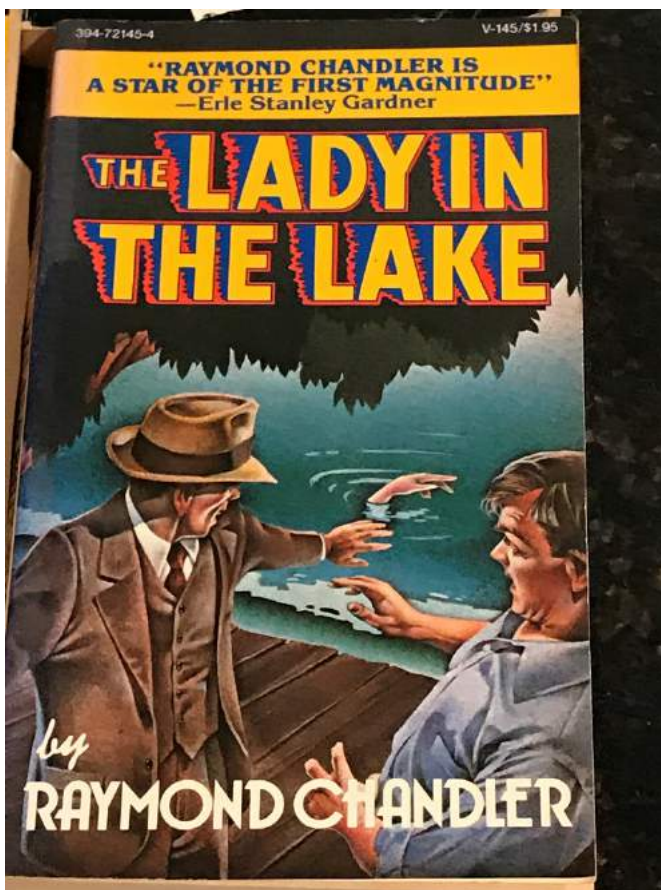


Figure 3: The cover of Raymond Chandler's *The Lady In The Lake*

the femme fatale, corrupt cops and sleazy journalists. Chandler wrote that the 'smell of fear' generated by such stories was evidence of their response to the modern condition: 'Their characters lived in a world gone wrong, a world in which, long before the atom bomb, civilization had created the machinery for its own destruction and was learning to use it with all the moronic delight of a gangster trying out his first machine-gun. The law was something to be manipulated for profit and power.' (Chandler, 1950) The best hard-boiled crime writers used a recurring protagonist in their novels. The example that is most close to my heart is Chandler's Philip Marlowe; the weary private eye that starred in over thirty stories and was later famously portrayed by Humphrey Bogart on screen. 'Marlowe, Chandler's virtuous and chivalrous "would-be-hero", finds himself violating his own knightly codex on his impossible quest for a better world. Thus, Chandler renews the

detective genre by violating the rules of the knightly hero and disrupting social stereotypes.' (Biro) Before the hard-boiled crime genre came into fashion, detective stories were constructed to follow the classic pattern established by Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, with 'the application of a heroic puzzle-solving detective like Poe's C. Auguste Dupin or Sir Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes.' (Biro) Chandler's Marlowe broke with the classical, well-mannered European detective established in the nineteenth century. The

hard-boiled protagonist isn't afraid to use violence as well as his connections to get to the truth. For me, Marlowe was the ideal vessel for my personal fantasies of traditional masculinity in a household that consisted solely of women. 'Chandler's private eye is not only an anachronism in the detective genre but also deviates from our expectations concerning the heroic. Chandler thus paradoxically violates both the norms of the detective genre and defamiliarizes our view of the society he is describing. [...] Marlowe moves through Los Angeles constantly searching for ladies to rescue.' (Biro) As a teen, I didn't yet realise that in most of these hard-boiled stories, female characters are shallow victims that are written to give the male protagonist purpose. The premise of *The Lady In The Lake* reads as following: 'A couple of missing wives—one a rich man's and one a poor man's—become the objects of Marlowe's investigation.' (Chandler, 1943) The wives are tellingly described as objects, since they are plot tools in a story about a man.

Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle established a narrative of isolated evidence; set apart, dissected and objectified. In their stories characters and the evidence became placeholders for a narrative, they produce a process of (forensic) dissection and disembodiment. Although the hard-boiled protagonist differs much from the well-mannered, scholarly detectives in earlier crime novels, the process of forensic examination and dissection of evidence remained intact. The disembodiment of female characters is perhaps even more prominent in the hard-boiled genre, and often displayed quite literally. On the cover of *The Lady In The Lake* (Figure 3), note the disembodied hand sticking out the water.

Chandler's Philip Marlowe didn't age well. I realise now that he is often homophobic, xenophobic, sexist and racist. I consider many of the stock characters that take a prominent place in the hard-boiled crime genre as outdated stereotypes. The femme fatale, for example, is a one-dimensional, devious woman that merely exists to create sexual tension and obstruct the main protagonist. 'These novels simmer with resentment over perceived encroachment and a desire to contain female power.' (Bancroft, 2018) Despite this, I always found a voyeuristic pleasure in watching the (erotically charged) interplay between the femme fatale and the hero. The male protagonists in the hard-boiled crime genre often lived my personal childhood fantasies: playing into conservative ideas of masculinity and heroism, perpetuated in narratives in which there is little room for the female perspective.

In many of these stories, the glamorous and wealthy inhabitants of Los Angeles mingle with its lowlifes. For me, these aspects fuelled my imagination of a darker and more enticing surrounding, in contrast to the unremarkable place I grew up in. In the hard-boiled crime novels the city's dark heart is brooding with 'dope fiends', organised crime and gambling rackets. In many of these novels, the questionable history of Los Angeles is a viable part of the story. Shady deals, blackmail and political scandals get in the way of the investigation. These stories were written a time of social progress, enlightenment and social and industrial advancement. The Chandler characters feel like the messy byproducts of these developments and a counter to optimism. 'These stories share a cold morality, a bleak view of a cruel world and guns.' (Jordison, 2014) Perhaps this crime genre came into fashion because it's morbid and pessimistic undertone reflected a recognizable part of American society, which struggled with poverty, crime and drugs. 'Those novels and the subsequent movies were born of an especially downbeat era – an age characterised and shaped by first the Great Depression and then World War II. The spirit of those stories perfectly fit the zeitgeist and summed up [...] a real, resonant sensibility felt in both America and around the wider world.' (Clayton, 2014)

Film noir

Double Indemnity (1944), *The Big Sleep* (1946) and *In A Lonely Place* (1950) are just a few of the hard-boiled film adaptations that used Los Angeles' dark side as their backdrop. The French called this particular type of American genre 'Film Noir', a name earned for the genre's dark subject matter and gloomy visual style (Eggerston, 2019). The cinematography of film noir is said to be derived from German expressionist filmmakers such as Fritz Lang and F. W. Murnau (Bergstrom, 2014) and is characterized by grainy black and white imagery, stark contrasts, and a dramatic emphasis on shadows and light. The aesthetics resonate with the sombre tone of the plots, which play out in seedy motels, dark back alleys and dusty gangster holdouts. The editing techniques of film (cutting, splicing, assembling and disassembling) closely mirror the procedures that the male protagonist uses in hard-boiled narratives in order to separate evidence from singular reality, allowing these narratives to translate naturally to the screen.

Film noir existed in a time when the deeply conservative Hays Code was active. Between 1934 and 1968, American films had to abide to a strict list of moral 'don'ts and be carefals'; which included the prohibition of scenes with 'profanity', nudity or an implied sympathy for criminals. (Adebowale, 2020) Over the course of its existence, the rules became less strict or were stretched. During the forties and early fifties, however, the code still heavily influenced Hollywood and censored an industry that thrived on films in which sex and violence were of paramount influence. These films lack explicit scenes, but often use cinematography and suggestive dialogue to imply violence or eroticism. In many noir films, the female character has to be rescued by the knight-like protagonist, embodying male fantasies of heroism and projections of female victimhood. To further build upon these fantasies, the camera - operated by men - was a tool used to further objectify and disembodify its female subjects. Through close ups and the (re)assembling of images, film noir 'cut up' and rearranged female bodies in the studio and editing room (Figure 4).

Film noir was one of the most prominent Hollywood genres of the forties and fifties. The numerous catalogue of hard-boiled crime novels lend itself perfectly for filmmaking, prompting major Hollywood studios to release multiple noir productions a year. Many authors in the genre were also screenwriters at the time and became a vital force in male-dominated Hollywood. The influence of film noir reached far and wide, and sparked successful European imitations, like Carol Reid's *The Third Man* (1949) (Guardian Film)



Figure 4: A close-up of Phyllis (Barbara Stanwyck) in *Double Indemnity* (1944) © Paramount Pictures

In the late fifties, the golden age of film noir passed with the rise of Technicolor and the end of the classical Hollywood studio system. 'Even so, the angles, aesthetics and beats that characterised those essential crime movies informed the genre films that followed in the post-studio system, post-Hays Code period.' (Clayton, 2014) In the late 1960s and 1970s, many classical hardboiled stories were readapted. In these films, hard-boiled narratives and tropes continued, but the films were shot in colour and often reflected on societal and political change. Examples are *Point Blank* (1967), *The Long Goodbye* (1973) and *Chinatown* (1974). The 1980s and 1990s gave rise to a revival of so-called 'neo-noir' films. Movies like *Body Double* (1984) and *Basic Instinct* (1992) continued many classical noir traditions, albeit warping tropes and characters to serve a new audience. After the turn of the 21st century, 'neo-noir' had become a genre that stood on its own, thus passing on the legacy of the hard-boiled crime into a new millennium. Examples of recent 'neo-noir' pictures are *Inherent Vice* (2014) and *Motherless Brooklyn* (2019).

The most remarkable thing about film noir is that it never seems to go out of fashion. 'The best noir stories could have been written today, even if they're 50, 60, 70 years old. [...] Men in power taking advantage of the weak and getting away with murder – that's the stuff of headlines today.' (O'Callaghan, 2016) However, I think there is a deeper reason for the everlasting appeal of film noir; every generation, the genre seems to reinvent itself - the underlining power of Los Angeles crime fiction is the way it captures the universal dread and anguish of urban existence. 'Aside from the aforementioned aesthetic allure, film noir is all about dwelling in – or at least dipping your delicately painted toes in – darkness.' (Clayton, 2014)

In the next part of this thesis, I'll briefly explore the 1947 murder of Elizabeth Short and analyse two modern movies that were based on it in order to demonstrate how this particular crime - and its cinematic adaptations - display the interrelation between the hard-boiled crime genre, the disembodiment of women and the apparatus of film.

II

Murder in Hollywood: The Black Dahlia

If there is one crime that feels like it comes straight out of a hard-boiled crime novel, it must be the murder of Elizabeth Short. Like numerous internet sleuths before me, I was captivated by her case and spent hours looking at the theories and evidence circulating online. It's significant this 1947 murder has multiple tie-ins with Hollywood and the apparatus of cinema, which I will point out in this chapter.

The Murder of Elizabeth Short

'On the morning of January 15, 1947, a mother taking her child for a walk in a Los Angeles neighbourhood stumbled upon a gruesome sight: the body of a young naked woman sliced clean in half at the waist. The body was just a few feet from the sidewalk and posed in such a way that the mother reportedly thought it was a mannequin at first glance. Despite the extensive mutilation and cuts on the body, there wasn't a drop of blood at the scene, indicating that the young woman had been killed elsewhere. [...] The young woman turned out to be a 22-year-old Hollywood hopeful named Elizabeth Short—later dubbed the "Black Dahlia" by the press for her rumoured penchant for sheer black clothes and for the Blue Dahlia movie out at that time.' (Federal Bureau of Investigation)



Figure 5: The Los Angeles Times reports that Elizabeth Short was identified by the F.B.I. © The Los Angeles Times

The murder would go down as one of the most notorious unsolved crimes in the history of the United States. A media frenzy ensued, thanks to the 'brutal, misogynistic and ritual nature' of the gruesome killing. [BBC, 2017] 'The murder was never officially solved, only adding to the crime's mystique. 'There was also the connection to the glamour of the area. She lived in Hollywood, had aspirations to be an actress.' (Martin, 2017). These aspects fuelled my personal fascination with the case and elevated it to a crime of mythical proportions in pop culture. 'The slaying of Elizabeth Short launched one of the most celebrated manhunts and crime-related media spectacles in history. The Black Dahlia case

has come to symbolize a sordid and politically corrupt aspect of mid-century Los Angeles that coexisted, and sometimes commingled, with the Hollywood wealth and glamour.’ (Nelson, Baybliss, (2006).

As the Los Angeles Police Department almost completely consisted of men at the time, the murder was naturally investigated from a predominantly male perspective. At the time of the murder, ‘Los Angeles had a rich newspaper and tabloid culture. All of these papers had underworld columnists... crime reporters. Crime was central entertainment in a pre-tv world, when people still got morning and evening newspapers.’ (Buntin, 2019) Early crime reporters from the Herald dubbed it ‘The Werewolf Murder,’ says John Gilmore (1994), as to further sensationalise on the gruesome details that slowly leaked out. According to the 2019 podcast *Root of Evil* (Gentile, Y & Pecoraro, R, 2019) there was a Black Dahlia cover story in the LA Times for thirty-one straight days (Figure 5). In his book ‘Hard-boiled Hollywood’, Jon Lewis (2017) claims that ‘the tragic and mysterious circumstances surrounding the deaths of Elizabeth Short, or the Black Dahlia, and Marilyn Monroe ripped open Hollywood’s glitzy façade, exposing the city’s ugly underbelly of corruption, crime, and murder.’ To me, the gruesome tale of Elizabeth Short symbolizes LA’s dark heart and embodies my personal fascination with the interwovenness between Hollywood, misogyny and (true) crime.

Exquisite corpse

Steve Hodel, who worked as an LAPD homicide detective for years, wrote a book called *The Black Dahlia Avenger*, in which he claims that his father – George Hodel – is Short’s killer. This book prompted writers/historians Mark Nelson and Sarah Hudson Baybliss to investigate the murder and its possible links to the surrealist movement; which has a long history of portraying women dissected at the waist or ‘in pieces’. They propose the theory that the murderer was familiar with surrealist art and that the crime might have been a macabre version of an ‘exquisite corpse’; an artistic method of collectively assembling words or images (a form of collage). The book connects surrealist art and its Freudian interest in dreams with the apparatus of film. Luis Bunuel’s famous film *Un chien Andalou* (1929) starts with a scene in which a man seems to slice a woman’s eye but then quickly cuts to the slicing of an animal’s eye. The scene plays with the idea of splicing as an editing technique



Figure 6: Salvador Dalí holding an artist’s lay figure (the chauffeur in the Taxi pluvieux), International Exhibition of Surrealism, Paris, 1938. © Publicity image

and the metaphysical suggestion of a cut. This is an example of the 'irrational cut' in which two unrelated events come into relation through the edit. Surrealist artists had a fascination for female mannequins; which they often used in art pieces and exhibitions and presented as 'readymade' art pieces (see Figure 6). These objects can often be detached or dismantled into parts. Aside from this, the surrealism movement is known for its interest in the subconscious and dreams of erotized violence. 'These themes provide a meaningful backdrop against which to consider the Black Dahlia murder.' (Nelson & Baybliss, 2006)

Adriana Cavarero coined the term 'horrorism', which is a form of violation grounded in the offense of disfiguration and massacre. Elizabeth Short, mutilated and cut into pieces, fits perfectly into Cavarero's theoretical framework. 'What is unwatchable, above all, for the being that knows itself irremediably singular, is the spectacle of disfigurement, which the singular body cannot bear.' (Cavarero, 2008) Cavarero writes this from the position of being a woman, recognizing a history of female dissection as a visual and narrative power tool in patriarchal portrayals of masculine supremacy. In relation to the Black Dahlia case, the 'spectacle of disfigurement' she mentions, isn't 'unwatchable' to male spectators. In fact, it seems to be the main reason why so many male writers, filmmakers and artists find the need to explore or fictionalise the murder. Multiple novels, motion pictures and shows were based on Elizabeth Short's death, and the case was featured on countless true crime shows and documentaries. In *American Horror Story* (2011), Elizabeth Short's ghost (Mena Suvari) cries and exclaims that she had dreams of becoming famous, but was found 'naked, on display for the whole world to see.' Another spirit (Kate Mara) responds; 'You were the front news of every paper for two months.' Elizabeth Short lightens up and utters; 'I really *did* become somebody,' In *American Horror Story*, the fictional version of Elizabeth Short accepts her victimhood in accordance to the male fantasy in which the Dahlia is reduced to her desperate longing for fame. Her murder doesn't seem to bother her when she finds out it made her famous. The scene further demonstrates how the male gaze in cinema produces the male fantasy of the apathic female victim. The real murder of Elizabeth Short is merely a source upon which male writers and filmmakers can indulge their carefully constructed fantasies.

In the following two chapters, I'll analyse two films based on the hard-boiled literature based on Black Dahlia murder, in order to explore how fictionalisations of this crime make use of the forensic process of disembodiment as described in chapter I. For each film, I'll analyse three scenes involving a part of forensic examination: the discovery, autopsy and the examination of the crime scene. Finally, I'll discuss the movie poster for each film.

III

Case study 1: True Confessions (1981)

True Confessions (1981) is centred on an LAPD detective Tom Spellacy (Robert Duvall) who tries to solve the case of young woman that is found cut in half. In the course of his investigation detective Spellacy while reconnecting with his brother Des (Robert DeNiro), an ambitious Monsignor. The screenplay was written by John Gregory and Joan Didion, and was based on Gregory's novel of the same name. 'It is a Los Angeles more or less familiar from dozens of other movies [...] small town, really, where the grafters and the power



Figure 7: The discovery of the body in *True Confessions* (1981) © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc.



Figure 8: A photograph taken after the discovery of Elizabeth Short's body. Photographer unknown, 1947.

brokers know each other.' (Ebert, 1981) The detective assigned to the case checks all the boxes for a classical hard-boiled crime protagonist. He is a representation of a traditional

male detective; he is rational, hot-tempered and conservative. The only thing he and me - the viewer - have in common is the obsession over the case; a desperate need to solve it.

Discovery

The scene where the body is discovered, differs little from how Elizabeth Short was found. The body parts of the female victim (called Lois Fazenda in this adaption) are found in a vacant lot at the edge of a shabby LA neighbourhood, laying naked and torn in half, amidst rubbish. The victim isn't represented as a person, but as two props. (Figure 7)

The photographs of the discovery of Elizabeth Short's corpse show a scene teeming with reporters and police men. (figure 8) They look like men waiting in line for an attraction or spectacle. In the adaption, the discovery of the murder plays out in a similar way. The only 'woman' on the scene is the cut-up corpse. What remains of her is subjected to the male gaze; the police men swarm around her naked remains. The detective briefs the protagonist while a photographer takes photos of the victim's lower half, further reducing Lois' remains to pieces of evidence. Susan Sontag made the observation that 'Photographs objectify. They turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed.' (Sontag, 1977). This scene displays the cinematic distortion of the male gaze, as enabled by a forensic process. The camera, the male gaze and the procedure become part of a single apparatus, turning Lois Fazenda into an object.

Autopsy

Detective Spellacy later visits the coroner in the morgue. As a viewer, I am present in the room; taking on the role of witness, or assisting detective, perhaps. The most striking difference between the forensic photos and fictionalised victim (Amanda Cleveland), is the absence of the facial wounds; especially the 'Glasgow smile' (see Figure 9 and 10), which was cut into her mouth. The movie victim's face appears somewhat angelic, almost statue-like. The wound of her dissection is neatly stitched up and a table conveniently covers the part where her body was severed. Susan Sontag (2003) wrote: 'All images that display the violation of an attractive body are, to a certain degree, pornographic. But images of the repulsive can also allure,' (Sontag, 2003) In light of this statement, I think it's important to consider that Amanda Cleveland, who played the 'corpse', was a Playboy model. According to Yazmin Dominique (2017), Playboy Magazine 'branded the objectification of women as

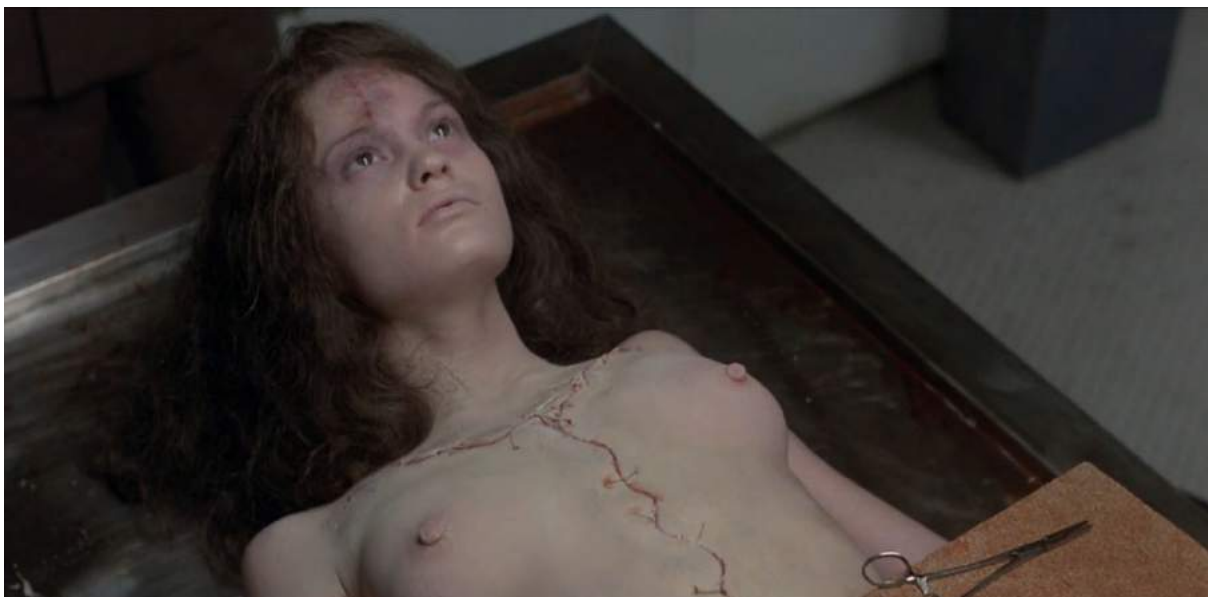


Figure 9: Lois Fazenda on display on the coroner's table in *True Confessions* (1981). © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc.

acceptable.’ (Dominique, 2017) Sontag wrote that there is an eroticized violence in the process of photographic objectification. By turning the female victim – through violence - into an object the killer can ‘edit’ and shape her body, according to his desire. After Lois’ death, the detectives examine her body in a similar manner; isolating parts and pieces of it, which they process.

However, the harsh reality of death seems too graphic for the filmmakers to show, for the gruesome autopsy photos of Elizabeth Short (see Figure 10) contrast sharply with the romanticised way the victim is presented in the autopsy scene. In the forensic images, Short’s eyes are halfway closed, her face is heavily battered and there are several cutting wounds visible over her body. Even I flinch as the sight of these photographs; the cold display of a senseless death.

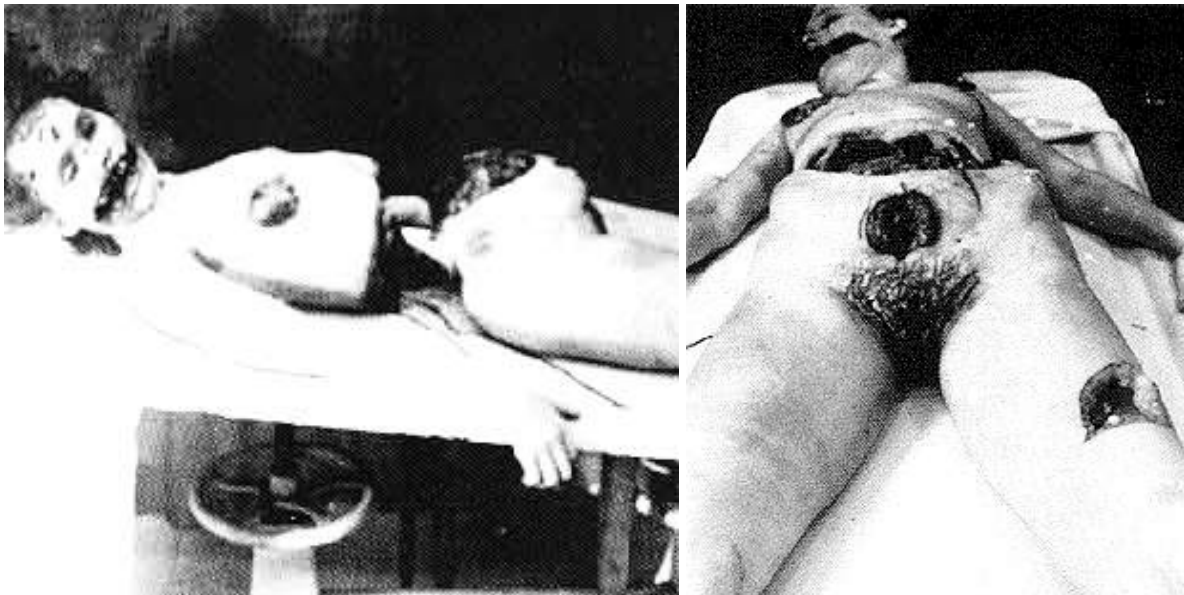


Figure 10: Two photos made of Elizabeth Short’s mutilated corpse at autopsy. Photographer unknown, 1947.

In *True Confessions*, the press sensationally labels the victim ‘The Virgin Tramp,’ for they find out that Lois was a Catholic and a prostitute. Although Elizabeth Short was never proven to be a prostitute, the victim in the adaption is subtly blamed throughout the entire movie for being a ‘party girl’. A review of the film held that ‘There’s not a foolish line in it [the film], nor a bland character,’ (Canby, 1981) but the reviewer obviously forgot the dead girl. As a character, she is so hollow she functions as a prop; I never learn anything about her personality or interests. Lois Fazenda is, quite literally, disembodied as soon as she enters *True Confessions* in the form of two props, and then, over the course of the film, what remains of her in memory is criticized and defiled.

Examination of the crime scene

Detective Spellacy eventually discovers that a sleazy porn producer is involved. Lois stars in a stag film that is a recurring trope in fictionalisations of the Black Dahlia case, despite the fact that such a film was never found. Aside from *True Confessions*, pornography plays a vital role in *The Black Dahlia* (2006), which I’ll discuss later. It was also a plot point in the videogame *LA Noire* (2014). In one scene, I watch along with two detectives as Lois Fazenda undresses on screen. (see figure 11) The fact that many fictionalised stories based on the Black Dahlia case involve a pornographic film, says something about the male fantasies of sexual desire that are so easily projected on this crime story, and further links eroticism with violence; assisting in the eradication of the victim’s personality. Post-mortem,

Lois is constantly belittled, blamed and given a mocking title by sensationalist media. Throughout this misogynistic process, Lois Fazenda's humanity is carefully erased.



Figure 11: Two detectives watch the stag film in which the victim stars. *True Confessions* (1981) © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc.

After discovering a lead hidden in the stag film, Duvall's character follows up and discovers an abandoned movie set: the place where Lois was tortured and killed. Tom opens a backdoor and finds a bloodstained mattress. A trail leads to a bathtub where the victim was drained of blood. Neither the camera nor the detective linger longer than necessary at the crime scene, and after I've seen the bathtub for two brief seconds (Figure 12), the detective leaves the room and draws his final conclusions. What is notable, is that the detective finds the scene on his own. In contrast to the discovery site, riddled with reporters and detectives, there is the absence of a body. The crusty red blood that trails from one horrific scene to the next is the visual manifestation of the actual violence, which remains invisible to the viewer. With a face of anguish, Tom visualises the horrors that occurred. I see a man coming to terms with the violence that another man has inflicted upon a woman. What he sees is the



Figure 12: The bathtub in which Lois Fazenda was drained of her blood. *True Confessions* (1981) Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc.

rampage of a monster... and it reminds him a little bit of himself.

This particular scene *has* basis in reality: the murder spot was found in Los Angeles in 1949, although it was a house instead of a movie set (Rosen, 1949). I find it notable that the movie establishes a link between the movie industry and horrible abuse. Still, the examination scene is an addition that mainly serves the redemption of the protagonist. He cracks the case through clever detective work, and therefore plays out my fantasy of solving the murder. The film is not about the victim. Rather it uses a real life murder as basis for a tale about two brothers. Two clever yet emotionally incapable men, both powerful in their own way, but each dictated and restrained by hierarchic powers and societal rules.



Poster

The poster for *True Confessions* shows a picture of the two stars. A female leg is put over it. It represents the victim as perceived through a male gaze; her stockings (which the victim in the film doesn't even wear) are added to create associations with prostitution and eroticism. There is no face, no body. Just a leg; an object of desire. Only when looking closer, I notice a splash of blood. The rest of the victim's body is excluded from the poster, as is the identity of Lois Fazenda in the film; where her murder is merely treated as a compelling puzzle for the male protagonist and me, the viewer, to obsess over. The poster couldn't be more fitting, for the movie cuts the horror into digestible parts while the actual violence is never shown. The victim is silenced, anonymized and sexualised; her death turned into little more than a masculine fantasy of eroticized violence. The poster, like the film, uses the ordering of images to encourage dissociation with the female victim so the focus stays

Figure 13: The theatrical release poster for *True Confessions* (1981)
© Universal Pictures.

on the male heroes; the two brothers centred in the image. As the tagline suggests, the men are trapped by a murder... imprisoned in the wire-like stockings of the dead girl. The metaphor removes the victim as central figure and beacons the message that this film is more about the struggle of the protagonists than the victim.

IV

Case Study 2: The Black Dahlia (2006)

In Brian De Palma's *The Black Dahlia* (2006), two policemen see their personal and professional lives fall apart in the wake of the Elizabeth Short's murder investigation. The film was based on James Ellroy's 1987 novel, also titled *The Black Dahlia*, a heavily fictionalised account of the Black Dahlia Case. Despite being based upon the critical acclaimed novel, the movie was badly received, both critically and commercially. The only thing critics applauded was Mia Kirshner's performance, who plays Elizabeth Short in audition tapes that are scattered throughout the movie. In one of these scenes, she crawls towards the director who gives her instructions. De Palma himself voices the director; implying he is implicated in her abuse. In these dreamlike fragments, Elizabeth Short is a melancholic but pathetic figure... desperate for fame and not afraid to use her body to get what she wants. A hybrid between a femme fatale and an insecure, wannabe starlet with spooky blue eyes. The scenes amplify the idea that the victim is held on a leash by Hollywood; a male-dominated world of powerful men. The detective on the case watches these pieces of film with a mixture of fascination and disgust.

At the heart of this film are two buddy-co-workers Dwight 'Bucky' Bleichert (Josh Hartnett) and Lee Blanchard (Aaron Eckhart) and I would argue an homosexual element to their relationship is implied. In the first part of the film, the two men fight each other bare chested under their boxing aliases Mr. Fire and Mr. Ice. This violent physical confrontation marks the beginning of their companionship in both work and private life. Later, they even share a wife – Kay (Scarlett Johansson) – a scarred beauty that functions both as an object of desire as well as a symbol for 1940s domesticity. She dresses in white for most of the film, in binary contrast with the Dahlia, known for her dark attire (see figure 14). Both are victims of (sexual) abuse, but Kay is eager to put her dark past behind her to play out the traditional role of housewife, while Elizabeth gets murdered for her promiscuous behaviour. Female characters are perceived through the gaze of men in this film, which produces a positive and negative image when the two are juxtaposed – both are fantasies made available to men.



Figure 14: Elizabeth Short (Mia Kirshner, left) and Kay Lake (Scarlett Johansson) visually represented as polar opposites through their appearance and clothing. *The Black Dahlia* (2006) © Universal Pictures.

Discovery

The film spends its first twenty-five minutes establishing the 'buddy-cop' relationship between the protagonists; experienced LAPD detective Lee Blanchard and rookie Josh 'Bucky' Hartnett. While on a raid, they conveniently notice several cops rush over to a corpse. (see Figure 14). Not much later, reporters breach the perimeter and flash their cameras at the gruesome discovery. As in *True Confessions*, everything happens similarly to the actual discovery of Elizabeth Short's remains. But instead of lingering his camera on the corpse, 'De Palma defies typical mystery/horror conventions by not displaying her mangled body in its entirety. Instead, he basically only shows the enthusiastic crowd of men [...] hovering over her, taking notes and photographs, muttering about the case.' (The Film Stage, 2016) De Palma seems aware of the probing male gaze and mirrors it back to me; showing the muttering cops from a Short's perspective. 'A single shot is dedicated to showing Elizabeth Short's face – when a hungry crow pecks away at her cheek. An apt metaphor.' (The Film Stage, 2016)



Figure 15: Men swarm the crime scene. *The Black Dahlia* (2006) © Universal Pictures.

Autopsy

When Bucky and Blanchard later visit the morgue, again, a group of men eagerly hover over the body, taking notes (see Figure 16). The scene is shot from above and slowly pans down, putting me, the viewer, in the perspective as a probing spectator - a Peeping Tom - who takes a closer look at the many inflictions on the dead girl's body, which are almost completely consistent with the ones Elizabeth Short suffered. The scene feels perverse and invasive, as if De Palma is mocking the victim through this forensic process. 'One of the cops asks, "Is it okay if I smoke?" The doctor jokingly replies, "She won't mind!" Elizabeth Short is already no longer a woman, no longer someone to be courteous and considerate of.' (The Film Stage, 2016). Instead, she quickly becomes a canvas upon which the male characters project their fantasies. During the investigation, Bucky gets involved with troubled rich girl called Madeleine (Hillary Swank) who gets a kick out of impersonating the Black Dahlia. Bucky starts an affair with Madeleine, but this cheap impersonation of the 'real' Elizabeth Short can't compete. Housewife Kay, patiently waiting for him at home, is no match for the necrophiliac fantasies he tries to play out with Madeleine. Meanwhile, his partner Lee slowly loses his mind as he projects the guilt he feels about the vanishing of his younger sister to the case. Ellroy's story unapologetically mocks the men who use the victim as a carrier for their fantasies, and thus forcing me, the (male) viewer, to reflect on my own complicity. 'In

many respects, the corpse of a woman is the ideal vessel for the hopes and desires of the men burying her. She can be anything they want her to be – a dream girl (Bucky's ideal), an opportunity to retroactively be a hero (Blanchard's take), a slut who had it coming (Elizabeth



Figure 16: Again, men hover over the corpse. *The Black Dahlia* (2006). © Universal Pictures.

Short's father's opinion), on and on. The ultimate fantasy.' (The Film Stage, 2016) The media are just as guilty... exploiting the crime; further objectifying and disembodimenting the young woman that was Elizabeth Short. In this movie, almost everyone is complicit. The only one that isn't, is Kay: the obvious allegory for the suburban dream wife... the white maiden opposing the Black Dahlia.

Examination of the crime scene

Detective Bucky drags the audience through the film with a narration of his thoughts. As De Palma is known for exhausting certain genre tropes through exaggeration and heavy referencing, I can only speculate whether or not he deliberately turned the protagonist into a cliché film noir archetype. He mutters quasi-poetic one-liners while doing what gumshoe detectives do; going over clues while drinking whiskey, breaking the law and shooting people who get in his way. Just as in *True Confessions*, a stag film is found, and Bucky finds the scene of the crime because he connects a clue from this film to Madeleine.



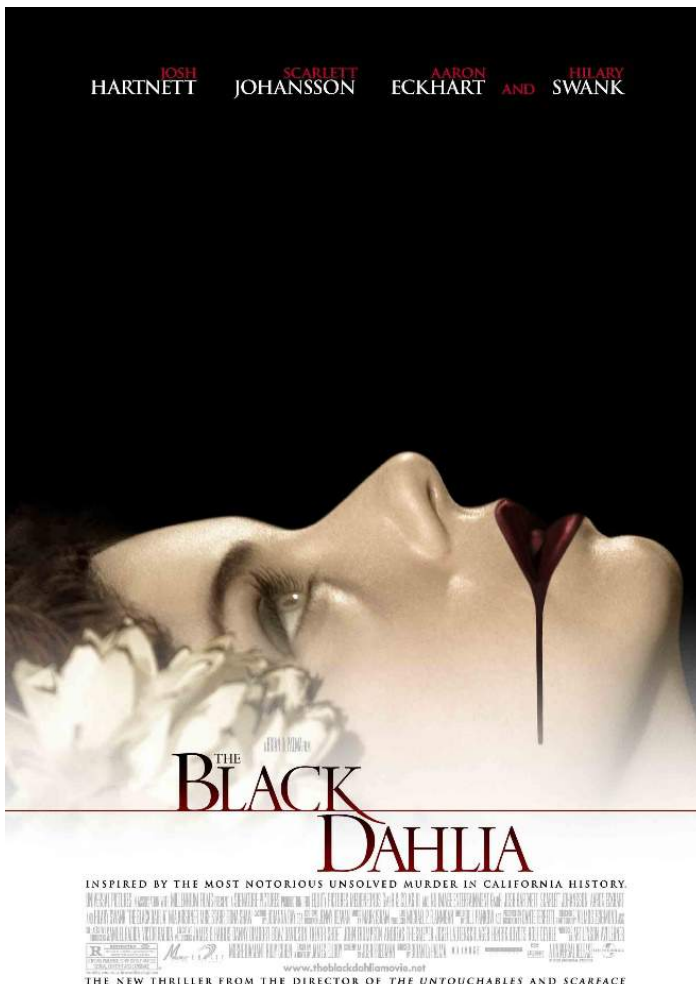
Figure 17: The spot where Elizabeth Short was murdered. *The Black Dahlia* (2006) © Universal Pictures.

That further leads him to unfold a complicated plot. It turns out that Short was killed inside a barn on Hollywood(land), owned by Madeleine's father; a crooked estate magnate called Emmett Linscot. Bucky breaks the lock and finds an improvised torture chamber (figure 17).

As in *True Confessions*, a bloody mattress is the central piece of evidence. But here there is also a strand of black hair and an eerie clown painting, explaining the Glasgow smile. The movie then explicitly shows the torture and murder through flashbacks for shock value. Later, Bucky finds out that the unhinged Ms. Linscot murdered Short out of envy. I find it notable that a woman is the culprit; for the actual suspect list consists solely of men. Writer Ellroy stated that he wrote the 1987 book in order to cope with the unsolved murder of his mother, who was found dead in a vacant lot when he was a child, much like Short. According to Ellroy, the book 'Is an attempt to honour two women who had died too young: Betty Short and Jean Hilliker. (Ellroy, 2020). Ironically, Ellroy earlier claimed that Short pawned his 'lifelong dialogue with misogyny.' (Ellroy, 2006).

The female characters in *The Black Dahlia* are either a pathetic failure (Short) or a crazy degenerate (Ms. Linscot, Madeleine). The only sane person is Kay, that escaped her abusive past to become a housewife with the wits and curves of a femme fatale. But Kay is a living fantasy, who quickly loses the interest of the male protagonists. Instead, they grow obsessed with the mythical Black Dahlia. They chase her ghost in order to find redemption or fulfill their darkest desires. But they all fail and eventually succumb to their fantasies.

Poster



The poster for *The Black Dahlia* shows Short (Mia Kirshner) looking vacantly at the sky, the dripping lipstick in the corner of her mouth referencing her 'Glasgow smile' (figure 18). It hints at the brutality of the murder without actually showing the violence (and thus gets around strict laws for theatrical posters). Short is pale and expressionless; almost like a mannequin or a waxlike doll. The profile of Kirshner's pale, model-like face contrasts starkly with the black background. Just as is the case with her pseudonym, Elizabeth Short is turned into an object that functions as a symbol, or a representation of the victim and her mythical place in pop culture. On the poster she lingers somewhere between dead and alive; she is still attractive enough for me to be compelling, but her glazy eyes eerily signal that she is likely dead. I find an almost necrophiliac quality in this the image; treading a line between disturbing and intriguing.

Figure 18: The theatrical release poster for *The Black Dahlia*
© Universal Pictures.

Perhaps the lack of prominent Hollywood stars on the poster amplified the movie's poor box office results; *The Black Dahlia* earned back half a million dollar short of its budget. On the

cover of the DVD/Blu-Ray release, however, the three main stars were put prominently in the center, while the Dahlia is absent. As with the poster for *True Confessions*, the victim's face is excluded from the image this time.

Conclusion

Over the course of the 1920s, the hard-boiled LA crime genre introduced a new type of rough protagonist against the backdrop of Los Angeles' underbelly; reflecting the downside of modern developments and America's problems with crime and corruption. This type of narrative broke with tropes made popular by earlier, scholar-like detectives who appeared in the work of Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle. The 20th century American detective was a flawed antihero, although built upon a narrative in which a forensic process of objectification and disembodiment are central. The protagonist is a male fantasy and female characters are merely minor (sexual) deviations in the story or 'things' for the knight-like protagonist to save. With the rise of Hollywood, this process, as well as character tropes, naturally transcended from the hard-boiled crime genre into cinema. Stories of hard-boiled crime were translated into film noir: a movie genre with a dark visual language, derived from German expressionist film. The genre reinvented itself over the years, but its source in the hard-boiled literature genre is still noticeable in contemporary cinema. Film, with its editing techniques and 'cutting', functions as the perfect carrier for the male fantasy established in hard-boiled crime fiction. The apparatus of film mirrors the forensic process of investigation; in which men isolate, disembody and objectify evidence.



Figure 19: Laurel Grey (Gloria Grahame) as a neighbour in love with a hot-tempered screenwriter (Humphrey Bogart) in *In a Lonely Place* (1950) © Columbia Pictures

The murder of Elizabeth Short – better known as The Black Dahlia - was committed in 1947, when the popularity of hard-boiled crime fiction was at its peak. The Hollywood murder case and its aftermath symbolizes the exploitative, misogynist nature of post-war Los Angeles, in which the police force was a male-driven force and sensationalist media capitalized on crime stories. The mutilation and the display of Elizabeth Short's body correlates with the themes (erotization of violence, women as mannequins, women in pieces) found in surrealist art, which is contained in the apparatus of film. The murder perfectly fits into Adriana Cavarero's theoretical framework of 'horrorism': a form of violation grounded in the offense of

disfiguration.

In order to further understand the connection between forensic disembodiment, the Black Dahlia murder and modern cinema, I analysed two films that were based upon the case. *True Confessions* (1981) takes a classical approach to the LA hard-boiled crime genre. The central murder operates as a plot motif in the story of two brothers. The detective functions as a flawed but righteous antihero through whom the viewer can solve the case. It first dehumanizes the female victim by portraying her as a promiscuous 'party girl', so she can easily become an anonymized forensic object of evidence; a puzzle for the protagonist - and viewer - to solve. The film establishes a link between eroticization and violence through romanticising the victim's appearance after death and a plot point involving pornography. This link is underlined by the poster, in which a bloody female leg in stockings is shown over the faces of the two male protagonists.

In *The Black Dahlia* (2006), two men also star, but here masculinity is defined through obsession and projections of guilt and sexual desire. Elizabeth Short is a mythical victim; prompting the two male protagonists to project their obsessions and (necrophiliac) desires upon her. Just as in *True Confessions*, this film uses the camera and narratives to disembody the female characters and metaphorically cut them into pieces; objectifying the victim and turning her remains into forensic objects. While *True Confessions* carefully anonymises the victim through narrative denigration and cinematic objectification, as to make room for the male narratives, *The Black Dahlia* does something else. Here Elizabeth Short is given a voice through audition tapes that the detective watches throughout the film. These fragments reveal that Elizabeth Short – as in *True Confessions* - is a promiscuous and pathetic figure, an image that conflicts with the fantasies the male characters project on her. In both films, Elizabeth Short is revealed to have starred in a stag film, even though this has no basis in reality. In *The Black Dahlia*, Short starkly contrasts with the character of Kay; a love interest of both protagonists that is portrayed as a suburban dream wife. The film further puts emphasis on Elizabeth Short as a victim of Hollywood; a male-dominated world that systematically exploits and objectifies young women. Sontag's theory of the erotization of horror is applicable, for the female victim is sexualised through the necrophiliac fantasies of the detective. An element of these fantasies is present in the poster, in which Short is portrayed in a mannequin-like way. She is visualised as a necrophiliac fantasy of mythical proportions, eerily lingering somewhere between dead and alive.



Figure 20: Elizabeth Short (Mia Kirshner) crying during a screentest in *The Black Dahlia* (2006) © Universal Pictures.

Both films are centred on the relationship between two men, played by famous actors. In both pictures, there seems to be homosexual element to the male relationships – especially in *The Black Dahlia*. The films, in their own way, slightly alter historic events in order to fit a male-driven narrative; to play out traditional fantasies of masculinity, projected on the Black Dahlia. The main difference is that *True Confessions* displays male investment in female victimhood as a means to find redemption for the protagonists and the audience. *The Black Dahlia* uses the murder case to explore and cynically comment upon men's delirious stake in the case; the detectives lose their sanity while chasing the victim's ghost. What's important in the fantasies played out *True Confessions*, is that ideal masculinity is defined by a classical, stoic rationality. In both movies, a defiance of moral codes and a resort to violence are shown as necessary and cathartic for the men to succeed, while female victimhood is merely a plot motif. *The Black Dahlia* seems more (self)aware of the fact that the male gaze produced this fictional narrative in which the male characters are written to have a stake in Elizabeth Short's tragic death. In both movies, the protagonist has to solve the case as to (re)gain relevance. The female characters are either dated stereotypes (such as the femme fatale or the hysterical mother) or objects that are disembodied or dissected by men through a forensic tradition.

After examining the hard-boiled tradition and analysing two films based on hard-boiled fiction in which the Black Dahlia murder plays a key part, I can clearly recognize the interrelation between the hard-boiled crime genre, the apparatus of film and the Black Dahlia murder. Through cinematic analyses of two films based on this case, I have shown how the hard-boiled crime fiction is a carrier for traditional masculine fantasies; the men that wrote these stories created investigative antiheroes whose redemptive journey takes centre stage. The narratives surrounding them allows for the eroticization of violence through the process of forensic investigation. In these narratives, women are silenced, anonymized and disembodied. The fictionalisations of the Black Dahlia case show that the apparatus of film is complicit, further using its techniques and editing to objectify and disembody women for the sake of the male fantasy that plays out on screen.

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