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All Body? Transformation, Generic Codes and Embodied Memory in Karyn Kusama’s Destroyer (2018)

Abstract: Karyn Kusama’s Destroyer (2018) was reviewed as a neo-noir re-working and a star vehicle for Nicole Kidman. This article argues that it in fact offers a complex re-visioning of both the noir narrative to which reviewers compared it, and the ‘woman’s film’ and its successor, the maternal revenge film. It examines the ways in which Kusama’s film plays on cinematic genre codes and structures to suggest that they constitute a ‘compulsion to repeat’, in which femininity as performance is scripted, defined and positioned, and, where it threatens transgression, rendered abject as bodily excess. The film’s flashback structure, it argues, first exposes the various scripts through which its protagonist Erin’s younger self performs the roles she is given, and then stages the recovery of embodied memory, as generic codes and structures give way to the phenomenology of the process of remembering. Through its construction of a memory text in which time is fractured and/or slowed in moments of intensity, the film works against conventional accounts of subjectivity to suggest that Erin’s recovery of memory is also a recovery of a specifically maternal body. It thus stages an attempt to retrieve, or construct, a subjectivity that is embodied, relational, and maternal.

Keywords: neo-noir, maternal body, memory, performance, subjectivity, women’s filmmaking
2018 saw the release of two films directed by women which cited Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976) as an influence. Both Lynne Ramsay’s *You Were Never Really Here* and Karyn Kusama’s *Destroyer* focus on avenging figures criss-crossing a bleak and hallucinatory US cityscape in what is at once a quest for vengeance and an attempt to rescue a lost and damaged daughter. In both, as in Scorsese’s film, a fractured and corrupt city is rendered through a haunted protagonist’s disturbed and fragmented point of view. In both, the film’s present is splintered by recurring flashbacks, so that time is disordered and driven by the interior fragmentation of memory. Both protagonists are morally ambiguous and capable of sudden explosions of violence.

Both of these protagonists, however, are middle-aged, with bodies that, visibly bearing the weight of their guilt and despair, disturb the gender expectations of the genre which the films both cite and interrogate. Joe (Joaquin Phoenix), the protagonist of Ramsay’s film, is ‘all body’\(^1\): ponderous and fleshy, his body is at once brutish and, in its self-conscious excess, possessed of a feminized vulnerability. Kusama’s Erin (Nicole Kidman), too, is defined by her body, but hers, though a maternal body, is one which in the film’s present is insubstantial: held together, barely, by pain. Feminist critics have argued that maternity is written on the represented female body as abject excess (Kristeva 1982, Creed 1993, Battersby 1998), but this maternal avenger seems stripped of all gender attributes, her body marked instead by a hollowing absence. I have written elsewhere (2020) about the ways in which Ramsay’s film critiques the narrative of violent but heroic white masculinity exemplified by that of Scorsese, to which it was so often compared. Here, I want to turn to the very different way in which Kusama transforms the neo-noir narrative which her film, too, takes as a model.

*Destroyer* follows LAPD detective Erin Bell as she pursues and takes revenge on Silas (Toby Kebbell), the leader of the gang in which as a young police officer she was placed undercover seventeen years earlier. The bank robbery carried out by the gang resulted in Silas’s murder of Erin’s FBI partner and lover, Chris (Sebastian Stan), shortly after she had discovered she was pregnant. In the film’s present Erin receives a dye-marked banknote from the original robbery and concludes that Silas, who disappeared after the robbery, has returned. We follow her as she tracks him down via the various members of the gang, whilst at the same time trying to free her daughter Shelby (Jade Pettyjohn) from her older boyfriend. At the close of a pursuit that is increasingly disturbed by Erin’s flashback memories we see her die of internal injuries sustained in her quest. The film’s narrative is revealed to be circular: the anonymous body that we saw discovered at the start of the film is

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\(^1\) This is a phrase used by Mary Jacobus to describe the (Freudian view of the) hysterical *female* body (1987: 202).
that of Silas—the outcome, not the trigger, of the quest we have witnessed.

**Remembering Women**

In a 1988 essay, ‘Remembering Women’, Mary Ann Doane discusses the relationship between cinema and its construction of ‘Woman’, memory, and embodied subjectivity. Like cinema itself, she writes, the cinematic woman has been seen to constitute ‘a lure for the male subject—more dangerous even than the cinema since she frequently leads him to his doom’. This screen Woman, however, is an abstract figure; constructed by cinema’s ‘narratives, its star system, its spectacle’, she has no access to subjectivity, to memory, or to history. If this process of erasure is to be undone, argues Doane, feminist cinema, and feminist film theory, must stage ‘a laborious construction of memory and hence a history’. Without this history and these memories, she writes, there will be only the ‘compulsion to repeat, based on forgetting, … the collapse of the past onto the present’ (1988: 3, 13). Her example of the feminist cinema she advocates is Sally Potter’s experimental first feature, *The Gold Diggers* (1983), where Julie Christie is both the character Ruby and herself as star, at once an image stripped of memory and the investigator of her own history and her own construction by and within the apparatus of cinema. Thus doubled, she watches herself perform, so that ultimately in the film, as Doane writes, memory or ‘subjective history’ is ‘recaptured through representation’. Ruby/Christie ‘simultaneously plays the role of herself and is the spectator of her own drama’ (1988: 13).

Doane is primarily concerned in her article with feminist film theory and, as Jane Gaines was later to express it, the need—and difficulty—for such work both to maintain its theoretical challenge to existing historical narratives, with their assumptions of linearity and transparency, and at the same time to itself construct a history, to ‘tell these women’s stories’ (Gaines 2004: 117). Here, however, I want to use it to think about Kusama’s film, one that is very different from Doane’s own example of the feminist film text. Kusama’s is a film thoroughly engaged with popular genre, but it too sees its protagonist/iconic star, as ‘spectator of her own drama’, recapturing memory through representation. Navigating the ‘compulsion to repeat’ found in popular cinema’s generic codes and narrative structures, she finally reclaims both memory and an embodied subjectivity, a subjectivity that the film defines as maternal.
**LA Noir**

Most obviously, *Destroyer’s* engagement is with *film noir*, or more specifically neo-noir. In interview, Kusama herself mentioned as reference points Pakula’s *Klute* (1971), and Lumet’s *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), as well as Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver*. Reviewers added Polanski’s *Chinatown* (1974) and other ‘LA procedural—*The Maltese Falcon* [Huston 1941], … *LA Confidential* [Hanson 1997]’ to which tradition Kusama’s film ‘recognizably’ belongs (Green 2019). Reviewing *Destroyer* for *Spectator USA*, Dominic Green declared that it is ‘*Chinatown* all over again’, in its Los Angeles setting and its double narrative structure, where ‘one trail is a procedural’ in which the murderer is tracked down, whilst the other ‘works towards a reckoning with a guilt’ originating in the past. But he also then suggests its difference from these male-centred narratives. In a description that links *Destroyer* to the ‘woman’s film’ and its successor, the female revenge film, more than to *film noir*, he qualifies his original designation: Erin, he writes, is motivated by ‘revenge, not justice’, and her violence is ‘a form of self-harm’.

The view of *film noir* implicit here is one characterized by Elizabeth Cowie as a specifically masculine fantasy, its paradigmatic story that of a just if flawed man who ‘suffers alienation and despair, and is lured by fatal and deceptive women’ (Cowie 1993: 122). As Green’s hesitation suggests, it is a scenario in which women function only uneasily as central protagonist, except, writes Cowie, ‘where the film is designated as a “woman’s picture”’ (1993: 134). Yet as reviewers recognized, the constitutive elements of *film noir* can all be found in Kusama’s film: the duplicitous woman; the use of flashback that can undermine or shift character point of view; the investigative structure with its posing of an enigma; the narrative complexity produced through the doubling of this structure, ‘so that the investigation of one enigma frames another’; a ‘perverse’ psychological motivation; and an urban setting with action frequently taking place at night (Cowie 1993: 126). Kusama’s most obvious generic twist, as she herself commented (Del Barco 2018), is that the woman who lures the upright man to his death is the detective’s own younger self, so that what she investigates is herself.

As Cowie suggests, central to both *noir* and neo-noir is the city. That of *Destroyer* is Los Angeles, a city without the ‘grizzled sense of the past’ (Arthur 1996: 21) that comes with a long urban history, and thus, suggests Paul Arthur, perhaps more inimical to memory. In an article on LA as crime setting, Arthur discusses its difference from the ‘fabled idea of “mean streets”’—those decaying and rain-drenched ‘narrow passages and
dark recesses’ redolent of past secrets and a corrupt present that characterize film noir’s New York or Chicago (1996: 21). In Los Angeles, he writes, a horizontal spatial discontinuity replaces the vertical descent into the underworld of the traditional noir city, a hyper-real light replaces dark corners, and the car, and separation, replace the street and proximity. In this setting we can find that horizon lines are lowered and horizontal shapes stretched ‘into patterns that squeeze human movement’ (1996: 24), whilst the car becomes central to the depiction not only of the urban space but of the interior space of the investigator-protagonist. Destroyer begins with just such a light, a framing, and a protagonist. After the close-ups of Erin’s eyes and face with which the film opens, we see a wide shot of the motorway flyover under which her car is parked. The angle is low and flat, and the shot is dominated by the vast horizontal concrete and metal structure which frames Erin’s car, squeezing it into a cramped space in the shadows beneath, the low horizon barely visible below the tiny window of sky against which the car is framed. To the right of the shot, also under the flyover, is an empty, boarded up space. The sound we hear is of the constant traffic overhead. This urban landscape, then, is stretched out, manufactured, arid, and inhuman. Cars dominate but people are absent. There are no people in the mall outside the bank where the first robbery takes place, and only a single couple to be warned away from the site of the second robbery. The park where Erin meets Shelby’s boyfriend, Jay (Beau Knapp), is almost deserted: like the river beside which Silas’s body is found, it is a vast, engineered concrete structure. When Erin leaves the police precinct to begin her quest for Silas, she is framed, in another low angle shot, against an immense wall on which is depicted a flattened-out version of the policed city. She passes only one other person.

This is an alienated, dreamlike version of Lefebvre’s city as ‘abstract space’: institutionalized, engineered, and devoid of both history and humanity.2 It is notable that both of the institutional spaces that Erin enters at the start of the film are similarly cold, empty and impersonal. The police precinct is a vast grid of modular office cubicles, almost without activity. As she examines the marked banknote she has been sent, Erin is framed by a metal grid barrier against rows of symmetrically arranged shelves and boxes—past cases tidily stored away. The FBI building to which she goes in order to identify the note is grander, a reflective high-rise façade of vertical stripes housing a central atrium dotted with symmetrically placed round tables. It too, however, is almost empty, and in this building, too, Erin is trapped within a grid of identical rectangular window frames.

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In this hyper-real public space Erin is both marginalized and alienated, disconnected from both her surroundings and her body. But if this alienation from public space would seem to place her in a long line of generic female protagonists—from Lucia Harper (Joan Bennett) in *The Reckless Moment* (1949) to the maternal avengers of the 1990s discussed by Jacinda Read (2000)—unlike them she is equally out of place in the domestic. In fact, we barely see her within domestic space: the film’s iconic image is of Erin sitting, alone, on the steps outside her house (see Figure 1). She enters only four domestic spaces. In three of them she is an intruder and in all of them her body is brutalized. In the stale, cluttered room where Toby (James Jordan), the first of the tracked-down gang members, lies dying, she acquiesces to his demand that she masturbate him in exchange for information, turning her face away not only in distaste but in bodily dissociation. In the lawyer di Franco’s (Bradley Whitford) house she is beaten up, and in the squalid apartment that Silas shares with Petra (Tatiana Maslany), the final gang member she tracks down, both women lie injured. All of these interiors, and that shared by the gang in the flashback sequences, are dark, oppressive, filmed often in close-up and in shades of brown. The briefest interior segment is in Erin’s own house, where she collapses in the hallway. As she comes to on the floor, the camera focuses on her face as she watches an ant slowly walk past. It is more in possession of the space than she is.

Erin’s preferred space, like that of the LA detectives described by Arthur, is the car, where the camera’s focus is on her face, with its intensity of concentration. Like them, she ‘cruis[es] the vast expanses of [LA’s] city and suburbs’, with their ‘culture of transience and automobility’ (Arthur 1996: 21–2), witness to its contrasting zones of poverty—the littered, close-packed streets, with their plastic-covered homeless shelters—and of
sleek, expansive wealth. But Erin’s car is not the ‘mechanized alter ego’ that Arthur describes, though as in other LA noirs it encloses her solitude. Increasingly, it functions for her as a space of representation, or cinema, as its various screens and mirrors frame the memories that play out in her interior vision, through the sequences of fragmented, temporally disturbed episodes that come to dominate the narrative. Like Potter’s Ruby, Erin becomes ‘the spectator of her own drama’, watching as the younger Erin ‘plays the role of herself’ in a film noir.

As Erin criss-crosses the city, then, and the camera focuses on her face, we find the forward movement of the film’s investigative structure increasingly fractured, and then eclipsed, by the replayed scenes of her life undercover with Silas’s gang. These begin in chronological order—we first see Erin and Chris rehearsing their roles—but, triggered by events in the present, become increasingly temporally dislocated. We are aware from the start of the scripted nature of her role: the FBI has given Erin a history and a character that she must learn. But her FBI bosses are not the only scriptwriters: very early in the film, as Erin drives, we hear Silas’s voiceover as he defines Erin: ‘Look at that face. You’re hungry. Hungry little mutt. You want…’ The camera pulls back to reveal the three dots on Erin’s neck that still mark her gang membership. Later, Silas’s voice will add, ‘You’re a liar. You’re a user. You wanna be powerful’. At only one moment in these sequences is there synchronous sound, so that it is never clear how many of these words are actually spoken by Silas. But he too—or the fantasy he embodies—defines Erin, in her role as noir femme fatale, a role we see her play out when she seduces Chris into betraying his position in the justice system by taking part in the planned robbery. To his, ‘This isn’t the way’, she responds, ‘Please. You gotta give me this, please. I need this… Do it for me. For us’. It is a line that could be spoken by Barbara Stanwyck in Double Indemnity (1944).

What the older Erin watches is her own playing out of the two possible noir roles for women. To her FBI bosses, and initially to Chris, she is the naïve and innocent girl, a victim. She was, says the FBI’s Lawson (Toby Huss) when she visits him at the start of the film, ‘too green’ for the undercover role she was given. Her present trauma, he thinks, might be helped by attending the ‘bible study’ evening he now runs. To the voice given to Silas this Erin is a mask: underneath is a hungry, impure ‘mutt’ that lies and manipulates for power. Whilst she is dismissive of Lawson, it is clear from the sense of guilt that she both expresses and embodies that she has accepted the characterization identified with Silas. Writing of the maternal revenge film of the 1990s, Read comments that in it, ‘the codes of film noir are used to construct [the maternal avenger] as guilty’, despite the apparent justice of her cause (2000: 227). In Kusama’s film,
however, that generic coding and its structuring power are rendered visible. As Doane suggests of Potter’s film, what Erin’s private viewing reveals is cinema as a structuring apparatus, producing from her a performance that is always scripted elsewhere.

**Performance and the ‘Woman’s Film’**

It was the element of performance in the film—notably Kidman’s performance as star—that was most commented on by reviewers. Her ‘unrecognizably unglamorous’ appearance, ‘sun-damaged, wrinkled, grimacing, exhausted and unkempt’ (Smallwood 2018), was seen to provide evidence of the star’s ‘powers of metamorphosis’ (Coyle 2018), in a ‘transformation [which] is startling’ (Dargis 2018). As the older Erin, Kidman’s voice and walk, as well as her face, are seen to be transformed, in a performance that evinces at once ‘an impressive physicality’ and ‘an air of dreamy unreality’ (Kermode 2019). But if her performance strips her of the star’s glamour, Kidman/Erin ‘is also powerful—and looks beautiful. There is a nakedness to her face, as if … we can finally see what she looks like’ (Smallwood 2018). Whilst the film’s plot and narrative space frame it as neo-noir, then, this discourse, in which character and star are merged in a story of transformation and revelation—the star is finally revealed to be what she really is—point up the engagement of Kusama’s film not only with film noir but also with its female-oriented contemporary, the ‘woman’s film’.

In his study of women in American genre cinema, David Greven (2011) emphasizes the crossover between the two: they share, he writes, both an aesthetic and a ‘willingness to explore the female potential for violence’ (2011: 53). Borrowing Jeanine Basinger’s broad definition of the woman’s film as one that ‘places at the centre of its universe a female who is trying to deal with emotional, social, and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that she is a woman’ (1993: 20), Greven argues that its central themes, themes central too to the rape-revenge film, are ‘transformation and female vengeance’ (Greven 2011: 182). A key element of both, he adds, is ‘the mother-daughter relationship, often depicted as conflictual as well as highly emotionally charged’ (2011: 36). Greven’s paradigmatic example is Irving Rapper’s *Now Voyager* (1942), in which Bette Davis, as ‘ugly duckling’ Charlotte Vale, also undergoes a ‘metamorphosis’ (LaPlace 1987: 144). As was common with these films, reviews and publicity conflated star and character, so that the key moment in the film is that in which a transformed Charlotte ‘looks like Bette Davis again’ (LaPlace 1987: 144), a moment that is prepared for by an early flashback to a much younger self, where we see
an artificially youthful but still reassuringly recognizable image of the star (LaPlace 1987: 139). For Greven, however, this moment is far from reassuring. In its open acknowledgement of ‘the theme of transformation’, he writes, it reveals femininity to be performance or masquerade (2011: 33). Charlotte’s performance is both structurally demanded and necessary if she is to ‘negotiate her own wants’ (Greven 2011: 31), but beneath it lie both self-loathing and a ‘barely concealed rage’ (2011: 33). In a final subversive twist, the ‘wants’ that Charlotte expresses centre on a maternal, not a heterosexual relationship: she desires ‘to be a better mother … than her mother was to her’ (2011: 47, original italics).

This is a rather different reading of the tropes of the ‘woman’s film’ from that offered by Read, for whom these films are inherently conservative. The female revenge films that she discusses deploy the codes of film noir to construct the maternal avenger as guilty, she argues, but they then draw on the circular structures of the ‘woman’s film’ to return her to the home (2000: 227). If she cannot be so repositioned, she must die. Here, I am less concerned with the accuracy of Greven’s reading of Rapper’s film, which, as he admits, runs counter to most feminist readings, than with the central elements he picks out and the ways in which they can illuminate Kusama’s film. For if Now Voyager is perhaps not as critically conscious of the themes it deploys as Greven suggests, Kusama’s film certainly is. In interview, she pointed to Destroyer’s ‘circular shape’ as characteristically ‘female’: as running counter to the ‘fast, … aggressively linear, and in many respects, completely unreflective’ movement that characterizes not only ‘the masculine construct of narrative filmmaking’ in Western culture but that culture itself (Robinson 2019). She also spoke of her films’ engagement with ‘some kind of female rage’ (Robinson 2019) as well as with ‘grief and trauma’ (Smallwood 2018). The ‘emotional heart’ of Destroyer, she suggested, lies in Erin’s ‘relationship to her daughter’ (Sims 2019): like Charlotte, Erin desires ‘to be a better mother … than her mother was to her’. When Erin’s quest reaches its end and she shoots Silas, the moment is anti-climactic, almost perfunctory; it is far less important than the moments of emotional intensity that precede and follow it.

Tania Modleski has written of the circular structure of the ‘woman’s film’ that its narratives ‘give the impression of a ceaseless returning to a prior state’, as if ‘each time you reach a destination, you discover that it is the place that you never really left’. In them, a sense of linear time gives way to a feeling of time ‘indissociable from space’. These are narratives, she writes, ‘peopled by … women possessed by an overwhelming desire to express themselves, to make themselves known, but continually confronting the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of realizing this desire’. Their female protagonists are silenced—it is the experience and
acceptance of loss, writes Modleski, that is at the heart of the woman’s film—but the desires thus repressed return, as they do, famously, in the case of Freud’s hysterics, through music or mise en scène, through fantasies of ‘events that do not happen’, or through bodily performance and excess (1987: 327–35).

If, then, Kusama’s film references film noir, like the maternal revenge films of which Read writes it places its noir elements within the structures and themes of the ‘woman’s film’. It does so, however, to very different effect. If the origins of Erin’s feelings of guilt are made visible through the various scripts which the flashback sequences expose, so, too, are the structures of performance and transformation of the ‘woman’s film’. As Greven suggests of Bette Davis’ performance as ingénue in the flashback sequence of Now Voyager, we can see this to be performance. It is not simply that all Erin’s words feel scripted here, or that the light is too bright in her final exchanges with Chris. Kidman, as all the publicity material emphasized, was almost 50 when she made the film, so that we are acutely conscious of her performance of a seductive and youthful femininity in these sequences. ‘You wouldn’t have known me then. I was twenty then’, says a now middle-aged and dowdy Charlotte to the psychiatrist whose questions trigger the flashback in Now Voyager. But we do know her, as Davis, whilst at the same time our attention is drawn to her conscious performance of a seductive girlishness, not only by its awkwardness (the young Charlotte, her voiceover tells us, had learned her seduction techniques from novels) but because this is not the older, elegant Davis we know from elsewhere. In Now Voyager, the film’s transformation narrative returns to us this other, known Davis, as an elegant and powerful figure. Despite reviewers’ attempts to find it, however, Kusama’s film refuses this narrative for its character/star, and stages another kind of journey, into the frustratingly a-temporal nature of memory and an imperfect recovery of subjectivity.

Memory Work

Writing on ‘memory texts’ and ‘memory work’, Annette Kuhn writes of the ways in which ‘the process of remembering’ may be ‘enacted cinematically’. Whereas formal autobiography is controlled and linear, she writes, memory texts are ‘imagistic’, closer to dreams and fantasies than to conventional narrative. In them, ‘time rarely comes across as continuous or sequential’, and ‘events may have a repetitive or cyclical quality’. The memory text is ‘typically a montage of vignettes, anecdotes, fragments, “snapshots” and flashes’, so that ‘remembered events seem to be outside
any linear time frame or may refuse to be easily anchored to “historical”
time’ (2010: 299). Cinema, in which, unlike literary autobiography, ‘a sus-
tained first-person “voice” is difficult, even impossible to maintain through
filmic means’ (Kuhn 2010: 300–1), has, as cine-psychoanalysis has argued,
an affinity with such processes. What is more, she adds, all of the attrib-
utes of the memory text ‘have to do with performance: the memory text
embodies a particular approach to, or type of, performances of memory’
(2010: 299). This, it seems to me, is the process that is enacted in
Kusama’s film when, in the private cinema of her car, Erin becomes the
‘spectator of her own drama’, watching as her screen self performs, first
the roles she is given and then, increasingly, memory itself. As this
occurs, generic codes and structures give way to what Kuhn calls the ‘phe-
nomenology’ of the process of remembering (2010: 302).

In these scenes of the film, generic codes and judgements are displaced
by moments of dreamlike intensity which, in giving us access to Erin’s
desires, and her own attempts to understand them, disrupt and question
these codes. I want to point to three such moments in the flashback
sequences. The first two are silent, inviting us to read Erin’s face as the
camera lingers on it in close-up. In the first and most negative of the
three, Silas has pronounced his judgement on her, their two faces lit by
flickering firelight. The camera holds on Erin’s intent face, as she
struggles to assess him and the truth of his words; but the scene closes
with Silas’s return gaze, closed, dominant, as he reasserts his authority.
The second is very different, and points forward to the concluding sec-
tions of the film. Erin has borrowed the bathroom key in a chemist’s
shop, and we see her in its cramped space as she answers Chris’s phone
call, then reads the result of a pregnancy test. Her actions—applying the
test, flushing the toilet—are slow (her constant sniffing suggests she has
snorted cocaine) and disengaged. The focus is soft, as if we are viewing
her through a window or mirror. She looks down, and is suddenly still,
surprise and pleasure flickering across her face, before the camera angle
changes and we see her clearly, as she looks up and out of the frame.
Her gaze is steady, anticipatory, joyful. Kusama spoke of her initial
desire to focus in the film ‘primarily on simple, behavioural, routine-
oriented tasks’ rather than ‘the narrative thrust of a crime thriller’ (Sims
2019). Her model was Chantal Akerman’s Jeanne Dielman (1975),
another film about female anger which is held in check by detachment
and bodily control, but where intense affect is registered through the
most subtle of changes of expression and behaviour. In this brief
sequence we catch a glimpse of such an approach: the scene demands a
closeness of attention, a straining to read the complexity of Erin’s
desires through the smallest of shifts in expression and gesture.

4 The idea that cinema
replicated both the
processes and the
situation of dreams/
dreaming was argued by
theorists such as Jean-
Louis Baudry (1976) and
Christian Metz (1975).
The third instance in these flashback sequences when the camera holds on Erin’s face, demanding that we try to know her, is the only flashback moment in which she articulates her desires—before she moves into self-conscious performance in order to seduce Chris into compliance. ‘I’ve spent my whole fucking life scrapping, jealous, hungry, scared’, she says. ‘I just wanna spend one fucking day on the other side of that’. Again, the camera holds on her gaze, this time hurt, angry, defiant. And once again we can see that Erin’s desires, and her fierce determination to both protect and mask them, are not the generic desires of the femme fatale. They are the outcome of a lived experience which is both gendered and classed. As Kusama herself suggests, the codes of film noir are the wider structural codes of Western culture, in which ‘walking through the world as a female’ means that transgressive acts and desires are seen not as heroic but as shameful and perverse (Robinson 2019). For Elizabeth Cowie, film noir is the form which American cinema finds to represent the connection between desire and (self) destruction (1993: 148), but this, I would argue, is a specifically masculine vision of desire, one conceived as tragic and heroic. For women, Kusama has suggested, desire means being ‘ostracized and shunned’, and a gnawing sense of disappointment and rage (Robinson 2019).

Erin, we learn in brief glimpses, is the daughter of poverty, neglect and abuse. She must struggle constantly to ‘pass’: as police officer, as girlfriend, as the ‘bad girl’ Silas requires her to be. Her performance in the flashback sequences is laced with anxiety as well as rage. ‘The problem with passing’, writes Beverley Skeggs, ‘is that someone may catch you out’ (1997: 86). Such passing, she adds, ‘speaks from a position of powerlessness and insecurity’, so that ‘attempts to pass are … dissimulations, performances of a desire … not to be shamed but a desire to be legitimated’ (1997: 87). It is this struggle and the anger and frustration it generates that characterize Erin, and that, as she repeatedly insists, separate her from Petra, Silas’s girlfriend. Petra’s father is rich; she, says Erin, had choice. She could play at her outlaw identity: ‘It’s all your choice’ says Erin repeatedly; ‘You can just call up your daddy any time’.5

5 The film, however, does not quite endorse Erin’s judgement, pointing out that Petra’s choices are circumscribed by gender if not by class. As a girl she was sexually abused by the lawyer, Di Franco, who simply dismisses her: she was ‘fun’, he says, but ‘she got in trouble’. In the film’s present Petra has no choices left: she is dependent on both Silas, who uses and betrays her, and on drugs.

All Body

It is in the film’s present, however, that it invites us most persistently to know, and to feel with, Erin. The many close-ups of her face are the triggers for the memory sequences, but they also draw us in, with minute shifts of expression, to her relationship to desire, and to loss, in the present. Above all, though, it is on Erin’s body that this loss is inscribed. As with other
films by Kusama (*Girlfight* 2000; *Jennifer’s Body* 2009), *Destroyer* is concerned with the ways in which female identity is written through (discourses of) the body, and the ways in which that body may complicate or refuse them. ‘You can’t look away from her’, said Kusama of Kidman/Erin’s ‘specific visual gestures’; even when, as often in the film, ‘seeing her uncomfortably close … you want to look away’ (D’Alessandro 2018). This is a body marked by pain and loss: reviewers wrote of it as ‘broken’ (Kermode 2019), as ‘punched and kicked and bruised’ (Smallwood 2018). Her gait is ‘ponderous, … leaden’ (Dargis 2018), the walk of ‘a wounded animal’ (Del Barco 2018); it conveys ‘an overriding sense of being weighed down or crushed’ (Kermode 2019). Erin seems ‘barely alive’ (Buchanan 2018): a ‘dead woman walking’ (Green 2019). Yet what is not mentioned here but is central to the film is that this body that seems held together only by pain and rage is also a maternal body. Doubled over, Erin folds her arms around her abdomen. Sitting facing Petra, she cups her hands over it. Her injuries are the result of repeated beatings, but the site of this pain and loss is specific. As she walks, hunched, Erin pulls her leather jacket closer in self-protection, but towards the film’s close, as she sits in the car having given her partner Antonio (Shamier Anderson) the means of solving the case, she draws back her jacket and shirt. We see a distended abdomen, criss-crossed with bloody striations, and Erin’s left hand gently cupping it. The pose is that of a pregnant woman, its scars like those of a Caesarian birth.

This brief scene offers a complex revelation. The progressive mortification of Erin’s body that we have seen—one reviewer compared her journey to the Stations of the Cross (Ebiri 2018)—is very specifically located. The female body, feminist theorists have argued, has been persistently seen as the hysterical or abject body. Her ‘symptoms inscribed on her body’, this female figure, writes Elaine Showalter, ‘is denied any access to a desiring subjectivity’ (1987: 67), and it is the maternal body that is most fleshily abject, least capable of subjectivity (Tyler 2009; Stone 2012)—that is deemed to be ‘all body’. In the present of *Destroyer*, however, Erin’s body is stripped of the markers of gender, in what seems to be a denial of embodiment itself (she is ‘barely alive’, a ‘dead woman walking’). Her constant motion, as reviewers commented, seems to be driven by the sheer force of her rage: as if she ‘were willing herself upright’ (Dargis 2018). Yet she is also an abject figure, ‘a woman you might … turn away from’ (Dargis 2018) more animal than human, existing on the boundary between life and death. In this final revelation we at last see the body, wounded but also maternal, that she has been concealing.

Writing of the ‘abject maternal’, Imogen Tyler has suggested that the cultural fantasies that see the maternal body as abject, as ‘fleshy…

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6 Kristeva’s definition of the abject as that which ‘does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’ includes within its categories the blurring of animal and human, as well as the maternal body (‘the impure, the non-separate, the non-symbolic’ [(1982: 102)]), and the corpse, ‘the utmost of abjection … death infecting life’ (1982: 3–4).
horror’, depend on the refusal to acknowledge maternal subjectivity. It is only when the maternal figure has ‘been stripped of all signs of identity’ that she can be ‘reduced to a shapeless, bloody abject mess’ (2009: 86).

Erin’s bodily mortification and refusal to acknowledge pain are bound up with an equally powerful disavowal of embodied identity. She belongs nowhere: in neither public nor private spaces. The only gestures of physical closeness we see from her throughout most of the film’s present are violent. She cannot touch her daughter—she remains physically distanced from her in their meetings, always held in public spaces—or her ex-partner: she stands isolated outside his house, his car. Hers is a disabling, or dismembering, of affect and its bodily expression that leaves her unable, and for the most part unwilling, to communicate. Yet, pulling against conventional accounts of subjectivity, what the film suggests is that Erin’s recovery of memory is also a recovery of the body: memory and subjectivity are embodied and reciprocal.

The process begins with the final meeting between Erin and Shelby, once again in the public space of a diner. The memories here are those of Shelby, and are not visualized. Instead, the focus is on Erin’s face and its pain, as her expressions follow every shade of Shelby’s story with an intensity that is unrelenting. Her face, looking down and to the right, chin lowered, eyes closed, becomes that of the Pieta. As she nods to acknowledge that Shelby’s story of mother and daughter lost during a snowstorm ‘did actually happen’, however, it is clear that the memory is shared: a moment when subjectivities become blurred. Shelby’s account is not without ambivalence: ‘I felt safe because I was with you’, she says, but then, ‘Why did you take us here? We were out there all alone for no reason’. But it releases the only movement of physical tenderness that we see from Erin in the film’s present, as she cups Shelby’s face in her hands and kisses her on the forehead, affirming ‘I… do… love… you’. It is a scene that recalls other feminist reworkings of the ‘woman’s film’ such as Gillian Armstrong’s High Tide (1987), where another mother wrapped up in grief and guilt finally takes responsibility for her relationship with her teenage daughter, in a scene that is choreographed across the tables of a diner. This, however, is a darker version. Erin releases the sense of guilt that she recognizes in Shelby—‘It’s my fault … It’s not you. All right’—but unlike Armstrong’s protagonist, she leaves alone (see Figure 2).

The film’s final flashback sequence returns to the journey into the snow remembered by Shelby. After Erin has given Antonio the envelope that will enable him to understand the killing of Silas, the camera returns to her eyes. We see the final scene of flashback intensity when Erin speaks her desire for ‘one fucking day on the other side of that’, and seduces

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7 According to ‘the dominant tradition of Western philosophy’, writes Patrice DiQuinzio, ‘the essence of human subjectivity is a set of capacities, primarily reason, consciousness, or rational autonomy, which enable rational, independent self-determination and action’ (1999: 7).
Chris into compliance. There follow brief shots of a coyote—Erin’s avatar\(^8\)—and of birds, then trees against a bright blue sky, the sun’s rays breaking through the leaves, before we return to the story recounted by Shelby, this time through Erin’s memory, in a sequence where the movement is slowed and we view through a snowy lens. This is neither the Erin of the film’s present nor that of the flashbacks to her undercover life, though the final shot recalls the steady gaze outwards that closes the scene of her pregnancy test. It is one centred in a moment of embodied experience and relationship, the relationship with Shelby. She carries the child on her back, and both mother and child look forward, as Erin walks with calm determination towards the camera. In Annette Kuhn’s theorization of memory, as we have seen, the ‘language of memory’ is ‘above all a language of images’ (1995: 160), so that the memory text is aligned ‘to unconscious productions like dreams and fantasies’ (2010: 299). Here, in these final moments of the film, memory and fantasy merge in a last ‘montage of vignettes, anecdotes, fragments’ (Kuhn 2010: 299) that articulate a desire centred on the maternal. A film which seemed to begin as a neo-noir in which the detective, in Kusama’s words, ‘is hunting herself’ (Sims 2019), ends on the mother-daughter relationship (see Figure 3).

In fact, as we learn in the final minutes of the film, almost all of its action can be seen as the layered production of memory, accounting, perhaps, for the ‘dreamlike’ quality (Ebiri 2018) that reviewers remarked on even the most physically punishing of Erin’s encounters in the film’s present. Kusama has used the ‘circular shape’ of the woman’s film, but not, as Read argues of the maternal revenge films about which she writes, to ‘restore [the heroine] to her proper role within the confines of the family’ (2000: 230). Instead, as Kusama has suggested, her use of the structure invites ‘reconsideration of everything you’ve just seen… a

\(^8\) Kusama reports asking Kidman to model her movement in the film on that of the ‘wild coyotes coming down from the hills’ in Los Angeles (Robinson 2019).
deeper look, a recontextualizing’ of the ‘aggressively linear’ narrative codes of the noir thriller (Robinson 2019).

**Conclusion**

At the close of Doane’s essay on ‘Remembering Women’ she quotes the final words of Collette Laffont’s character in Potter’s *The Gold Diggers*: ‘I know that even as I look and even as I see I am changing what is there’. The words, she writes, describe ‘an active process of remembering’ without which there is only a ‘compulsion to repeat, based on forgetting’ (1988: 13). Cinema’s genre codes and structures, Kusama’s film suggests, constitute just such a ‘compulsion to repeat’, in which femininity as performance is scripted, defined and positioned, and, where it threatens transgression, rendered abject as bodily excess. The film’s journey into memory involves the navigation of these codes and structures and, through its construction of a memory text in which time is fractured and/or slowed in moments of intensity, an attempt to retrieve, or construct, a subjectivity that is embodied and relational. It is a focus that is signalled, in fact, at the very start of the film, when *Destroyer* briefly references a very different attempt to render a maternal, embodied, and desiring subjectivity through a re-working of the ‘woman’s film’. Jane Campion’s *The Piano* (1993) begins, like Kusama’s film, with the camera looking through its protagonist’s eyes at a blurred closeup of her own pink flesh. Ada looks through her fingers held before her face, Erin at the inside of her eyelids. Both shots render a subjectivity that is embodied but cinematically ‘impossible’. Ada speaks to us in voiceover to tell us that she is silent; what we hear, and what will organize the film’s diegesis (Gordon 1996: 202) is her ‘mind’s
voice’. The wholly internal vision which opens Kusama’s film similarly signals the interiorized nature of its diegesis, though it is only at its close that we see conclusively that this has been the case. Campion’s film returns to Ada’s ‘mind’s voice’ in its final sequences, in a reworking of the woman’s film’s circular structure that both refuses and reaffirms its masochism: Ada is both alive and ‘learning to speak’ and silent, dead, beneath the ocean. Kusama’s film ends less ambivalently. We see Erin’s eyes, whose opening began the film, still open but now unseeing, and we return to the teenage skateboarders behind her car that she noticed at the film’s beginning, still caught in their own circular movements, before the film fades to black. We end as we began, within her now fading consciousness, the only sound that of her heartbeat.

In film noir, female desire is inextricably linked to female duplicity and guilt. In the ‘woman’s film’, Doane has famously argued, following Freud’s formulation, its (presumably female) spectator is offered ‘masochistic fantasy instead of sexuality’ (1987: 19). In it, she writes, the woman is given no access to desire—merely to ‘the desire to desire’ (1987: 9). As writing on Campion’s films The Piano and In the Cut (2003) has shown (Gillett 1995, 2004; Gordon 1996; McHugh 2007), any feminist attempt to appropriate these codes and structures must navigate the questions about guilt and masochism that they pose. Kusama’s film, I suggest, makes these codes and structures visible as its overt structuring elements. Within and against them, however, she stages the construction of a memory text in which both embodied subjectivity and desire are recovered. The model of subjectivity that is recovered, however, is not one bound to the codes of (hetero)sexual identity and desire that, in different ways, structure both of these popular genres—the relationship with Chris is a minor element of the film, and inseparable from Erin’s performance of femininity. Instead, it is the maternal relationship that is foregrounded, and with it a model of subjectivity that sees it as both embodied and relational. It is a model in which memories overlap and are shared, and that is not bound up with gender performance, or to either domestic, enclosed space or the public space of institutions and action. Its realization would represent, Kusama suggested, ‘some kind of real transformation’ (Robinson 2019, my italics), but we glimpse it, with Erin, only fleetingly.

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